

## CHAPTER 4

# THE OMINOUS PROPHECY



Armed only with the dagger hidden within the folds of her baggy cloak, Eridani returned to the city that wanted her dead.

The constables barely glanced at her when she passed through the city gates. No one expected the renegade princess to walk into the patriarch's stronghold. All the constables saw was another peasant seeking her fortune in Skond.

Eridani proceeded with caution, avoiding patrols and maintaining a brisk but steady pace that helped her blend in with the young messengers and apprentices running errands for their employers. As she walked toward the Street of Tailors, she was immersed in the laughter of children and singsong patter of merchants trying to entice the passersby to their stalls. The smells of cured meats, fresh flowers, and exotic spices permeated the air. Horseshoes clanked against the sun-drenched cobblestones. This was the Skond she had grown used to, the city she almost considered home. Not the brutal, nightmarish side of it she had been exposed to in the last few days. She would have given almost anything to regain the sense of security and the carefree existence she used to enjoy. She pulled the cloak tighter around her shoulders and pressed on.

She slowed to a leisurely stroll within a hundred paces of the house her family rented, looking for any signs of it being watched. She turned back and walked by a second time. There was nothing obvious, but she couldn't be certain. She had to rely on luck and the element of surprise—the patriarch's men would surely not think either Danchu or her foolish enough to return.

On the third pass she ducked into the shadow of the servants' entrance and rushed to the second floor, skipping steps. Thinly carpeted wooden planks groaned under her weight. She reached the top of the staircase and found the doors to the upstairs rooms ajar. The apartments had been ransacked, picked clean of anything valuable.

Eridani winced as she walked through the rooms. Did the patriarch's men loot the place? More likely it was her own servants, people she had trusted to cook her food and sweep her floors, people who—she would have sworn only a week ago—were loyal to her and her brother. She reached Danchu's bedroom. There, on the oak four-square bed which likely remained in place because it was too heavy to be moved, slept Dewynn, one of the house staff. He was dressed in clothes from Danchu's wardrobe and stank of cheap wine.

Eridani remained still and listened to Dewynn snore lightly for a few heartbeats, then advanced quietly toward the far corner of the room. There, Danchu had hidden their coins under the floorboard. The bulky wardrobe normally positioned above the hiding place was gone, but the flooring appeared undisturbed.

She crouched over the floorboard and drew her dagger. She wedged the blade between the two boards and tried to gently pry them apart. The flooring wouldn't give. She applied more force, until the board cracked with a loud crunch.

Dewynn rolled off the bed and growled like a startled cat. He blinked sleep out of his eyes and squinted at the intruder. Their gazes locked, with Eridani still on her knees, crouched over the broken floorboard.

"What an unexpected surprise." Dewynn slurred his words slightly. He advanced on Eridani and she stood up, until they were facing each other. He was a head taller than her. Muscles played under Danchu's tunic, which was barely large enough to fit Dewynn. "You came back just in time. I ran out of wine and out of things to sell for more, but you'll fetch your weight in decent brandy, won't you?"

"Have you no loyalty? No shame?" Eridani looked up into Dewynn's bloodshot eyes. "My family treated you well."

"Loyalty? Ha!" Dewynn closed the distance between them, forcing Eridani to retreat a step. "What has a stuck-up bitch like you, or your pompous fool of a brother, ever done to earn my loyalty? Don't flatter yourself. You've never been anything but a meal ticket."

Eridani was on him in a flash. Had he been sober and alert, she might not have risked an attack. As it was, she surprised him. Dewynn stumbled back

as he tried to keep away from the blade she wielded. Eridani used his own momentum, pushing him, causing the servant to fall over backward and hit the wooden floor hard. Before he could gather his wits, she was on top of him. Her dagger pressed against the flesh of his neck below the chin, while her left hand pulled his head back by the strands of his tangled blond hair.

"How dare you threaten me?" She spoke through clenched teeth, hoping that her anxiety would sound like anger. "I'm the Princess of Kozhad, born of the ancient bloodline of warrior kings. On a bad day, I could cut down ten lowborn brutes like you without breaking a sweat." She pulled harder on his hair. "Do you know what I'm taught to do with traitors?"

The servant shivered in her hands. "Mercy," he whispered. There was no hint of bravado left in his voice. He looked like a large, scared child.

Eridani stared at the beads of sweat forming on Dewynn's forehead. It would take almost no effort to let the blade dig deeper. She had already killed once; she remembered being surprised at how little resistance the sword encountered as it entered a man's back. Is that what she was now—a ruthless killer? Could she afford to be anything else? If she spared Dewynn's life, how long would it take him to run to the constables?

