

PROMPT #2: You've been raised all your life to fulfill a prophecy, only for the seer to realize they were mistaken — you have no great destiny after all. What do you do now?

Burden of the Chosen

by **Davis Welch**

In a forgotten land where you and I will never tread, Osek, The Oracle, walked among the Meadow of Dreams, so that she might hear the will of the gods. Her bare, wrinkled feet took ginger steps among the soft grass and swaying poppies, and she turned her head to the havens in search of the gods' messengers.

Long did Osek gaze at the sky, and as day turned to dusk; a brown eagle descended from the brilliant orange on the horizon. The eagle circled Osek twice, then landed before her. Osek, who witnessed much from the gods, narrowed her eyes to the beast before her. Many messages she witnessed, but *this* was something different. A sharp cry filled the air, and Osek looked once more upon the sky. A gray owl circled above with silent wings, and from its talons a plump, lifeless rat fell between Osek and the eagle. The eagle tore the flesh of the rat, bloodying its yellow beak as it dug into its gift. Osek watched in disbelief, understanding only as a seer chosen by divinity would understand.

The bird grasped the rat's liver with its mouth and swallowed it in one gulp, then it flapped its mighty wings and flew back into the sinking sun. Osek, eyes wide with shock, muttered to herself,

"No...it cannot be, surely..." but as Osek turned towards the owl, it flew opposite of the eagle, towards the rising moon. Osek sent summons for a council before the sun left the sky.

Over the next week, Representatives from all the houses in the land, greater and minor, answered Osek's call, and many set off to the Meadow of Dreams. Grand figures rushed to hear Osek's prophecy, and the grandest of all, Coeus of House Eos, traveled with his son.

Coeus took swift strides on the rocky dirt path through the forest. All the beasts and spirits of the wood peeked from around towering trees and from under small stones so they might see the champion of the gods and his son, who would surpass even Coeus himself in greatness. Coeus wore white robes the color of his beard; he lacked hair on the top of his head, but not charm or strength. His chest was always full of pride, fueled by his deeds. Tyris, his son, followed behind his father, blonde hair grazing his cheeks in the wind; he had the olive skin of his mother, not the stark white complexion of Coeus.

Coeus stopped and turned to face his son, and spoke with a voice like thunder, “Tyris, dear boy! You must match my pace.”

Tyris paused, shaken from the heavy thoughts in his head.

“Yes father,” he said. Coeus frowned and stepped forward; he adjusted a golden eagle pin on Tyris’s shoulder.

“Your pin was loose, Tyris. You mustn’t be so sloppy; you are an extension of myself at these meetings, and I am the representative of the Sun itself.”

Tyris felt the eyes of insects and robins and dryads peering at them from every direction. He looked at Coeus’s hands—Coeus’s hydra slaying, kraken thwarting, lion strangling hands. Tyris suppressed a shiver.

“Tyris?” Coeus furrowed his brow. Tyris blinked and stumbled over his words.

“Yes, of course, I won’t bring you any shame.”

Coeus grinned wide and bright. “Come along then! This is a day like no other. You will become your own man today, as the Sun god selects your first labor.” Coeus began on the trail once again, and Tyris followed his father.

In the Meadow of Dreams, before the nobles arrived, Osek’s pupils set silken blankets and feathered cushions of deep purples and lavish blues on the pillowy grass. They put bottles of fine wine in a nearby clear, cool stream outside of the meadow to chill, and they brought the golden treasure of bees and tender meat from slaughtered lambs. Osek sat in the middle of all the comforts, perched on a large gray rock, warmed from the sun’s rays.

Kirith, the youngest disciple of Osek, passed by his teacher as he placed bottles of wine among the blankets. He looked up at Osek, her skin the color and texture of leather, her hair white as winter’s snow, and her eyes, fierce and hazel, staring at the sun.

“Osek?” Kirith said. Osek blinked and turned to Kirith, examining his short brown hair and pale face. She opened her mouth, and in a calm, steady tone said,

“Kirith.”

Kirith's lips parted in a mischievous, curious grin only a child can manage. "Can you tell me? Can you tell me what beast the son of Coeus must slay?"

Osek closed her eyes while Kirith continued to prod, words spilling out of his lips, "is it a gorgon? Or a basilisk? Oh! What about a sphinx?"

Osek opened her eyes and spoke slowly. "If you do not know, then I cannot tell you. Now go, place a bowl on each blanket."

Kirith didn't stop smiling as he ran to go fetch the drinking bowls. Osek turned her grim gaze back up to the cloudless sky.

As all the noble houses arrived, Osek was nowhere to be seen, but her followers greeted each guest and told them to take their pick of the slew of blankets and delicacies. When Coeus arrived, a cheer went up from the crowd, and the members of other houses jumped to their feet to greet him and his son. Few stayed laying on their blankets, eyeing Coeus with distaste and Tyris with jealousy.

Coeus shook hands with the other nobles, and they shouted questions and jests at him and Tyris. All Tyris saw was a blur of fine robes, coarse beards, and wine stained lips. He felt the eyes of powerful women and hungry men dig into his back.

