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Another Side of Destiny

by

Harper Peace

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## **Another Side of Destiny**

A tale from the Lands of the Sweet Waters

*Translator's note: Some words in this tale don't have direct equivalents in English. As this may be confusing, I've listed those words here:*

Charm: something that can be wished on, and the wish comes true.

Glamour: the appearance of someone or something, caused by a wish. When people talk of a glamour, they often mean the appearance of their own face, or someone else's.

Omen: a prediction of the future. "Taking an omen" is not an everyday event. Omens are sought at significant life events, such as child-birth, coming of age, and marriage.

Warding charm (or ward): a particular type of charm, always worn on the body. This type of charm warns when its wearer is in danger, usually by growing warmer or lighting up.

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"Sorry," I whisper. I lean over him, and find a stubble-free patch of cheek to kiss. "I'm getting up."

"Mm," he says.

"It's nothing. Don't worry."

The bed creaks as it loses my weight. I scoop up sandals and balance my charm box in the crook of an arm. At the curtain, I bunch the beads together so they won't rustle.

My husband lies still, and his snore is restarting.

In our courtyard, the shadow of the eastern wall covers everything, except our water charm at the tip of its reed pole. The sky is a flat, soft, morning blue. I think the day promises to be warmer than yesterday.

I tie my sandals, and notice there's a scuff on one heel. It has to be from last night, when I was holding my new-born niece, and not looking where I was walking.

From our chest, I lift out linen strips: light blue today like the sky. I wrap my loins and pin a strip in place. Dissatisfied, I pin it tighter, then wrap my breasts so tightly they ache. Today, my charms need to be close.

"Mother and Father," I say, and bow to their statues. "Welcome to the new day." Yesterday's offering of oil has gone. I pour new drops for them on their little clay feet. "We had dinner with Jon's brother and their children," I tell them. "The new baby does have Jon's eyes." I want to tell my parents of the warding charm, but I can't: it'll make it too real. "Well," I say and try to smile. "Well."

I know I'm hesitating.

At our west wall, I close the shutters against the coming warmth of the day. The tree we've trained there is starting to bloom. A brown bird lands on the uppermost branch, weighing down the thin wood so much I think it might snap. It's my bird, named after the destined I'm named for. Its morning song would be an omen, for a little of that Emily's unused destiny to be with me, but it stays silent.

I carry my box up to the roof and sit down on our prayer mat. Sunwards, the roofscape descends towards the city wall and the towers of the Dawn Gate. Singers dot the roof tops; but not many, it's still early. The song of the closest singer rises and falls on the morning air. No one sings with her yet.

I watch my charm box, waiting for the locking charms to take the sun; somehow the box is not its normal, comforting self. A sparkle grows within one charm, and then others catch the sunlight. Each charm blinks once before it darkens.

Three voices sing now. Two harmonize the Welcome together; they both have older women's voices. The third singer is a girl-child, and she sings two verses behind. She sits motionless, a rooftop in front of me, the palms of her hands held together above her head.

I love mornings like this, when a verse-gap in the Welcome awaits me. I accept their gift, raise my arms, and start my verse. We four become one in our welcome for God, and it lifts my heart.

When all our verses are sung, I bow to the sun, and touch charms to wish my box open. I pick out thongs, necklaces and bracelets, and smooth them on the song-mat, so no charm blocks another from God's light. In each charm, an eye sparkles its little fire, then fades.

I pick up a toe-ring and run my wishing finger over its tiny, rough stone. Today, I will follow the almanac properly. It's a day for dressing from toe charms up to hair charms, for the right details of blessings and wardings, all in the right order.

I add anklets, I tie and loop charms to my loin cloth. At my waist, I loosely tie a thong so its single, warding charm hangs against my skin below my navel. I knot charms at my chest, add necklaces to my neck, and earrings to my ear lobes.

When I reach my final hair pin, there are no singers left within hearing. God and I are alone, together, silent. I can hear my own breathing: it's shallow. My stomach feels empty.

I breathe in. "Dear God," I sing, my voice lower than before: for me and for God alone. I touch my hair pins and my ear rings. "I wish for your blessings," I sing. "For my sight, for my hearing, for my taste, for the gift of smelling flowers. I wish your blessings for my spirit."