She pressed the blade deeper into his flesh and drew blood. Dewynn whimpered.

She showed him the cheap dagger she had pilfered from Lady Voriana's estate. A few drops of his blood stained its blade. "This is a poisoned dagger," she said, thinking of Danchu. "The blade was dipped in the venom of desert scorpions from the far south."

Dewynn sat up and clutched at the cut on his neck. He shook like a toddler in winter.

"Betray me again, and you will die a slow, painful death," said Eridani. "Prove yourself loyal, and I'll give you the cure." She was risking her life to save Danchu—would this creature do any less to protect his own?

"What must I do?" asked the servant.

She crossed her arms and waited.

"What must I do, Mistress?" he said, and offered an awkward bow, his hand still clutching his neck.

"There is another traitor. A caravan master named Turo. Today you will have your cut tended and sleep off your wine. Tomorrow, you will kill him for me." She pointed at the door. "Go. If you succeed, return for your cure at sundown, the day after tomorrow."

Eridani had no illusions about the fumbling drunk's chances of killing

Turo. Most likely, he would meet his end at the hands of the caravan master's sellswords. If so, it was the death he deserved, delivered a day late. But then, there was some remote chance of him ambushing Turo and getting away alive. And if he somehow succeeded, by the time he learned there was no poison in his body, Eridani would be long gone from Skond.

She watched Dewynn leave and turned her attention to the damaged floorboard, but couldn't retrieve the coins until her hands stopped trembling.

NO ONE STOOD guard at the entrance to the sorceress's estate. Her reputation, combined with the superstitious nature of most people, was protection enough.

Eridani pushed open the metal gate and walked into the wild garden. Twisted, malformed trees surrounded the sorceress's home. Bushes and grass grew wild, seemingly untended for decades. She picked her way through the undergrowth, careful not to twist an ankle. Such a large plot of land inside the city walls must've cost a fortune, but Skond's only practitioner of the arcane could afford it.

Eridani didn't fear magic, because she didn't believe in it. Her father had always cautioned that everything in the world could be explained in a rational manner. Only the ignorant attributed what they couldn't understand to the meddling of gods, demons, or sorcerers. The old witch had the cure for the poison that was killing her brother, and Eridani would bargain for it as she might with any healer or alchemist.

Ivy crawled up the castle-like walls of the large house. Eridani tried the heavy front door. It creaked as it opened. The cavernous hall was not lit. Eridani took a few steps inward, and stopped to let her eyes adjust to the dark.

"Hello?" she called out, but no one replied. The house seemed abandoned.

Eridani walked around the hall. The house was three stories high but she could find no ascending staircase. The only path she found led in the opposite direction. She felt her way down the steep incline, resting her hand on the wall for support. The long corridor continued to descend. Deeper down, she could see no light at all. She advanced slowly, feeling ahead with her toes before taking each step.

A dim candle flared up on the wall next to her. Startled, Eridani looked around, but the candle gave off more smoke than light and revealed nothing but a small area of bare corridor.

"Hello?" Eridani tried again. When no one answered, she pressed on. A new candle lit up every dozen steps. Eventually, the floor leveled out but the walls extended outward in both directions. She was standing at the entrance into another large hall.

She took a few tentative steps forward and a dozen candles positioned in an oval formation flickered to life. Even so many of them together provided little illumination; shadows swirled in the center of the hall. Eridani squinted. She could make out a shape hidden in the shadows.

She took several more steps toward the center. The shadows shifted right in front of her like a tangle of ethereal snakes. Someone moved within, cloaked in darkness.

"Hello," she said, for the third time.

The shadows parted and an enormous ogre stepped through. The monster bent down until it was face to face with Eridani, less than an arm's reach away. It was gray or dark green, she couldn't quite tell in the dark. Its face was a caricature of a man, seemingly too large for its form, misshapen like an unfinished clay molding. She could smell decay on its breath. It bared its fangs, each pointed canine the size of her fist, and roared a deafening challenge full of primeval rage.

Eridani stood her ground.

"Show yourself, Sorceress!" she said. "Save your illusions for others. I know there are no mythical monsters in the world."

The ogre stared at her for a moment, then its visage melted and dropped to the ground in a cascade of sand.

Magic tricks, thought Eridani. Better magic tricks than what she'd seen at carnivals, but magic tricks nonetheless.