"What a day for you and your boy, huh Coeus?"

"You can't help him with his first time around you know!"

"You're looking a little nervous boy!"

Tyris tried to keep his chest high and eyes alert. He opened his mouth to speak but Coeus's booming laughter silenced him and the other guests.

"Nonsense! Coeus cried, "My kin fears no challenge, he didn't even scream when he fought his way out of his mother's womb!" Those standing erupted in laughter and gasps of awe. Tyris thought about how often he heard his father tell that story.

Everyone settled into their blankets. They ate greasy meat with their fingers, drizzled honey on plump figs, crushed tender grapes in between their teeth, and washed everything down with dry, earthy wine from golden bowls. Many passed Coeus their bowls of wine so he might partake with them; Tyris sat upright, refusing all that was offered to him.

As Osek emerged from the edge of the meadow, the guests lay on their sides with full bellies and dribbling chins. None besides Tyris watched her slow walk toward the center of the gathering. As Osek stepped on her smooth, warm stone, the chatter went quiet.

Osek raised her arms and bellowed, "Twenty years ago today, Coeus, The Golden, brought his child to this stone, and the gods renewed their blessing of the House of Eos. They

confirmed what many thought, that Tyris, son of Coeus, shall replace his father as the Sun's chosen champion."

Tyris's stomach twisted and turned, his head felt light, as if he had too much wine, though he hadn't taken a drop.

Osek continued, "Traditionally, when the next chosen reaches twenty years of age, the gods reveal their first bounty."

Coeus licked his lips and put his hand on Tyris's shoulder. Tyris heard his heart slamming against his chest, he swallowed, trying to moisten his bone dry mouth. He stared at his father's rough hands and thought he might scream.

Osek paused and gazed at her audience. She locked eyes with Tyris, and knew him for what he was.

"However," Osek said. Coeus's smile changed to a frown. "The will of the gods has changed."

Tyris froze, he couldn't hear his heartbeat anymore. Coeus's face was that of unpainted marble.

Osek continued with her declaration, "Tyris, House of Eos is no longer the Sun's chosen. Instead, the gods grant Jalira, House of Mene, labor today."

All the creatures of the Earth stood silent, and not even the wind blew. Kirith, who stood at the edge of the gathering, blinked.

Coeus rose to his feet and roared like a lion denied its prey, "You've brought me to a den of vipers! What treachery is this?" Spittle flung from his lips, his face grew red and a throbbing vein bulged on his forehead. "Resend such blasphemy at once!"

Osek tilted her chin upwards. "I will not deny you the truth, and I shall not feed you lies."

The council broke into chaos, shouts rang out in the air, guests scrambled to their feet. Wine bowles clattered to the ground, thrashing feet turned the fruit and meat into stick stains on the grass and silks. Three men twice the size of Coeus struggled to hold him back as he clawed the air in Osek's direction, calling for her blood. Those that scorned Coeus met each others' eyes and shared toothy smiles. A wayward elbow bloodied the nose of a drunk elder, and his cohorts howled with rage. Those most fond of Coeus screeched curses at Osek, who spoke calmly in a vain attempt to reduce their ire.

None, save for Kirith, saw Tyris rise to his feet and walk with slow rhythmic steps toward the forest at the edge of the meadow.

The shouting and jeering slowly faded as Tyris entered the forest, and the babbling of a wide brook filled his ears. A wave of fatigue rushed through his body, and he collapsed to his knees, sinking into the soil of the creek bank. Tyris gasped large, greedy breaths that filled his lungs and exhaled choking sobs as hot tears poured down his face, dripping on his robe. His chest rose and fell in shaky, irregular intervals as he expelled his worries from his body. Even after his breathing returned to normal, he couldn't stop the tears from running down his cheeks. He heard a soft voice from behind him.

"I'm sorry you...I'm sorry you won't get any glory."

Tyris threw back his head and laughed, a long indulgent laugh. He breathed a deep, steady sigh, and turned around to see a young disciple of Osek's, a mere child standing before him. Tyris thought of how he must look to the child, a tear stained mess of a man with red cheeks and a damp nose, and he said, "What is your name boy?"

"Kirith," he replied.

"Kirith," Tyris said, he found that he couldn't stop smiling.

"Kirith, I want you to have this," Tyris pulled the shining eagle pin from his shoulder and placed it in Kirith's hands. Kirith's eyes widened, but he said nothing.

"Now, I want you to run back to the council meeting, and don't tell a soul where I'm at, alright?" Kirith nodded his head and dashed back out of the forest.

Tyris crawled over to the creek and splashed crisp, cool water on his hot face. Without the pin to hold them, his robes fell from his shoulders, and he pulled them off so he was naked as a newborn baby. He rose and stepped into the stream, clear water parting at his ankle, round stones shifting under his toes. He drank from the stream and felt the cold water move down his throat and into his belly; then he laid on his back in the stream, and the water overtook all but his nose. His father's voice shouted his name from far away, but Kirith did not answer the call, and no eyes fell upon him.