

**with rhyme and reason**

by iztopher

Rhen was the chosen one, whatever that meant.

This was originally a Yuletide 2022 gift for DisjunctionJunction.

thanks to heyhowdyhello for betaing this fic for me!

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When the priestess gently pressed her ring into Rhen's palm, Rhen couldn't help but wonder why. There was an unsettling conviction in her voice as she called Rhen chosen one, something that felt like it had to mean something, somehow. Rhen could hardly imagine what, could hardly imagine why.

In the two years that followed, Rhen would learn it meant more than she ever could have anticipated, or more than she ever believed growing up in Clearwater. She was destined, she learned, to wield a legendary sword, to sing a magical song, to save a world so much wider than the one she grew up in. What she had dismissed as a woman's delirious, half-dead ramblings, was the passing of a torch so fierce it burned to carry.

One night in the Wildwoods Tavern, as she dabbed healing salve on the crow-claw marks slashed across her arm, Rhen finally found the nerve to address it.

“Why is it me and not you?” she asked.

“I don't know.” When Talia spoke, it was soft, almost apologetic. “I must have done something wrong.”

Rhen couldn't imagine what Talia could have done wrong that she was doing right. Talia was her age when she set out to defeat Zorom, she had told her, but she also had three years of training behind her and a best friend beside her. Rhen had an apprentice's leave from school and the son of her former slaveowner. What she wouldn't give to have the sword singing tattoos on her chest, or Peter at her side, right now.

"How do we know I'll succeed where you failed?"

Bad word choice. Talia winced.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't-"

"I was a mage, not a sword singer," Talia said, firmer than necessary. "I did not - could not - trap Ahriman's soul. The Sword of Shadows is the key."

"And I'm the one to wield it."

Talia sighed. "So it would seem."

It would seem that every answer Rhen learned only brought more questions. Why, of every sword singer in Aia, was she the one meant to save it? There was no denying her natural affinity for sword magic, but it had laid dormant for fifteen years. Even now, she was only an apprentice, technically not allowed to wield the Sword of Shadows even when the druids unlocked it. And yet Talia had found her and given her the ring, had called her chosen, long before she'd ever conjured lightning or even held a real sword. That seemed to suggest she couldn't just be replaced by any one of her classmates.

Sometimes she wished she could be. Maybe the tall girl in her Natural Sword Magic class who always raised her hand, or the freckly boy who transferred in from sorcery classes mid-semester when the instructors realized he could only cast magic while holding a metal staff. Or better yet, Lorad himself, practiced and self-assured, a far more appropriate hero than some teenager who lacked even the confidence to escape school and find her way home.

The Oracle was different in person. More human. When she appeared as an apparition in the Empress's hall, she was otherworldly. When a transparent finger poked Rhen's arm and she felt it, Rhen may have assumed she was a deity. In the flesh, she looked like any other old woman; just a little nicer dressed than a Clearwater grandmother. This Oracle was someone Rhen could talk to, although she said surprisingly little of substance. It seemed every question Rhen asked came to the same place: the weight of Aia rested on her shoulders, and hers alone. If she faltered, if she failed, every effort and sacrifice made up to this point would be for nothing.

"If I'm the chosen one, meant to defeat Ahriman," Rhen began, "why did you choose me?"

The Oracle laughed, rough and warm, like she'd just taken a drag from a pipe. Rhen, who did not ask her question to be funny, tried not to be annoyed. "I did not, child," she said. "I am far closer to omniscient than omnipotent, and even then, there is much that I have to learn."

"But you control all this." Rhen gestured across the Sun Temple, but she meant past the golden columns and out to the entirety of Aveyond.

"Only as much as a mother controls her unruly children," said the Oracle. "I believe the word 'influence' is more accurate. All I can do is guide you."

