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THE PROPHECY

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Her sister had gotten herself into trouble again, Maedran knew.

It was not unlike Silvas to run off to the nearby Tevra Kingdom on a whim, but it was unusual of her to not stick to her word. If Silvas had written in her letter that she would be home by the end of the week, she should have been home on time. She had always done so in the past, and that is how Maedran knew that her baby sister was in trouble.

The boat that linked the Isle of Aluun to the land of the Tevra Kingdom was packed with people that day. Every time Maedran looked around out of boredom, her eyes encountered a half-drunk soldier stumbling by or a frightened youth clutching their satchel.

Those were the kind of people who traveled to Tevra, and it left Maedran wondering what her sister found so appealing about this Kingdom. The war that opposed it to the neighbouring Shoff Empire had been going on for over two years now, and the situation had not improved one bit. The worst for Maedran was to see so many teenagers from the Isle volunteering to join Tevra's army in search of purpose.

Sure, Aluun was a remote place, lonely and neutral on all matters. There was not much one could do except work in a farm or in a shop. Some would surely call it boring, but Maedran saw nothing wrong with a peaceful, uneventful life. It was certainly better than living in times of war. But apparently most people disagreed. Her sister Silvas, especially, did not see eye to eye at all with her. The young woman had always yearned for more than life in the family farm, for adventure. But ever since she had started to exhibit a natural talent for magic, she had taken this as a sign that she was meant for a higher purpose. Silvas disappeared to the Tevra Kingdom for days doing gods know what, and their parents did not even care. They were honest, hard-working farmers who had no time to waste on a haughty child. Maedran was the one who worried.

And obviously, she was right to.

The boat rocked and a few passengers grunted in their sleep. A voice announced that they had reached their destination. Maedran got up, ready to set foot in Tevra for the first time in search of her missing sister.

The port town of Issi was small yet bustling. Many farmers from the Isle sold their productions here, attracting people from all around the Tevra Kingdom. Issi was the only place on this side of the Patrikka Sea where one could find the fruits, vegetables, cereals and sturdy horses of Aluun. The popularity of the town had made it so that a lot of Tevra's merchants settled here as well, and nowadays Issi was renown across the Seven Isles for its mercantile activity.

To Maedran, the port town of Issi was crowded, loud, and stinky. The seaside air carried the mixed smells of fish and horse manure, and the farmer had to gather all her willpower to leave the quay without vomiting. When she reached a quieter, more residential part of town, she took a deep breath and thanked the gods her family farm produced cereals. Then she looked around, confused.

Though she stood only a few steps away from Issi's gate, she could see no carriage offering public transport. She stood there thoughtful until a voice made her start.

“If you're waiting for the public carriage you're going to be here awhile, young lady.”

Maedran looked over to see an old woman wrapped up in colorful clothing standing by the gate. “What do you mean?” the farmer replied as she approached the old woman. “Is it not a thing, here?”

The woman chuckled. “Oh it is, it is. Or rather, it was. But public transport pretty much disappeared when the war came. The roads aren't safe enough anymore.”

“I see. So I would have to go on foot, then? All right.”

Maedran began heading for the gate, but the old woman stopped her. “No no no, young lady. I told you the roads aren't safe. If you must travel, at least take this.” The woman held up an iron sword that Maedran had not noticed she hid behind her back, and the farmer frowned conspicuously. “I won't let you go without it. Trust me, you'll need this.”

Maedran had no intention to trust anyone in Tevra, but she was no fool. If one is to travel alone in a land at war, one better have a sword. “Thank you,” she said as she grabbed the sword and hurried away.

It was not until the town of Issi was out of her sight that she began to wonder why an old woman carrying a sword had been so conveniently there waiting by the gate.

To Maedran's surprise, the road that led from Issi to the next town was not a road at all, but a long, winding dirt path. She walked alongside it warily, keeping a tight hold on her sword.

She arrived in the small village of Dia within a few hours and decided to eat something before continuing on her way. As she settled on a bench to take a few bites off the fresh bread in her bag, she noticed a group of young people with ropes on their shoulders. Two of them had horses and spoke loudly, boastful grins on their faces.

“I really don't get how you haven't caught one yet,” one of them said. “It's the easiest thing!”

