

THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

Murder, treason, betrayal.

All words that sat uneasily with Queen Aysha as she sat alone in Orshwinna. Seven days ago she had been queen of all Vanakia after a long and bloody rebellion that had finally ended a thousand year civil war. Now she was sitting alone in a cell at the top of the prisoner's tower, awaiting the dawn when a rope adorned her neck and she was tossed from the battlements as a mute testimony to all who claimed descent from the gods.

A daughter of gods? Whoever heard of such a thing? Granted the gods were in evidence everywhere, but they were aloof, uncaring and if truth be told, Kirshwinians had to make their own rules in a world that had gone mad.

Aysha turned and stared at the remains of the last meal. They had given her that last request along with her preferred method of death. A rope would snap her neck, the alternative would have been a ritual steeped in mysticism as her body was opened up and her internal organs removed carefully so as to keep her alive while her skin sloughed from her flesh and then the feast would begin as her executioners cooked her piece by piece. It was a punishment reserved for only the most serious crimes. She had banned the practice since assuming the reigns of power five years ago but she knew it still went on in the more remote parts of Vanakia. It had been a certain path to paradise for tens of thousands of years; the rope was the way of the criminal destined for hell. Strangely it had been Garaksta, her betrayer who agreed on the hangman's rope. Aysha had no need to ensure her entry into paradise, unlike others who chose the feast of the gods.

A bird twittered in the distance and she lifted her eyes in time to see it fly to the window and perch on the windowsill. She stared blankly at it, taking in the four winged creature with a mixture of bemusement and awe. She would not see such a creature this time tomorrow, her body would be food for the birds of the air dangling until the flesh had been picked from her bones.

"What say you," she murmured, "what part of me will you eat first?"

"There will be no eating," the bird replied in a haunting voice that seemed to come from everywhere at once, "I have ordained your body be entombed beneath the ice in Jenowa."

Aysha sat up in alarm at the words, a talking bird?

"You are not a bird."

It was a question as much as a statement of fact and if birds could smile then this dun-coloured creature was certainly smiling. It nodded his head and jumping to the floor, strutted to the remains of the meal and pecked at the bread and meat.

"The food of the Valkanians is not the healthiest," the bird looked up, "you might want to have the cook beheaded?"

Aysha chuckled quietly at the dark humour.

"Perhaps I will make that my last request," she frowned, "but who are you?"

"My name has never been spoken," the bird replied, "not even Tanda the Most High knows my name although he knows of me."

"So what do I call you?"

"My name is He Who Was And Is And Is To Come," it replied, "I move between worlds and different times taking a personal interest in the beings I have created. It was a remarkable feat to end a thousand year civil war, my congratulations to you."

"Thank you," she wiped her eyes, "but all that is naught now, I have been betrayed, my warrior maidens slaughtered in the night along with my hounds and I was brought here to Orshwinna and subjected to the mockery of a false trial."

"Because you claimed to be descended from Krann."

"I am descended from Krann, the Vanakian god of war and Yaindee, an exiled Valkanian princess," she straightened up.

"No sword fashioned by mortal hands can pierce my flesh no mortal weapon can kill me unless I decree it."

"But klingite fashioned in the pits of hell can pierce your flesh, I was there when it happened. I saw the riders approaching."

Aysha swallowed the bile. The bitter memory of seeing her four warrior maidens falling to the

blows of the Vanazzian assassins had lived with her every waking hour. Their naked bodies hacked to pieces along with those of her hounds. She had been paralysed by the sword thrust that sliced into her side, it should have killed her but the assassin knew his craft and her wound had been dressed before she was brought here.

“Aye, they were all slain, their bodies dismembered before my eyes and I could do nothing, the klingite blade had disabled me.”

“A blade that had been forged in the fires of hell by Baltaki, god of the underworld, his curses still eat into your soul. Were you to survive the coming day you will still have to fight the evil growing in your bones.”

Aysha shuddered and closed her eyes.

“I have been praying for six days but it is as if the gods have grown deaf.”

“They are not deaf,” it replied, “but your voice is as a whisper.”

“But you heard.”

“My power is greater than that of the gods, it was I who created the gods and goddesses, the wood spirits and water nymphs. The very universe is sustained by my will alone, not even the stars could remain were I to withdraw my power.”

“So you have the power to end this?”

“All power emanates from my breast,” it puffed up its chest, “without me nothing exists but a shapeless void.”

Aysha nodded and stared out the window.

“I am listening,” she screwed up her face, “your name is a long one. Is there a shorter name I could call you, if I might be so bold?”