Rhen did not feel particularly guided, more like told exactly what to do with precious little in the way of how to actually do it. Talia had reunited with Devin, some long-lost, faraway king, and as far as Rhen could tell this arbitrarily meant that Rhen was prepared to undergo the rest of her quest on her own. She wondered why the people who seemed best equipped to save the world - older, more experienced, more worldly and wise than she could ever hope to be - had so little to say about it. Why did this journey have to loom over her so much darker and deeper than anyone else?

Graduation was heartening. The tattooing process, while painful, hurt less than her freshly-healed lightning strike from Nanghaithya. She looked at herself in the mirror: sword inked along her sternum, sheet music curling around her calves, and reminded herself they meant she had proven herself a hero. She found she had some faith in Rhen Darzon, Sword Singer, to save the world.

And then it turned out Rhen Darzon, Sword Singer, didn't exist, at least not quite in the way she thought she did.

Once again, a silver ring was deposited in her hand, but this time, it was her father who placed it there, and the delicate metal was worked into an unfamiliar family crest Rhen was told was her own. This time, the confusion rose inside her like the storm surge of a hurricane. The weight of the gift was obvious immediately, and when Rhen took it in her hand she felt like a pallbearer.

"Why me?" she asked, voice cracking under dual strain of fighting off her

horror and the anger boiling up inside her. She was supposed to be able to go home after this, to be normal, to feel the weight of the world settle and lift from her shoulders. Now she was told she'd have to carry a crown instead, gifted by parents she'd never met for a kingdom she'd never even seen.

"Parents leave things to their children," Tailor said, "and it's not always what either of them want."

He pulled her into a tight embrace, and she couldn't hug him back properly for fear of dropping the ring.

Being the heir to the throne of Thais came with a body count, Rhen learned. When Ahriman's forces attacked Thais, it was to destroy the child prophecized to one day defeat him, the child who escaped across the ocean in her adopted father's arms. Every casualty of the battle was collateral damage.

Rhen found it hard to believe she was worth all the trouble. She knew she wasn't worth all the death, couldn't imagine anyone in all of Aia who was. And yet cities had been razed to prevent her from fulfilling a future she never had a say in.

How strange, Rhen thought, that it seemed the whole world would clatter to the ground and shatter to pieces if she simply chose to walk away. How sobering, to think that all that death would be for nothing. She wanted to do the right thing, to protect people, of course, but she couldn't help but feel trapped in this prophecy, in the idea that every choice she made had been preordained.

But like it or not, Rhen Darzon Pendragon was going to charge forward, sword in hand and song in lungs.

With newfound confidence, Rhen slashed at the daeva Zarich and rescued the druid Armaiti. As she touched the druid's soul to their stone-solid body, Rhen couldn't help but marvel that here she was, saving the protector of her isle. She grew up taught to honor the druid, to worship at their temple when her family visited to celebrate the fall harvest, and now she cupped her hands a hair's breadth away from them, restoring the life and vibrancy that represented the health of the Western Isle itself.

She really was doing it. Every family she and her growing party helped, every village they saved, every druid they brought back to Aveyond, made Rhen feel she could actually save Aia. Wasn't she already, after all, piece by piece? The prophecy began to feel less like the burden of duty and more like a promise, a comfort. She could do this, and the world would be better for it. Maybe she would be, too.

It seemed no one believed in her more fiercely than Dameon. First it had startled her, the conviction with which he told her she could do anything she set her mind to, especially when he paired it with a grand, sweeping bow and a kiss to the back of her hand. He was just another person who thought he knew her, who respected her for being the Chosen One and not Rhen.

But then she got to know him. He laughed at her jokes and told her his own, although they never landed half as well. He helped heal her injuries, sitting with her as the magic stitched her back together, talking with her to pass the time and distract from the pain. And when she absentmindedly complained that sometimes she wished this quest didn't fall on her, he didn't scold her like she thought a druid would. He pursed his lips and frowned, and said, "of course, you should do the right thing. But you deserve a choice."

When she felt like Dameon was Rhen's friend, not the Sun Druid guiding the fabled Sword Singer, she finally found the strength to ask him. "Why do you have so much faith in me? Your own mother couldn't stop Ahriman, what makes you think I can?"