Maedran did not hear what the other answered, but she focused her attention on the horses. As an inhabitant of Aluun, she knew a thing or two about those beautiful animals. The young people's horses were obviously wild, and the ropes on their shoulders were probably what they had caught them with. Those horses were far from the sturdy mounts of the Isle, which were used for farmwork or as warhorses, but they seemed healthy and vigorous. Perfect for travel, perhaps?

Maedran dusted the breadcombs off of herself and approached the young people. “Excuse me, did you catch those horses in the wilds?”

“Damn right we did,” one of them said, puffing their chest proudly.

“There's a whole lot of them just North-East of the village,” said another.

“Would you mind showing me how it's done?” Maedran asked earnestly. “I'm making my way to Aedranas and I'd really like it if I didn't have to *walk* there.”

“You're going to Aedranas on foot? That'd take weeks!”

“We need to help her!”

“All right, all right, settle down,” the ones with the horses ordered. They then turned to Maedran again. “We'll lend you some rope. Com now, let's see if you can get one on your first try!”

And laughing and cheering, the group accompanied Maedran to a thin patch of forest not far outside of Dia.

As it turned out Maedran could, in fact, catch a horse on her first try.

After having been explained the process and showed how to use the rope, she lay her eyes on a gracious grey mare with robust body. She approached the animal slowly and carefully, almost with reverence, threw the rope around its neck and walked up to it. A few reassuring words later she was on the horse's back, trotting triumphantly towards the awe-struck group of youth.

She thanked them and offered to help those who not caught a horse yet, but the proud village teens refused.

So Maedran continued her journey with a new companion, their calm natures according perfectly.

Long days of travel followed, dull and dreary. The weather had turned to rain and both Maedran and her mare were soaked to the bone when they reached Catria, a town only a few hours away from the capital city Aedranas. Maedran did not have a lot of money, but she decided to try and pay a visit to the local inn anyway.

She had to spend almost all that she had, but she secured shelter for her horse and a meal for herself. The innkeeper was fine with letting them stay until the weather let up, if it let up today.

Maedran's meal was a warm dish of potatoes and cabbage that she ate slowly and conscientiously. Her mind wandered to her sister. She would be in the capital soon and she would finally be able to look for Silvas. But would she be able to find her? In her letters, Silvas described Aedranas as a gigantic city full of mysteries, and she often talked about how amazed she was to still be able to discover new places in the city even after having been there dozens of times.

Maedran was about to jump into a haystack in search of a needle. She was not sure that she was up for the task, but did she really have a choice? Who else would care for her baby sister, if she did not?

A couple of hours later the weather finally calmed down and Maedran retrieved her mare from the inn's stables, ready to begin the last leg of her journey. As she passed in front of the inn, however, her eyes once again fell upon the old woman in colorful clothing who had given her the sword back in Issi.

The farmer halter but did not get off her horse.

“Almost made it, have you?” the old woman said. “But you wonder if that will be enough.”

Maedran frowned but remained silent.

The old one gave a breathy chuckle and stepped closer. “You're right not to trust anyone on the Crown Isle. But here, I promise this will help you.” She produced a map the same way she had produced the sword days ago and handed it to Maedran. The farmer checked it to find that it was a detailed map of Aedranas.

“Once you get there,” the old woman added, “seek Kaliv the blacksmith. He always seems to know everything, and I'm sure he'll be able to help you find what you're looking for.”

She chuckled again as Maedran, now clearly uncomfortable, thanked her with a suspicious look and galloped away.

“And I highly recommend the Cauliflower Inn,” the old woman cried out behind her. “They make

the best apple pie!”

The Cauliflower Inn was a charming establishment, richly decorated in shades of green and white, but it was quiet and simple. Maedran quickly saw eye to eye with the cheerful owner, who happened to be a former farmer of Aluun. After having recounted her story, she managed to arrange for lodgings and food for herself and her horse at a heavily discounted price and in exchange of some occasional help in the kitchens. The owner of the Cauliflower seemed to place more value in her baking skills than in her coin pouch, and for that Maedran was thankful.

Her sister, however, had apparently never set foot in this inn, so Maedran would have to start by seeking out the blacksmith Kaliv that the mysterious old woman had told her about. She did not have much to go on, and she guessed this was as good of a tip as any. And luckily, the innkeeper knew where to find him and pointed it out to her on the big, intricate map of Aedranas

The capital's blacksmithy was located in the industrial district, on the other side of the city. Aedranas was so big that a river ran through it, almost cutting it in half. Maedran had to cross a bridge and walk for a long time before reaching her destination. The industrial district seemed warmer than the rest of the city, and it was crowded with busy people hurrying along. It reminded Maedran of the early mornings in Aluun, just before the marketplace opened to the public.

