

Prologue

Kellay glared at her husband, daring him to argue. He sighed and held out his hand to her. As he did, his sleeve slipped back to reveal traces of a tattoo snaking up his arm, marking him as Guardian. Kellay had a matching tattoo and her throat closed in anguish for what that mark meant today. Still, she relented to his silent request and grasped his hand with her own.

“I have served Him faithfully. I have done everything He has ever asked but He cannot—*cannot*—ask this of me!”

“Kellay, we must.” Her husband’s voice was hoarse.

“But what about the baby? The prophecy you interpreted clearly said only the eldest was the Chosen; it said nothing of the baby. How could He be so cruel as to take both our children at once? What is the price of sacrifice?”

“Kellay, hush. You saw the prophecy as well as I.”

“Yes, I *know* the Other is coming into power.”

Both of their children started to cry, and Eltang frowned at his wife and shook his head. Kellay heard the silent reprimand for upsetting their children. Every Guardian knew who the Other was from the moment they were born. The fear of the Other was as ingrained in them as their love for Mansra. That her youngest daughter was a baby still and her oldest one not yet four made no difference. Even the name of the Other spoken aloud would affect them deeply. “But so what if th- so what if *he* is coming into power? Should that give Mansra the right to take *our children*? Why can’t I go instead?”

“Kellay, hush,” Eltang said again. “We don’t question Mansra. He is right, and He is good. If our children are called by Him, it is because they are needed to serve his purpose. The strength of the Guardians flows strongest in the veins of the young—you know that. We are too weak to take th- to take *him* on.”

Kellay looked away from her husband. She knew that. It used to be that Mansra protected many worlds, but not any longer—not since the Other had stepped into the picture. As the Other’s power grew, Mansra’s faded. If the Other destroyed *Mansra*, then the worlds would be lost. That was why Kellay’s children were being taken from

her. Who else but the Guardians' firstborn would be strong enough to restore the balance? But...these were *her* children.

Kellay grabbed her husband's arm. She glanced at her eldest daughter, then switched her language to one of the ancient tongues—one that her daughter had not yet learned. Would never learn, now. Not if she was being taken off the Guardian planet.

"*You* know how they are taken. It's dangerous. So many children don't make it through. So many lives are lost...and if anyone finds out who they are..." Kellay choked on the words, and she suppressed a scream.

"We are Guardians, Kellay. There is a price to protecting the worlds."

"*They're* not Guardians. Not yet. They won't survive without His protection."

Kellay felt her husband's fingers tense around her own and looked up at him.

"I gave the eldest His ring."

Kellay glanced down at her eldest daughter's hands, restraining her desire to gather up both her children and flee before the priests came. She saw the ring, now that she knew to look for it. Mansra's ring had been entrusted to him when he had entered Guardianship. Kellay didn't question how her husband's ring fit her four-year-old perfectly. Once given, the ring would fit its new bearer. So it had always been.

"But you can't! That is not yours to give. He won't be pleased." Yet as she said this, Kellay felt hope swell in her heart.

Please, Mansra, Kellay prayed to Him, *let her never take the ring off. Let it protect them both.* She was so desperate she almost called Him by name, but stopped herself in time. It was never wise for Guardians to invoke Mansra's true name. "We'll never see them again," Kellay said, defeated. "They'll be all alone out there."

"They have each other, love," her husband said. "Be strong, now."

"I am strong," Kellay snapped.

She was more than strong: she was Guardian. She looked to the door as the priests arrived.

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“And you will know the end has come by these signs: the sun will blacken into darkness, creatures will come from the depths of the ground to destroy the people, and Elyan will rise up from the ashes of fire. Thus, will Eliva fall.” –From the Prophecies of Berech

Deep underground, in a kingdom all but forgotten by humans, the drægonelle hissed uneasily. The human girl was awake again, and having visions. The drægonelle checked on her sleeping baby, then stretched her mind out, trying to *see* her. It was difficult, as the girl was not one of hers. Not yet, anyway. The drægonelle closed her midnight blue eyes and focused. It took a few minutes. At first all the drægonelle had were impressions: the rustle of a human dress whispering across the ground, the pounding heartbeat of the girl—she was frightened again. Frightened of her visions.

