Past Proceeds Destiny

By Lyngard

Chapter 1: The Call

A soft breeze rustled through the leaves and lifted my hair from my shoulders. It was a welcome respite. The rains of the season had come and gone leaving an oppressive heat with their disappearance. However, time marched on, I reminded myself, and it seemed to move more and more quickly with each passing season. In a few more lunar cycles, we would be celebrating the harvest and preparing for the winter months

I laughed silently to myself, taking great care to make no sound. We had just celebrated Litha not less than one lunar cycle, and yet my thoughts had already turned to another celebration, another mark in time. My desperate need for relief from the stifling humidity must be playing games with my mind if I were already dreaming of the first freeze. I'm sure once the first snows reached the Hunting Plains, I would be once again dreaming of the heat that I was currently despising.

Mist swirled peacefully in the glade below. My feet skitter-stepped as I adjusted my weight, and the buck grazing in the clearing lifted his head and snorted. He pawed the ground with his right foreleg, and then immediately stilled. Only his breath, displacing the mist around his muzzle and his ears flicking forward listening, kept him from appearing like a statue.

After several slow minutes, the male deer lowered his head and resumed grazing among the lush vegetation growing at his feet near a small spring. The threat he had perceived had passed. In truth, it hadn't, for we were the threat.

To my left, further out on the sturdy tree branch and in my peripheral field of vision, I saw Willa move. She had her bow out and arrow drawn. Sadness pierced my heart, and I sent a quick prayer to the goddess, thanking her for her blessing and asking forgiveness for our want. This was not our way, not originally. In times past, before the aliens had come, we never would have chased after meat – certainly not so far away nor so early in the season.

My eyes strayed to the beginning nubs spouting on the deer's head. They were just starting to branch, a couple of points on each side. If we could have waited, they would have most likely grown into a crown of at least three times that. The soft velvet covering the antlers sparkled in the dappled morning light, created by the heavy tree canopy, which blocked out all but the strongest rays of the sun. Again, he suddenly stopped grazing and turned in our direction. His ears twitched listening intently to the air chime gently through the leaves.

We were several meters from our target, and the wind was in our favor keeping our scent behind us. Yet, I still held my breath. It would be a shame to loose this chance especially since Willa and I had been tracking this glorious beast since long before the dawn began to light the horizon.

Willa remained motionless, a statue herself. I knew she would not take the shot until she was certain it would be a quick and instant kill. Not like the mutants did. They took sadistic pleasure in playing with their food, wounding it, and tracking for days. Sometimes, they would give up the chase, bored with the hunt, and simply search for the next kill whether they needed the food or not.

Anger coiled in my gut from a recent memory, and my hand drifted to the knife strapped to my thigh. Almost a week ago, I had found a small doe, barely a full season old and not worthy of a meal, clinging to life at the edge of the Forest of Silence. The natural dampening of the thick foliage kept her bleating inaudible; but the silence only made her plight more heartbreaking.

She lay half paralyzed and gasping for air. She had been shot; the shaft from a crossbow was still half buried in her left shoulder. Blood, dark brown and bright red mixed together, dripped from her muzzle as she tried to breathe through fluid pooling in her lung, which had most likely been grazed by the shot. She was mortally wounded and in pain. I had taken pity on the creature and had taken my knife and slit her throat, ending her life and her misery.

Carrying her across my shoulders, I took her carcass home, but instead of feasting on what little meat she had, we burned her in a pyre of thanks to the goddess. Her suffering would have rendered her inedible, and this was the best honor we could give her for her life, which had been cut too short. It seemed the goddess had listened since she had granted us the buck in the clearing below.

The deer slowly lowered his head to the fertile ground and resumed foraging for his breakfast. I watched Willa close her eyes, take a breath, and hold it, but before she could release the arrow, a deep sound – two long, low blasts followed by two equally low but shorter bursts and again to the long – resonated through the forest.

The buck immediately startled, its large black eyes dilating, its head and ears shooting in the direction of the trumpeting. He snorted in panic and reared back on his hooves. With his whole body set for flight, he took to the opposite direction of the announcing horns and us.

Willa released the tension in the bow completely retracting her arrow. The buck had moved so quickly with the interruption that she had not been sure of the shot. She whirled in the direction that the announcing horns had come. Again, we heard the herald in the same succession as before.

