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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 from the ashes of fire. Thus, will Eliva fall.
—From The Prophecies of Berech

She'd had a name, once. She must have. Didn't everyone have a name? The girl stared into a lake. *Lake*. That still body of blackened water had a name. But what was hers?

She looked around at the rocks and the dead trees. There wasn't much here. Not much to name, at least. Everything looked dead. Was she dead, too? There were no animals, no living plants. It was just her, some rocks, and that black, black lake that looked almost like a hole. The more she stared, the more *wrong* the lake felt. Staring at it for too long almost made her dizzy.

The girl tore her gaze away from the black lake and rubbed her hands over her arms. It was cold here in this dark, dead place. As she rubbed, she noticed plain gray straps rested on her shoulders. She pulled off the straps and discovered that she carried a pack. A part of her wondered what was in the pack, but she couldn't really bring herself to care. Did it matter? Did anything matter in this dead place? Did anything matter if *she* was dead?

Movement flashed in her peripheral vision. The girl turned her head and watched someone approach. A slender young man with dark-grey eyes and black-brown hair sauntered slowly over and plunked himself down beside her. He looked no older than twenty.

He smiled at her, but it was not a friendly smile. It was a cold, cruel smile. "Well, well, how nice of you to join me."

"Who are you?" the girl asked. Her voice sounded hoarse, as if she hadn't spoken for days, maybe even weeks. When had she last spoken? She couldn't remember.

The man's smile widened into a grin.

A shiver of fear went up the girl's spine.

"You've been forced onto the Shadow Planet, I'm afraid. Your memory will take a while to return."

The girl frowned. "Shadow Planet? What's that?"

The man gestured vaguely around them. "This," he said. "It's everything Eliva is not. Cold, dead ..." His words dropped off as he moved his hand as if trying to make something magically appear in it. Nothing happened.

The girl stared at his hand, then looked back at his face.

"... devoid of any magic," he continued.

"Were you trying to do magic?" the girl asked.

The man shrugged. "It's pointless to do anything here. There's no magic and no life, aside from us, of course. Nothing can die here, but nothing can live here, either. We just ... exist. For now."

"Do you know who I am?" the girl asked.

The man traced a finger around the girl's face, then grabbed her chin. His cold fingers dug into her skin. "What's it worth to you, should I tell you your name?"

"I have nothing to barter with," the girl protested.

"You have exactly what I want," the man countered, releasing her chin.

A small inner voice told the girl to flee, but she was curious to find out more. "And what's that?"

"Knowledge. Your memory will return in time, and with it your knowledge. I will tell you your name if you swear to me that you'll answer three questions of my choice when your memory returns."

The girl paused as she considered. She held up a finger. "First, if my memory is going to return, then how do I know I'll need your help remembering my name? I should remember on my own soon enough." She held up a second finger. "Second, that doesn't seem fair, a single name in return for *three* questions."

"But I've already given you two answers, my dear. First, I told you where we are: the Shadow Planet. Second, I already told you"—he paused as he considered—"three important things about this place that you didn't otherwise know." He held up his right hand and started counting on his fingers. "That it's devoid of magic, that we're the only two living things here, and that nothing can die here. You'll see I'm being nothing if not fair."

The girl thought it through. It felt like making a bargain with the

devil, yet what if her memory *didn't* return? At the very least she'd have a name she could call herself. Names were power, weren't they? "Alright," she agreed. "Tell me my name, and when I remember who I am, I'll answer three of your questions."

"Swear it," the man insisted.

"I told you I'd do it, didn't I?"

The man shook his head. "Not good enough." He paused and looked around, then closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "This place has no magic, but there is power in a bargain here. I can feel it. You'll be held to your oath on this planet."

The girl sighed and rolled her eyes. "I swear it," she said.

The man smiled at her again. "Your name is Taliya. You are—were?—a princess in the kingdom of Kilarya, on the planet Eliva." He paused and stared at her as if expecting a reaction.

The girl, Taliya, rolled the strange names around in her head. Taliya? Kilarya? She tried to rustle up an emotion at hearing her name, but she felt nothing. He might as well have been naming someone else.

"Well, alright then. Thank you," Taliya said finally.

The man looked disappointed. "I guess it'll take more time for you. I remembered everything rather quickly. You've been sitting here for maybe a day."

