

Ultima IX: Redemption Fiction Part 1
Saying Goodbye
by Brad Venable

The sun was shining bright on Monk Isle this day. The usual air of calm at the ancient monastery seemed all the more reverent on this clear spring day. The monks filed slowly into the Great Hall, passing one another in solemn silence. The line of bodies snaked through the room to their seats; the only sounds piercing the air were the erratic flickering of torches and the occasional creak of wood under stress.

Watching intently from an alcove, the old woman began making her way to the front of the Hall, casting a glance over the body of assembled people. She took slow, purposeful steps that made very little noise in the already deafening silence. Her face was a careworn mask that hid her conflicting emotions from those gathered in front of her. She reached the makeshift pulpit and turned to face them.

How will they take this?

Thoughts of what she is about to do fill her head. Of all the emotions filling her head at this moment, doubt weighs heavier on her mind than any other; it is the first in a very long time she could remember doubting at all.

It must be this way.

The Vision assured her of what must be done. It had been the first Vision since the Balance was restored. She had welcomed the inky blackness of dreamless nights after all these long years. Then, with one Vision, everything changes—changes that many of her followers will not be able to accept. Her resolve hardens as she attempts to drive the doubt from her head. With a subtle sigh, she turns her attention to her task at hand.

“It is with a heavy heart that we gather this day,” said Xenka the Prophetess. “We come today to bid farewell to one of our own...Brother Karnax.”

Xenka looks down at the body of her former follower. He looks much as he did in life, save for the look of peace that now inhabits the dead Monk’s face. The look, now forever etched into the high cheekbones and tanned skin, belies the man that Karnax once was.

Before the return of Xenka, Karnax was the closest thing to a leader that the Monks ever had. He radiated an air of confidence in the uncertain years of the Imbalance, for it was written that Xenka would return, and her harbinger would be the Stranger From Another World, a hero not of Serpent Isle who was fated to save the world.

Xenka snaps out of her reverie as she notices the eyes of all upon her. She sighs, and begins again.

“Brother Karnax was a good man. He was a man of fortitude. A man of strength. His interpretations of my visions may have been misguided to a point, but his heart was always in the right place.” Looks of uneasiness overcome the faces of many of the monks.

“Indeed, many of you paying your respects today are guilty of that, as well,” Xenka continued. “If for a few acting on their instinct, the Stranger From Another World, known to us now as the Avatar of Britannia, would have failed in his quest to restore Balance to our land, and also to his own.”

She looked over the stunned faces of those who had, until this very moment, had followed her without question. Now those eyes looking back at her possessed a myriad of sentiments, from shock to insolence. Xenka locked eyes with each one, then those who sat in calm indifference—Miggim, Draxta, Tarlin, Braccus, and...one set of eyes whose reaction was unexpected.

“Thoxa, my child...why do you weep so? ‘Twas you who trusted your instincts to help the Avatar when he first landed on our shores,” said Xenka. “There is no shame in the action you took...your defiance of Karnax was both appropriate and warranted.”

The young monk raised her head to look at Xenka through tear-clouded eyes, the hood of her robe collapsing to her shoulders. Her long, blonde hair, no longer held in place by the confines of the hood, tumbles down her face to her shoulders.

“I do not weep in shame of my actions, prophetess,” said Thoxa. “I weep for Karnax.”

Murmurs spread amongst those not under the constraints of a vow of silence like wildfire. Xenka smiles knowingly...her gift had never really left her.

It was no secret there were countless confrontations between Thoxa and Karnax regarding the Stranger From Another World in the days of the Imbalance. Interpretation of the prophecy was always the topic of discussion, especially whether to aid the Stranger directly or not. While on Monk Isle, the arguments were never heated enough to harm one another, but very shortly after the Stranger’s arrival on Serpent Isle, Thoxa met with the Stranger and companions. Against Karnax’s wishes, she gave the Stranger the Hourglass of Fate. Karnax confronted Thoxa on the very beach the Stranger had disembarked. To say both were wounded would be an understatement.