My fingers move to my necklaces. "For my breath. For my sustenance." I touch the charms on the linen strip around my chest. "For the sound of my heart. For the strength of my arms. For the nimbleness of my fingers." I touch the charms on my loin cloth. "For my children's place. For my legs to walk and run. For feet to stand upon. Thank you God for your gifts."

I look into yellow light of dawn. Another singer starts in the distance: a man. I can't make out whether he sings the Welcome, or for his wardings and blessings.

I can't delay it any longer. "G...od," I start. "God, I wish your warding, for any ills that might come to me, of body and of spirit. Ward me, I pray of you." I touch the charms clipped in my hair. "Ward my senses, and my spirit." I move my fingers downwards. "Ward my heart. My breath. My sustenance." I hesitate. "Ward my c...children's place."

The single charm I've hung below my navel flashes into life and doesn't fade.

I touch it and wish the light to go away. It doesn't. It must be tangled with my wish for warding from harm.

"Oh... God," I whisper to the morning light.

"You've started without me?" Jon asks. There's a smile in my husband's voice that I can hear without seeing. "Something secret you're wishing for?"

I turn away from the sun. Jon hasn't dressed. He looks lovely, even sleepy faced and without a charm.

He sees my ward and his smile drops away. "What's that?" he asks.

"Hold me." I take shelter inside his open arms. "I love you," I say to his chest.

"What's wrong?" he whispers "The charm's a ward?"

"Yes."

He breathes in, hard. "For where?"

"My children's place. I'm... sorry."

"Sorry? What's there to be...?" He stiffens.

"I wanted it, Jon."

"Wanted?" He pulls away from me, and plucks up my face to look into his. He's lost color.

"Emily, how could you?" His hand brushes at the skin above my charm. He steps back and scowls at my belly, as though something poisonous lives there. I think he'd kill it if he could.

"Jon..." I begin. He's blurring in my tears.

He pulls me back into his arms. "It won't be true," he says. "We'll sing tomorrow for a better omen. It's third time that's the charm."

"Jon, this is the third time."

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The father's old face has lines worn by kindness. "Let's try again," he says, "from the beginning."

"I used a charm against falling pregnant." I say. "But I stopped."

"When, child?" he asks.

It's hard to say this, in front of Jon. I look down at the cloister floor. "Three moons ago."

"And your bleeding is overdue?"

"Yes father. A moon."

"And afterwards you tried to use a charm against an omen?" The old man's voice is low and gentle, but there's something else mixed with it.

"Yes," I say.

He frowns. "Because the child was ill-omened?"

"No, father, my child isn't. It's because... I was told that it would be hard for me to bear children."

"We," Jon says. "We were told it would be too hard. We decided not to." My husband isn't looking at me. He's looking up and away at the tiered terraces of the Inner Temple.

The father looks from me to Jon. "Who told you of this omen? A Temple father?"

"Yes father." Jon says. He unwraps our marriage tablet and passes it across. "That father took omens for us, and then he charmed Emily."

As the father reads, the lines on his face change to sadness. They smooth when he looks up at me, but his face is still easy to read. "You have the charm?" he asks.

"Yes," I say.

He takes it by its thong, and holds it up in front of his face. "Not from the Temple," he says. It's not a question.

"I'm sorry, father."

"And you have come to see me because of a ward charm? It has lit three times? You think something is wrong with the pregnancy?"

"Yes father," I say. "And because... I thought it would be different now. I prayed that, if I was blessed, then the omen would... there would be a new omen, and you can tell me what that is."

"No, child. An omen doesn't stop. It's God's warning for you. It's to help you, but it never changes. We must change because we hear God's words." He looks at my belly. "Let me see you," he says.

"What should I do?"

"Nothing," the father says. "Only let me see." He stands slowly, and hobbles away from us. He reaches up to a line of charms and pulls on it, swinging the charms around and unclipping several. "Emily, please come and stand here in the light. Pull up your tunic." He lowers himself down onto a bench in the center of his cloister, favoring his back.

I join him in the sunlight, and he lays a warm charm against my belly, touching it with his wishing finger. I see and feel nothing from it.

