

Courtesy Preview: Prologue
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Synergy Books May 2008
ISBN: 978-1-933538-83-9



The men's angry voices rose in a crescendo as their nervous mounts squealed and shied away, fearful of entering the deep gloom of the spirit woods.

"Leave him!" the captain shouted. "His wound is fatal. We need not risk the wrath of the wood nymphs on a dying poacher!" He jerked his horse around, spurred it sharply, and led the king's soldiers away at a gallop.

The wounded man cowered, shivering in the chill of the shadowy mist. He waited until the soldiers' cries and the sound of pounding hooves grew fainter. When silence embraced him once more, he struggled to his feet, slipped, staggered, and then fell to his knees on moss-slicked stones beside a stream. Clutching his bloodied side, the dying man fought to regain his footing. Swaying on unsteady legs, he attempted to find his balance and stumbled forward only to drop face down in the shallow water. Blood swirled in an increasing eddy that tainted the sacred pool beyond, releasing a sudden coppery odor that sent a pure white stag fleeing in a cloud of apprehensive snorted breaths and shrill calls of alarm.

Choking as he ingested water, and quivering with the growing chill brought about by loss of his physical life force, the man rolled onto his back and drew up his legs as a painful spasm of blood-strangled coughing overwhelmed him. Tendrils of thickening mist swirled at the bank of the stream, the nebulous vapor gradually shifting from shapelessness to indistinct form as the glowing life within the deepening twilight grew and revealed the forest's twin sentinels, Flida and Karid.

Flida gripped Karid's formless fingers, drawing her sister back beneath the trees. "It is a Man!"

Karid, tugging against her sister's hold, replied, "Aye, near death. I can feel his fear."

Again Karid pulled against Flida's fragile grip and broke away, the energy from her effort casting a sudden bright flare.

"Stay back, Karid! Do not touch him!" Flida exclaimed.

"Why? I have never seen a Man, and are we not charged with easing the terror of death's claim?"

"In fern or fawn, but not in Man! Never in Man. Only the ancestral gods may accept the life force of a human and free a soul. You know it is so! Come back! Come away, Karid!"

Karid gathered the mist around her, drawing it in to give her form more substance. Kneeling beside the fallen man, she whispered, "You are dying."

The poacher's eyes flew open as his startled gasp brought on another fit of strangled coughing.

"Do not fear me. I am the wood nymph Karid, a sentinel of these woods. Your wound is mortal, you are dying," she told the man as she examined him with growing interest.

Karid's soft words earned the man's feeble nod. He raised a bloodied hand and reached out toward the pale spirit, his movement dispersing the hazy outline of her delicate form. "Help me...end my suffering. Accept my soul...please..." he begged.

"No! You must not," Flida warned. "Karid! It is forbidden to any but the gods. Only they have the power to judge a man's soul. You know it! Our realm is here within the wildwoods and does not include the flesh of men. Come away! Leave him!"

Karid shook her head, and a cascade of glittering particles showered the dying poacher in a waterfall of light. "He came to us! Should I abandon him in his final moments simply because he is a Man? That would not be very charitable. I want to share his thoughts and feel the passion of warm flesh as he struggles to cling to life," Karid said, eager with desire. "Then I will send him gently on his way. Surely the gods will forgive my curiosity in the presence of such compassion."

"Karid! Do you mock the gods?"

Karid ignored Flida and cupped the man's face in her hands. Her wistful eyes claimed his, and her lips dropped to meet his mouth as she drew into herself his dimming life force and struggling soul.

She drew away with a rapturous cry. "Oh, Flida, there is such ecstasy in Man's flesh! The rush of blood and fearful pounding of the heart! It is unlike anything I have ever felt!"

Karid's ethereal image then rose, paused, and convulsed. She began thrashing about as if captive to a seizure, poisoned by the touch of a human. Flida screamed and shrouded her sister's writhing and contorted form, trying to tear away the flesh that was quickly taking possession of Karid's spirit. "No!" she wailed.

A thunderous roar followed the flash of the dark god's arrival. "Nymph, you dare to steal from us?" The smoky voice sent coils of sooty darkness around Karid, hiding her from Flida's anxious gaze.

Discomforted by the flesh that now covered her form, Karid huddled into herself, arms clutching her newly formed knees. "I meant no harm. The man was dying. I only

wished to save him from the pain and fear of death, to ease his passage, nothing more. He came to us, came into our woods, into the realm of our rule.”