Dameon laughed for a moment, soft and sad. "When you think of my mother, you think of the Druid of Dreams, who nearly saved the world. When I do, I think of the woman who murdered my father. The world deserves a better hero. It deserves you, Rhen."

He meant it as a comfort, but it landed as a dagger. Rhen didn't feel so innately different from Talia - a sixteen year old girl, facing down death and destruction at every turn. How could she blame her for becoming a thirty year old woman trying desperately to cling to the peace she'd created? Rhen wondered, in twenty years, when she had saved the world and sheathed the Sword of Shadows for the final time, what she would do, who she would hurt, to make sure it wasn't all in vain. Dameon seemed so confident the answer was no one, but...

"Your mother did what she needed to," Rhen said. "The best she could. Ahriman's armies were surging, but he hadn't yet come back to power. She wanted to stop us from reaching the point of no return."

Dameon scoffed. "And look where it got us. If you want someone to blame for what you're going through, try my mother."

Rhen had thought of Talia's attempt as an earnest, valiant effort - one that bought time for the world, if nothing else. Of course Dameon would view it as an abject failure. But if power and prophecy were as arbitrary as everyone around her insisted they were, how could she possibly blame Talia for the odds of her life?

"As a druid, I probably shouldn't say this, but I don't put much stock in prophecy or the Oracle's ramblings. I don't think you're going to save the world because you're destined to do it, Rhen. I think you're going to do it because you choose to."

Of course he couldn't actually mean that. Of course, when Dameon said, you will choose to save the world, he meant you will forsake it with me. Rhen wouldn't - she couldn't - she refused, to let everything that had happened until this point be for nothing but her own gain. To betray the six people standing behind her the way the boy standing in front of her just had.

And yet, some part of her considered it. Not for immortality, or power, or Dameon - just for the sake of making a choice. To prove she authored her own fate.

Bitterly, the last shreds of her that could feel anything beyond fear and rage wondered, if that was what it meant to be the chosen one - for making that choice to be enough. To have the power to shape the world with a single decision. Everyone behind her already had chosen to risk their lives, and yet as far as she knew, according to the prophecy, hers was the only one that mattered.

She could only hope it would be enough, but she couldn't believe it was. How could she have possibly gotten this far without Lars keeping her alive when there was no one else to? Without Elini's quick thinking or Te'ijal's surefire shot, John and Marge's sword practice and sea shanties, even Galahad's patronizing insistence on seeing her safe above all else?

Without Dameon, his sunlight working in tandem with her shadows?

She threw the fairy dust in his eyes. She pleaded with him, willing the desperation in her voice away, relying on her singer's lungs. She could belt in the middle of battle; she had to be able to call her friend back. She had to believe his decision wasn't as etched in stone as hers was.

She had to believe his choice mattered.

And in the end, it did. It was the blade Rhen wielded - she couldn't herself think of the Sword of Shadows as her sword, not when she would be returning it so soon and hopefully never have to hold it again - that sliced down Ahriman's chest and sucked in his horrible, shrieking soul. But it was the fury of the sun itself, directed by Dameon's trembling hands, that weakened his magic and threw him to the ground.

Rhen sheathed the Sword of Shadows. Her voice was hoarse and her throat was raw. She had blood from at least three different people, not counting herself, staining her sword singer's uniform. But her job was done.

Or, part of it was, anyways. Rhen tried not to think about the Pendragon signet ring stashed in her inside pocket. She watched as the door to the Sword of Shadows swung shut and evaporated into the stone wall of the temple and hoped it would never appear again. It should have brought a sense of finality, but Rhen felt liminal. Things weren't finished yet.

She approached the Oracle, who greeted her with outstretched arms and an open, smiling mouth. Rhen didn't return the gesture, but it was just as well, as the oracle squeezed her arms just above the elbows with all the force of her bony hands. "Congratulations, sword singer. You have done well."

"I was just doing my duty."

"Ah, yes, that tricky word." The Oracle released her grip on her arms.

