

The Temple Treasure

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Of course, it started raining halfway down the road. The patches of blue sky between the treetops tinted into grey. In a single moment, hail started pouring down onto the convoy, transforming the dirt road into mud.

"Keep your eyes out, all of you!" Tylin Khan could be heard barking from ahead. "And move! If one of you blind morons gets us into an ambush, I'm gonna play ball with your head!"

Somebody thrust me forward. I grimaced, stumbling on, my boots sinking into the mud. That much I already knew about Tylin Khan: She barked everything, as if she was a wolf.

The chains cut into my wrists. My whole face itched by now, but since my hands were cuffed behind my back, I couldn't scratch myself. I would not personally have been opposed to an ambush.

If there were gods somewhere up there after all, they were probably laughing themselves silly over me.



I had been captured because my father had pushed me in the direction everybody else ran away from when the Forest Rebels attacked.

One struggle and one hit on the head later I had woken up with the faded carpet of the upper castle floors tickling my nose. An intimidating woman with arms like a blacksmith hovered over me – that's how I met Tylin Khan, and she would never give me much reason to readjust that first impression. Dirty, ragtag foresters flitted through the parlor behind her. The castle had fallen.

While Khan looked me over, I studied the hatchet in her grip. Despite the blood dripping from its blade, it looked about three times as well-tended as the rest of her.

"You're right," said Khan to the rebel warrior at her side, inspecting me the way you would a piece of furniture. "She got them holy symbols on her cheeks. Hmm."

Her companion grabbed her shoulder. "The new Oracle," he said urgently. "They's all talkin' of it everywhere. Castle of Byrn's got its own Oracle now." Then, in a reverent voice: "What a hostage. She's worth a thousand coins."

"Hmm," said Tylin Khan, twirling her hatchet in contemplation.

It cut through the air bare centimeters from my cheek. I couldn't help but pale.

"We don't have no space for a prisoner," said Tylin Khan.

"*A thousand coins*," said the man as if she'd lost her mind.

Khan shrugged and stood up. "Well then," she said. "Take her along."

Somebody grabbed my collar and yanked me away. Abruptly I realized that the Forest Rebels hadn't come to raid the castle for the Oracle.

They hadn't cared about the Oracle at all.



By the time we were marching onto the forecourt of the Temple of Kurn, the skies were clearing up. Servants with suspicious looks on their faces barely dared to leave the shadows. Khan installed herself in the middle of the court and declared to the world at large that she hadn't come to rob somebody for a change but rather to propose a trade. So the servants cautiously approached, visibly uncertain

whether they should bother offering the rebels wash water and towels. We were then led into the audience hall to meet Pirmin kin-Abdil Alimdar, The Radiant.

I'd heard of Pirmin Alimdar. Everybody had heard of Pirmin Alimdar. He had managed to transform the Temple of Kurn, formerly a backwater of the powerless and ignored, into the most influential place of worship of all the Lands of Erimar. It was said that nobody read the Oracles as accurately and wisely as he, as if the Gods whispered the words to him directly – including further reading suggestions and footnotes.

The first thing I noticed about him was the fact that he wasn't sitting on the velvet pillow draped over the gallery. He hovered a span above it, his legs crossed, looking severe.

The second was that he could barely be older than I was and that he suffered from an intense case of acne. It gave me no displeasure to deduce that for once in my life – and despite the golden tattoos on my face – I counted among the most beautiful people in the room.

Upon our entry, the Radiant placed the scroll he'd been studying next to him in the air, almost knocking over a tall candleholder with his awkward adolescent limbs. He cleared his throat, and righted it.

Face expressionless, Khan pushed me out of her way. I stumbled to an undignified halt in a corner, where my smirk died as quickly as it had formed.

"Greetings, Pirmin," she said, burying her hands in the pockets of her pants. "I wanna sell you something."

The priest gave the candleholder a last suspicious look before deigning Khan worthy of his attention and declining his head as if he were a hundred. I knew the type: Either he was so smart that leaders of Forest Rebels in his audience hall didn't faze him in the slightest, or he was so powerful. Or both.

At any rate, he was the only one in this room who was hovering.

"One may address me as kin-Abdil Alimdar, the Radiant," he informed her gravely. "And one may introduce themselves before petitioning for the benevolence of the Gods. Only then may one submit their offer. The temple protocol makes it so."

Khan shrugged.

She snapped her finger.

A filthy pixie of a boy who I hadn't even noticed before dissolved from the rebel pack.

