

1

“Elyan wears Chaos as his cloak and Darkness is his companion. In his footprints, Destruction.”
—From the Prophecies of Berech

“You stopped it, but you didn’t fix it. Are you planning to?” Fifteen-year-old Princess Taliya jumped at the unexpected voice. She whipped around to face the stranger who had snuck up behind her. A young boy was studying her closely. He appeared to be around eight years old—the age of the palace fosterlings—although he didn’t wear the uniform of one. He had black hair that stuck out in every direction and eyes so dark they were almost just as black. Taliya glanced around the rest of the palace corridor, but they were alone. It wouldn’t have been unusual to see servants scurrying about, but she had tucked herself into a discreet area of the castle so she could spy out the window on what was happening below.

“Who are you?” she asked the boy.

He considered her for a long minute, a slight smile tugging at the corner of his mouth that didn’t look friendly at all, and Taliya turned back to the window, using the movement as an excuse to put a bit of space between them as she watched the scene in the courtyard.

Talon, Captain of the Guards, was lightly dressed despite the chill that still clung in the early morning breeze. In the trees, Taliya could see some birds out chirping to welcome the sun, while others roosted quietly in their nests. Soon their eggs would hatch, but spring was not far enough along for that to happen just yet. Drawing her attention back to Talon, Taliya could see that he was directing his soldiers to load a group of young children and toddlers into a horse-drawn cart. The *stolen* children who came from another world. Taliya even spotted the girl who Sorcerer Craelyn had thought might be a Guardian—or destroyers, as he called them. Taliya had recently

become quite convinced that the Guardians were meant to do good in the world, not destroy it. How the Guardians were meant to be a force for good, Taliya had no idea. But her recent discovery that she was a Guardian herself helped this assumption. Not that she would have ever told Sorcerer Craelyn about her true origins, but she had the feeling he suspected her anyway. Why else would he have tried to kill her two days ago?

Taliya mentally shook herself and refocused on the present. From this distance the little girl looked fine and appeared to be sleeping along with all the other children. Her long black hair had recently been brushed, and her skin looked less pale than when she had first arrived. Taliya wasn't sure if the children were sleeping due to a spell that had been placed on them by Craelyn or if they were still recovering from being ripped from their home world into Eliva. When Taliya had found out about the kidnappings earlier this week, she had put a stop to it, albeit only temporarily. There would be no more children stolen from other worlds, but that wouldn't solve the problem of Eliva's dying population. Her father, the king, had told her as much. As far as she knew, it was a secret that only she and a select few in her country, Kilarya, knew about—her parents, the king and queen; her uncle, Lord Kade; Sorcerer Craelyn; and her friend Page Bryndan.

The last of the children had been carefully tucked into the cart, and Talon was exchanging words with the three soldiers who were taking them to their new homes. The children were being sent out to families throughout Kilarya, where they would be adopted and cared for and loved. Craelyn had explained to her that the journey through worlds was a one-way trip and trying to return the children to their home world would surely kill them. He justified the kidnappings, saying that the children were about to die in their home world anyway, and he was giving them a chance to live. Taliya hadn't believed him. His predecessor, the gentle Sorcerer Maddoux, had likely saved children in that manner, but Sorcerer Craelyn was cut from a different cloth than his former master.

"We've met," the boy said, causing Taliya to turn back around to face him. He continued to stare at her.

Taliya wondered if she should remind the boy that it was rude to stare at Kilarya's princess so openly, but he was just a child. And yet...there was something in his eyes that sent a chill down Taliya's spine. There was a cold, calculating intelligence that reminded her of the brawynns. The carnivorous winged, horse-like creatures that had recently entered Kilarya. There hadn't been a single brawynn in their country for decades, but now thanks to the civil war in the neighbouring country, Glenifer, humans weren't the only ones crossing the border as refugees. The recent arrival of the fearsome brawynns had not been welcome, especially when they had attacked the castle a couple days ago. Taliya had managed to negotiate a temporary truce with them. How long that truce would hold was yet to be seen.

"Have we?" She would have remembered meeting the young boy. Maybe. Probably. As the crown princess of Kilarya, she met a lot of people. But the coldness in the boy's eyes was certainly memorable.

"You may call me El."

"Greetings, El." She wasn't about to say she was pleased to meet him because she wasn't.

"You don't remember me," El said.