"A day?" Taliya looked around them. Surely it hadn't been that long.

The man shrugged. "Could be longer. Or shorter. I told you, things don't live here. They just exist. There's no sun to tell the time, no darkness in which we might completely despair. There's no heat to warm us, nor cold to make us shiver, just this unending, unceasing grey. And"—he jerked his chin towards the black lake—"that."

"What *is* that?" she asked.

"It looks like a lake, doesn't it?" the man asked, his voice suddenly sly.

"But it isn't a lake," Taliya guessed.

The man shrugged. "It could be. But you can sense it, can't you? That there's something *more* to it?"

Taliya stared at the black water, trying to figure it out. "The water doesn't move," she observed. The man opened his mouth but before he could say anything, she added, "but there's no wind to move it."

“Is it water?” he challenged.

“Yes—no? It could be oil.”

“You could go touch it. Then you’d know,” the man cajoled, his voice holding a false note of sweetness.

Taliya shivered. “No,” she said firmly. “I don’t think I’ll do that.”

The man eyed the water with his dark-grey eyes. “I said nothing could die on this planet. But that”—he gestured to the black liquid—“that’s not of this planet, is it? Maybe I’ll just throw you in, so we can test my theory.”

Taliya started and shifted away from him, her body tensing. “You wouldn’t dare,” she snapped.

The man smirked at her. “You don’t even remember who I am, Taliya. How could you know what I would and wouldn’t do?”

“Who are you?” Taliya asked him again.

The man tsked. “That wasn’t part of our bargain. I never said I’d tell you *my* name.”

“Yes, you will,” Taliya insisted.

“And why would I do that?”

“Because you’re arrogant.”

The man threw back his head and roared with laughter. The sound was painfully loud in this still, silent place, and Taliya flinched back, fighting the urge to clap a hand over his mouth and shush him. But he himself had told her there was nothing else alive on this planet, so there couldn’t possibly be anything out there to hear them. And yet ... she glanced nervously at the lake, the blackness still and menacing.

“Thank you for that laugh, Taliya. As my gift to you for that, I shall tell you my name.” Once again, the man held up his hands and flourished them, then sighed and stretched his fingers out as if they ached. “I was once the greatest sorcerer in all Eliva. I’m Craelyn.”

* * *

Bryndan shivered in the cold wind and wrapped his arms around himself, trying to find a comfortable position as the wind whipped his brown hair around his face. It wasn’t quite long enough to fall into his eyes, but it was long enough that it annoyed him in the high

winds. He and Prince Damin—*former* prince, Bryndan reminded himself—were squashed together in an uncomfortable net the brawynns were using to fly him and Damin back to Kilarya to help Princess Taliya.

Bryndan couldn't stop thinking of her. The Kilaryan princess was a couple of years older than him having just turned sixteen, yet her figure was still slim and petite, and she'd not yet developed to full womanhood. Taliya kept her hair cropped much shorter than the normal style of Kilaryan noblewomen, but it suited her, highlighting her golden eyes. Her eyes had always been a topic of quiet conjecture since no one else in Kilarya had golden eyes, not even Taliya's parents, King Allandrex and Queen Charlestte, who both had green eyes. So, it had made sense when this past spring Bryndan and Taliya had discovered she'd been adopted; her birth parents were from another world, a concept Bryndan still had trouble wrapping his head around. But where was she now? Was she okay? The brawynns' message had been cryptic when they had found Bryndan and Damin in Glessia, the capital of Glenifer.

"How long will it take us to get to her?" Bryndan asked, breaking the awkward silence.

Damin shrugged, as much as he could within the confined space they shared, and stared out at the horizon, his lips set in a grim line. He didn't seem bothered by the cold wind the same way Bryndan was, but then, perhaps the former prince of Glenifer had more important things on his mind.

At nineteen, Damin was just five years older than Bryndan, but he looked so much older. Damin had fled Glessia, the capital city of Glenifer, earlier this spring to seek refuge in Bryndan's home country, Kilarya, after Damin's foster brother, Raspin, had slaughtered the entire royal family and most of the court to seize control of the throne. Bryndan, training as a page to one day become a Kilaryan knight, had met Damin after he'd arrived as one of the hundreds of refugees. While they hadn't exactly become friends, when Damin had returned to Glenifer to kill Raspin and regain his throne, Bryndan had gone with him. But it hadn't been the journey they had expected; while in Glenifer, they had met up with Elise, Damin's sister, who had also, unbeknownst to Damin, survived the royal massacre.