She smiled “and then you can tell me why you have come to me in these last hours if not to rescue me.”

“I knew you would say that it turned and faced her, “I come to offer you a choice and you may call me Eternity, it is what I am when all is said and done.”

“Choices I have,” she replied, “to give up my life to the rope or the ancient way of death, I have chosen the first, but what are your choices. Eternity?”

“To be rescued from death now or to give up your life and return at a time I ordain in the future.”

She sat forward and stared at the creature.

“What are you talking about?”

“I will show you,” the bird flapped its wings, “close your eyes and let my voice guide you.”

Aysha stared at the cup of wine, was she hallucinating? She had heard that a little concoction of herbs added to wine could bring about strange dreams but the wine had tasted like wine.

She turned to the bird and nodded.

“I said I was listening, now I am watching.”

She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes.

For a moment she felt nothing but the cold stones against her back but then she felt warmth spreading from her toes through her body until it felt her whole body was on fire. Aysha was vaguely conscious of a slight tearing as her soul was taken from her body and then she saw blackness followed by light as she rose high above the battlements of Orshwinna. Spread out like a star, its walls had never been breached. Her armies had laid siege to it twice and been forced to withdraw. These last few years she had explored every inch of the castle and the surrounding city, intent on learning its secrets. She swallowed the grief and turned to the north, somewhere beyond the icy steppes lay the home of the Ice Lords, half beast, half Kirshwinian, they rode on fiery, winged beasts. It had been the Ice Lords who had turned the tide of battle on the Plains of Gannyweir.

“This world is dying,” Eternity intoned in a voice that was definitely female, “were you to live to the fullness of your years, you would see much of what you have accomplished undone before your eyes. This world was placed in a time warp and its inhabitants forbidden from learning the crafts that would enable them to reach the stars, it was done for a reason.”

“And what is that reason?”

“It is far beyond here,” Eternity replied, “come and I will show you.”

The vision was fading and she fell into blackness for what seemed like an eternity until eventually

she was brought to a blue globe suspended in space. A fiery sun blazed down upon it and she shielded her eyes from it as she neared the planet. The bottom and top halves seemed encased in a sea of ice while blue waters surrounded the continents.

“This is the planet I have chosen,” Eternity murmured in her ears as they alighted in a narrow valley, “the despised ones, the monkey people who will one day send their ships into space and time seeking new worlds to conquer, in time they will come to Kirshwin and seize control. But there is one among them who will see the error of her people’s ways and rise in revolt. It is she who will take your sword and pierce your heart and together you will throw back the tide of oppression and restore the balance not only to Kirshwin but to other worlds.”

“You are not making sense,” she stared around her at the flat headed race struggling to bring down a giant hairy beast with a long trunk, “you are choosing these beasts to restore harmony?”

“Not these.”

She turned to the voice to find herself staring at a woman, a tall shapely woman dressed in gold who smiled and pointed to the cliffs above her.

“Those beings were once as the flat headed ones, they are the ones who will rule this planet.”

Aysha stared in disbelief at the tall beings on the cliff top, they looked like Kirshwinians, with two legs, two arms, a body and a head, even their features were similar. Perhaps at one stage in their own history they had been as these people.

“It is a common form I have grown fond of,” Eternity replied, “very functional don’t you agree?”

“Aye,” she narrowed her eyes, “but they are holding spears and what are those things in their hands?”

“Slings, now watch.”

She watched as the flat headed ones finally succeeded in bringing down the hairy beast, it breathed its last and the leader let out a howl that echoed up and down the valley. The others joined in with their howls as they pranced around the dead beast.

An instant later a stone whistled through the air and struck the leader between the eyes, his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell back dead in a shower of dust. The others didn’t notice until two more of their number had fallen dead from the slingers. A howl of rage rose as the tall beings rained stones and spears down on the flat headed ones their unerring aim wreaking havoc amongst them. A few tried to hurl spears back but their aim was too short and eventually they turned and ran.

Aysha watched as the tall beings descended to the beast and began the gruesome task of butchering the animal. Some acted as guards she noticed in case the flat headed ones returned. She noted a difference between them, some had breasts, like the females of Kirshwin, they were doing the butchering while the ones without mounds were guarding.

“Male and female,” Eternity nudged her.

“I know,” she nodded, “we are the same.”

“These are the ones who will call themselves human beings, to your people they will be known as Boonkini, the hated ones.”

“I think the flat headed ones will hate them as well,” she replied, “they have stolen their food.”