Taliya considered a polite lie before settling on the truth. "No I don't," she said, already turning away. "Now please excuse me—"

"You're different than last time," El interrupted. "And yet you haven't changed at all." He sounded disappointed, resigned, even. He glanced back to the window and stared at the children. Taliya followed his gaze.

Talon had stopped talking to the soldiers, and they'd all settled into the cart. One soldier was sitting in the back to watch over the sleeping children, and two more were sitting up front. The soldier driving the cart flicked the reins and the horses started off. Talon waved a farewell to the soldiers as they left the castle grounds. Taliya watched them go, her heart aching. She sent a silent prayer to Mother Jualis and Father Kilmar to watch over them.

"So, are you?" El persisted.

"Am I what?"

“Going to fix it?”

“Fix what?” Taliya answered impatiently.

El pointed to where the cart filled with children had disappeared outside the castle gate. “Fix *that*.”

Taliya’s heart skipped a beat. What did El know about the kidnapped children? Who was he?

“What do you know about the children?” she asked carefully.

“I know they’re wrong. They make this place wrong.”

Taliya hesitated, looking at him. She had recently learned that Prince Damin, the refugee prince of Glenifer, was magic-sensitive. Did El carry some of that same magic-sensitivity? Could he sense those children were from a different world?

“We’re trying to fix it, but it’s not that simple.”

“It’s exactly that simple,” El countered.

It didn’t solve the problem that the population was dying.

El burst out laughing. “That’s funny. You’re funny. The population isn’t dying. Not the human population, anyway. It’s growing just the same as before.”

Taliya bit her lip. Could El read her mind? Or had she said that thought out loud? Was she really becoming so careless? *Who are you?* she asked him loudly in her mind. He smirked at her but didn’t respond, and Taliya didn’t know what to make of him.

“You’re mistaken,” she said aloud. “You might not know such things, but my father does.”

“Oh, how interesting.” El clapped his hands together in excitement. “Someone is lying to the king.” He licked his lips and gave her a sly look that sent a chill through her spine. “But who would gain from such a lie? And who would be powerful enough to deceive a king? I like intrigues.” El glanced back to the window. “But I don’t like the wrongness. Fix it.”

Taliya’s mind was churning at what El just said. Was he right? Was the population *not* dying? Her father and Lord Kade had been so certain of the truth. But what if they were wrong? What did that mean?

“I don’t know how to fix it,” she said, her mind still racing.

El cocked his head at her. “Huh,” he said, “you’re kind of useless, aren’t you?”

Taliya drew herself up so straight even her mother wouldn’t have found fault with her posture, flicking her short brown hair over her shoulder. “I’m the princess of Kilarya,” she said coldly. “I’m—”

“You’re lies,” El interrupted.

Taliya froze for half a heartbeat. The brawynns had called her the same thing when she’d negotiated with them. They said she’d smelled of lies. Who was El, saying the same thing?

“Who are you, El?” Taliya demanded. “What do you want from me?”

El gave her a slow smile. “Everything,” he told her.

The hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and Taliya took a step back despite herself.

“But not yet,” he added. Then he laughed—a happy sound that didn’t match the predatory look on his face—and skipped off down the hallway.

Taliya shivered, hugging herself as she watched him leave. Then she turned on her heel and headed back towards the main corridors of the castle, speeding up until she was almost running.

* * *

Deep underground, in a kingdom mostly forgotten by humans, the dragon Tchyal surged to his feet when the boy suddenly appeared in front of him. He was an old dragon, consumed with grief at the death of his leader even as he cared for her child, Rishaal. Tchyal stepped in front of his young charge protectively, showing the boy—who was not *really* a boy—his teeth.

The not-boy tutted at him. “None of that, Tchyal. None of that, now. You know who I am.”

“Yes,” Tchyal hissed, breathing smoke in his distress.

The not-boy scowled as he looked behind the old dragon to Rishaal.

“Ugh. How long does it take for you creatures to grow up? Your new dragonelle is barely more than a baby. How is that supposed to help me? I liked the last dragonelle better. She wasn’t all that

powerful, but she was certainly more fun to play with. Especially when she died.”