"Oh mighty kin-Abdil Alimdar, oh Radiant One," he said with a surprisingly sonorous voice, blinking and pushing his glasses further up his nose. "It is Tylin Khan who has come to you, chosen leader of the brave and the free, those who are known as the Forest Rebels. We battle the injustices of the monarchs, who rob us the fruits of our hard labor on the field. We bring freedom and equality to the farmers and laborers, so the Gods permit it, oh kin-Abdil Alimdar, oh Radiant One."

He fell silent and stepped back without having looked at any one of us.

"What he says," said Khan. She had produced a piece of tobacco from one of her pockets and was chewing on it. It colored her tongue pitch black; occasionally it could be glimpsed between the remains of her teeth as she spoke. "If you agree to my deal," she continued, "the Gods gonna be even more benevolent to you, I bet."

Then she pointed at me. "I got an Oracle on offer."

All eyes turned towards me. I cleared my throat and tried to look sublime.

Suddenly, imprisonment in the Forest Rebels' lice camp didn't seem quite as awful anymore.

It would take kin-Abdil Alimdar less than five minute to notice that I wasn't really an Oracle. And I didn't at all look forward to a reunion with Tylin Khan's hatchet.



"The Oracle cannot fall into the hands of the rebels!" Commandant A lentis had spat, slamming his beer mug onto the table.

The Forest Rebels were already marching towards the castle by then. I personally believed that the Command Table should have considered that before they sent the castle sentry away to replenish the treasure chest. But I was only there to fill my father's mug, and nobody ever asked what I thought.

Involuntarily I glanced at the Oracle, who sat in a corner, sniffling quietly. It had turned fourteen some days ago but looked as though it was ten. The holy golden symbols tattooed on the girl's forehead and cheeks like a particularly exotic rash didn't help any. She might as well have been playing dress-up in her mother's holy day garments.

Commandant Yorp nodded gravely. "Even if it should cost us the castle – the Oracle cannot fall. We will have to resort to a ruse."

"Last year up in Munk, old Alestor protected his daughter by dressing a tavern wench in the garb of a princess," Commandant Lerion suggested. In the chair next to him, my father stroked his beard thoughtfully.

The old men exchanged looks across the table.

"The Oracle is marked with holy tattoos," A lentis said in a doubtful tone. "The priests would refuse to tattoo an unblessed. They would consider it an attempt to fool the Gods."

Lerion shrugged. "It so happens that I have some skill in the handling of a tattoo needle."

Probably acquired in the drunk tank, I thought, and stashed beer mugs on my tablet.

"But where to find a fourteen-year-old girl now? Most families have already fled from Byrn."

"The rebels will only know that Byrn has been graced with a new and powerful Oracle. Somebody runty will suffice."

A moment passed in pondering silence.

"Rhi," said my father. I froze on my way to the door. "Come over here for a minute."



"What has caused you to believe that my temple would even require another Oracle?" Pirmin kin-Abdil Alimdar asked. He eyed me up with a squint, as if he wasn't just clumsy but also had bad eyes. Not that that fact would help me, if you considered the size of his brain and the fact that he associated with real oracles as part of his daily routine. "Thank the Gods, they have blessed us with three oracles, more than any other temple in the land. Pilgrims journey here from near and far to be told divine truths for a humble tax-exempt fee."

Khan seemed to consider that while she chewed on her tobacco. It appeared as if she had to translate all those long sentences to herself, although she didn't seem to mind letting it show. "Four oracles are more mighty than three," she eventually said. "That's like with them arrows. We got a couple of crates with arrows, good arrows, they's gonna last us for weeks. But if somebody offers a good deal for arrows, I take it anyway. Can't ever have too many arrows. They don't rot."

The eyebrows of the Radiant one rose. "You would see fit to compare our temple's oracles, our divine offspring with a commodity of war?"

Khan frowned. Then she shrugged and snapped her fingers.

The urchin with the glasses stepped forward.

"Oracles are a tool of power," he pontificated. "Arrows are a tool of power. The former grant power because they provide that which the poor and the unfree need so direly, but which costs them crops and money. The latter grant power because they aid in wrestling down our dictators, and in allowing the poor and unfree to keep their own tithe, which thereby means for them crops and money and which the Forest Rebels protect. Gods willing it shall be so, oh kin-Abdil Alimdar, oh Ra..."

"What he said," Khan remarked. The boy retreated.

"I see," Pirmin Alimdar said and shifted his weight in the air.

My fidgeting intensified.

The new tattoos had started itching again; excess tint was leaking out.

"I assume," Alimdar said after a moment, "you came to haggle for arrows."

Khan clicked her tongue and pointed a finger in his direction. "Been told you're smart," she said. "You're smart."

"We could do with some more horses, too," she added after a moment of thought.



My father had two wives and one husband, who had another wife himself. I had seven sisters and three brothers, and each one was either an especially gifted swordsperson or a prolific student of the arts.