Unlike Damin, Elise didn't want to regain the throne once Raspin

was deposed. Instead, she had insisted the only way forward was to establish a body of elected representatives to usher in a new system of democracy. She had asserted that neither she nor Damin could ever repair the reputation of their broken country's royal bloodline, and they all needed to look forward to a new age. Bryndan had thought the idea sounded rather positive, but Damin hadn't seen it that way.

In the end, Damin had faced off with Raspin, but he hadn't killed him. Rather, he'd helped ensure that the fearsome brawynns could do the job. Brawynns were obscure beasts, and Bryndan was still getting used to them. From a distance, they could be confused with a winged horse with a black-brown coat, but up close, they couldn't be mistaken for anything but a predator. Larger than any horse, their hind feet ended in talons they could use to perch on sturdy branches like an eagle, but their front feet were more like a lion's paws with large, retractable claws. Bryndan adjusted himself in the net, trying to find a more comfortable position, and as he did, his gaze travelled up to where the two brawynns carrying them had snared their net in their front paws. The claws were partially retracted to grip the net, but even retracted, each claw was almost as large as Bryndan's hand. He shivered as he stared at those claws.

Until recently, brawynns had been the only species of magical creatures living on the surface of Eliva, but they hadn't been seen in Kilarya until recent days. They were fiercely tribal and fought each other more often than they fought humans, using their magic to control the winds to their advantage whenever they attacked. But they also had a strict code of honour that they followed. When Princess Taliya had managed to persuade them into an uneasy alliance with humans, they had promised on their code of blood-begets-blood that they would not kill any human unless attacked. Bryndan had known that rule, as had Damin. Apparently Raspin had not, for when the brawynns forced their way into the Gleniferite throne room where Raspin and his men were holding Damin and Bryndan prisoners, he'd attacked instead of surrendering, fighting until the brawynns overwhelmed him and he'd succumbed. Only after Raspin and his men were killed had the brawynns demanded Damin return with them to Kilarya, under Taliya's orders. Bryndan hadn't been invited, but he'd managed to convince the brawynns to take him, too.

Bryndan shifted so he could pat his trouser pocket, to ensure the ring was still there. It had been Raspin's ring, but more than that, it was a Guardian ring. As far as Bryndan was aware, Princess Taliya was the only other person who carried such a ring. The ring marked her as a Guardian, or in other terms, someone not born on Eliva. Kilarya's former head sorcerer, Sorcerer Craelyn, had been using his power to steal children from other planets, and some of those children were Guardians. Craelyn had called them destroyers, but Bryndan refused to believe it. Princess Taliya wasn't a destroyer. If Bryndan was going to label anyone a destroyer, it would have been Raspin, but Raspin hadn't been a Guardian. Bryndan didn't know what it meant that Damin's foster brother had been in possession of one of their rings. So, his plan was to give it to Taliya and see if she could make use of it.

"What do you think she needs?" Bryndan pressed, trying to break the uncomfortable silence. The brawynns had only said Taliya needed Damin's help and they would take him to her. None of the dozen brawynns travelling in their group had uttered a word since they'd left the throne room in Glessia.

Damin's brown eyes shifted towards Bryndan, and he frowned. "How should—" Suddenly, Damin clapped his hands over his head and screamed as if he was being torn apart just as the day plunged into utter darkness.

"What—" Bryndan gasped.

The two brawynns carrying their net squawked and fluttered, and Bryndan's stomach plunged into his mouth as the net dropped to the ground. Before he had breath to scream, the brawynns had regained their flight and steadied the net, but even in the darkness Bryndan could sense they were dropping quickly to the ground. "I've gone blind!" he yelled, throwing his hands up to his face.

Seconds later, he let out a grunt as his back met with the hard ground. The net released around them as Bryndan flailed. What had happened to him? Why couldn't he see? His breath quickened and he started to gasp, desperately waving his hands in front of his face to see if he could see anything. He pressed his fingers into his eyes until he saw stars, blinking rapidly as he pulled them away again, his eyes straining to catch a glimpse of any light. "I can't see. What happened? Why can't I see?"