Tchyal snarled at the not-boy. He knew the not-boy was Eliva itself currently taking the shape of a human boy. Tchyal had lived on the world Eliva for centuries—longer than any other magical creature in their underground kingdom—yet he had never encountered Eliva manifested in a speaking form before. Eliva had previously only deigned to speak to Rishaal’s mother, their former drægonelle and leader of all magical creatures. She had told Tchyal how Eliva would come to her and speak. Eliva took many shapes, but often it seemed to prefer the shape of a human. The drægonelle had confessed that she thought Eliva specifically chose the human shape to irritate the drægonelle, since humans were so tiny and weak compared to a dragon. Seeing Eliva here now, Tchyal thought she might have been right. His heart thrummed with sorrow at her loss.

“You go too far, Eliva,” he warned.

The not-boy smiled slyly, looking from Tchyal to the young drægonelle. “Call me El. I like that name better.” He took a step closer to the drægonelle, and Tchyal moved to block him. Drægons grew in size not from age but from both the wisdom and power they gained as they learned new skills, and Tchyal was the largest among his kind. When he stood at his full height El was barely taller than his forepaw and he could have crushed the child easily with one swipe. Yet smoke plumed out of his mouth as he fought his fear.

“The last time you spoke to our drægonelle, you sent her to the surface *to her death*.”

“Oh,” El clapped his hands in delight. “You are so *angry* with me. How delightful. You want to hurt me, don’t you?” El took a step forward, his eyes turning entirely black as he appeared to let the magic within him rise to the surface. “But do you dare touch me, old drægon? Do you *dare*?”

Next to him, Rishaal woke from her sleep. She was tiny among drægons and only a little larger than El. Her scales were currently a dark purple in colour. She blew smoke when she saw El but said nothing.

Tchyal did not take a step back when El approached, but his muscles trembled as he held his ground.

“You smell of humans,” Tchyal said, changing the subject. The one thing he had learned about El from Rishaal’s mother was that Eliva was easily distracted.

El blinked and his eyes returned to normal. He scuffed the ground with his foot and hitched his hands into his waistband, acting the part of a petulant human child. “I wanted to see *her*. The Guardian girl. I was curious.”

Tchyal pricked his ears at that. He saw El watching him out of the corner of his eye, smirking as he waited for Tchyal to ask.

Tchyal glanced at Rishaal, who stared back at him coolly. Tchyal sighed, and turned back to El.

“*Well?*” Tchyal asked.

El pouted, crossing his arms as he stuck out his lower lip. “So disappointing. Like this one,” El said, pointing his foot at the drægonelle. Rishaal curled her lip back at him but remained silent. Tchyal noticed she was a little larger than when she had first woken up. *She learns*, he thought with grim satisfaction. There was at least some good that came from Eliva’s presence before them.

“She’s useless. She doesn’t know how to fix the wrongness. She won’t be able to stop what’s coming,” El whined, staring at the drægonelle. Tchyal wasn’t sure if he was referring to the human child or the drægonelle.

The old drægon considered and discarded a few responses before he answered. “She might be more powerful than she appears,” he said carefully. Tchyal may have been considered powerful among his kind, but El was unpredictable, and he couldn’t risk putting Rishaal in danger should El lose his temper.

El gave Tchyal a predatory smile, and Tchyal dug his claws into the stone beneath him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” El rubbed his hands together. “Perhaps it’s time this *baby*”—he spat the word at the drægonelle—“met my Guardian. It would be fun, wouldn’t it? To send another drægonelle to the surface and see what happens?”

“No,” Tchyal whispered, horrified. The drægons and the other magical creatures were still reeling from the shock of losing their last leader. And Rishaal was so much younger, so much more vulnerable than her mother. She was also the last of the line of drægonelles, as she was too young to bear her own children. If she were killed, the magical creatures wouldn’t have anyone to unite them. They’d drift back to their tribal lines, just like the brawynns on the surface. Distant kin to drægons, the brawynns were the only magical creatures who refused to live in the underground kingdom and instead remained on the surface among humans. Away from the drægonelle’s influence, their tribes had savage wars between them almost as often as they fought the humans they despised. Tchyal was one of the few drægons left who had been alive before the days of the drægonelle, when they lived under the sun instead of underground. He had no desire to return to those dark times.

El tutted with false sympathy. He reached out and stroked Tchyal on a claw. Tchyal shuddered and pulled his claw back. The smoke on the drægon’s breath started spark.

“It’ll be *fun*, Tchyal,” El repeated “You’ll see.”

Tchyal curled his tail around Rishaal, looking down at her in terror. Rishaal snuggled into his side, rubbing her head against him.