Now, after all the confrontations, Thoxa sits before the entire assembly and weeps as one who has lost a family member. Tears stream down her face and she looks to Xenka for strength.

“I do weep for Karnax. He was as a brother to me,” said Thoxa, rising. She looked across the gathered monks with an icy stare. “Scoff if you might, my brothers and sisters. In the end, Karnax and I shared the same enthusiasm in helping the Stranger. We simply differed in our approaches, but...now...it matters not.”

Nods from many of those assembled helped to ease the tension that was thick in the air.

Xenka looked down at the one person of which she was most proud. She could see that Thoxa followed her heart in all her years as a monk, and followed it with a fervor that reminded Xenka of herself. Xenka smiled at this, and mused at how she and Thoxa had each faced great challenges for her way of thinking.

“You are correct, my child...more than you can possibly know,” said Xenka. “But I speak too soon...let us not tarnish the good memories of our brother by reliving the bad.”

More nods from the assembled monks. Thoxa nods and reclains her seat, fresh tears still assailing her eyes.

Xenka continues the service, and slowly, she sees each pair of eyes slowly well up and pour forth tears full of sorrow as each person remembers the man they respected. Soon, Xenka finds herself unable to keep the tears in check, but the prophetess weeps for an entirely different reason than her followers.

I cannot do it! I cannot take the meaning from their lives...

The next day was as bright and beautiful as day of the farewell ceremony. The bells rang the hour of devotion for the monks, and they filed swiftly into the Great Hall in the same solemn silence as the day before, but this day, the air itself seemed energized in anticipation of the day's events.

Xenka appears from the alcove as in the previous day, but her careworn face seems all the more tense as she approaches the pulpit. The prophetess steadies herself and gives an audible sigh that makes the bowed heads look up in surprise.

Xenka speaks.

“My children, I know this is the time of day that you normally take devotion, but I must make known that of which shall affect us all forevermore.”

Soft creaks accompany the bodies shifting uneasily in their seats, as Xenka face becomes even more grave than before.

“Today will mark a turning point in the life of every person assembled here,” said Xenka. “My children, after three years of darkness, my sleep is once again troubled by a Vision.”

Looks of concern overtake the monks' faces, and murmurs softly spread through the chamber at the return of Xenka's gift. The doubt again permeates her being and she closes her eyes, the strength to continue evading her. Then, a voice not her own resonates in her head...

Prophetess...you must tell them...Reveal their path to them.

The voice that has lain silent since the disappearance of the Stranger now speaks once more. She inhales deeply, finally at ease with what she must now do.

She steels herself and begins...

“My children, before I reveal the prophesy...I must now confess that the Vision did not come to me last night. It came the night before...the night Brother Karnax went to the undiscovered hereafter.”

Looks of disbelief are exchanged by the monks. Their minds race with questions, the most prevailing: *Why did she not reveal it?*

“Yes, my children...I am guilty of the same misguided intentions that Karnax was,” Xenka continued. “I feared the consequences of the Vision granted me by my gift.”

Sitting directly in front of Xenka was Brother Tarlin. His normally calm, even wistful face is twisted with worry at the declaration. Xenka waits knowingly for Tarlin to respond.

“Prophetess, what did the Vision purport?” said Tarlin, his voice wavering slightly.

“Brother Tarlin, the prophesy affects us...every one...all will be revealed in its own time,” said Xenka calmly. “First, the Vision itself, then the prophesy.”

“My children, the Vision showed us in the Great Hall, as we are now... then each and every one you ripped the hood from each robe and placed it at my feet. Then each in turn, I blessed you all and wished you good journey.”