The candles flared up, illuminating more of the oval hall, and revealed a woman in a flowing green gown standing at the far end of it. Her hair was white, and her face full of wrinkles, but she stood straight and carried herself with apparent ease. She was smiling.

"That is precious," she said, stepping forward. "Well done on seeing past the mirage, but to assume there are no monsters? Ha! Oh, to be so young and foolhardy again."

Eridani thought it best to swallow the insult. She pressed her palm to the center of her chest, a respectful greeting among equals. "I'm Eridani of Kozhad."

The old woman offered a mocking bow. "The name is Oshekzhothep the Seer. It's a little exotic for your tongue, so feel free to call me Sorceress."

"I need your help, Oshekzhothep." Eridani was sure she mangled the

pronunciation. "I seek the cure for the poison of the red desert scorpion."

"Straight to the point, eh? And why should I bother to help you?"

Eridani held up a purse of coins she had retrieved from under the floorboard. "I can pay."

"Gold is meaningless to me," said the sorceress. "I can transmute as much as I need from the base elements."

Eridani wasn't deterred. "There are many tales of you accepting coin in exchange for your services."

"Those tales are told by people who are either too ashamed or too afraid to disclose the real bargains they'd struck."

Eridani suspected the witch was merely trying to up her price. But then, she really could have all the gold she needed, whether she came by it via supernatural means or not. "What bargain would you strike with me, then?"

The sorceress walked around Eridani, studying her as one might a statue. "Can you offer me power? Influence? Secrets? Those are the true commodities, not some metal or stones that glint prettily in sunlight."

"The cure is for my brother," said Eridani. "He is the King of Kozhad. Surely it would benefit you to be in the good graces of a king?"

The sorceress continued to circle her. "My bargain is with you, not your brother. He may be a king, but it's you who dared to enter my abode on his behalf." She stopped in front of Eridani. "Permit me to read your future."

Eridani looked at the sorceress with suspicion. "You want to study my palm, or cast bones?"

The old woman chuckled. "True divination isn't a parlor trick. All that's required is your consent. Then I shall know whether you'll ever possess anything I might want."

Eridani sighed. "Go on, then."

The sorceress stood still and stared straight at Eridani, but her eyes seemed focused elsewhere, as though she were looking somewhere far away. A rustling sound came from the dark corners of the hall and the red flames took on an orange hue. They flickered as if caressed by the wind, even though Eridani felt no breeze.

The candles flared up and the sorceress refocused on Eridani. The smirk was gone from her face. Her pupils were wide, and she regarded Eridani as though she saw her for the first time. "You have a complex and ambiguous destiny," she said. "Much of your future is a mystery, even to an adept like me. There is potential for both greatness in you and great evil, and your path is lined with many difficult choices."

Eridani had visited a seer at a carnival once. There, a fat woman stirred coffee grounds and delivered vague prophecies. Hers were about the promise of future happiness and requited love rather than difficult choices and destiny, but Eridani couldn't shake the feeling of similarity. She put no stock in the empty predictions of either fortuneteller. "Will you help me, Sorceress?"

"I will take a chance on you, yes," said the sorceress. "After all, the investment is small enough. You might prove to be of great value to the Invisible God someday."

Eridani hadn't heard of an invisible deity, but with so many pantheons of gods being worshiped across the Heart, she wasn't surprised. She waited for the witch to name her price.

"I will give you the antidote for the poison to deliver to your brother. In return, I will ask a favor of you sometime in the future, and you must grant it no matter what, if it is within your power. Do you accept?"

Eridani thought back to the fairy tales and legends where the hero was suckered into what he or she felt was an easy bargain. They were meant as cautionary tales, but those characters were usually in a position where they had something to lose, whereas she thought she was paying a smaller price than the value of the coins in her purse. What favor could she possibly grant this witch? She was going to leave Skond and their paths would most likely never cross again. And besides, fairy tale heroes always found ways to outsmart the devils they bartered with.

"I swear it," Eridani said.

The sorceress plucked a small blown-glass vial out of thin air. It was filled with a viscous liquid the color of ash. "Have your brother drink this."

Eridani accepted the vial. Her hand brushed up against the hand of the sorceress, which felt leathery and cold.

"Make haste," said the sorceress. "Save your brother, if you can. He is the only one you can rely upon. Beside him, everyone you know and trust will come to betray you."

It may have been the chill of the underground hall, but Eridani shivered.

Those words stayed with her as she left the sorceress's home, clutching the vial in her hand underneath the cloak. Only after the afternoon sun warmed her skin was she able to shrug off the ominous prophecy.