
The Dark Prophecy of Oz

Part 1 : Shadows Under Oz

By
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Based upon and continuing the famous Oz
books by L. Frank Baum

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Chapter 1

The Reaper

Black ink surrounded Ozma on all sides as she tried to move around. She didn't know where she was in the tepid blackness, and she certainly wasn't used to sensory deprivation. Coolness chilled her skin.

"Hello?" she called out. "Where am I?"

No one answered the floating princess of Oz. Definitely not a place she liked being.

In fact, this was a position she'd long feared, ever since she was a girl, and even when she was a boy. No, this was not the way she wanted to be.

Being alone was a place of pure hell for her.

"Where am I?" she repeated. "If anyone can answer me, if there is someone, somewhere in this darkness..."

"There is," came the reply.

"Good," she sighed with relief. "I'd rather not be alone anywhere. In fact, the only place I'm alone usually is in my chambers..."

"Yes," returned the voice, which sounded like it was rising from a pit of ice, "and to some extent, that is where you are, but yet, you are away from there."

"I don't like riddles," she said, frowning. "Who are you, and where am I?" She took a step forward, to her surprise. She didn't think that she could step and float at the same time.

"Do you truly wish to see my face, Princess Ozma?"

"I do," she replied.

Chills swept over her as the stranger stepped out of the darkness. Black robes swirled about him, and he brandished a scythe which was decorated with long-forgotten runes and

carrying a visibly sharp edge. He let it fall to his side and he picked up a bony hand to pull back the hood, revealing a face that sent Ozma into a place of anger and revulsion. A face devoid of skin and bearing an eternal smile.

"I have heard of you," she said. "In fact, Glinda has had much to say about you."

"Really. Do tell," he invited.

"You are death himself. The reaper of souls."

The reaper bowed. "At your service." Ozma noticed that the Reaper's mouth didn't move, but his voice emanated from within the skull.

"I doubt that," Ozma retorted. "In fact, any soul alive exists only to serve in keeping you employed."

"It's a living, as the living tend to say." Ozma could tell that, had he any skin on his face, he would be smiling.

"I don't like your job. I take great pride in the fact that my home is a place where you don't need to visit."

"That isn't a good thing, you know," the Reaper replied. "By having this enchantment on the land of Oz, you have caused a shift in the order of things, a condition which is against Nature itself."

"You'll have to take that up with my mother." Tears were now forming at her eyes.

"This place is a refuge," Ozma continued, "to preserve the finest beauty in nature. That was my mother's desire." She began to see red as the conversation continued.

"Your mother, Lurline, Queen of Fae." The Reaper chuckled. "While she is wise in many things, she is also known for some of her greater mistakes. I can understand her feelings, though."

"Can you now?" Ozma scrubbed the tears from her eyes.

"But you see, I can't denied forever. Oz does not exist in a place that can exclude death. Eventually, the end must come."

"It won't come as long as I sit upon Oz's throne." Ozma's

tears were gone now, replaced with stern determination.

"Don't be too sure of yourself. To all, I come eventually."

"Wait," she said, cold realization dawning on her. "Am I dead?"

"No, this time you aren't," the Reaper said. "This time, you are merely being given a warning."

"But people aren't supposed to see you."

"Normally not," the Reaper growled, "But normally, people are supposed to live a limited lifespan." He approached the princess, who tried to back away.



Loud enough to jolt him from his sleep, Fastidious the guardian nearly fell from his bed as a new visitor entered his home. He looked up at the beastly shadow standing before him. Fastidious narrowed his eyes, trying to see what it actually was, but it seemed to have no form, just shadow.

"Who...?" Before he could eke out the remainder of his question, the shadow was fast upon him, and its hand was on his throat.

"Do shut up," it hissed in a low growl. "I am not in the mood for pleas of mercy."

"So you mean to do me harm," Fastidious replied.

"Oh yes," the shadow grinned. "Harm to you and everyone else in this land, and beyond."

"Well, you can't kill me," he replied, struggling against the shadow's grip. "In Oz, no one can die, even if you get them to the point where they would normally be killed."

"Don't underestimate me." It narrowed its eyes and glared at the little bearded man. "Oz is an abomination of Nature and, for that matter, so am I. And two abominations of nature can cancel each other out."

"Would you care to test that?" the creature continued, flicking a black tongue over its pointed teeth. "It's not like you're

in a position to resist."