“I guess I’ll see you soon,” El laughed, clapping his hands in excitement. He turned on his heel and skipped out of the chamber. Tchyal breathed smoke for a long time.

2

“In for a feather, in for a bird.”
—*Kilaryan proverb*

Taliya was on her way to a meeting when she crossed paths with Talon. It wasn't going to be a true council meeting, as Taliya did not hold a seat on the council. But what she did have was the dubious honour of being the only Kilaryan the brawynns had been willing to negotiate with when they had attacked the castle. As such, her parents requested yet another informal meeting to learn all they could about the negotiations and the treaty that Taliya had organized.

The Captain of the Guards looked as if he had aged ten years in the last two days. He gave a perfunctory bow to Taliya without making eye contact, his mouth set in a grim line as he started to move past her. Talon had always treated her with extra kindness, and it hurt that he didn't even notice her now.

“Are you alright, Talon?” Taliya asked, drawing his attention to her. For Talon, she could afford to be just a little bit late to the meeting.

Talon paused and glanced down at Taliya, his face bleak. He snapped his fingers at his men, who strode past him. They were heavily armoured and carrying handfuls of weapons between them.

“These are terrible times, Princess Taliya,” Talon said. “No brawynn has been seen within Kilarya's borders for generations, and now they're arriving from Glenifer to settle in Kilarya? I've spent my whole life learning how to protect our people from desperate and power-hungry men, but how can we defend ourselves from beasts that attack from the sky? Beasts who can control the wind in their favour?”

“The brawynns have promised not to attack us unless we attack them first, remember?”

Talon put a hand on her shoulder, but his expression didn't soften. "People do stupid things when they're scared, Taliya. The civil war in Glenifer already threatens our borders and brings us more refugees than we can handle. And now all the brawynns are coming, too? And how can we even trust them? What motivates these creatures? We don't know why they attacked us in the first place."

Taliya knew. Sorcerer Craelyn—Kilarya's most powerful sorcerer—had killed the brawynn's leader, the drægonelle. The brawynns had attacked the castle as an act of vengeance on her death. But she couldn't tell Talon that. Craelyn was dangerous and cunning—he had proved that when he had tried to kill her while she had been negotiating with the brawynns. When Taliya had accused Craelyn of his treachery, even her parents had sided with Craelyn over her. How could she speak the truth to Talon when even her own parents didn't believe her?

Instead, she said, "We must pray to Mother Jualis and Father Kilmar for wisdom in the days ahead."

Talon shook his head. "I don't believe in the gods."

"You...you don't?" For all that she had felt close to Talon growing up in the castle, she had never known this about him. "Is that a recent decision?"

Talon shrugged. "It just makes sense. Where are they? What have they done for us? The only help I've received in life has been from people. Good people."

"Perhaps the gods work through them?"

Talon gave a short bark of laughter. "Never. I'm part of a group that feels the same. We don't bother worrying about *any* gods. We rely on each other."

Taliya considered this. What would he do if he knew she had recently discovered she was Elyan, the prophet destined to come at the end of the world? She didn't know much about her role in the prophecies—it was something she was still trying to figure out—and she certainly was no god. But if Talon didn't believe in the gods, did that mean he didn't believe in prophets, either?

“You look concerned, Princess, but you shouldn’t be. The group I belong to is filled with the most altruistic people I’ve ever met. They’re the reason I’m in my position you know.”

Taliya opened her mouth, then shut it again. Talon had been born a poor peasant in a country village. His rise to the rank of Captain of the Guard based on merit rather than social standing had broken a longstanding Kilaryan tradition.

“You earned your position,” Taliya disagreed. “You deserve to be here.”

“Perhaps, but nobody would have looked twice at me if not for the group I belong to.” Talon glanced down the corridor. “I didn’t mean to take up your time. I have a lot of defenses to sort out in the days ahead. These are difficult times for us all.”

“I’m sure we’ll sort it all out. I’m meeting with my parents right now to discuss it.”

“Then Father Kilmar grant you the wisdom to see us through this time, Taliya.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the gods,” she said, surprised.

“I don’t, but you do.”

Another group of soldiers—also well armed—rounded the corner. They paused and bowed when they saw Taliya, glancing to Talon for orders.

Talon dropped his hand from her shoulder and gave her a quick bow, then turned to his men. “With me,” he ordered, and led them out of sight.