One was a divine singer. I also had a brother who had barely turned six but already could jump in the air and stay there longer than could be fully explained with good joints.

I myself had an inspired sense of sarcasm, so I didn't even make for a good bride to be given away to someone important.

So when the scouts reported the advance of the Forest Rebels, it was I who was ordered to my father's side to carry his ammunition and fill his mug, while the other ten took the first opportunity to flee to allied castles through the secret passageways.

The Oracle waited for its fate to be decided in the command tower.

It didn't seem to have very sturdy nerves. Shortly after everybody took their leave, I found it huddled up in a kitchen corner. Tears were running down its face.

"Never you worry," I said. I sat down next to the child on the floor and gave her a handkerchief. "Of all the people here, you are the safest. Everything that's happening right now is to protect you."

"I've always w-w-wanted to be an Oracle," sniffed the girl between nervous hiccups. "I've always d-d-dreamt of the temple. The G-g-gods p-p-promised it to me. But n-n-nobody said that the rebels would want to take me a-away... into the *forest*," she added with a wail.

It took me a moment to find a second handkerchief but then I did. I handed it to her, too. "What's so great about becoming an Oracle?"

Everybody takes me seriously, I expected. Last month I was but a farmer's daughter. Now I live in the castle. I wear beautiful dresses. Everybody looks up to me. The commandants expect me to cure all that ails them; the lords and ladies asks for my council, and the crowds part in the streets to let me through. I'm seen by everyone. I'm the temple treasure.

"I always know what h-h-happens next," sniffled the girl, which I confess amused me more than decency permitted.

Awkwardly I patted the child's back and waited for her tears to dry.



Tylin Khan had been born to lead. It showed at once – the fact that she had transformed the Forest Rebels into the terror of the Valley of Castles gave the biggest clue. She led the deadliest raids of all, and her rebels worshipped her as if she were a kind of oracle on horseback herself. She did not, however, seem to possess certain other skills, as far as I had been able to observe. In the daily grind of rebel life, she employed three speakers: one for the long words, one for the multiplication tables, and one for lascivious jokes. I didn't even want to consider how her sex life worked.

Pirmin Alimdar, the Radiant, possessed more wisdom and intelligence than the rest of the temple combined and could hover, but he obviously battled bad skin.

If I wasn't fearing for my own life at the time, the meeting of their minds would have entertained me greatly.

"You understand that your proposal might not be worth the resulting trouble for me," said Pirmin, the Radiant. "Should it become publicly known that I provided the Forest Rebels with arrows, I would alienate my allies once those same arrows pierce through their hearts."

"Personally I always aim at their belly," said Tylin Khan. "Most soldiers wear armor to protect their chests. And once they're down bleeding out in the dirt, they can't fight anymore just the same. Plus," she added, "it's not like you depend on those allies' support. And

anyway. If we really do them in with those arrows, it's not like they's gonna be a problem for anybody anymore after."

"True." Pirmin tilted his head into an immodest nod. "But we want to spread the message of the Gods in peace."

"You wanna do business in peace," said Tylin Khan.

Pirmin Alimdar shrugged. "I see no difference."

Inwardly I drew a longing path from here to the exit onto a mental map.

"Listen," said Tylin Khan. "You want the oracle or not? You got three. The other temples've got none. So, three more than the others. If I sell it to one of them others, you's only gonna have... uhm..."

"Two more," supplied Pirmin before the math boy could be deployed. "I see. Oracle of Byrn?"

To my shock, his eyes turned in my general direction.

"Step forward."

I swallowed dryly as I took a step towards doom.



Pirmin Alimdar, the Radiant's skin showcased a particularly spectacular display of colors from up close.

He had floated further up so that he could inspect me at eye level, which disquieted me far more than his dermal troubles ever could.

"Well," he said. His gaze moved across the brand-new tattoos on my forehead and focused on a spot next to my nose, which itched even more than the others, probably because it was particularly oozing excess ink. In all likelihood, he knew about how long since the Oracle of Byrn had been sanctified, and how long it took the average tattoo to heal.

"Well," he said again.

I wondered what exactly Tylin Khan and her hatchet would do to me once it became known that I wasn't worth a thousand coins, because I didn't speak divine truth; I couldn't even sing.

"Do you speak to the Gods of wheat and bread?" asked Pirmin Alimdar without taking his eyes off the spot next to my nose, as if poking at an exotic jellyfish with a stick to see if that would kill it.

I cleared my throat and resisted the urge to scratch myself.

"That's right," I said. "Every day.

"And wine. Sometimes about wine," I added after a moment of silence while trying not to hyperventilate, since he seemed to be waiting for something specific.