“Save him? When did the gods grant you the power to save the souls of men? You lie, spirit!” roared the dark god. “I can see the truth behind your actions. Your desire was not for this man’s wellbeing but was driven by your jealousy and pride and by the belief that we would not feel the tremor of your trespass.”

“Surely my curiosity will not be judged harshly!” Karid pleaded. “What harm can come from taking a single human soul when the gods have so many?”

“You defy the gods and ask what harm will come of it?” the dark one asked with a burst of laughter. “You have betrayed your sister and the spirit world you serve, broken the laws that bind you to risk a moment in the pleasure of the human’s flesh. Now, flesh-bound you will wander the earth beyond these sacred woods, revered by none and reviled by many.”

“Do not take my sister!” Flida implored, her fragile image ice blue, pulsing in fear and sorrow, and her crystal tears falling to blanket the moss beneath her feet in glistening snow. “A single nymph cannot protect the magick of these woods! Karid’s act was not one of disrespect. She was just curious. Take back the human form! Let her stay with me!”

“Loyal Flida, what your sister did was not done out of kindness. By her action, Karid scorns the gods. Her fate now lies within the flesh she so desired. Your tears cannot stop what has begun,” the god hissed, a slow smile shifting the shadows of his features, “but if you truly believe Karid’s protestation of innocence, perhaps you are compassionate enough to join her in the realm of men?”

Flida stared at the loathsome flesh that now engulfed her sister. “Karid... I...” she whispered and turned away, “I cannot find you innocent.”

“I thought not,” the god replied, fading in a bell-like peal of satisfied laughter and lingering accusation. “Even your sister finds you guilty, Karid, and unworthy of her sympathy. Go now from this sacred place. Until the bounty of the gods is loosed, here you will no longer have power. Here you will no longer be welcome. Let the gods see how you fare among men.”

Karid rose and held out hands now enfolded in fragile flesh. She raised them to touch her newly formed face and stroke the long golden hair that fell like silk across her heaving breasts. Karid’s luminous emerald eyes watched her tormentor disappear and then shifted their gaze to Flida.

“Sister, you will soon wish you had not forsaken me. I will not bow beneath this curse. I will rise among the flesh-bound and lead them against you for shunning me this day. I will bring war to you Flida, and men will curse your name!” She flexed her fingers and closed them to form angry fists.

“There is strength in this blood and bone, which the god has bound to the magick of my spirit. I will learn to love this beating heart and the breath of these lungs. From behind this shield of flesh, I will rule men with the breath of dragons. I may not be revered, but I will be feared and obeyed.”

She spun around and raced away toward the realm of men, the moonlight gilding the halo of her hair and flashes of pale flesh.

Flida watched the first dead, argent leaf drift to the earth nearby. “What will you do, Karid? And how will I stop you?”



Malaia, blood heiress to the throne of Quondam, dove against the toppled giant, an enormous knotwood tree that had been ripped from its anchorage in the frenzy of mating dragons. She pressed her face into the leaf litter, trying to make her body as small as possible, and clamped her hands over her ears to muffle the thunderous bellowing that threatened to deafen her. The earth came alive, shifting and shaking beneath Malaia's body, trembling under the weight of the massive dragons as they wrestled and battered one another, tails lashing and wicked jaws snapping.

Another tree crashed to the ground and sent a new shudder reverberating through the soil beneath the terrified woman. Suddenly the sounds were much closer, within the very glen where Malaia hid. She whimpered, oblivious to the possibility of alerting the beasts to her presence. It would be impossible for them to hear the faint sounds of her distress above their own deep-throated growls and labored breathing.

When the wizard Aenzl had approached her with the idea of saving the dragon's magick within the king's man-born bloodline, Malaia had felt indebted to the old man. It was he who had offered sanctuary when no other would. Even those most loyal to the king's reign fled ahead of Queen Karid's armies, condemned by association, warranted for execution by command of the new ruler. Queen—the use of the title caused Malaia to gag—Karid. She shivered as the name assailed her senses with images of razed villages, the smell of scorched earth and burning flesh, and the sounds of men screaming. The story of the former sentinel's betrayal and subsequent banishment from the spirit wood had traveled from mouth to mouth in the kingdom. It was the beauty of Karid's human form that had drawn Malaia's brother, the king, into a deception that ended in his murder. The king's death left Malaia to be hunted as the last mortal heir to the throne of Quondam and Karid its self-appointed queen.