Taliya finally made her way to the meeting room. Her parents were already there, as were her cousins—Erok and Milahny—and Prince Damin, the refugee prince from Glenifer. Lord Kade had sent his regrets that he couldn’t attend the meeting, or he would have been here as well. The large table in the centre of the well-lit room had space for at least a dozen people, and Taliya had heard Erok grumble a few times how uncomfortably crowded it became when the full Council sat down to meet. Seeing all the empty chairs before her now served as a stark reminder that this wasn’t a *true* Council meeting. Her parents merely had more questions for Taliya about her treaty with the brawynns. Since Damin had been the only other human present

at the treaty, her parents had asked him to come along and offer his insights as well. Being a Gleniferite who was familiar with the brawynns, the beasts had permitted Damin to observe their negotiations with Taliya as an impartial witness.

When Sorcerer Craelyn arrived in the room a few minutes later, Taliya felt the blood drain from her face. She had been hoping he would skip this meeting. At only 18 years old Craelyn's power was already unmatched. He smiled tightly at Taliya, his dark grey eyes cold as he assessed her. Taliya heard the Arvile bell rang just as Craelyn took his seat next to her parents. The Arvile bell rang out every hour until one hour after dark and started in the morning one hour before dawn. Taliya's great-grandfather had started the tradition after so many frustrations with people arriving late to meetings and students sleeping through their morning classes.

"I don't like this, Taliya," the king began. "Why did you offer the brawynns to make their home here? What were you thinking? I've already sent out messengers, but let's be honest: our people will never accept this. The brawynns are frightening creatures and men who are afraid lose all reason. A lot of people are going to die, Taliya."

Taliya felt herself shrinking under her father's public reprimand and Erok cleared his throat. "I'd like to interject a little first." He turned to Taliya and put a fist over his heart, offering a shallow bow from his seated position. "Our pages are alive because of you, Taliya. Praise Berech! And who knows how many others in the castle you saved? If you hadn't negotiated with the brawynns, they would have surely attacked us, and we were woefully unprepared. Thank you, cousin. You did a good job."

Taliya flushed at his praise. Erok was the same age as Craelyn, but the two men couldn't have been more different. While Craelyn's slight build and plain features were entirely forgettable, Erok had thick golden curls, strong muscles that spoke of long days training with a sword, and lips that turned up in a perpetual smile. Taliya had heard her friends swooning over her cousin more than once. Beside him, his older sister Milahny nodded and gave her an encouraging smile.

King Allandrex's scowl didn't change. He was a large man, and the more Taliya looked at him the more she realized how obvious it was that she had been adopted. From his nose to his lips to his shoulders, everything about the king was broad and imposing. Both her parents had round faces, green eyes, and dimpled chins; features which the golden-eyed, slightly built Taliya did not share. "Good job or not, we're in a bad place. I'll have to pull soldiers away from the western border to control the panic in the towns when the brawynns arrive, which I'm reluctant to do. The situation along the Gleniferite border remains unstable at best, and the reports from my spies tell me Raspin is still on a killing rampage. I worry that he might turn his sights to Kilaritya."

Beside her, Damin stiffened at the name of his former foster brother. It was Raspin who had killed Damin's entire family and forced the Gleniferite prince to flee for his life. Refugees from Glenifer were still crossing into Kilaritya daily, and now—thanks to Taliya's negotiations—those refugees would also include the brawynns.

"Blood begets blood, sire," Damin said tightly. "That is the mantra the brawynns live by. They are honourable in their own way... and certainly more honourable than Raspin. If we can convince your people not to attack them, the brawynns will leave the Kilarityans alone. *Most* Kilarityans," he added, glancing at Taliya.

Taliya flinched as all eyes turned to her.

"*Most Kilarityans?*" The king repeated, slowly, his voice laced with the threat of violence. "Taliya, what does Damin mean by '*most* Kilarityans'? I thought you told us they wouldn't attack *any* of us unless provoked, and I've already sent my knights off to proclaim just such a message."

Taliya cleared her throat and gave Damin a desperate look. He stared back at her blandly. Although he had been with her during the negotiations, clearly he was going to let her do all the talking about what had happened.

"The brawynns attacked because they claim someone killed their dragonelle—their ruler," Taliya paused and cleared her throat.