He shakes his head. "You *are* pregnant, child."

I start to cry, I don't know why. Jon doesn't come to me, and doesn't speak. I can see nothing on his glamoured face.

"Emily," the father says. "You know what's written on this tablet?"

I nod my head and let my tunic droop.

"It's most unlikely that you could bring a child into the gift," he says.

"I thought the charm--"

"No, child. Using this..." he picks up the charm and swings it slowly from side to side, "will not have changed any of that." His face is sad again. "There are no charms against omens." He moves my charm next to one on his belt, but neither light. "I doubt that this thing casts any enchantment."

"It does nothing?" Jon asks.

"It lights up when your wife touches it," the father says. "Look." He touches it and it lights. "But I made no wish, certainly not against an omen. Tell me where it's from, and I will see that the squires take action."

"But what should we do about the warding?" Jon asks. He hasn't moved a step towards me. He isn't protecting me.

"You can try to have the child," the father says, and his hand touches mine. His hand is cold. "We will do all we can. But..." he looks up above me, up at the Inner Temple, "God has warned."

"There's nothing else?" Jon asks.

"There is," the father says. "You can decide not to try."

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Jon sings the Welcome, and I take the verse behind. It's beautiful to sing with him: it makes the pattern stronger. Voices join us from other roof tops, until six of us weave the song. Then Jon's verses ends, and then mine.

We watch the sun and listen to distant songs, neither of us wishing. We don't know what to wish for. I touch his hand, but he moves it away.

I *do* know what to wish for: I wish that he would talk to me. How long will he keep punishing me?

"I don't want..." he says to the sun.

I wait for him to let it out.

"...to lose you," he finishes.

I'm crying again.

"Emily, how could you be so selfish!"

"I hoped--"

"You hoped! It was a *marriage omen*, Emily. When an omen comes for the Holy Father does he hope? He acts!"

"Yes! And what does he do, Jon? He conjures enchantments! We have silver now, and what are we doing with it? I acted! I bought a charm."

"You thought that was enough?"

"Charms are always enough!"

"Against *omens*, Emily? If they're always enough, why does anyone fall ill? Why aren't our parents still here? Didn't you hear the father?"

"I wanted something to... look forward to."

"Why isn't this enough?" he asks. He spreads his hands wide, as though he's asking the whole land. "Why is this never enough?"

"I have to have hope."

"You have no hope?" he asks.

I know I can't answer that, not without hurting him too much.

"We agreed," he says. "We talked and we *talked*. You didn't even want children. The marriage omen was not a loss, that's what you said."

"I didn't want children, not before I met you."

"What does that mean?"

"I didn't want a child. Not before. I want one with you."

He starts to dress himself in charms. "We can't keep it," he says. "I won't let you. You heard the father."

"Jon, I can't do that! It would be like... destroying a part of you!"

"Keeping it means the end of *all* of you!"

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Today there's the drone of bees here. In the half-moon since we visited, flowers have opened on the creeper that shades the cloister. Their perfume is sweet, but not sickly: a childhood smell. The bees are cleaning them of their pollen.

The father snoozes in the dappled shade. He has a little dribble on the corner of his mouth.

"Father," I whisper, going down on one knee.

He startles and stares, and his hands clench in the shawl around his knees. I think he doesn't know who we are.

"Emily and Jon." I say.

"Yes?" he asks.

"We've decided, Father. You asked us to come back today."

He looks from Jon to me, and his face crinkles into understanding. "I'm sorry," he says. He nods once, as though he's agreeing with himself. "I promise there'll be no pain."

"Father," I say, "we've decided to keep the child."

The father lets out a breath, and for once I can't read his face. "Then I will do everything I can, child. All I can. Lie over there. Let your own child be in the light."

I lie down on the bench and pull up my tunic. I can't help studying my belly, as though, since this morning, it'll have grown curved, and I'll be showing.

The father is at his charm rack. He pulls down charms until he has a handful, and then threads them all onto a single thong. He lays the thong out on my belly in a ragged circle. One charm he lets dip into my navel. "Let us sing together," he says.

