

Fantasy

The Lady of Prophecy

By: E.V. Wallace



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I'm the wife of a roleplaying history nut, the mother of a young son and servant to a hoomous-loving cat named Jester.

Writing during the few hours a day when my son is asleep, I love crafting yarns set in a world of remorseless deities and fierce heroines where life is uncertain, fate unforgiving and magic a perilous enigma.

Twenty Leagues West of the Island of Thera - 1550 BCE

"You may call me Kikere of the forked tongue but I swear by Aradne Fate Weaver I speak true. The Lady's Priestesses knew nothing of the cataclysm's coming."

Mutters whisk around my fellow refugees like the spray that drives us to huddle under the ship's mast. Eidine does her best to shush them, but the fact that until recently she was a Priestess herself adds little to her credibility. I raise an eyebrow at one of the common rumors that flies around the crowd.

"Whether her most favored servants left our Island the previous Moon I know not," I continue, "but if so their escape was down to fortune, not foreknowledge. Who should know this better than I, who tended the sacred snakes every day since I learned to do so

without risking a bite?"

Eidine flashes me a smile which I return as the mutterings turn quizzical.

"You ask whether I am proclaiming them guiltless? Victims, like all on Thera, of a goddess who abandoned us to the Earthshaker? By no means. Cultivated ignorance can never be faultless, particularly when it is as dearly bought as theirs."

I gasp at the pain that erupts from my left hand. Eidine shoulders her way to my side, her black curls tumbling free from their restraints. She kneels, then unwinds the bindings that protect my old wound. The black flesh and exposed sinew should be familiar to me by now but I flinch at the sight nonetheless.

Our ship rides a brisk wind that has carried us miles from Thera, but our company must be more jittery than I realized; my flinch is echoed by dozens of my fellow escapees. I glance down to the leather snake tube tied to my belt. A guilty hiss emerges. My brown eyes meet Eidine's jade ones and we share a chuckle. I did more than flinch the day

the wound was inflicted. Shock jolted through me, freezing my body and mind in disbelief that Medjasse, of all my charges, had delivered such a bite. A bulge partway down her body testified to her lack of hunger and I had cleansed my hands as I always did before tending the Temple's scrying snakes. Whilst waves of fire from my hand burned the ice from my veins, Medjasse's yellow stare met mine. The viper held her body straight, tall, and rigid as the blood-red pillars that supported the temple roof, the zigzag track along her back vivid like a lightning burn in the morning sun of the courtyard. I cradled my hand, ignoring the demands of a nearby healer to let her examine the wound. Instead, I stared at an animal who was normally content to curl in the comforting embrace of her sandbox but now strained every sinew to pull away . . . and her eyes . . .

Never have I seen terror claim a creature so.

I surrendered my burning hand to the Healing Priestess, the faster to thrust the other into a thick glove I had long disdained when tending Medjasse. With it in place, I reached down to her rigid form and endeavored to coax her back into her tube. If serpents could scream, her shriek would have reverberated through every chapel the temple

could boast. She lunged, fangs extended, then twisted away, landing in a writhing heap as though the sand beneath her was molten. My mind roiled, its tumbling worsened by the poppy juice the Healing Priestess had pressed upon me.

"The High Priestess will need to see this." How I forced the words through my numb lips I had no idea.

"Because a molting snake took exception to rough handling?"

The Healer Priestess jerked on the linen she was winding around my wound, shooting a bolt of pain up my arm.

"Medjasse isn't in molt, and I've tended her since she first hatched." I gritted my teeth against the pain. An angry susurrant from the temple denizens attracted by the commotion surged and then receded like waves in a sea cave. The priestess hesitated, allowing me to catch my breath and press my advantage.

"Will the High Priestess not be displeased if she is kept in ignorance of a potential omen?"

The Healing Priestess snorted in disgust, then hauled me to my feet, barely allowing me time to upturn Medjasse's hiding tube over her twisting coils. With the serpent safely contained and her tube secured to my belt, the healer dragged me across the

courtyard into the inner temple, displaying none of the gentleness Prosepene, Great Healer, and Lady of the Poppies required of her acolytes.

With her dragging on my arm I plunged into the shadowed darkness of twisted passageways, their ocher-washed plaster turned blood red in the gloom. One turn, then another, then a third, or was that last just my head lurching in circles from pain, poppy juice, and Medjasse's venom?

We rounded the next corner and the scent of spices laced with newly hewn cedar filled my senses. Torches flickered over the walls, lending painted griffons a semblance of life amidst the incense smoke that sanctified every inch of the room. I prostrated myself upon the floor tiles, any less would be an insult to Lady Aradne's chosen on earth.