"Well," said Pirmin Alimdar, the Radiant, then added abruptly: "What's five-hundred-and-eight to the power of three?"

"Huh?" I said with confusion.

"I see," said Pirmin, and I started preparing myself for my funeral.

"Three crates of arrows, four burros and a hundred coins shall be my only offer," he said to Tylin Khan.

The very same turned around to the walking slide ruler among the bunch, who shrugged and nodded.

"Done," said Khan.



When Tylin Khan and her entourage left the hall, Pirmin Alimdar floated down to the pillow on the gallery and stood up almost without stumbling over his own feet.

He walked me up to the highest balcony of the temple, where we watched the rebels on their way back to the forest.

"What was your purpose before you were an oracle?" asked Pirmin Alimdar.

I stared at the swaying rears of the combat horses shrinking out of sight.

"I had seven sisters and three brothers," I replied. "My father was commandant of the sentry. I sharpened his sword and refilled his mug."

"You are speaking in the past tense," stated Pirmin Alimdar.

I shrugged. "The Castle of Byrn has need of a false oracle no more. I did my duty." Then I braced myself, because quick and painful was preferable to slow and torturous. "What will happen to me now? I'm not an oracle. I cannot tell you divine truths."

With a contemplative face Pirmin Alimdar leaned onto the balustrade and swept his gaze across the lands. It was the first time he looked like a human being to me, an adult man, no half-child dressed up in mighty temple drapes like the real Oracle of Byrn also had. The sight however brought back my anxiety, and I took a cautious step away from him.

"I've known that I was destined for the temple all my life," he said. "At six years old I ended a fever plague because I noticed that it only befell those who drank water at a certain spot downstream. At twelve I was the only one in my village who extracted roots but didn't speak of trees while doing so. I would have been a terrible farmer. Tylin Khan would have laughed me out of her camp if I had ever attempted a warrior's life. And even being a husband – I have never quite understood what compensation others find for the strains of marital life." He made a face. "But the temple paid my parents many coins, and purportedly they used it to obtain a new plow. They needed a plow more urgently than they did me."

That begged the question whether he'd made sure to accept especially large tax-exempt fees from his parents through the years. But in view of the fact that I was talking to the floating Radiant of Kurn, my survival instinct kicked in.

Instead I offered: "I have a very distinct sense of inappropriate humor. On a good day it took me less than two sentences to make my father livid. I could mock the Gods if you should happen to have need of that."

"A talent of greater value than you might think."

"What will happen to me?" I repeated.

That was when Alimdar sighed. His gaze was on the faraway spot where the rebels had vanished into the forest, long gone from sight now. "You go out into the world," he said. "You do what you want. Because you don't have a destiny like myself, or like an oracle, like even the rebel leader Khan. Nobody needs you to make anything happen. Nobody is waiting for you – no task and no duty is waiting for you. You are not needed. It is the greatest gift the Gods may bestow upon anybody."

"It gets less exciting when you starve, and spend your nights sleeping in barns," I pointed out.

"You wear holy tattoos on your face," the Radiant said in surprising good humor. "You do not have to sleep in barns with holy tattoos on your face."

"I've always longed to play the lute," he added after a moment. "But temple study left no time to do so. My fingers are not long and thin enough and there was more sense to focus my efforts on something that held a greater promise of excellence."

An alien feeling swelled in my chest when I tried to picture what he was suggesting. I grew aware of the true vastness of the lands in front of us, the forests and valleys of Erimar, reaching past the horizon.

I had heard it said that the world didn't end at the mountains. I had heard it said that there was something other behind them, maybe another valley or more rock, or another ocean. Never before had I had reason to ask what else was waiting out there.

"Why did you pay for me?" I asked.

The shoulders of the Radiant bucked up and down blithely.

"Because I am at liberty of giving liberty to others," he said. "And maybe, having that liberty is worth more than all of my skill." And after a pause he added more casually: "I was curious to see what would happen."

Again I gazed at the lands, where nobody needed me and nothing waited for me, where I could turn in any direction that so happened to entice me. No obligation demanded I go home. My father's mug could be filled by any one of my siblings.

Maybe, I thought suddenly, that was the real temple treasure.

That spark of that alien feeling in my chest grew.

I decided that I liked it quite a lot.

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Patricia's lesfic exists in German as well and can be found at www.patricia-penn.de.

About The Author

Patricia is interested in obscure trivia, good cognac und true crime. She spends her days teaching companies marketing, living in the Taunus Mountains close to Frankfurt, Germany alongside her Golden Retriever. On occasion she has also been known to knit or to debate what should happen next with a horse. Her last girlfriend emigrated to Mexico – hopefully not because of her.

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