“By the time the human ones reach your world the flat headed ones will be a memory, they are a slow witted race. The human ones will change their world so rapidly they will be forced to look to the stars for new worlds. They have many faults but they are also capable of changing their minds as well and I am thinking they will be able to turn the tide.”

“I am not so sure I want them on Kirshwin,” she turned to Eternity, “they are a very dominant race.”

“It is what is needed to combat the greater evil,” Eternity turned and waving her hands, swept her high into the air and into the inky blackness of space and time.

She found herself staring at a monstrous red eye that stared back at her malevolently, Eternity was holding her back as she murmured into her ear.

“Behold the face of evil, this creature has been present in the universe from the day I took form and began my war against it. If this being wins the war then all that I have created including myself will be sucked into the abyss.”

“What is it?”

“Nothingness,” she replied, “the absence of everything, it is growing as we speak, spreading its evil throughout the worlds. Baltaki was drawn into its evil many eons ago, the destruction of the last

thousand years came about because this evil seeks to destroy and unmake all that I have made, we are twins, one creates, one unmakes.”

“And you want these humans to destroy this thing?”

“Not just the humans,” she replied, “Human and Kirshwinian will unite to unmake evil, you belong to a race that is much older and wiser and I will keep you in your old ways until these humans leave their home and come to you. Evil does not know this as yet, but I suspect it knows something of my plans, perchance we will seek a way to divert its attention between now and then.”

“We?”

“You and I,” she replied, “you will not lie cold beneath the grave. I will take you with me and we will seek to instruct the human ones, they are a fickle race and if we do not instruct them they may destroy themselves.”

“One thing bothers me,” Aysha replied a moment later, “why not blast this evil into nothingness, why rely on mortals and immortals? If you have such power why not use it?”

“Ah,” she replied, “now we come to the heart of the matter.”

The vision faded and Aysha found herself on the mountains overlooking the ancient city of Jenowa, she could smell the fresh fragrance of the trees and hear the soft lowing of munkas grazing on the hillsides. Eternity sat beside her and leaned back against a rock while Aysha waited.

“It was the price I paid when I brought myself into existence. A war between myself and the other would have resulted in an explosion of such violence, all would have been obliterated. It has been waiting for such a war since the beginning of time but I will not give into its desires. I will use the despised ones to bring about my purposes in the universe. One thing evil does is overlook the insignificant, it does not think I would dare bring mortals against it.”

“A wise tactic, perhaps,” she frowned, “and you think my death will accomplish this?”

“It is what the great evil wants, it has been watching your progress and thinks if you are removed it is free to unmake this world. But I will allow it to keep the Kirshwinian nations where they are and travel to this other world, together we will make a new people who will come to Kirshwin and bring about a stronger race capable of sailing into the heart of evil and defeating it forever.”

“You offer me a strange choice,” she rose and walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down upon the castle. As a child she had played in its streets, watched by her mother. She had not known of her father until she had encountered him on a hunting expedition into the Jenowan Mountains. The vision had been as real as this one. He had shown her the length and breadth of Kirshwinian history and charged her with the task of uniting Valkanian, Vanazzian and Varghannian into one Vanakian nation, once more to take their place amongst the nations of this world. When she had returned to Jenowa she had raised an army and joining with Valkanian rebels, had embarked on an ambitious campaign to end the thousand year civil war.

“I should never have trusted Garaksta,” she murmured, “there were those who said that his story did not match his wounds but I needed his wisdom.”

“It was enough for the task at hand,” she replied, “but you are right, he deceived you from the start.”

“Well I rue the day I trusted him.”

“These things have a way of working themselves out, without his betrayal I would have been forced to look elsewhere for the Saviour of the universe.”

“And if I take the second choice and escape my execution?”

“You will have to lead another army against Garaksta and I will be forced to continue my search.”

“Then it is done,” she sighed, “but I am not looking forward to having my neck snapped,” she touched her throat, “it is a painful death I am told.”

“These things too can be worked out,” she replied, “my magic is deeper than all.”

“Then we will do this,” she turned.

Eternity smiled blissfully and reaching out, touched her brow.

“Then sleep, on the morrow we will deal with this minor matter and travel to distant worlds, there are many other worlds I would show you.”

Aysha blinked as the darkness descended and felt something cold and hard against her back. When she opened her eyes she was staring at the bird now sitting on the windowsill. She smiled and farewelled it.

“Farewell my friend.”

The bird twittered in the manner of Kirshwinian birds and rising in flight, circled the room and dropped excrement into the cup of wine at her feet and then flew out the window.

Aysha bent forward and taking the cup, drained it. She couldn't taste anything but wine but felt a pleasant glow as the darkness descended.