Her baby twitched, sensing her mother’s tension, and the drægonelle paused to nuzzle her until she settled back into a dreamless sleep. She took an extra moment to stare in both wonder and dread at her baby, her daughter. The wonder was at the power that her daughter was growing into every day; the dread was in knowing that her own days were numbered. The prophecies had warned her that as the human girl came in to her full power as prophet of the end times, the drægonelle’s days were numbered. Soon, she would have to go to the surface where she would meet her end, and all hope would be with her baby. Her baby, and the human girl whose distress had woken the drægonelle from her sleep.

The drægonelle snorted and blew out smoke in anguish. The prophecies about the end times were clear, but the drægonelle still held hope that the human girl and her daughter would find a loophole, a way to escape the destruction of their world. *She* hadn’t found it after all her centuries of searching, but that didn’t mean it

wasn't there. Time was running short, and there was so much she needed to do before the end, but the closer that day came the more the dragonelle dreaded it. There was something wrong with the human girl that she watched; something that smelled almost of deceit. With each passing day, the taste of this deceit grew stronger in the dragonelle's mouth, but she did not know what it meant. All she knew was that it was wrong. When the girl arrived here, perhaps she would know. The dragonelle had already sent orders to the horses that lived in the palace with the girl; they knew to bring the girl here when they found opportunity to do so. She had been trying to reach the girl through her dreams, enticing her into the woods where they could meet. But the dragonelle's connection with humans wasn't as strong as with horses, and she would just have to be patient. She sighed at the irony. Already she had lived hundreds of years, and now when it mattered most she had no time.

The dragonelle cast her mind back to the girl, trying to reconnect with her. It was so difficult, so difficult when the humans did not belong to her. But this one would, she reminded herself. This one would, and then maybe she would understand what was *wrong* about her. She closed her eyes and focused. The girl was speaking in the highborn Kilaryan accent, and it took the dragonelle a few moments to remember the language so she could translate the words in her mind.

"It's me and it's *not* me. It's like...it's like there are two of me. It just doesn't make sense. Night after night I see myself dying in that fire. In one way, I'm barely more than a babe, but I'm also older...a young child, you know? But I've never even *been* trapped in a fire, so why such dreams? I wake up and can still feel it burning me. And then there is that blackness. That awful, hungry blackness that grabs me and swallows me up."

"Dreams are strange, Princess Taliya. They play trickster to us all." Jef smiled at his garden. "Lilies are simple flowers. They just grow where they're planted. A Princess's life is not so simple, eh?"

Princess Taliya smiled at the gardener. When the nightmares had first come, Princess Taliya had escaped the student dorms for the openness of the gardens. She hadn't spoken to Jef at first, other than

to dismiss the gardener from her presence. Taliya was as polite to the servants as anyone else, but she didn't share her secrets with them. She didn't even share them with her best friend, Juliette.

Yet Jef had played a subtle game that had intrigued Taliya from the start. He didn't treat her with the same careful deference most of the servants adopted in her presence. But he *listened*. Before she knew it, she found herself telling him of her constant nightmares—nightmare, she corrected herself, since there was only one—that forced her to seek refuge in the gardens almost every morning. Under his gentle gaze, Taliya found herself wanting to confess her secrets aloud.

“Good night, Jef.”

He cracked a wise smile at her. “Until the morrow, Princess.”

Taliya rolled her eyes at him. “Goodness, I hope not!”

Jef bowed, and she turned on her heel. Her conversation with the gardener had left her feeling lighter, and Taliya skipped back to the gate, kicking at the dead leaves as she did so. She was just pulling open the door when her ring burned in warning and she ducked. An arrow planted itself above her head, and Taliya shrieked.