I stare up, seeing sunlight through closed eyes. We make a little weaving of verses, the father leading and Jon last, but Jon's verses sound out of rhythm. It's a poor prayer we make.

"I must first try to understand more of what's wrong inside you," the father says. He shows me the charms on my belly one by one. "These charms are all wards, though more subtle and individual than yours." He touches one, presses it into me, towards my baby, and then touches a second. His wishing finger walks from charm to charm, then back again. I watch the frowns and puzzlement pass across his face. In the end he shakes his head.

"Father?" I ask.

"That told me little," he answers. "Another way, I think." He takes up the charms, and then pauses to look down at me. "A boy, or a girl? Would you like to know?"

I look at Jon. My husband looks away and shrugs. It hurts me like a kick. "Yes," I say. "I would like to."

"A girl," the father says.

"A *girl*, Jon." I reach out for my husband's hand, but he doesn't let me take it. "What should we name her?"

"You decide," he says.

"Please don't, Jon." My husband scares me. If I could see behind my husband's glamour what would I see? Despair? "You agreed," I say.

Jon stares at the Inner Temple. "So did you. You..." He doesn't finish. Jon thinks he can do nothing to change fate, so now he does nothing at all. I won't believe in that.

The father has taken down more charms. "Enchantments," he says. "Mild, but you may feel some sensations within you. Not to worry, they will not hurt you, or her."

*Her.* Our child. That sounds so strange.

He rests the charms on my skin and lets them drink the sunlight. "Tell me if you feel anything," he says. "Anything. A resistance, a stretching, even wind." He smiles. "No glamour at all on your face, please. How you react, it's important for me to see." He touches the new charms, one at a time, watching my glamourless face and the charms on my belly.

"I feel nothing," I say.

"More charms," he answers.

When he adds new ones, there isn't enough room on my stomach. Old ones slip off onto the bench. He doesn't seem to care, though they must be very valuable. He touches the new charms, pauses, then touches them again, then again in a different pattern. Another frown appears on his face, and deepens. "This is most strange," he says to me.

"What is, father?"

"Would you wait here, please... Emily, Jon. I need to seek another voice."

"Yes father," I say. My husband stays silent.

I watch the father leave. Jon stands reed straight and distant, looking away and up, watching the bees.

"Please sit with me, Jon."

"There's nowhere," he says.

"On the bench. I can put my head on your lap."

He obeys silently. That's not like Jon.

The bees make the only sound. Their hum and the sunlight should make this a drowsy place, but sleep doesn't come.

When our daughter is born, perhaps Jon will see it's all worthwhile. I can hope for that. He'll know she'll be a comfort for his old age. She'll tend his statue when he passes. Otherwise who'll do that for him? Or for me?

Jon startles and stands. I see who's entered and spring up, scattering charms. I bow to the Holy Father, then rush after them.

"Lie back down," our father says. "I will collect them."

"But--"

"The Holy Father wishes to examine you," he says.

"Emily, I am told," the Holy Father says, smiling. "Jon?" The Holy Father is even older than I would have thought, but he stands very straight, taller than my husband. "Sit please, as you were."

Jon sits and I lie down, my head back in his lap. Jon's glamour is high.

From his belt, the Holy Father takes a link of three charms. He holds them out to the sun in the palm of a wrinkled hand. When he places them on my belly they feel hot, not like those our father used. He presses on them, waits, nods to the other father, and touches them a second time. He adds two more charms and presses.

"Yes," he says, and takes a seat at my feet. I'm embarrassed. I should have worn my best sandals, not these. "Emily," he says. "I'm sorry, but we cannot help you, not with charms. We can't enchant you."

"Holy Father?"

"Not there." The Holy Father points at my belly. "We have the natural remedies of course, and we will use those to help, as we may."

"Holy Father, I don't understand," I say.

"The child is destined."

"God!" I cover my mouth though the blasphemy's already escaped.

"Yes," the Holy Father says, without a frown. "God. God's will. There is no other destined in your family line?"

"No!"

He looks at Jon.

"No, Holy Father."

I glamour up, but the Holy Father's already seen it. "Why are you crying?" he asks.

"Holy Father, she'll be destined."

"Yes?"

"And you ask why I cry!" *I've raised my voice to the Holy Father!* "Forgive me!" I scramble upright.