Milahny frowned and tilted her head, her golden blonde hair cascading past her shoulders. “You explained all this already, cousin. I thought your negotiations were successful in brokering peace?”

Taliya tried really, *really* hard not to be jealous of how beautiful her cousin was. She began to twist the ring on her finger before remembering that it was gone. She settled instead for tucking her short brown hair behind her ears, earning her mother’s disapproving frown. The queen didn’t like it when her daughter fidgeted.

“I *sort of* brokered a peace. The brawynn law of ‘blood begets blood’ still holds true, and they have sworn to avenge the death of their drægonelle.”

“Then what does this mean? They’ll attack us anyways?” Milahny said.

“No?” Taliya hesitated and glanced at Damin, who shook his head at her in silent agreement with her answer.

“No,” Taliya repeated more firmly. “At least, not all of us. They, eh, they’ve given us one month to hand over to them the person responsible for killing the drægonelle so they can enact their ‘blood begets blood’ thing.”

Taliya was trying hard not to look at Sorcerer Craelyn as she said this. He went still as she spoke, his expression blank. Taliya couldn’t tell what he was thinking but her heart pounded painfully in her chest. What would he do if he knew what she suspected? *Did* he know what she suspected? King Allandrex said nothing, but his face got darker and darker at Taliya’s words.

“How would we know who this so-called killer is? Are they even in Korign? Or Kilarya?” Queen Charlestte piped in, shaking her head in disapproval. Her short, dirty blonde hair was pinned up tightly, giving her round face a more severe look. “We’ll never find that person—if indeed it even *was* a person who killed the drægonelle.” The tone in the queen’s voice conveyed a strong sense of doubt.

“But more importantly, what happens if we *don’t* give them the one who killed their ruler?” Erok asked.

Taliya tried to whisper the answer but her throat closed.

“Speak up, darling,” Charlestte encouraged.

“They said they’ll kill *our* ruler.” Taliya looked at the table as she said it.

After a long moment, she gathered her courage to look up at her father. The rage had left his face. He looked resigned but not altogether surprised.

“Well, that creates a new problem,” he said thoughtfully.

“You’re not—” Taliya cleared her throat and tried again. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Taliya, child, the brawynns are not the first creatures to want me dead—it’s part of being a king, I’m afraid. They are, perhaps, the first creatures to *announce* it ahead of time. Honourable in their own way, indeed.” The king gave an amused glance at Damin, who nodded solemnly back.

“So, what are we going to do?” Taliya asked.

Erok shrugged. “Well, we can’t give them the drægonelle’s murderer. We don’t even know who it is, and I can’t imagine how we’d find out.”

Taliya couldn’t help herself. She glanced up at Craelyn, and he locked eyes with her. His face remained blank, but Taliya felt a shiver go down her spine. The last time she had seen Craelyn was when she had accused him of trying to kill her. While she had been in negotiations with the brawynns, Craelyn had underhandedly worked against her in such a way that could have gotten her killed—*would* have gotten her killed—if her friend Jef, the gardener, hadn’t sacrificed himself for her. But when Craelyn had protested his innocence, her parents had believed him over her. Craelyn had demanded an apology from Taliya for her accusations, an apology he was still waiting for, as she had no intention of giving it. They hadn’t even held a memorial for Jef, yet. They couldn’t hold a funeral, as there was no body, since the brawynns had eaten him. They would have eaten *her* if Jef hadn’t sacrificed himself. A mere two days later, and it was like his sacrifice had never happened. Taliya had planted flowers yesterday in his honour—in his favourite part of the garden, where they always talked—but it wasn’t the same.

Taliya closed her mouth and sat back in her chair. From the corner of her eye, she saw Damin glance between her and Craelyn, a speculating look in his eye.

“Well,” Erok said, “even if we knew who it was who killed their ruler, I wouldn’t want to condemn that person to death by brawynn.”

“Agreed,” Craelyn said breezily. “People before beasts.”

“Agreed,” said the king.

“Then what are we going to do?” Milahny asked.

The king rose to his feet. “We’ll need to discuss this at Council. I have no intention of sacrificing *anyone* to the brawynns, least of all myself. We have a month to figure this out. Berech help us.”

“The Spring Festival is in a month,” Erok pointed out.

“Of course it is,” the king grumbled. He grabbed the queen’s hand and waved a dismissal at them with his other hand. They all rose from their chairs and watched the king and queen exit the room.