The air inside the blacksmithy was suffocating, but oddly enough the brightly lit space was quite welcoming. A young apprentice came to greet her, and she asked to see Kaliv. She held her rusty iron sword in her hand as if to give herself an excuse to be here. The apprentice did not question her request, however, and went to fetch the master blacksmith.

Kaliv was a short, stocky man with bulging muscles and a thick black beard. He spoke in a quiet low tone, and when Maedran explained who had sent her here, his voice grew even quieter. He ushered her into a side storage room and pulled a thick curtain behind them.

“Tell me what you need, but make it quick,” the blacksmith whispered, glancing around the room to make sure they were alone.

Maedran decided to talk in whispers as well. She described her sister and explained the situation briefly, giving only the necessary details. The blacksmith nodded pensively all throughout.

After she was done a thin smile appeared on the man's face. He looked almost *relieved*. “I know where your sister is,” he said. “Just let me show you on your map. You should hurry, though. They need you *now*.”

“They?”

“Don't ask questions. Just go.”

Without giving Maedran time to react Kaliv pulled the curtain and rushed back to his anvil. The farmer stood confused for a moment then looked at her map.

This was all very strange, but she had no choice but to give it a shot.

Grand Meeting Room, here I come.

Compelled by something she could not quite understand, Maedran broke off into a run. She rushed through the industrial district, shoving the busy workers aside, and crossed the bridge again.

The Grand Meeting Room was located in a private corner on the grounds of Tevra's university. Maedran wandered through its paved courtyards and impeccable lawns in search of the building, unwillingly drawing attention to herself. The university trained elite soldiers, mages and scholars, and they all glared at her as she passed them by. The farmer was undeniably out of place here.

With a sigh of relief she finally found the walled-off courtyard that nested the Grand Meeting Room. The people who gathered there strived to keep a low profile, so there was no guard stationed outside and the gates stood wide open as if the building was just another annex to the university.

Maedran walked up to the door and hesitated. What if this was a trap? Who were “they” and who were the enigmatic old woman and the secretive blacksmith who had guided her here? And *why* had they guided her here?

And what if Silvas was behind the door and needed my help?

Maedran pushed the door open unceremoniously.

Inside, a wide round table surrounded by ten chairs filled almost the whole room. Eight figures sitting on the side chairs turned their heads to look at her with surprise. The chair directly in front of Maedran was empty, but across the table, facing her, was a familiar face.

Silvas slowly got up, a look of utter shock on her face. “Maedran?”

“Silvas!” Maedran took in her sister she had not seen in such a long time. She was still a good head taller than her, with a thin body and beautiful long black hair, but something in her eyes had changed.

Nevertheless, when Silvas crossed the room to rush into her arms, Maedran held her tight and felt herself struggling to hold back tears. She had found her.

“I can't believe you really came for me,” Silvas said.

“Of course I did. But what happened, who are these people?”

“This I believe I can answer,” said a voice behind them.

Maedran turned around to see the old woman in colorful clothing standing right outside the door.

“So a prophecy told you that my sister and I would save the kingdom?”

Maedran did not believe a word of what she had just been told, but she decided to play along anyway to see what would happen.

“It was foretold,” the old woman insisted, sensing her doubts. “Your sister and her protector, you, are to set foot on the battlefield in three days to put an end to this conflict. It is of utmost importance.”

“And what's in it for you?” the farmer asked accusingly.

“You mean except the restoration of peace? Well, I guess some part of me also yearns for revenge. It is something that lies in the soul of all the Kali.”

“The Kali?” Silvas intervened. “The Tribe of the Old Country?”

The woman scoffed. “Glad to see some still know of us even all the way across the Patrikka Sea. Yes, I am Kalini of the Kali tribe. Kaliv, that you both met, is also of the tribe. And any way is good for us to get back at the Shoff Empire, even if just a little.”

“They drove you out?” Maedran asked.

“They killed us, and there's only a few of us left now. But that's not what we're here for.”

“And what *are* we here for?”

“To prepare you for battle,” Kalini said. “You only have three days left, and you need to be ready.”

Maedran sighed. “Do you mind undoing whatever you did to my sister first? If you want my help you better make sure I have no reason to turn on you.”