Karid's armies also hunted the magick flames of the few lingering dragons so that she alone would possess their power, and soon her armies would extinguish the dragons' magick forever. Only the fulfillment of Malaia's promise to the wizard could prevent this loss and save the wildwoods and the realm of men from Karid's cruelty. The wizard swore that Malaia's forbidden union with the magickal beast would be blessed by Flida, sister of Karid and remaining sentinel of the dying wildwoods, and that the planting of the great dragon's seed within Malaia's fertile womb would provide a powerful future ruler—a rightful blood heir, strong enough to challenge Karid and reclaim Quondam's throne for men. A beast born of Man and magick, a dragonspawn allied with Flida against Karid's false rule, would have the power to stop the decay of the sacred wildwoods.

A sudden shadow caused Malaia's thoughts to return to the dragons. She had imagined dragons' mating to be similar to that of a farmer's cattle, with the cow standing while the bull covered her, grunting in his effort to inject his seed. Nothing she had ever seen had prepared her for the reality of witnessing the dance of the dragons.

Talons locked, the dragons swiveled and whirled overhead. Their broad leathery wings outstretched in a balletic pirouette of titanic proportion, they danced to a symphony of thundering dragon song before breaking free and crashing in meteor-like strikes that cratered the earth and sent missiles of grass-bound soil ricocheting skyward.

Malaia raised her head and peered between tattered branches, hoping to see just how close the monsters had drifted. In the small meadow beyond her desperately inadequate tree fortress, the dragons continued to drive against one another, the wings of the male beating furiously as he lifted off the ground and attempted to settle behind the female.

The snarling and snapping increased as they charged and butted one another with such tremendous force that more trees crashed about them and the ground was set aquiver. The larger dragon, the female, was neither docile nor willing. She fought against the slightly smaller male, ripping scales and leaving great gashes along his heaving sides, but the male was stronger, or at least had more energy, for now that the female tired, he gripped her roughly just under her wings and behind her forelegs and thrashed about trying to place his greatly engorged organ into the shadows beneath her tail.

A final roar shattered the air as the male hit his mark. The great female gave a long, low groan and released a fiery breath, scorching the grass of the glen. The male pumped feverishly before suddenly going rigid and bellowing out his conquest. With a downward sweep of his great wings, he lifted from the female, spilling a bit of his precious life-giving seed. In a final gesture of dominance, he snapped his great jaws and was gone, soaring away over the great woods and calling out his victory.

The female dragon squatted and released a hot stream of urine, marking her presence in the glen, before rising into the air to follow after her mate and disappear. Scanning the area for Karid's soldiers, Malaia cautiously climbed out from her hiding place. Reassured that she was alone, she pulled the small vial that the ancient augurer had given her from beneath a dirt-smudged cloak, but her hands shook so badly that she dropped it twice before finally securing it firmly in her grasp. What had she been thinking? To make such a deal with the old soothsayer now seemed beyond comprehension. What would become of her once the dragon's seed was planted? What beast would be born of the forbidden blending? But then again, what if she failed the wizard? Would he withdraw his offer of protection? What chance for her then?

Still shaking with fear, she hurried to the site of the dragons' mating to search the ground for her prize. There on the crushed grass lay the dragon's spill, viscous and still steaming, carrying the magickal beast's foul odor. Malaia knelt and scraped the sticky white seed into the glowing vial, stoppering it with the gauzy black leaves the wizard had provided. She watched, stunned as the fragile gauze stiffened and formed a barrier within the vial, securing the dragon's milt until it could be delivered. Holding the clear flask to the light, Malaia shuddered at the movement of the dark seeds within the thick, milky liquid. It was a potential for life that would, by the skill of a sorceress's midwifery, a wizard's will, and the blessing of a woodland nymph, soon be united with a seed of her own.

Malaia wrapped the vial tightly within a soft cloth and slipped it inside her shirt, between her breasts where it would remain warm and viable. Then with a last furtive glance about her to make sure she remained unseen, she hurried away toward the road and the village of Dragonfire, where the sorceress C'thra and the wizard Aenzl waited.

It seemed to Malaia that an eon had passed. The seasons slowly turned around her, from hopeful spring through sun-kissed summer and on to brittle autumn. All the while her belly grew greater, and she felt the life within battering against the walls of its membranous cell until she believed the beast would not wait to be taken by the sorceress but simply burst out of its fleshy confines.