“Willa, that is the call of an arriving ship,” I said, but I was confused. We were not expecting any of the tribes until next Litha.

“I know, Nayda.” Willa quickly slid the arrow back into her quiver case and the bow onto her back. Grabbing the nearest length of a vine, she launched herself in the direction of the signal, and I followed suit. I noted that while she had been startled by the introduction of the conch shell horn, she didn’t appear to be completely surprised by it.

“Were you expecting them?” I switched hands to the next length of vine and kicked my feet forward to swing on to the next bank of trees.

“In a manner of speaking,” she replied, cryptically. She also continued to swing vine to vine throughout the dense foliage.

I was surprised that we were heading directly toward the shore rather than back to the Treetop Kingdom. Willa apparently wasn’t interested in arriving with a full welcoming party. At our pace, it would just be the two of us long before any of the watchers would arrive.

I thought back to the hunting parties planned for today; indeed, Willa and I were the only ones close to the North Rock Mountains. The others were either near the Hunting Plains or gathering berries and herbs in the Forest of the Enchanted Unicorns. It was possible that no one would be even close enough to hear the signaling ship.

I gauged my vault to the next vine and noticed that the trees were beginning to thin. We were coming closer to the base of the mountains. There were only two ways to the shore from here, either the Pass of the Rockmen or skirting along the bank of the River of Despair not far from the Bridge of Light.

I wasn’t relishing the likelihood of dodging boulders if we should awaken the rock guardians, but I wasn’t too thrilled with the alternative either. This was mating season for the Black Widow Sharks. They often congregated at the mouth of the river where it met the sea, and during this period of time, they were very aggressive. I knew this firsthand as I had once witnessed a shark jump onto the bank and catch a passing unicorn. Then with prey fully contained within its deadly jaws, the creature wiggled itself on its eight legs back into the water.

Willa stopped on the last of the tall trees and waited for me to join her. “The pass of the Rockmen will take us too far out of our way. We’ll go along the river bank.”

“Willa,” I began, but she cut me off.

“I know, the Black Widow Sharks…but we can make it if we’re careful.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I knew that she was right. Time was of the essence. We needed to get to the landing party before they started to make their way to us. Tribes from across the sea, unescorted on our land, and without Queen Willa’s blessing could meet danger quickly – not just from the native flora and fauna in our area but also from uninformed Warrior Maidens. As far as anyone knew, this was an invasion force although I doubted that. Willa was not acting as if this visit was a huge surprise.

I tried not to be angry at that. If she knew there was a chance that a ship might be coming, then why hadn’t she said anything to me or anyone else for that matter? What could be on the ship that required such secrecy?

Willa led the way to the River of Despair. This close to the North Rock Mountains, there was no bank of which to speak. Instead, the mountains just died into the river. One false step, and it was a plunge into the waters below. I glanced over the edge past the razor sharp rocks that poked out of the rapids and

caught sight of several fins swimming against the current

“We go one at a time,” Willa said and scoured the area for the best path, best hand and footholds, to use on the sheer face of the cliff that we had to cross to get to the shore.

I knew my objections would fall on deaf ears, so I just nodded my head. “Before you go, give me your bow.”

Willa carefully slid her weapon and ammunition from her shoulder and held them out to me. “Hopefully, you won’t need it.”

“Hopefully,” I agreed but still threaded an arrow into the bow. I was by no means the markswoman that my sister was, but I could certainly hit something the size of a shark if it decided that my sister might make a nice bauble for attracting a mate.

By the goddess’s grace, Willa made it to the other side without incident. “All right, Nayda,” she called, “your turn.”

Mimicking the way Willa wore her bow, I slid the weapons around my shoulder and torso. It might be a bit tricky to climb with the additional armament, but I could manage. I tried not to think about the fact that I was on my own completely in my climb. I hadn’t thought about who would watch my back if the sharks should spy me. It wasn’t like I could throw Willa her weapon, or could I?

I dropped from my preliminary handhold with the new thought. “Willa, I’m going to shoot you a line and tie off the bow and quiver.”

I once again removed the bow and chose an arrow with the line already secured to it. I quickly set about sighting and shooting. The arrowhead embedded itself deeply in the ground at Willa’s feet. She waved a hand, and I sent the weapon and arrow case plunging down the cliff face where they swayed like a pendulum.