The old woman gave a breathy laugh. “Did not take a lot of travel to toughen you up, huh?” She then looked over at Silvas and pensively declared, “Oh, right, the spirit that led you here. Those things always attempt to linger even after they're no longer needed.”

Kalini muttered a few words and waved her hands in front of Silvas' face. The light in the young woman's eyes returned to normal, and Maedran nodded. “Thank you.”

“Well, time for you two to be on your way then,” Kalini said, ignoring her. “The Council will take care of everything, my duty here is done. The rest is all up to you. Go with our trust, young ladies.”

The old woman gestured for the two sisters to look behind them, where three members of the Council surrounded by two guards were waiting to take them away.

The training could only last two days, and it was therefore extremely intensive.

Silvas' card-based magic being fairly rare, no teacher was found to help her hone her skills. Thus, since she was to train on her own, they locked her all day in a small empty room in order to make sure she did nothing else but practice magic. Silvas did not seem to be bothered by that, almost glad for the time she was given to improve her abilities. Maedran, on the other hand, was shocked by what her sister had to go through. Her own training focused on swordfights, which she turned out to be pretty good at, though not great. But once she had devised a strategy to sneak food to her sister during the day this became her main objective, and she could more often be found hiding in the kitchens than on the training ground.

Then, at midnight at the beginning of the third day the three members' of the Council – who were, as the two sisters had found out, the General of the army, the Archmage and the Spymaster – and their guards returned to accompany them to the frontline.

Silvas stood on the battlefield between the footsoldiers and the archers. Maedran and the Council members stood a short distance away, waiting for the young mage to complete her spell.

Six cards of Silvas' deck were levitating in front of her. She closed her eyes as a seventh card floated up to place itself in the center of the circle they formed, and they all began to glow. Seconds later a translucent shield appeared around the soldiers. She nodded, wincing.

The Spymaster raised their arm and the archers readied their bows. Soon a volley of imperial arrows came crashing down against the magical barrier. Right after that the Spymaster gestured again and the archers released their arrows. A few faint yelps came to the soldiers' ears.

A moment later the imperial footsoldiers came into view. The General ordered his troops to move forth. Silvas dropped the shield to place her cards in an offensive position while Maedran unsheathed her sword.

The battle proceeded at a maddening rhythm. All around the battlefield soldier fought and died, both sides suffering heavy casualties. In the midst of all the confusion Maedran found herself isolated, facing off with a tall, imposing figure clad in a set of heavy armor glinting in the sunlight.

Their duel lasted for what felt like hours, the young farmer dodging and parrying the figure's mighty greatsword strikes until the moment when she finally saw an opening in their armor as she was sidestepping a particularly violent blow. Unwilling to wait any longer, she decided to take her chance now. She brought her sword up and lunged at the figure. She felt her blade sink in between

their ribs and kept pushing, stumbling as they collapsed with a gurgle.

Maedran pulled out her sword and the knight's blood quickly sunk the ground all around them. From the dark red puddle the farmer raised her head to find all the remaining of both sides standing in a circle around her. They had been watching the duel attentively.

Suddenly Silvas rushed to her sister's side and began to speak. "Is this really what you want?" she cried out. "Why are we even here? What are we fighting for? Can you tell why the friends who stood by your side are now dead? For someone else's lands? For someone else's power? Lay down your weapons. Go home. None of this is worth it!"

Silence fell on the battlefield.

Maedran grabbed her sister's hand and squeezed it tight.

The battle ended after Maedran struck down the imperial General and Silvas gave her heartfelt speech.

Soon after, the war ended as well. The imperial soldiers had returned home with stories to tell, and as they refused to fight again the civilians began petitioning for a cease-fire. Under public pressure and left without an army, the Emperor had no choice but to give in and leave the Tevra Kingdom in peace, at least for a time.

Maedran and Silvas, recognized as heroes of the Kingdom, were both offered wealth and position.

Maedran refused any and all rewards, only wishing to go back home and put this all behind her. She did ask, however, for Kalini of the Kali tribe to be rewarded as well.

Silvas asked for a position of teacher at the Tevra university, where she opened the very first class of card-based magic. She used the money given to her to buy a place in Aedranas then sent what was left to her family with a letter of apology. Her parents, of course, forgave her.

A few years later, driven by her need to be with her sister, Maedran returned to the Kingdom to open a very successful bakery where she sold traditional homemade breads and pastries of Aluun.

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