“But, prophetess,” says Miggim, voicing everyone’s thoughts. “What does the Vision *mean?*”

“Brother Miggim, the prophesy is this,” says Xenka. “The Brotherhood of Xenkan Monks...*is, today and hereafter disbanded forever.*”

“*WHAT!?*”

Every head in the room turns to the source of the outburst. It was a man whose name no one could remember...the primary reason being that he had, until a moment ago, taken a vow of silence.

Xenka gives a winsome smile at the ironic exclamation. The prophesy now revealed, she feels the weight of her burden lighten. The group of disbanded monks round on Xenka, their eyes begging for answers.

“Yes...that was the Vision and prophesy of two nights ago. I stood before you yesterday knowing that the brotherhood gave you all purpose and direction in your lives. I feared that taking that away would leave you all with nothing.”

“So I remained silent, and that night I prayed for another Vision to reveal the new purpose and direction in our lives. Sleep overcame me, and another Vision came. Upon waking this day, the images were as clear as they were while I slept.”

“The Vision showed that my fears were unfounded, yet doubt still clung to my heart...that is, until I addressed you all, and then a voice resounded in my head. It was the voice of the Great Earth Serpent. It instructed me to reveal your path, and the fear that paralyzed my actions before then vanished.”

“So I stand before you all now, with a firm and steadfast resolution. What I feared for you all was answered by the Vision...and that while we have all reached the end of one path in our lives, it is time to reveal the new path that we shall each take to carry us through the next part of our lives.”

Xenka inhales deeply and begins.

“Each of the cities on Serpent Isle has been decimated because of the Imbalance. Most that remain blame the Chaos Banes that possessed the companions of the Avatar for the destruction of the three cities, but through the Vision, I know that to be untrue.”

The disbanded monks look at each other with puzzled looks.

“The city of Moonshade was seemingly destroyed by Shamino the Anarch. In reality, it had been long weakened by the Imbalance, and the ‘adepts’ of Moonshade worsened the effect by shutting themselves away from the outside world, and each other. There, they found themselves living in a world of prejudice and falsehood; they plotted constantly against one another, looked down upon the non-adepts, manipulated those that were of use to them, and stole away the children of Serpent Isle like thieves in the night, as their parents slept, unawares. When the Chaos Banes were loosed, they found great irony in utterly destroying the city which opposed each of them. That is the reason Shamino the Anarch chose Moonshade...because Anarchy opposes Prejudice.”

All eyes were now locked on Xenka, the monks’ attention hanging on her every word.

“The city of Fawn was similarly blinded in its own vain pursuit of beauty. As the old proverb says, ‘beauty is only skin deep,’ Fawn could not have been a more fitting example of it, for beneath the roofs of the beautiful white buildings and behind the back of the lovely ruler of the city, there was a secret war being waged. Kylista, the High Priestess of Beauty, thinking herself the fairest on Serpent Isle, found it repulsive to serve Lady Yelinda. She ruthlessly conspired with the Great Captain Voldin, and Zulith, the Chancellor of Fawn to take control of the city. The acts of ruthlessness and hatred were brought on by the Imbalance, and was like a beacon that attracted Mad Iolo after the freeing of the Banes. The bitter irony was twofold for this city, though...only two were

left alive after laying waste to Fawn: Lady Yelinda and Ruggs the sailor. Lady Yelinda's beautiful skin was magically stripped from her body, leaving her hideously deformed...only the return of a sacred artifact by the Avatar restored Yelinda's outer beauty, but her mind will bear the scars of the ordeal for many years. Ruggs, however, was spared physical harm *because of* his ugliness, but was subjected to the emotional scars of being forced to watch the brutal murder of his secret love, Delphynia the herbalist. If only the Imbalance that caused the ruthless hatred to run amok in the city of Fawn could have been stopped sooner...Mad Iolo, the Bane of Insanity, may have never been attracted to the city of Beauty.”

Everyone shifted uneasily in their seats. The Visions were never this detailed...or explicit.

“What occurred in the city of Monitor will be difficult for many of you to endure, and if any of you wish to leave the room, then by all means...go.”