Craelyn quickly strode out a different door, leaving Taliya behind with Erok, Milahny, and Damin.

Erok rubbed a hand through his golden curls. The messiness of his hair should have made him look bedraggled, but instead he just looked more handsome. He paused and gave Taliya a wan smile. “Not bad for your first negotiation, Tals. I don’t think anyone else could have done better.”

Taliya crossed her arms and shrank away from him, rejecting his praise. “What do you think we’ll do?” she asked in a small voice.

Erok opened his mouth, but a glance from Milahny had him shut it again.

“That’s for the Council to worry about, Taliya. You’ve done your part, now we will do ours,” Milahny said gently.

Taliya flinched. While kindly spoken, Milahny’s words were just a reminder that she wasn’t—and would never be—part of the Council. The *adopted* daughter of the king and queen, her future was not in Kilaria but in the Isles of Aminthia, where her betrothed, Prince Alastar, lived. Very few knew she was adopted, and Taliya had only uncovered this secret herself very recently. The hurt of that discovery was still very fresh, and Taliya hadn’t found a way to

discuss it with her parents just yet. Even the thought of bringing up the subject turned her mouth to sand.

Taliya glanced over at the door that Craelyn had just left. She took a deep breath to gather her courage.

“Excuse me,” she said to Erok and Milahny, then turned on her heel to hurry after her parents. She caught up to them in the corridor.

“Something else, Taliya?” the king asked.

Taliya glanced around her, but they were alone. She dropped her voice to a whisper and stepped closer.

“It’s about Craelyn—”

“*Sorcerer* Craelyn, Taliya,” the queen chided.

“There’s something you should know about him.” She took a breath to tell them about her suspicions that Craelyn was the dragonelle’s murderer, but the king interrupted her.

“Have you apologized to him yet?” the king asked.

“What? No! I mean—”

“Taliya, you owe Sorcerer Craelyn an apology for your behaviour.”

“But he tried to kill me! If it hadn’t been for Jef, I’d be dead.”

The king crossed his arms across his barrel chest, his face closed and brow furrowed. “*Enough*, Taliya. *Enough*. Your baseless accusations could cause more harm than you realize. Didn’t you stop to think about that? You owe him an apology—a *public* one, at that.”

“But I—”

“Sorcerer Craelyn has been *more* than patient with you, child. We will not speak of this again, understand? I can’t force you to apologize to him, but I trust you’re mature enough to do the right thing.”

Taliya stepped back, feeling her heart shutter. Like the last rays of a sunset, her trust in her parents melted away into darkness.

She gave a perfunctory curtsy, then turned on her heel. She was walking so quickly she nearly bowled over Damin, who caught her by the arm to steady her. At 19 years old, Damin looked as if he carried the hurts of the world on his shoulders. He’d escaped the slaughter of his entire family less than a year ago, and the pain of his loss showed. Sometimes when they were talking together, he’d relax his guard. His mouth would quirk into a secret smile and a glint of

mischief would enter his eyes, and Taliya would feel her breath catch in her throat. His ears stuck out a little too much and his dark brown hair was always disheveled, but when his lips turned up into his little secret smile Taliya sometimes caught herself wondering what it would be like to kiss those lips.

He wasn't smiling now.

"We need to talk," he murmured. He guided her out to the gardens. Jef's gardens. The gardens were filled with trees and bushes, with clearings of grass and bench seats throughout where people could gather to picnic and relax. Multiple stone pathways were lined with flowers of every colour that bloomed in all seasons except winter, and even then Jef had ensured that there were plenty of bushes and trees with colourful branches to brighten the snowiest of days. Some bushes were pruned to perfection while others were left to grow wild. It should have looked disorderly, but somehow it all came together perfectly. There were others who would happily take up the chance to be chief gardener now that Jef was gone, but Taliya didn't know if they could match Jef's creative eye for beauty. And would they love and cherish his lilies as much as he had?

Thinking of Jef brought back the aching loneliness that his death had left behind.

When they were alone, Damin dropped Taliya's arm and stepped away from her.

"You know something, don't you?" he accused her.

"I know lots of things," Taliya hedged. Her mind was still reeling from the hurt of what her parents had said to her.

Damin scowled and crossed his arms. "Stop evading. You know what I mean. I saw you back in the council chamber. You know who killed the drægonelle, don't you?"

Taliya scowled back, crossing her own arms to mimic his expression. "And what if I do? Who would believe me?"