"About that. I believe I was... not fully honest with you in the past. I couldn't be, yet, you see. There was too much you did not yet know, that it was not my place to teach you."

She narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I told you you were not chosen by me. That was true. But I did not tell you who did."

Something leapt from Rhen's stomach to her throat. Did Talia choose her own successor? Did the gods and goddesses speak through the druids and

select her? "Then who-"

"No one person, or being, creates a prophecy. No one force picks its players and casts them in their roles. The world itself decides that."

Of course she couldn't possibly get a clear answer. It wasn't like she had earned one from saving the world. But the Oracle must have caught the mix of confusion and frustration on her face, because she continued on.

"Take Aveyond," she said, waving her finger around them, voice cracking slightly with excitement. "This place, its strength is a matter of the people who believe in it. The Druids are made immortal and powerful, are allowed to flourish, because they are recognized, worshiped, as protectors of their domains. If everyone suddenly decided they weren't important, if they shrugged off their belief, their power would wane. Aveyond's power would wane." Her voice dipped lower, grave, for a moment, but then she locked eyes with Rhen and smiled brightly, age lines crinkling. "The world chose you, Rhen. Thais chose you. Her people believed, and they hoped, that the princess would return, and would defeat the great evil that had destroyed their home, and in the force of doing that, they made sure that she did."

So that was why it couldn't have been any sword singer, why it had to be her. For the first time, Rhen felt a small swell of pride push against the numbness and obligation in her chest. She allowed herself to smile back. There was something reassuring about the idea that she had been chosen not by some unseen fate, but the very people she'd worked so hard to save. They may not know much about her, but maybe they could learn.

"I know Thais doesn't feel like your home. But you will make a great queen. Her people - your people - have always thought so."

"So I really am the chosen one," Rhen said. If what the Oracle said was true, then maybe this really was the end.

The old woman's eyes sparkled as she dropped her hands to her hips.

"Whatever do you mean? You destroyed Ahriman, did you not?"

"I mean... Talia thought she had, thought she was, and look how that turned out. And anyways, when it came down to it, I don't feel like I was any more important than anyone else was. For a moment there, I thought Dameon might have been the chosen one."

The Oracle laughed softly. "Maybe in his own way, he was. Maybe neither of you could have done it without the other."

Rhen thought it over. That made sense to her, but it brought more questions with it. If she wasn't the only chosen one... Her eyes swept across the room. "...If that's what being the chosen one meant, how many of us are there? How many people in this quest needed to be there for it to happen?"

She expected the Oracle to be evasive. She wasn't. "Yourself, of course, and our fickle friend the sun priest. The sorcerer. And the pirate."

Rhen, Dameon, Lars, and John. The list surprised her. "But I'm sure I would have died, without-"

"There are hundreds, if not thousands, of ways your quest could have gone. It is not that the others were not important. It is that they were, strictly speaking of the fate of the world, not necessary. You can technically cook without spices, but why would you?"

Rhen sighed. She pushed away the voice that said you didn't need Elini, so John didn't need to be poisoned by a love potion. You didn't need Te'ijal or Galahad, so you could have stopped them from ever meeting. She also couldn't fathom the journey without them, so there was no need to dwell on roads untraveled. Instead, she asked, "if four of us were necessary, why was I the chosen one? Why put the burden on only one of us, instead of sharing it?"

The Oracle smiled wryly. "It was still your quest, girl. You just couldn't do it alone. The others were needed to help you through the difficult parts. The sorcerer to start it. The pirate to bring you home. The sun priest to finish it."

Home... Rhen realized it was the first time she'd heard the word and immediately thought of Thais. "Well," she said, "next time you have a prophecy with multiple people in mind, maybe share the love a little and let the others know."

"Ha! I will have to take that into consideration. For now, though... what is next for you, sword singer?"

Rhen smiled weakly. She fumbled for the signet ring in her pocket. For the first time, she thought about sliding it on.

She slipped it on her finger. She found she liked the way it fit.