Faces filled with shock stared at Xenka, but they stayed, transfixed by morbid curiosity.

“So be it.”

Xenka closed her eyes, gathered her thoughts, and continued.

“The Pikemen of Monitor were annihilated because the Imbalance preyed on the weak. As with the other cities of Serpent Isle, Monitor was tainted from within...but here, the city was infected by none other than the leader of the city and the Leopard command. The deception that Lord Marsten perpetuated did not limit itself to simple cowardice. He secretly made a pact with the chieftain of the Goblins, Pomdirgun. Marsten would let the goblin horde ravage the countryside as long as the city would never be invaded. The dilemma of the pact was that Astrid, Champion Knight of Monitor and Marsten's lover, was the leader of the patrol that pursued the goblins into the forest just outside of Fawn. They were captured by Pomdirgun, and Marsten was alerted. Having no justification for stopping the patrols and retreating to the city, Marsten gave the word to kill Astrid and scatter what remained of her body outside of the city.”

Tears were flowing freely amongst the throng of people. While some shook their heads and others sat in stunned silence, one sat in the front pew, the look of recognition on his face...as if this story was as familiar as the refrain of a bard's tale.

“As expected, the effect of seeing the mutilated remains of their Champion Knight exhausted the already waning morale of the Pikemen. Marsten pulled the patrols into the city to ‘bolster defenses.’ Apathy spread throughout the city like a cancer, until soon, the only fighting done by the Knights of Monitor were amongst themselves on the List Field. The city sank further and further into hopelessness until the Avatar arrived that fateful day. The Avatar passed the Knight's Test and, upon investigating further, discovered several traitors in the city, including a goblin in disguise. The goblin spy revealed his chieftain's plan to betray Marsten and attack the city, and the Avatar took immediate action, infiltrating the goblin village and slaying Pomdirgun as he slept. The Helm of

Courage was retrieved, and the connection between Marsten and the goblins revealed. The city seemed safe, but the apathy and cowardice had already stained the knighthood. It was this Apathy that brought the Wantonness Bane to Monitor, a mere shadow of the city that once stood for Courage.”

As Xenka finished, a look of relief fleetingly crossed her face as though she had just confessed to atrocities that she actually committed, and was now free of the burden. The entire room was silent for a long while.

Xenka spoke again.

“My children, you now know to what extent the Imbalance affected this land. I now believe that I completely understand the Visions my gift granted me. This island has long been a safe haven for those devoted to helping the cause of returning Balance to Serpent Isle. I now see that since Balance has been restored, our purpose as a brotherhood has been fulfilled, and thus, we are not needed anymore, at least in the way we all know. That is why the Vision of two nights past alarmed me so. I knew that you would all demand answers...deservedly so...and they shall be given to you now. If we still wish to help mankind, then we must leave the safe confines of Monk Isle and assist the people directly.”

All eyes were on Xenka. The monks sat in determined silence and each awaited their fate with aplomb.

“The next part of the Vision is very important. I saw a land not our own. There were vague resemblances to Serpent Isle, yet they were most assuredly places that none of us had ever seen before. The first place I saw was a castle...there were knights, training with focused dedication...and as a result of that enthusiasm and discipline, the same knights were able to fight hordes of monsters with incredible skill and courage. The most unforgettable detail was that each of them held a shield with a curved serpent embedded within it. The next place was a city...I saw mages trading with merchants honestly and ethically, and saw those same mages living in tolerance of the people who did not use magic. Because of the ethicality, honesty, and tolerance of one another, the people of the city lived in harmony. Lastly, I saw another city with a castle overlooking it...people in this city would gladly donate a coin or two to a street beggar, greet each other on the street, and care for the sick with great compassion. I then saw a king...his face was benevolent, his manner was regal, and he showed a deep regard for his subjects when hearing their concerns. Each time he issued a decree, he did for the benefit of as many as possible and always provided explanation for his decision. This fine balance of the emotion of the people and the logic of the king resulted in the rational understanding of the world around them. My children, this was a land more in Balance than our very own.”