Apparently, the motion also garnered the interest from the denizens below. One right after the other, two sharks leapt into the air. Their jaws snapped angrily at the threat or possible meal. However, the bow and case were too small and too close to the rocks for them to get a piece of either. That fact didn’t appear to be a deterrent for them though. Soon, more sharks joined in the hunt as if they could sense prey near. Unfortunately, that prey would be me.

Willa pulled on the line and inch-by-inch moved the bow and case over the craggy surface. By the time she had retrieved it, the sharks had grown disenchanted with the chase and were back to investigating the shores and under the water for more easier meal options.

I found my handholds again and slowly worked my way across the steep surface. I was about midway across when I heard a strange sound below me like water being sucked into a whirlpool. Securing myself to the wall, I glanced down in time to see a large black shark eject itself from the water.

Water droplets scattered like weapon's fire explosions. I was doused from head to toe. My handholds on the sheer rock surface became slick. Even as I dug my fingers and nails into the crevice, I felt my foothold slip. I pressed myself to the rock face still trying to regain the foothold I had lost, but I could not. My right hand gave way, and I swung drunkenly out into the open air.

A crunching sound of jaws too close to my body made me jerk backward. A fine spray of liquid gushed over my already wet body. I recognized the acrid and lethal scent immediately and closed my eyes and mouth tightly. Blindly, I struck the wall with my back. My foothold and handhold could not compensate for the completely different direction I was now facing, and I felt the odd sensation of nothingness as my body freefell from the cliff wall.

Sounds seemed to slow down. Above the roaring of the wind, I heard someone scream. It sounded like my name. I felt something smooth nudge my shoulder and then a sharp report of something sharp penetrating a thick hide. There was another shriek, which could have been mine, but I was desperately trying to keep my mouth closed. If by some miracle, I managed to survive the fall into the waters below, I didn't want to be paralyzed by shark venom. I would try to go down fighting.

I wondered how far I had fallen. I braced for the impact of water and maybe stone if I managed to make it that far without the jaws of something clamping down on my body. Shouldn't I have hit by now?

Suddenly, something coiled around my torso. My freefall downward was now a quick change of direction. I felt the wind leave my lungs in a hard rush. I struggled slightly, not knowing what was happening, but a soothing baritone voice called out. "Easy, Nayda, I've got you."

Tygra? I must be dreaming. I must have already hit the water and was now in a state of complete delusion. Of course, that didn't explain how I could feel the heat of a body pressing against mine or the cold wind blowing across my face.

I again felt like I was falling, but this time, I was securely held against something warm. The drop to the ground was sudden, but not uncomfortable, and the arms that held me did not release me but held on to me as the rest of my body was set gently down on what felt like terra firma.

"Don't move, Nayda." That was Willa's voice, laced in an icy calm that I knew meant that I had scared her as much as I had scared myself.

"Are you hurt?" The same rich baritone that had saved me asked.

I shook my head slightly, but kept my mouth and eyes tightly closed. I knew that I had received a face full of venom. There was a rough scraping of something like an arrow shaft across my face. I tried not to flinch. Leave it to Willa to collect the venom on my body. It would make a potent toxin to be used on our arrows.

The scraping was then replaced with a cloth, wet and cold. The touch was different as well. Gentle, like a

mother cleaning a child, although I was no child. I suddenly felt self-conscious and grabbed the hand and the cloth to clean my own face.

Very slowly, I cracked my eyes opened as I scrubbed at my face. I had not been dreaming at all. There in vivid orange and black with a creamy white to add to the contrast stood Tygra. He wore an expression on his face that showed that he was still deeply concerned. I was suddenly grateful for the fact that my face had been rubbed almost raw. It would hide the heat of embarrassment that I could already feel flooding my cheeks.

“Thanks,” I offered. The smile that split the tiger’s face was so resplendent with relief that I had to look away. I was acting like a silly child, I warned myself. I knew there were no more knights in shining armor to come to my rescue like the stories of old, and besides that fact, I was never one to play the damsel in distress.

At the edge of the cliff, I caught sight of a dark grey panther looking down; Willa was at his side. I walked to where the pair stood, ignoring the warning I barely heard from the tiger, “I wouldn’t…”

I should have listened. I felt my stomach clench and then churn as I stared into the frothing waters below. In the midst of a swarm of sharks lay an unmoving black body, larger than the sharks swimming around. There was a broken shaft of an arrow still poking through its head. Blood pooled around the creature as one after the other, jaws of steel tore into the dead flesh. The gnashing of teeth and territorial warnings being hissed could be heard even as high us as we were.