The Lady sat upon a throne set into the center of the back wall, flanked on either side by griffons and gilded standards bearing the double-headed axe of the Earthshaker. A canopy of golden sea silk shielded her face and upper body from profane eyes. Only the brilliant layers of a skirt so fine it seemed impossible its wearer could walk upon the ground remained visible of the Lady herself. Visions of my own plain russet skirt, stained jacket,

and ragged hair rope swarmed into my head. Nonetheless, I crawled forward until my forehead touched against the smooth granite of the scrying bowl freshly filled with sand at her feet.

“Who enters the abode of Aradne, Fortune Forger, the Lady of Prophecy who spins the fates of all?” The High Priestess’s voice cut through the air like the shriek of a striking hawk.

“One of the scrying serpents bit its handler, Revered Lady.”

I staggered to my knees, keeping hold of Medjasse’s hiding tube only with difficulty. The High Priestess leaned forward.

“You are the bitten one?”

“Yes, My Lady . . .” Silence billowed around the room but the Lady made no sign that she had even heard my reply. I tried again. “They call me Kikere and Medjasse here . . .”

“Let the serpent be laid in the scrying bowl.”

A priestess emerged from the shadows and took Medjasse’s hiding tube. Evidently forewarned of the animal’s behavior, she untied the strap that secured its lid, then tipped Medjasse into the bowl with one fluid movement.

All human eyes may have been on the symbols drawn in the sand but Medjasse ignored them. Instead, she twisted into a knot of scales and muscle,

writhing as if trying to escape the ground itself. The priestess beside me gasped. Her round face appeared no older than mine as she stumbled against my throbbing hand. Despite the poppy juice, I let out a scream.

Medjasse froze as if her coils were marble. She let out a hiss that caused even the High Priestess to start then reared upwards until her body stretched pillar straight. The High Priestess leaned forward, only for Medjasse to lunge, missing the lady’s august thumb by a hair’s breadth.

“The animal has touched none of the cardinal points. The scrying is void.” The priestess beside me intoned. Her voice may have squeaked a little, but it brooked no argument. On the sand Medjasse held herself rigid, hissing as if daring us to approach.

What rouses such terror in you, girl?

Despite the pain, incense, and the rising heat of the day, chills coursed through my veins.

“Indeed?” the High Priestess took a breath. “I have heard of this, animals are afflicted with madness, slathering at the mouth and savaging all within reach. Such creatures must be destroyed and their bodies burnt lest their sickness spread.”

From my earliest days, I have been loyal to the gods, would no

more think to doubt a pronouncement from the Lady’s chosen than I would look to the west for the sunrise. Now however I gaped in disbelief.

How can the chosen of Aradne speak so?

“But my Lady I have tended the scrying snakes since childhood and can assure you that they do not suffer from such afflictions. I’ve never heard of any animal without fur foaming at the mouth and . . .”

“The Chosen of Aradne, Fate Weaver has spoken.” The young priestess’s voice reverberated with shock at my temerity. Pain bolted through my arm where her grip tightened. I turned, but my eyes met only an ocher red face and eyes cast resolutely towards the floor tiles.

“I have seen all that is needful, my decision is made. Sister Eidine, you may return to your duties.” The High Priestess’ voice cut the air like a blade of finest flint.

Beside me, Sister Eidine bowed so deeply she nearly fell head-first onto the floor tiles. Then she fled, shooting me a scandalized glare as she left. Two guards entered the room, signaling the end of the audience and I scrambled to coax Medjasse into her hiding tube. No sooner had I succeeded than one of the guards snatched it from me.

“Send the animal to be sacrificed then return to your duties.” The High Priestess ordered, before turning to one of her attendants. A muffled hiss emerged from Medjasse’s hiding tube. Before the guard could retreat I kicked his shins with all the force I could muster. His shocked bellow filled air already alive with screams of outrage. I followed up with an elbow to his midriff. He doubled over grunting and his fingers slackened around Medjasse’s hiding tube.