Looks of confusion scatter the crowd, not understanding the significance of that portion of the Vision. Xenka sees the perplexed looks and immediately begins again.

“What I saw were the embodiments of the Principles on which the cities of Serpent Isle were founded. Those were places in the world of our ancestors...the world is Britannia, but our forefathers knew it by another name...*Sosaria*.”

A gasp of alarm rose quickly from the assembled monks. Murmurs filtered through the group as Xenka raised her hand for silence.

“My children, I know from a young age we were all told of the tyrannical Beast British, who sought to suppress the use of magic and force his subjects to swear fealty to him, and turning ethics into the law of the land. I believe now that our ancestors were mistaken in their initial judgment of Lord British. People are always afraid of giving up freedoms to which they have grown accustomed, and it was no different with our ancestors. They acted rashly by leaving without seeing the results of the unification of *Sosaria*, however. We know that the Stranger From Another World is the Avatar of Britannia. We all know that the Imbalance would have consumed Serpent Isle and then spread to other worlds without the coming of the Avatar to our shores. Some may say that the coming of the Avatar did more harm than good, but they say that from a world that owes its continued existence *to* the Avatar. The Avatar is not just the Champion of Britannia...he is the Champion of Balance, and knowing that, there is no doubt as to why Britannia prospers. Such a champion would not represent the tyrannical Beast British from the stories of our ancestors, but the benevolent king from the Vision.”

Xenka leaned over the pulpit and narrowed her eyes to emphasize her next words

“That is why, my children, we *must* embrace Truth, Love, and Courage. Only by adhering to *those* Principles will Harmony, Dedication, and Rationality spring forth, as they did in Britannia. This reason alone is the likely reason for Britannia’s strong resistance to the Imbalance. As the Chaos Banes were attracted to the cities through opposition, so shall we relate the Principles. The deficiency of Moonglow was falsehood, so it is there that we shall teach Truth. Fawn’s detriment was its adulation of outward beauty, which nearly always is a mask for the existence of hatred for one’s true, inner self. It is there that we shall teach unconditional Love. The initial dedication to, and later abandonment of Courage by Monitor is by far the most tragic, therefore we shall nurture the city back to unwavering Courage.”

Nods of agreement began filtering through those assembled. The people began glancing from side to side, as if waiting for each other to voice their thoughts. Impatiently, Draxta stands up.

“Prophetess, I believe I speak for everyone when I say, do with us what you will.”

Nods abound as Xenka smiles at Draxta’s candor, then looks to the heavens and whispers thanks to the Great Earth Serpent. She looks back at her followers and smiles grimly.

“Then I shall reveal the final part of the Vision, my children. It showed each of you...it showed bits and pieces of each of your lives, starting with the past, and ending with

where you are to go after leaving Monk Isle,” said Xenka. “I will now tell each of you where you are going...”

“And Joxta...you shall investigate sightings of a town that has appeared to several travelers in the Gorlab Swamp...it may actually be the *city of Gorlab*, after all these years. Simply investigate and gather information. Afterward, choose another city and assist with its spiritual and physical renewal.”

Xenka looks down at the last five remaining. She smiles sadly as she realizes that the end draws near.

"Miggim...you have served the brotherhood for many years as both scholar and friend. This has been true your entire life, from the days as a scribe's assistant, to the time when you saved a childhood companion from drowning. Yes, Miggim...your path is exceptionally clear to me. You shall set up residence in Moonshade, there to assist Fedabiblio the Magister in the finding of new pupils for the Seminarium. You must accentuate the importance of the pursuit of Truth, however. Show them that their devotion to law without tolerance is a fantasy, imaginary at best. And if all else is imaginary, then only Truth is real. The best way to show the rest of Serpent Isle that the city is newly hospitable and honest in their dealings with others is by first *recruiting* the novices that show promise, not kidnapping them from their parents. That shall be the first step to a new Moonshade. Soon after, the artisans will return and the rangers will be making wine again. Remember that the path to Truth will need constant vigilance in those initial months for the people to become accustomed to the new way of life. Eventually, the citizens of the *new* Moonshade will mirror those in its Britannian counterpart.”