"Forgiveness is easy enough," he says. "Would you like us to take the omens for her?"

"NO!" I go to one knee, and stare at his feet. "No," I say in a quiet voice. "I would not like that."

"No?" he asks.

"I don't want to know, Holy Father. Please. I've lived with my omen for so long. I don't want it to be like that for her. Like it is for me. Please."

"Omens are to *help* us, Emily," the Holy Father says.

"Please. She will live, and she'll be special to me, whatever else she becomes. That's enough for me."

My husband raises me up and enfolds me in his arms. "Don't cry," he says.

His new tenderness starts my tears. "She's *destined!*" I say. "Why not?"

"For great things," he says.

"Like my destined? My namesake? You'd wish her ending for my child?"

"But our child will *live*, Emily. She'll be born. She has that much, whatever the rest of her life holds. We can name her now, Emy. What name for her? You decide."

"Zoe."

"Zoe?" I can hear his smile. "Where did that come from? There's no Zoe in your family."

"There are no tales of a Zoe, either, are there?" I ask. "No destined Zoe? That's my omen."

"Zoe then," Jon says.

"Yes."

"Thank you Holy Father," my husband says. "This is such good news. The best news..." He tails off.

In Jon's silence I look around behind me. The fathers' faces are solemn.

"What's wrong, Holy Father?" Jon asks.

"Zoe cannot be charmed, Jon," the Holy Father says. "More than that, she decides your wife's fate."

My husband laughs. "Isn't that what all children do? Then all is well. Zoe can't be destined to hurt her own mother."

"Your daughter wishes to be born at any cost," the Holy Father says. "No. I have said that badly. Your daughter cannot yet *understand* the cost. She's a creature of feeling. She feels her way towards her destiny. Your wife cannot have children without great suffering, or giving up her life. Zoe will make sure one, or both, of those will happen. She will be born, even if her mother must... pass on ahead."

Jon's arms tighten around me. "How could that be?" he asks. "Why would our daughter's destiny be for her own mother to do that?"

"Paths are paths, Jon," the Holy Father says. "Only God walks all. Zoe will choose from what paths she can, and she will choose for Emily too."

*They talk about me like I'm not here. And I feel like I'm not.*

"Holy Father," I say. "Even before we made her inside me? Did she want to be born, even then?"

He looks away, at the Temple, and the sky. "Such things are beyond my knowledge," he says. "Of this nothing is written. But, I think," he looks down, straight at me, "I think yes. I am sorry."

I turn my back and retreat inside my husband's embrace.

I thought this was all of *my* doing. I thought I was the Emily who could change fate. Maybe I never was. Maybe my daughter worked through me, to make her own destiny, and my fate has always been the same.

"You mustn't... hate her, Jon," I say.

"Hate her?" he looks down at me. "How could I?"

"If... I pass, don't hate her. She's innocent in all this. She only wanted to be born, and that can't be a sin, can it? I'll love her anyway Jon, no matter the pain she brings me. You must do that too. Please promise."

He doesn't answer me for a long moment. "I promise you," he says. "But how could I hate her, Emily? It would be like hating part of you."

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Taken, set down and sealed as being a true record of Emily's spirit.

In the 19th year of the Holy Father. The City of the Sun.

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*Translators note: This text was found on a clay tablet, inside a second sealing tablet, which was baked hard. This was common practice, both to preserve the inner tablet and to keep its text a secret until the clay seal was broken open.*

*The sealing tablet has the impression of a multi-tiered building, tapering towards the top - I assume, the Temple - and a short text asking that the seal remain unbroken until Zoe's eighteenth birthday.*

*The seal is broken, but I'm told this happened recently, within the last fifty years. This, and the fact that this tablet was sold, on the black market, with another batch of sealed "spirit tablets", leads me think Zoe could never have read this record.*

*I would like to think that this is because her mother lived, and so there was no need.*

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I hope you enjoyed this tale.  
If you did, please review it. Thank you.

Three short tales from the lands are available:

Another Side of Destiny  
Clay for Ellen  
My Joy Charm

The tales can currently be read in any order

The new, novel-length tale will start serialization this year.

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