“Princess!” Jef cried, surging towards her. There was an answering shout from the walls above as one of the guards took up the cry. Footsteps echoed as people ran down the stone stairway at the edge of the gardens.

There was a *thump* as if something fell out of a tree, and a small boy broke out from the bush, carrying a bow that was almost as tall as he was. He wore the uniform of a fosterling. “I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I know I shouldn't have been practicing in here and I-”

He stopped dead when he saw her and collapsed to his knees. The bow dropped beside him, forgotten.

“I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it!” he wailed.

Guards surrounded the fosterling who looked even smaller in their presence. Taliya watched him shrink away from the guards and her heart squeezed.

On her sixth birthday, Lord Maddoux had given her a puppy. Taliya had instantly fallen in love with its big, brown eyes and shaggy brown fur. Within a few days Taliya's mother had the puppy

removed, stating that it was too filthy to be around the princess. The puppy had cried when the queen's guard carried it away, and for weeks afterwards Taliya had nightmares about those whimpers of despair. She had screamed and cried and begged her mother to bring the puppy back, but her pleas fell on deaf ears. There was something in the boy's face that reminded her of that puppy. *But I'm not six years old any longer*, Taliya reminded herself. *I couldn't protect my puppy, but I can protect this fosterling.*

"Your Highness, what happened?" one of the guards asked. He held up a lantern to peer at her more closely, and his face darkened in anger.

"Send for Talon and Sorcerer Maddoux. They must know of this treachery."

The boy's eyes widened in terror. "But it wasn't- I didn't mean- I didn't-"

"What happened?" Taliya demanded.

"Your Highness, we should await testimony until Talon and Lord-"

Taliya gave him a look that silenced him. No matter that she was barely 15 years old, she was still their princess. "I have a right to question him."

The guard pressed his lips together, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, Fosterling?" Taliya prodded.

The boy looked up at her, tearful. "Please, my name's Bryndan...Fosterling Bryndan. I didn't *mean* to shoot at you. Another boy was teasing me this morning, saying that I couldn't draw this bow if I tried. Said I would never be a knight. I told him he was wrong. He said *prove it*, so I told him-" Bryndan hiccupped. "I told him that when he walked through the gardens on his way to training tomorrow there would be an arrow sticking in that wall," he gestured to a spot on the wall well above Taliya's head, "and he would know it was me, and that I could too draw this bow."

"Fosterlings are forbidden to use bows unsupervised, and *never* in the gardens," the guard said with a frown.

Bryndan hung his head.

"I just wanted to show him. If I had shot the arrow in the training grounds, he would have said that *anybody* could have shot that arrow."

"You climbed in the tree to get a better shot? Didn't you *see* me?" Taliya asked.

Bryndan swallowed.

"Honest, I thought you were well enough away."

Taliya sighed. She *had* been well enough away, right until she had skipped her way into the arrow's path.

She looked up at the high spot on the wall that Bryndan had indicated, then at the arrow planted at her eye level in the door. "I don't know whether to congratulate you for being a good shot or scold you for being a bad one," she mused.

Bryndan missed the humour in her voice and hung his head.

Jef looked at the wall, looked down at the arrow, and cleared his throat. Taliya wasn't sure if he was hiding a laugh or not. Knowing Jef, he was probably relieved the stray arrow had not struck any of his well-tended lilies, even if they had already been dead-headed for winter.

"Yes, my lady," Bryndan mumbled.

He looked so dejected that Taliya was about to offer him a word of comfort when the door burst open behind her. Talon—the Captain of the Guards who broke tradition when he earned his station by merit alone—was the first out the door. He paused to bow to her before approaching the scene.

"I'm glad to see you're okay, Highness."

"It was an accident, Talon." Taliya cautioned. "He's just a fosterling who needs training."

Talon sighed. "We still have to inform Lord Craelyn of this, and the boy will need to be questioned."