Four more...there are only four more...

Xenka sighs and then continues.

“Braccus...your love of the flora and fauna of Serpent Isle, and above all, your skill with herbs has been a boon to your brothers and sisters for a great while. Ever since your childhood, you have had a kinship with the earth and its creatures, and your undying love of the land is the reason why your path leads to Fawn. You must teach that unconditional love to those who would seek residence there. The city will need to learn that while ‘beauty is only skin deep,’ love goes beyond our skin...indeed, to our very inner being. It plunges to the depths while soaring on the heights. Again, great care must be shown in order that love might be cultivated, much like fresh earth after the rain. Yes, Braccus...your talents as an herbalist and your love of the world will shine like a beacon as an example to all...and when the new inhabitants see this, they shall allow compassion for themselves and each other to be their guide, not the worship of the fair or handsome. It is said that ‘love conquers all.’ For the future of Fawn, I certainly hope so.”

Only three more...

“Thoxa, my dear...in your short time here, you have shown each and every person you have touched that it only takes one person to have the courage to stand up for what they believe is right. In my Vision of your past, I saw what many people have spoken about in hushed whispers...your defiance of Karnax...your assistance of the Avatar and his companions...the active pursuit of Balance. It is for this reason that I send you to your home of Monitor, there reuniting you with the young Champion Knight, Cantra, and reinforce to her that courage turns not from any peril. Indeed, Thoxa...Monitor will rise again, like the phoenix from its own ashes. The city is well on its way to becoming the bastion of valor it once was. It shall be up to you to teach the Champion Knight that there are ways to display courage that have little to do with hostility...and as you shall guide Cantra in courage, she shall teach you the art of defense. Yes Thoxa, you are to become a Knight of Monitor. The endless courage you have demonstrated in all facets of your life shall be an example to those who might hearken back to darker days...perhaps someday, you will wear the Helm of Courage physically as you have spiritually your entire life. Bring glory back to the knighthood. Teach them, Thoxa...for the sake of your home.”

Two...

Xenka closes her eyes for a moment. In that split second, she sees the three Serpents. The gold of Balance glows strongly in the Void, as does the red of Chaos. The blue of Order, though, seems to waver in the inky blackness. It continues to waver until a flash of blue blinds her, and then the triumvirate of Balance, Chaos, and Order each glow with a brilliance that threatens to fill the entire Void. A flash...and she sees a simple urn, being carried by a person dressed as a monk. The person’s identity is obscured for a moment, then the figure’s head turns and its face is immediately recognized. Xenka suddenly wakes from the Vision that overtook her. She looks down and immediately sees the look of curiosity in the eyes of her monks. Her gaze falls on a face in the front...the same as the one in the Vision.

“Draxta...a moment ago, I was prepared to send you to assist King Zhelkas in the Furnace Mountains. However, just as I began to speak, a Vision came to me as I stood before you. In it, I saw the three Serpents in the Void...two were glowing bright in the emptiness, but one began to flicker. ‘Twas the Order Serpent...the insanity brought on by the Imbalance has affected it so that the Balance itself will not hold it in check. It is fighting the Balance, and the only way to save the Order Serpent from itself is to bind it, much like the Chaos Serpent was by Sir Dupré.”

Draxta’s face becomes pale, a mask of apprehension. Xenka sees the fear in her eyes and immediately goes to comfort her.