“Bryndan, Bryndan, calm down,” Damin said softly. Bryndan felt Damin’s hand reach out to grip his arm, then find its way up to his shoulder, where he gave Bryndan a gentle shake. “You’re fine. You didn’t go blind. We lost the sun.”

Bryndan forced his body to still and took a deep breath before he spoke. “The sun? We can’t lose the sun. That’s impossible.”

“It was magic. That’s what I felt,” Damin said, his voice shaking. “But look up. The stars are still there ...” Damin paused before adding quietly, “... some of them.”

“What do you mean *some* of them?” Bryndan demanded.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. We’re likely under a tree canopy, and with the sudden loss of light, it will take our eyes a couple of minutes to adjust.”

“What about the brawynns? Are they still here? Can you see them?” Bryndan asked a little louder, hoping they’d answer him. But if they were close by, he couldn’t hear them. The forest around them had gone silent, as if in shock. Had the brawynns flown off? Abandoned them in the middle of nowhere? Or were they simply ignoring the humans because they didn’t care about them?

Thinking about the possibility that they had been abandoned in the middle of the forest made Bryndan’s panic start to bubble to the surface once again, so he took another deep breath and tried to focus on Damin’s words. He didn’t question Damin’s assertion, as Damin was magic-sensitive. But still, why such a reaction? “I’ve never seen you react so strongly to magic,” Bryndan whispered.

“I’ve never felt anything nearly as strong as that,” Damin responded just as quietly. “I thought it would split me in two.”

Bryndan could feel the former prince sitting up, as if trying to get his bearings. Bryndan decided to do the same.

He put his hand on the grass, which was still warm from the sun. He looked around, his eyes straining to catch any glimpse of light. After a moment, he gave up and closed his eyes altogether. At least then he could pretend his blindness was by choice rather than the absence of the sun.

Gods. What did that mean? Growing up in Kilarya, Bryndan had been around many powerful sorcerers, but none had done anything as powerful as this. “What magic could destroy the *sun*?”

“I don’t know if it was magic alone,” Damin said quietly.

“What do you mean?”

Damin took a deep breath and began to quote. “And you will know the end has come by these signs ...” he started to say before his voice broke.

Bryndan shuddered even as his mind rewound. With his eyes closed, he could imagine he was back in Lord Kade’s class, listening to him recite various prophecies. Bryndan hadn’t much cared for Lord Kade’s discussions on prophecies, but some were almost poetic and easy to memorize. While Lord Kade had especially enjoyed discussing the prophecies of Berech, the prophet present at Eliva’s creation, he had also found time to describe the Elyan prophecies, which some people called the End-Time prophecies. The Elyan prophecies described the Alirth Clash, Eliva’s apocalyptic demise when its Shadow Planet consumed it. Could this truly be the start of the Alirth Clash? Taliya had told him *she* was Elyan, and at the time he’d said he believed her, but he’d been lying. He hadn’t believed her, not really. He just hadn’t wanted to think about what it meant that their whole world was about to end.

Damin cleared his voice and kept reciting. “The sun will blacken into darkness, creatures will come from the depths of the ground to destroy the people, and Elyan will rise from the ashes of fire. Thus, will Eliva fall.”

Bryndan reached down again to grab the ring in his pocket, clutching it through the fabric. “What happens now?” he asked, his voice a quiet whisper in the blackness.

“I don’t know,” Damin said.

2

One comes from fire, another cheats death.
The last is a hero who knows not his quest.
United together to face an old foe,
Their path will end at Elyan's woe.
Through the great battle, two worlds will collide. They
will shadow each other,
But only one will survive.
—From The End-Time Prophecies: Elyan's Liberation of
Eliva

Sir Quand W'len, revered knight of Imasdan and current guest at the Kilaryan castle, froze when the darkness fell over Eliva. He had retrieved his saddlebags from his room and had just returned to the gardens to catch up with Taliya when the world was shrouded in black. Quand put a hand to the hilt of his sword and slowly, silently, drew it. Cries of alarm sounded all around him from the few gardeners out and about in the early morning and many more from the Kilaryan soldiers lining the palace walls.

Quand knew better than to draw attention to himself, for he knew who was nearby: Berech.

The Kilaryans believed Berech was a prophet who had come at the beginning of the world and would return to save Eliva from the end times, but Quand knew better. Taliya had called Berech “the Other” and described him as evil; she couldn't have been more right. Berech was a deceiver who would destroy the world and help bring about the Alirth Clash. And he was already here.