I shuddered as I watched the sharks opportunistically feeding on their dead kin, some taking pieces away with them and others swallowing the bites whole. Had it only been Willa and myself, I probably would have thrown up, but I would not show that kind of weakness in front of the two male ThunderCats.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, pleased that my voice didn’t shake like my insides seemed to be.

“We were in the North Rock Mountains investigating a Thundrillium deposit when we heard the horns and decided to investigate. It was just dumb luck that we arrived and saw the Black Widow Shark attempt to take you down for a morning snack.”

I suppressed the images that poured into my brain at my recent almost tumble into the River of Despair by way of deadly jaws. I saw Tygra give Panthro a glare, but pretended not to be fazed by the words or the tiger’s apparent irritation at the panther’s description of what had happened.

Willa glanced back at the river for a moment apparently thinking the same thing that I had been. That had been too close. “Well, you might as well come along, ThunderCats. This call has more to do about you than it does us.”

My sister did not offer any more information, as the four of us quickly made our way past the mouth of the River of Despair and around the base of the mountain. As the shore came into view, I could just

make out the shape of a large ship on the distant horizon. There were five masts, but the sails were not inflated. They were situated not to catch the wind while the vessel was anchored out at sea. In the fluttering breeze, I could make out the labyrinthine symbol on a flag affixed to the stern. It was a tribe ship from Rodos, the same island nation that had joined us this past Litha.

As we continued on, I saw a landing party boat had been pulled onto the sand. Stationed next to the rowboat were three men. Willa pulled out her hunting horn and blew the customary greeting. The men turned to us and began to walk our direction. In moments, we were facing each other.

Knowing that there were procedures of which they were not privy to nor accustomed with, Tygra and Panthro hung back. However, I took solace in knowing if there were any provocations, they would not hesitate to act. I took a step forward but kept a respectful distance situating myself at Willa's elbow.

"Kaleb." Willa greeted and took another step forward to meet the leader of the males.

"My lady." Kaleb knelt on one knee in front of the warrior queen.

I released my breath not realizing that I had been holding it. Even though I knew that the meeting had not come as a shock to my sister, I still had been plagued with a feeling, a premonition that all was not as it seemed. Seeing Kaleb offering Willa such respect mollified me.

I glanced at the other two males who had accompanied their leader. I was surprised that I recognized the second in command, who held his position just like I was holding mine. He was the male who had been staring at me all through the Litha celebration. That fission of foreboding crept back up my spine. He must have recognized me as well; his eyes never strayed from mine.

I felt a heat on my shoulder and realized that I was not the only one who had observed the apparent fixation on me. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Tygra had taken a small step so that he was now standing directly behind me. Usually, I would be angry at such a possessive stance, but right now, I was oddly comforted by it.

"Do you have word?" Willa asked as Kaleb got up to stand in front of her.

The human male leader glanced to me and then to the two ThunderCats behind me. I saw him raise his eyebrow in silent question to Willa. She simply nodded for him to continue.

"The Oracle bids the aliens to come to the islands. She says she must speak with the lion directly. That there is a hidden truth that has brought him here, a destiny that comes again."

"What are you talking about?" Panthro asked obviously not liking the veiled reference to Lion-O.

"Peace, Panthro," Willa held up her hand. "Lord Lion-O is aware of this mission, he was the one who instigated it."

I watched the panther and tiger exchange glances. They obviously were as in the dark about what was going on as I was. Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better.

"Willa, perhaps, we should all return to Cat's Lair and let Lion-O speak directly to this Oracle's messenger."

"Is that your wish?" Willa asked Kaleb.

"I will do as you wish, Queen Willa. I only ask that you and your sister grant us safe passage through this land and remain with us while we talk with the aliens."

A shiver ran down my back at Kaleb's reference to the felines as aliens. It wasn't the word, but the way in which he had said it. It also accompanied a strange look from the male who seemed to be smitten with me.

Panthro and Tygra again shared a look. It seemed that there was more said without words than with them at this meeting. Tygra stepped forward. "The Thundertank is on the other side of the mountains. There is enough room for all of us, and it will get us back to Cat's Lair by nightfall."

Willa nodded her head. With Tygra and Panthro in the lead, we began the arduous ascent over the mountains to the ThunderCat vehicle.

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