“No, my child...you are not the one chosen to bind the Order Serpent. In the Vision, you are the one carrying the urn that holds the Ashes of Balance. You must take the necessary artifacts, go to the Grand Shrine of Order in the Spinebreaker Mountains, and perform the ritual to reunite the Order Serpent.”

A look of relief instantaneously washes over Draxta’s face. Xenka smiles as she speaks softly to the young monk.

“Draxta...you must do as the Avatar did those months ago. You must restore the Order Serpent with the Ashes of Balance, which can only be made by sacrificing a person who is in Balance.”

Xenka turns back to the dais and a voice fills the silence before she can return to her place behind the pulpit. She turns to hear Brother Tarlin speak.

“Prophetess...*who is to be sacrificed?*”

The old woman stares at Tarlin for a beat. She takes a deep breath and speaks.

“I am.”

The gathering of monks gape in astonishment. Xenka stares gravely at them.

“By virtue of your silence, I believe you all understand the gravity of the circumstances.”

She glances over the crowd, meeting each set of eyes and looking for any response. As she looks, every person begins to weep terribly. Soon, the sounds of sobbing rival a nursery full of newborn babes.

“My children, I beseech you all not to cry over this singular truth. It is as I told you...the prophesy affects *each one of us*. Remember how it was before I returned? Remember when the Avatar was called the ‘pawn of prophesy?’ I realize now, at the end, that we are *all* ‘pawns of prophesy.’ Now that the Balance is restored, there is no reason for the Xenkan Monks to exist in this world. This is why the Vision showed the scattering of the monks. All the prophesies from *The Book of Serpents* have been fulfilled, and now the Great Earth Serpent wishes to guide us down one final path toward our destinies.”

Xenka looks down at each face, and every one speaks to her without uttering a word.

What could warrant that kind of destiny?

Answering their collective thoughts, Xenka continues.

“Mine shall serve a greater purpose, my children. If I were to ignore my fate, the Order Serpent would annihilate itself completely, and this world would suffer the wrath of Imbalance once again.”

As Xenka finishes, she looks at Tarlin. His face is twisted in pent-up frustration. Finally, he can suppress it no longer.

“Prophetess, why you? Why not any other? Why is it you that suffers such outrageous fortune? Why could it not have been me?”

Xenka looks at him disapprovingly.

“Tarlin, in all your time here, I had hoped that you, above all others, had learned to accept *your* destiny as all the others had learned to accept theirs.”

Tarlin is agonized by the remark. His face hardens as his frustration finally boils over.

“Then what is my destiny? What would you have me do?”

Xenka returns the gaze.

“You need not learn your destiny from me. Your path is clearer than any other person in this room. You must return from whence you came and complete the task you were sworn to carry out...*Lord Blackthorn.*”

Tarlin’s heart skips a beat. The angry retort catches in his throat and dies before it ever reaches his quivering lips. Mixed emotions then flutter across his face erratically as he searches for the right thing to say. He finds nothing.

The other monks look from Tarlin to Xenka and back, not quite understanding what is unfolding before them. Finally, shaking the look of disbelief, Tarlin speaks.

“That name no longer has any meaning to me.”

Xenka looks at him impatiently, weary of the ruse.

“Have you learned nothing in your time here? Your past has shaped you into the man you are today, Tarlin!”

Tarlin hangs his head in defeat. He looks up at Xenka with a pained expression on his face.

“That past has made me into a shell of a man! A withered husk of a person who is haunted every night by a past he cannot escape! The shadows still come...they are dead, yet *they still come!* I thought I left that all behind me...”

His voice falters as he chokes up. A look of understanding washes over Xenka’s face.

“You cannot simply toss that past aside...those who ignore the failures of their past are doomed to repeat them. You must know that...”

“But I betrayed my friend! Everything he achieved, I nearly destroyed...and yet he still gave me the choice...”

The world dissolves around Tarlin.

Blackthorn is on his knees, hands bound. Lord British stands before him. His once-regal robes hang in tatters from his shoulders, yet he looms over the fallen Regent with a majestic, but sad manner.