"You mean Sorcerer Maddoux, surely?" Taliya frowned.

Talon shrugged. "Sorcerer Maddoux is unwell. His apprentice, Lord Craelyn has been taking over all his duties."

Taliya's heart skipped a beat. Talon nodded to one of his guards, who grabbed Bryndan by the shoulder and hauled him inside. When the captain turned to go after him, Taliya caught his sleeve to hold

him back. She glanced at Jef, who bowed and backed away. Once they were alone, Taliya lowered her voice.

“Sorcerer Maddoux...he’ll pull through this one, right, Talon?”

“He took a turn for the worse yesterday.” Talon hesitated. “It... doesn’t look good, Princess. Even the greatest of wizards can’t cheat death when it comes knocking.”

Taliya gave a sharp nod, blinking to hide her tears.

“What will this do to my people? Sorcerer Maddoux means so much to them.” *He means so much to me.*

Taliya didn’t say those words aloud, but Talon reached out and squeezed her hands as if he had heard them, his eyes filled with compassion.

“Go to him, Princess. He would like that.”

Taliya hesitated, then withdrew her hands. “Not yet. I need to attend to Fosterling Bryndan’s trial first.”

Talon’s eyebrows raised.

“It was an *accident*, Talon, I know it was. He seems like such a sweet boy, and he doesn’t deserve to be punished. Sorcerer Maddoux is the face of justice, but Lord Craelyn isn’t...he isn’t...the same.”

Talon sighed. “You must learn to trust him, Taliya. Sorcerer Maddoux chose him as successor, and you must trust his judgement.”

“Of course, I trust him,” Taliya said hurriedly. “I just...he’s so young. I feel I should see this through, to honour Sorcerer Maddoux.”

Talon still looked puzzled, but he nodded and shrugged, withdrawing his hands. It was not for him to question the princess’ decisions.

“I’ll attend to Sorcerer Maddoux as soon as the trial is over.”

“He would like that,” Talon said softly. He bowed and headed inside, leaving Taliya alone in the garden.

Once he was gone, Taliya sank against the wall. She yawned and rubbed her eyes as the adrenaline of the night faded away, leaving her exhausted. Taliya glanced up at the sky, which was already lightening. The Council would meet immediately after morning bell to discuss these events. They would hear testimony from Lord Craelyn and then Bryndan, before deciding his fate. Taliya, as a member of the royal

family, was not required to stand witness, but she would be permitted to speak her Voice in the Council if she requested so ahead of time. To get permission, she needed to speak with her parents immediately. She yawned again and then opened the garden door to head inside. She headed straight to her royal rooms. On the way, she caught the attention of one of the servants.

“Send Pallaster to my rooms at once.”

The man bowed and strode quickly down one of the corridors.

Taliya got to her rooms and wasted no time searching for some suitable attire among her wardrobe. She couldn't wear her student's frock if she was going to be attending the Council today. Pallaster arrived a few moments later, with two maids trailing her. Her face had the pillow creases of someone who had just gotten out of bed, but her hair was in place and her frock neat. Taliya was always impressed with how quickly the handmaid put herself together on such short notice.

“Your Highness.” Pallaster curtsied as she entered the room and the two maids did the same. The dark-haired one was familiar to Taliya, but the one with flaming red hair was new.

“Pallaster, I need to visit my parents today.”

“Of course.” She came alongside Taliya and began eyeing the different dresses. “On what sort of business?”

“A fosterling blundered an arrow earlier this morning and it nearly killed me. I need permission from my parents to speak in Council at his trial so I can defend him.”

Pallaster raised an eyebrow. “*Defend* him, Highness?”

“It was an accident, Pallaster. I know it was. The poor boy is a terrible shot and I may have skipped my way in front of him at the wrong moment.”

Pallaster giggled. “Oh, my! That's terrible. I'm so glad you're all right but oh, how *awkward* a mistake...from being a bad shot to attempting to assassinate the Crown Princess.” Pallaster snorted and reached out to snag a light purple frock with gold trim.