Eventually the time arrived, and she lay in the pastoral midwifery area within the sacred boundary of the standing stones, feeling the great stresses of her muscles as they attempted to expel the unwanted creature, the creation of the dragon's seed and an ovum from Malaia's fertile womb.

Her body was bound to the birthing chair, the arrival of her beastly child inevitable and just moments away. Malaia tossed her head back and forth as long wails of agony burst from her throat, her white-knuckled fingers clutching the edge of the seat on either side of her thin, naked hips. Her flesh was slick with the sweat of pain and terror and the dreadful fear of the creature she had conspired to create—the creature that caused ripples across her swollen belly under the magick touch of the sorceress.

Shadows drifted around the glen, always just beyond Malaia's field of vision. She could only see the sorceress C'thra, whose eyes shifted from the dark V between Malaia's trembling legs and pain-contorted face as she issued a midwife's sharp directions. Hot tears of regret ran from the corners of Malaia's eyes, filling her ears and muting the sounds around her.

“Push, Malaia! Push!” C'thra's harsh voice demanded.

The mother-to-be bore down. The pain between her legs grew daggersharp, and she gritted her teeth to strangle the scream that welled up from deep within her soul. Suddenly the pain grew so great that she could no longer contain her cry. Her lips drew back in a hideous grimace, and her shrill voice rent the air, blanketing the glen with her words of anguish.

“Death, take me, and curse this newborn demon! Set me free of this beast! Death, free me of it! Oh sweet death, what have I done?” With the third calling of death's name, Malaia's words trailed into silence as the spawn of her sin slid from the warmth of her womb into the chill of the world.

C'thra glanced to her left, giving a subtle nod to the others, who waited expectantly. No sound broke the stillness save the mother's soft weeping. Such were the exhaustion and fear that claimed her that she did not see her death approach. A gossamer veil of deepening darkness covered Malaia, stealing the breath of life and ending her days.

Aenzl, the aged wizard, drew forward. “Karid, go from here! Here you have no right to be! You are nothing more than the desperate distortion of a woman, not worthy of either gods or men. Your place is in the killing fields. It is there you will find the countless souls you must feed upon in order to renew your cursed flesh. You have no power over those within these sacred woods.”

“Such cruel words uttered against a nymph and a lady!” Karid said as she stepped into the light. “I would expect a gentler greeting from a wizard of the mist. Have we not long shared this world in peace? Have I not made way for new life by the taking of the old? Can you truly fault me for twisting a curse into a blessing, Aenzl? Are you faulting me because I have learned to love the warm flesh of Man?”

“You, Karid, are no longer nymph—your betrayal makes it so—and you are certainly no lady. You dare to call your violent rule peace? No matter the splendor of your physical form, you are nothing but false flesh that fools no one except the humans you corrupt to do your bidding,” the wizard scoffed. “You spoil everything you touch, and it is you who moved among men, deceiving the lawful king with false beauty before slaying him and stealing his crown. It is your desire to live in the flesh that has allowed the human blight to spread across our sacred lands, to claim the world and scar it all, leaving us naught but this small patch of dying woods. You are as false as a whore’s cry of pleasure.”

“One cannot rule Man with weakness. It requires a fist of fire. I rule Quondam. All save this bit of the Feverous Forest you call home, and soon enough I shall snatch even this from Flida’s tenuous hold. My sister cannot save the forest alone, and she does not have the power or skill to call forth an ally. She is weakened by my absence, even as I am strengthened by Man’s flesh. So too are you doomed, old man, as are all those who still believe that the magick of our ancestors will rise to save them. There is no magick. There is only the power of Man. And I control Man. Only a few black Noor who served the king continue to resist, and soon enough they will succumb to my promise of protection or die without it. Frankly, I do not care which they choose.”

With an angry shake of his head, Aenzl swept around Karid and paused beside C’thra to place a pale, gnarled old hand on the head of the newborn.

The wizard commanded, “Sever the bond.”

The sorceress cut the binding cord, releasing the pale child from the attachment to its dead mother. C’thra lifted a white-hot iron from the glowing coals and touched it to the severed end of the still bleeding umbilical lifeline, causing the fleshy blue-purple cord to sizzle and the blackening blood to boil away. With soft cloths she wiped away the mucous of birth and stroked the softness of the infant’s downy head. She whispered to those waiting to hear her words, “The perfect image of a human and not like a dragon. This babe is as perfect as I have ever seen—a flawless vessel to contain the final fragment of Quondam’s sacred magick.”