“Thy deeds were black, yet thy punishment is not mine to give. The evil of thy reign did not begin with thy heart, *though there it must be ended.*”

Lord British looks down at Blackthorn with pity in his eyes.

“I have no wish to see thee die for having been ensnared by dark powers that took thy will from thee.”

Lord British sighs deeply, then nods to himself. He looks down to his hand, where the newly-returned Orb of the Moons throbs softly in his palm. He closes his eyes and whispers a few words. Suddenly, he casts the Orb to the floor. A red Moongate springs up, pulsing in the half-light. Satisfied with the result, Lord British continues.

“Instead, I offer thee a choice. Thou canst return to Castle Britannia with me, and accept the trial and verdict of the Great Council...or...thou canst enter this gate, and live thy life in exile...in a place that neither I nor thee hath ever seen.”

Lord British looks at Blackthorn with hopeful eyes...the eyes of a friend.

Blackthorn averts his gaze in shame. His hands still bound, he struggles to his feet and begins to walk towards the Moongate. As he nears it, only then does he turn back to take a final look at the man whom he betrayed. Lord British is weeping as Blackthorn turns his back on his homeland and his king one final time.

Blackthorn steps into the pulsing gate, the flash of light blinding him as Britannia fades.

Tarlin’s eyes focus back to reality. He shivers at the memory, and blinks as his vision returns. Then he feels the eyes on him...it is in this moment that he realizes that the Vision was shared by all.

They know...

He looks up at Xenka as the feeling of dread creeps up his spine.

How will they take these tidings?

Tarlin glances around, and meets the stare of every monk in the Great Hall. Instead of finding looks of anger, or even cool indifference, he finds expressions of compassion and pity. His eyes settle on Xenka, who regards him warmly.

“Do you see? Your brothers and sisters forgive you, Tarlin...for they know the man, not the pawn of dark forces and, as you said, ‘outrageous fortune.’ I have seen your past. I

know the shadows of which you speak. They were the spawn of an artifact thought destroyed long ago, and their existence came about by events set in motion well before you ever became Regent of Britannia. *You are not to blame, Tarlin...*”

Tarlin listens, brooding over what Xenka tells him. A look of resolve begins to form on the sharp features of his face. Xenka sees this and quickly continues.

“Remember the companions of the Avatar? You were ensnared by malevolent forces as they were. You are no different. You are a good man, Tarlin. But it is time for you to be that man for the people of your homeland. Lord British, in his friendship, gave you a precious gift with the choice of exile. Because now, Britannia needs you...your friend needs you...Lord Blackthorn, your exile is now over. It is time to do what is right, and return the favor given you by your king.”

The look of resolve is now firmly upon Tarlin’s face. He stands slowly and walks to Xenka. He embraces the old woman tightly and whispers into her ear.

“Thank you, prophetess. Thank you for making a blind man see again.”

Xenka returns the embrace and whispers back to him.

“Do not thank me too soon...The road ahead is treacherous, and there is much yet to do.”

Xenka releases him and turns to the other monks. They sit, determined, waiting for her to speak.

And now it ends.

“My children, it is time.”

She returns to the dais and steps behind the pulpit. A solitary tear falls down her cheek.

“You all know the path. Now, you must walk that path. Some of us have much more difficult paths to walk than others. Others have shorter paths, and some shall be walking their path for many years to come. But know this...whether your path be long, short...straight, twisted...easy to traverse, or if there is difficulty every step of the way...remember the path, and never stray from it. For you each affect the fate of the world, as the prophesy affects each of you. Now, my children, it is time to gather your things and go...except you, Draxta...and you, Tarlin...the rest of you, may the wisdom of the Great Earth Serpent guide you down the path of your destiny. I wish you all well and good journey...may we all meet in the undiscovered hereafter. My children, one last time...farewell...and goodbye.”

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