“This one, Highness. It will bring out your lovely golden eyes and the lower cut will ensure anyone who sees you that you have not been harmed. At least, not in the bosom,” Pallaster teased.

Taliya laughed. “Shame, Pallaster! I have no bosom to speak of.”

One of the maids—the one with the dark hair—burst out laughing before quickly covering her mouth with her hand. The fiery-haired one remained expressionless as she assisted Pallaster.

With the help of Pallaster and her capable assistants, it wasn’t long before Taliya’s hair was combed into place, and she was dressed and ready to face her parents.

“All finished,” Pallaster said with a curtsy.

It was shortly after dawn when Taliya approached the door to her parents’ private chambers. The guard at the door nodded a greeting to her from his post.

She could hear her parents talking.

“-without Sorcerer Maddoux? What about the children?” The queen sounded worried.

Taliya’s hand froze where it was, poised to knock on the door. She bit her lip.

“Lord Craelyn will know what to do. He *must* know what to do. We won’t survive unless we-”

The guard at the door cleared his throat, raising his eyebrow at her eavesdropping, and Taliya flushed. She knocked quickly. Inside the room, her parents hushed.

“Enter,” King Allandrex called.

Taliya walked in and shut the door behind her. She curtsied, discretely rubbing her sweaty palms on her dress as she did so.

“Taliya, child, praise Berech you’re alright!” Allandrex kissed the top of her head.

“You look pale, sweetheart. Are you sleeping well enough?” Charlestte asked.

“Of course, mother.” Taliya couldn’t bring herself to tell them about the nightmares. They would send for a shylic to see if she was sick, and then the whole palace would know all about her nightmares.

“I... I wanted to talk to you about what happened.”

“Of course. Come sit with us.”

Taliya sat, and Queen Charlestte cleared her throat meaningfully. When Taliya glanced over at her mother, the queen gestured for Taliya to sit straighter, which she did. Charlestte smiled.

"I don't believe the fosterling was trying to kill me. It was an accident. I wasn't paying attention to my surroundings and... well, it was just bad luck and bad aim on his part. I'm worried about his punishment."

"Sweetheart, he could have killed you with that arrow. He *must* be punished."

"I know. I just... I know it was an accident. He deserves the benefit of doubt."

"Taliya," Allandrex was frowning. "This is for the Council to decide."

"Then I request to give Voice at the Council."

The king rose to his feet, and Charlestte put a calming hand on his arm.

"How would it look if you were to defend him before the Council?"

"Like the truth!"

"Taliya," Charlestte chided, and Taliya snapped her mouth shut. She took a deep breath.

"Please, let me speak my testimony. It's permitted upon my request, and that's what I'm doing right now. I'm not trying to interfere with the Council's decision. I just want to make sure that the fosterling's punishment is a true reflection of his crime."

"Well, then." Charlestte said, standing up. Taliya followed suit. She could sense her dismissal. The queen glanced at her husband, who was still frowning.

Charlestte grabbed her hand and kissed Taliya's cheek. "You're growing up." She smiled.

Taliya's heart filled with hope. "I have your permission?"

"Yes, dear, you do. Now off to morning meal with you."

Taliya hesitated.

"Mother?" she asked. "Is it true that Sorcerer Maddoux is dying?"

Charlestte sighed. "It is," she said.

"What will this mean for us?" *What did you mean about the children?* Taliya wanted to ask, but she couldn't bring herself to admit she had been eavesdropping.

Charlestte rose and clasped her hands, much in the same way that Talon had. Allandrex came over and kissed her on her forehead.

“It means a great sadness for all of us, but nothing will change. Lord Craelyn is said to be even more powerful than Sorcerer Maddoux. He will protect us in the times ahead.”

“What times ahead?”

The queen glanced at her husband, who shook his head slightly. “Never mind, Taliya. Everything will be fine. We’ll see you at Council.”