Karid stirred, her shadow looming across the glen. Settling near C’thra’s side, the queen hissed in a voice as cold as glacial ice, “This is the challenger my sister sends? This is your hope for a future king to save mankind and the spirits of the wildwoods?” Karid spat her disdain. “And you dare call my embrace of the flesh a betrayal? My sister has betrayed you all!”

At the sound of Karid’s voice, the child’s eyes opened, locking on those of the woman who would hold his fate, and within his mind the echo of a small dragon’s roar was heard.

Karid’s form swirled away, trailing bitter laughter as her ghostly gray sleeve rippled in an expansive gesture. “His own mother summoned me to take her life and curse him, and so, as is my right, a curse I offer—that Man shall judge this child a beast, brand him, and exile him to a rock where his own blood will bind him. His very name will be forgotten, forbidden even as memory! I shall let you keep your dragonspawn for he is rooted in neither the realm of Man nor magick, and unless he is, he will never rule.”

“Beware of pride, lady Karid, and of where your love of flesh and blood may lead!” Aenzl shouted.

There was a soft shuffling as the shadowy figure fled, leaving a chill, angry challenge in her wake. “A curse upon you all! Let the dragonspawn stop me if he can, wizard!”

“Beware your pride...” the wizard once again warned as Karid disappeared.

“My sister has grown harsh and bitter within the flesh.” From deep within the gloom came a dancing light. In a shimmer as pale as silvery moonlight, the nymph Flida made her way forward and took the babe from C’thra’s arms. Her eyes grew damp, and a single tear fell upon the child’s brow. “It is fey fair you are, my little one, and with my tear I will temper my sister’s curse. While I cannot dispel it completely, I can balance it with my blessing. For no more than ten generations will Karid’s curse bind you upon a prison rock, and no dominion will she ever have over you lest you speak her name thrice.

“I will send a woman traveler, one born beneath the sign of serpent and dragon, a stranger to Quondam’s shores. This woman will embrace you and set you free by the speaking of your forbidden name. Together you will go forth as legend to uncover the power within a tomb and free the bounty of the gods. Only then may you rise to challenge Karid and take from her the curse of flesh. From there you will be free to choose your own path within the realm of Man or magick.”

Shaking the particles of light from her hair, Flida lifted the likeness of a hand, and her golden voice charged C’thra and Aenzl with the child’s care and keeping. “Until death, I charge you, C’thra, with my legend’s care. With no mother, he will know naught of himself, and so I entrust you with his nurturing and truth. Share my words and my promise, wrap him in your wisdom, and call him son.

“Aenzl, hard will be your service, for when Karid’s men come to judge the dragonspawn ’twill be you who must sacrifice your freedom to see him safe. Bind yourself to him, and become his steward and teacher, his keeper and friend.”

Flida gathered up the infant’s tiny hand and brought it to her lips, her whispered kiss stirring wisps of red-gold hair about his fair and cherubic face. “You are the hope of our tomorrows. You will be a legend to those accursed by Karid, the redeemer of magick, and a king among men.

“I leave you now with these final warnings. Take heed of the depth of Karid’s anger and her desire to keep the form of flesh, for she has betrayed the sacred trust of the gods again and again in order to keep its pleasures and its power. But no such life can be given Karid without the gravest sacrifice of others, and what my sister does in the name of Man is not of Man at all.

“Guard well this child when at last he ventures beyond the rock of Karid’s promised prison. There will be many who would lead him astray.”

Flida returned the child to C’thra’s waiting arms, the luminosity of her presence fading with her final words, “My blessings upon you all.”



As the dragon child grew, the world of men became warped and twisted, shattered in the self-destruction of the two warring factions—those whose fear-driven loyalty was to Queen Karid, and those who were devoted to Flida and the ancestral gods.

Karid’s curse burst upon the dragonspawn in the first year of his manhood. Beneath the false queen’s merciless gaze, a panel of judges declared the young man a beast born of a forbidden union and guilty of murdering the queen’s prime elder. They branded him and sentenced him to a rocky prison, bound by the blood of his signature. His name was

proclaimed demonic and forbidden even to the memories of men. For ten generations, the child born of the union between woman and dragon bore his punishment in silence, but that which was done to him in the name of Man was not of Man at all. It was of Queen Karid.

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