She awoke in the early dawn to the sound of footsteps ascending into the tower. Chains rattled and a key was inserted into the lock, the door creaked open and Garaksta stood before her a satisfied smile on his face.

“Ready to face your fate?”

“I am ready,” she rose slowly and held out her hands, “I am Aysha, daughter of Krann and you will rue this day till your dying days when all you have stolen will vanish before your eyes. Baltaki has corrupted your heart.”

“As you say,” he replied, “but it is your body that will be eaten by the birds.”

“My body,” she smiled and looked down, “is the temple of the Most High, she can make me anew.”

Her hands were tied firmly behind her back and she was led down the steps, into the courtyard and up another flight of steps to the highest battlements. A burly Valkanian rose, the rope in his hands, one end was tied around a pole set into the courtyard, he pulled at it firmly.

Aysha stared straight through him and then turned to the onlookers. She knew all them well enough, generals who had stood at her side through two defeats and the final victory, counsellors who had helped her rule Vanakia these last five years, and servants who had come to her and whispered in her ears. All had stood by silently, terrified of the power Garaksta now commanded. Baltaki had indeed been busy.

She shook her head in sadness.

“One is coming to this world who will awaken me from death's slumbers,” she spoke clearly, “and then we will see again the glory of Kirshwin but until then you will remain savages, remnants of a great people.”

“Go to your death,” Garaksta spat, “blasphemer.”

“Blasphemer?”

She stared at him.

“I am Aysha, daughter of Krann and Yaindee and I will live on in this world and other worlds, but when I return it will be with an army at my back and fire in my eyes and you will quail before my sword of justice.”

So saying she turned and walked resolutely to the battlements. The skies opened up and she saw the hosts of heaven before her. Krann held his sword high in the air ready to strike the first blow but she stilled him.

“The time is not now father, I will come to you in time and you will understand.”

“Blasphemer,” Garaksta screamed, “hang the whore.”

She turned and smiled as she bowed her head and let the noose slip around her neck and without a further word stepped up onto the battlement. The hangman reached for her but she kicked him aside and leapt from the wall. For a few moments she felt nothing as she plunged down, and then she felt the sudden pain as the rope ran out. Blackness rushed through her and she was floating through the air. She heard the voice of Eternity calling and then she was standing in a field of pink flowers, a tall maiden walked towards her and bowed slightly.

“That wasn't so hard, was it?”

She glanced around and saw her body twitching at the end of the rope, it kicked a few more times and then stopped.

“The Jenowans will steal your body away and take you to Jenowa.”

“Better than being picked clean by the birds.”

“Even if that were true I could still remake your body.”

“Give me bigger breasts,” she touched her breasts.

“They are big enough,” she replied, “now let us depart this place, there is another world I would show you.”

Aysha stared at the strange winged beast.

“We will ride on that?”

“I have named it Dragon, it is known by other names on other worlds.”

She whirled and smiled.

“As you can see, you have form and substance, as do I.”

Aysha ran her hands over her figure and murmured in surprise.

“It is a strange feeling, one of being dead and alive at the same time.”

“We are living in the eternal now, come there is much I would teach you before Yohanna awakes you from death.”

“You know her name?”

“I was and am and am to come,” she replied, “all things are known to me in an instant but I will save you such power lest it destroy you.”

Aysha turned once more as she neared Dragon. Her lifeless body was swinging at the end of a rope, her eyes bulging obscenely.

One life had come to an end, the new one had begun.

Joanna Stevenson, former native liaison agent for the Askalimat tribes approached the crystal topped coffin and stared down at the perfectly preserved corpse of a woman beneath. She made a mental calculation and sucked in her breath. Forty thousand Earth years, what techniques of embalming did these Jenowans possess? She looked as if she had just been laid to rest yesterday. Her eyes were drawn to the strangely pointed ears. An elf? She had seen paintings on rocky crypt walls deep in the mountains of beings with pointed ears, but no Kirshwinian had pointed ears, at least none that she had seen.

Joanna turned to her companion, Valmunti the Siskewan chieftain.

“I am supposed to pierce her heart?”

“It is the prophecy in these parts,” he replied, “I cannot say if it is true or not.”

Joanna looked at the black blade in her hands, klingite was stronger than steel and capable of slicing through steel and even the hardened plastic armour of Earth soldiers, it could pierce a rock hard crystal easily enough.

“This is foolishness,” she reversed her grip on the sword and stepped forward.

“May the gods go with you, Yohanna,” Valmunti breathed.

Joanna raised the blade.

Eternity held her breath.

Written by Alastair Rosie. © 2006

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