It was enough. I pried Medjasse out of his loose fingers and then dodged around him, plunging from the room into a twisting forest of passageways. I raced through the murk, stifling screams when charging bulls and griffons reared from the wall frescos, leaned a simulation of life by the torches. Each turn froze my blood at the prospect of running into the pursuing guards whose shouts and footsteps echoed through the shadows. After a turn, the corridor opened out into a well-lit room. My heart plunged when I recognized the chapel in which animals gifted to the divines were dispatched. I tried to swerve, but a party of guards spilled into the room behind me, cutting off my retreat. My grip tightened upon

Medjasse’s tube and I backed away, fear knifing through me when the guards spread out, surrounding the two of us before advancing. It was only when they parted to allow an officiating priestess to approach, holding out her hand with the smile that wordlessly demanded Medjasse’s surrender that the earthquake struck. Priorities can change when the earth roars, pillars tremble and roofs fall on the innocent and guilty alike. Guards and priests who seconds before had been intent upon Medjasse’s capture now jumped for the nearest door jam and screamed to divine Aradne for deliverance. None had attention to spare for me when I hitched Medjasse’s tube to my belt and then ran for our lives. Only sister Eidine spied me fleeing the ruined temple. She did not raise the alarm, just stared around her with the wide eyes of one living through what she had always believed unthinkable. Weaving my way through the shattered streets and rubble proved no mean feat. Still harder was negotiating the heaving crowd that surged from the city to the comparative safety of the beach. Keeping afloat in a storm of bodies and trampling feet took all my wits while the carcasses of those who failed turned my bones to ice. Only

when I reached the harbor could I collapse into the coarse sand, my bitten hand aflame with agony. I repress a shudder at the memory. Six moons after that day people who used to go about their lives, busy and purposeful as bees, still wandered aimlessly about the beach. The bones of the city we used to call home stretched across the cliffs like those of a cursed Leviathan. My hand’s wound long since dried, a black scar laying bare dead flesh and useless tendons. At least the mice and rats moved down to the beach with us, so finding food for Medjasse was no great task. Keeping her calm proved more so over time. Although biddable enough in the days following the earthquake, it took maybe a moon before Medjasse shrank from the touch of the ground once more, preferring to lurk in her hiding tube. I wear it lashed to my hip even now and their Medjasse dwells to this day, safe from the unstable earth. Eidine warned me to leave the snake be each time she visited my campsite. Several times since the earthquake she would come by laden with food I never asked how she acquired. I didn’t argue and we munched her contraband in a companionable quiet whilst her eyes darted

from my hand to Medjasse to the lost souls strewn across the beach. Anywhere but at my face. *At least one priestess of Thera is in possession of a conscience.*

Regardless of Medjasse's behavior, anyone with eyes to see could watch the waters of the bay turn green and thick over the next half-moon.

Anyone with nostrils smelt the sulfur lacing the air so heavily that many were hard-pressed not to choke upon it.

A sacrifice of all surviving cattle did nothing to sweeten the waves. Instead, an island of black ash swelled from their depths, growing by the day and belching black smoke from its molten summit.

"They're saying the bay boiled the day before yesterday."

I jumped, and whilst at my hip Medjasse hissed her displeasure at being jostled. For a sheltered priestess newly emerged from her novitiate, Eidine moved with the silent grace of an assassin.

"They're saying many things. Do they suggest what we should do about it?"

Eidine snorted.

"The High Priestess sent a party of sponge divers to explore the new Island yesterday. They returned one man fewer and swore that they would not go back even were Lady Aradne herself to command them. The High Priestess then ordered us

to sacrifice all the goats now the cattle were gone. What she thinks we will eat without the milk and meat the herds produce I cannot say."

I stared, even since the earthquake Eidine had never voiced her doubts so bluntly.

"You do not believe she has thought of that?" I asked. Eidine grabbed a pebble and flung it at the sea.

"I think spending moons sitting on a beach sacrificing what little food we have left whilst our home rots around us is not a wise course of action, no matter who advocates for it." Eidine half garbled the words. She expelled the rest of her breath in one great gush and her face turned the colour of the setting sun.

"And so?" I asked. Eidine's eyes flashed about us. No one sat within earshot.

"It could be that even a younger priestess may have resources of her own." She murmured. "Were it so, such a priestess might hear about a merchant ship leaving Thera tonight. She might even be able to scrape together enough goods to cover passage for herself, maybe even for one more person?"

I breathed deep, hardly daring to allow hope to bloom in my heart after six moons of ill omens. In case I harbored any doubt the earth chose this moment to rumble afresh under our feet.

The burnt island spewed a new plume of smoke from its summit, one so thick it threatened to blot out the sun. I jumped up to follow Eidine across the darkening beach towards the jetties. When we boarded the promised boat, Medjasse shifted in her tube. For the first time in moons, the movement was not accompanied by a hiss or the prickling of teeth almost piercing leather. When we turned into the ocean beyond Thera's coast, Medjasse shifted again, finally finding contentment in the unknown dark.