Defiance sprung from the sudden fear that filled Fastidious's heart. He pulled and pulled at the shadow's hand until he finally broke free. *Run*, his mind told him, and run he did. The shadow shrieked, "Go ahead! Make it a sport! It has been a long time since I have hunted!"

And it had also been a long time since Fastidious had ran. Most of the time, his duties guarding the Passion Fire merely required him to be sedentary.

Of course, there were enough caves below this part of Oz that he could have gotten at least some exercise, he realized, and now he cursed himself for not taking advantage of them.

He darted down a tunnel on his left that normally only he knew about.

The shadow began its hunt. "Where are you, little man?" it called out. "Wherever you go, I'll find you."

Ah, psychological warfare. Fastidious had seen plenty of that before he took up the position of guardian. He didn't expect to see it used on him.

Not that it affected him in the least. Oh, no.

He rounded several more corners before he finally emerged in the familiar underground forest.

Now to find a place to lay low.

Down a path that he'd used dozens of times before, he pushed past the many fronds of green surrounding him. These plants were big, larger than most leaves on the surface could boast. Maybe he could hide behind the waterfall.

"You don't do a very good job of masking your scent or your tracks, guardian," came the shadow's voice from behind him, Well, now was the moment of truth, to see if he could get away with his life intact.

He stopped and turned for a moment and saw the pursuer emerging from the secret tunnel. *Well*, he thought, *so much for that. Maybe I can find or build a new one later.*

He looked back in the direction he was originally going, and saw that the waterfall was too far off to get to. He looked around and saw a bush, bearing the biggest leaves of all the foliage around him.

He dove in, being as quiet as he could be.

Through the leaves, he watched the creature stalk towards him, its eyes darting this way and that.

He tried to keep from shivering, but his body wouldn't let him calm down.

And then, it was standing right beside him. If only he could just still his heart and breath.



"Open your eyes, Ozma," the Reaper requested. She did, and the tears began to flow freely. "I understand how you feel. No one likes to see the ones they love, or anyone else for that matter, perish." He held his arms open. "Even I don't like my job sometimes. I have taken children that were merely days old, and I have even wept for them. But then, I have also taken men, deep into their old age who have lived a full life, whom I could, in good conscience, take from this mortal coil, and I celebrate them."

"Why can't you be happy that all these people in my country can live full lives for as long as they want?" Ozma was shaking now. "Why do you even need to consider us?"

"Because Death is a part of life, my dear." He folded his arms in, still clutching the scythe, which Ozma eyed. "Besides, do you really believe that your land contains no death?"

"Of course, I am certain of it," she replied.

"Know this, even since you have taken your throne, I have visited Oz." His voice dipped to a drone now. "Creatures get eaten. They get burned to death, fall to accident, and are consumed. Many times, people in Oz have met fates that have prevented them from living.

"And mark me, Princess Ozma," he went on, "I will be

making more frequent stops here."



Pleading wasn't working, but Dorothy kept trying. "Ozma, wake up!" She grabbed the little ruler's shoulders and shook her. "Ozma, you're only dreaming." Ozma continued to moan and cry in her sleep, panicking the Kansas farmgirl-turned-princess. "You're only..." She brought her hand down in a slap across Ozma's cheek "...dreaming!"

She suddenly pulled her hands back. She hadn't meant to really strike her best friend, but what else was there? This was not good. Even with that slap, Ozma wasn't waking up.

"Ozma, please," she cried softly.

Perhaps, she reasoned, if shaking and slapping wasn't working, maybe comfort would help. She climbed under the covers with Ozma and pulled her close. Ozma jerked about with her moaning, but it wasn't hard for Dorothy to wrap her arms around her and pull her tight against her.

"Ozma, if there is any part of you that can hear me, please fight back against whatever is making you like this, " She whispered into her ear. "It's only a dream. Please believe me."

Without warning, Ozma suddenly thrashed around, as though fighting someone.



Claws fell upon the leaves and branches around Fastidious. He could feel the cold radiating off them as they passed by his head. He was filled with sudden terror and he burst from the foliage and took off running.

"I knew you were there, guardian!" With a swiftness Fastidious had never known, the shadow followed in his wake. He kept going, but he knew there was no way to get away from this unearthly beast.

Not that that was going to stop him. He'd never been known to give up.