"*Gods*, Taliya. It *was* Sorcerer Craelyn, wasn't it?" he pressed.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. It takes a great power to kill a drægonelle. There aren't many people in Kílarya with such power."

"How—" Taliya started.

Damin tapped his chest. “I’m magic-sensitive, remember? That means I can sense magic in people—and things. Unlike Glenifer, Kilaritya is steeped in magic, and it was hard for me to distinguish its magic from the people’s magic. Until the brawynns helped me, at least.”

When Taliya had been negotiating with the brawynns, they had offered to help Damin “see,” claiming that being in Kilaritya was blinding him. Taliya didn’t fully understand what it meant at the time.

“Anyone could assume Craelyn is the most powerful of us. You don’t become the sorcerer of Kilaritya without the power to back it up.” Taliya said.

Damin shrugged. “There are others with power here as well, though they hide it. Like you.”

“What do you mean?” Taliya’s heart thrummed in her throat. Could he tell that she wasn’t from this world? That she might even be a so-called Guardian?

Damin reached out and brushed the hair from her face, frowning in concentration as he stared at her. Taliya got the sense he was looking at something she couldn’t see.

“You have a power; unlike any I’ve seen before. But it’s wild and out of control. Craelyn’s power is organized and does his every bidding. I don’t know if you can touch your power or not, or if you can even feel it.”

Taliya forced a laugh. “What power, Damin? The power of persuasion? My own parents don’t believe me about Craelyn.”

Damin blinked and refocused on her face. “What are you going to do?”

“Do?”

“About Sorcerer Craelyn.”

“I don’t know,” Taliya answered honestly.

“The brawynns won’t negotiate further, Taliya. I know your father thinks he can figure out a loophole, a way to prevent bloodshed. But he can’t. I *know* the brawynns, Taliya. I’ve dealt with them for years. They won’t be appeased unless they kill either Sorcerer Craelyn or the king in their vengeance.”

Taliya thought about his words for a long moment. “What would you do?” she asked quietly.

Damin looked away from her, his brow furrowed in thought. “I don’t know,” he answered finally. “*Gods*,” he said again. He rubbed the back of his neck.

“You can’t tell anyone. About Craelyn, I mean,” she pleaded.

“And why not?”

“Because he’ll kill you!”

“Like he tried to kill you?”

Taliya crossed her arms and looked away. *Gods help her, what should she do?* She couldn’t drag Damin into her problems—he had enough of his own.

“Who else knows?” Damin asked.

“Knows?”

“That Craelyn *actually* tried to kill you when you were negotiating with the brawynns?”

“No one! ... Well, one other person. But he won’t tell.”

“Who?” Damin asked.

Taliya pressed her lips together and shook her head. She wouldn’t give away Page Bryndan, even to Damin. She evaded his question by asking one of her own. “Do you think others will figure it out as well?” *Do you think my parents will learn the truth for themselves?*

Damin frowned. He rubbed a hand over his face and Taliya saw the tension leave his shoulders. He blew out a large breath then held out his hand to her. Taliya looked at him for a moment before she took it. His hand was callous and rough, but then so was hers. Some noblewomen took pains to protect their hands when they went riding, or did needlework, or performed any other number of tasks that might cause their hands to develop callouses. Taliya had never cared for such a practice.

“People are often blind to the truth,” he said softly, staring at their clasped hands. “You can have something right in front of you, staring you in the face and not see it unless you want to.”

Taliya looked at Damin’s lips, and she thought once again of kissing him. He looked so vulnerable and alone. Part of her wanted to follow the path down which this conversation would lead. But

there would be no going back, and her fiancé was arriving any day. She pulled her hand away from Damin's and hugged herself.

"You mean like my parents with Craelyn?" she asked, trying to keep her voice light.

Damin stared at her for a couple of breaths.

"Yes," he said finally. "Like your parents with Craelyn."

"They'll never see him for what he truly is."

"No, they won't." Damin stepped back, his mouth tightening in disappointment.

"I won't let the brawynns win, Damin. And I won't let Craelyn win, either." She turned on her heel and marched away from him. She paused once to glance back over her shoulder and saw that he was still standing in the same spot, watching her. He was flexing the muscles of his hand that had held hers. His face was hidden in the shadow of one of the trees and she couldn't read his expression. She turned away from him and headed back into the castle.