Quand silently cursed himself. He should have taken Princess Taliya and left without their saddles when he saw Berech riding across the field towards them. Taliya had admitted to not riding bareback well, so Quand had mistakenly believed he could spare the few minutes to gather the saddles and his saddlebags so they could escape faster and farther. But he'd been wrong. He needed to find Taliya immediately and do whatever he could to help her escape from Berech.

As part of his knighthood training in the northern country of Imasdan, Quand had spent days with a hood covering his eyes as he hunted and tracked in the woods to prove he didn't need to rely on sight. Imasdains were not so foolish that they believed sight the only sense of value. For now, Quand listened carefully as he padded across the gardens. He didn't dare whistle for his horse and give his position away, but his horse was well trained and would be where he'd left him.

Quand had spent many mornings walking through the gardens on his way out to the training fields when he'd been a guest trainer for the Kilaryan pages. This familiarity served him well as he made his way through the gardens by memory, his sword drawn and his breathing quiet and even. Around him, lanterns and torches that had been doused for the day were hastily relit, and the gardeners scurried around and clutched at each other in terror.

Quand kept away from the light, his dark skin merging with the shadows. He was a familiar figure in the gardens early in the day, but if the gardeners spotted him, they might cling to him for reassurance and ask questions. Quand didn't have time for that.

He found his horse, but no Taliya. Curse his timing. She must have left already. He must have taken longer than the instructed hundred breaths he'd told her to wait before she was to leave without him. He quickly saddled his horse, then grabbed his reins and headed to the gate. It would be awkward to ride with the spare saddle, so he left it lying on the grass; he could give his saddle to Taliya when he caught up to her and ride bareback himself since it made little difference to him.

He paused when he heard Talon, captain of the guards, yelling orders. Another time, Quand might have ignored it, but the careful respect in Talon's voice when he returned to regular conversation told Quand he was speaking to the king. Quand dropped his horse's reins and crept closer so he could eavesdrop. He wasn't worried his horse would follow him and give him away; Imasdain steeds were smarter than that. Dropping the reins signalled the horse to stand still, and that's exactly what his horse would do until he returned.

Quand wasn't above eavesdropping on the king if he could, not if it meant he might hear something useful before he chased after Taliya. They'd agreed to meet near an old, unused river crossing on

the Upper Koris River, but Quand was confident he could catch up with her long before she got there, especially as she would be riding bareback.

“This is the man, Your Majesty,” Talon said.

Quand eased forward a little more until he could peek through the bushes. Talon held a torch that reflected off the gold stars on each shoulder of his silver-and-green uniform. The dozen guards surrounding the king wore identical uniforms but without the gold stars marking them as captain. Talon had been the first man in Kilarya to earn his station on merit alone, and in the short time Quand had spent here, he’d been nothing but impressed by the captain.

The Kilaryan guards faced a gaunt man with long black hair who couldn’t have been older than thirty. In the flickering torchlight, his eyes looked ice cold. “You are the king,” the man stated, his voice flat. He glanced up at the black sky, but Quand felt as if it was just for show. “I’ve returned to you now, to save you all. The Alirth Clash is here, and it will destroy all Eliva. Only I can prevent it.” The words were strong and confident, but the tone was off, as if he was a performer on a stage speaking from a memorized script.

“Who are you?” King Allandrex demanded, his green eyes sharp as he crossed his arms and stared down the smaller man. Perhaps the king was used to intimidating others, but Berech was clearly not one to be cowed.

“I walked on Eliva centuries ago,” the man said, standing up straight and flaring his nostrils proudly. But again, Quand felt as if he was witnessing a staged production. Everything about the man felt off, and he wondered if the king noticed it too.

The man continued. “I return to you now, in the end times. I’m Berech, the one who will save you all.”

Quand shivered despite himself.

“Berech? The prophet?” Talon asked, sounding doubtful.

“Have not the prophecies foretold my coming? The magical creatures have risen from where I trapped them underground centuries past and are attacking humans. The sun”—Berech gestured vaguely towards the black sky, then shrugged—“is gone. The Alirth Clash is upon us, and the sun won’t return unless I can stop the Shadow Planet from consuming Eliva. We have weeks left, at most.”

“You’re a mighty sorcerer,” the king said slowly, running a hand through his light-brown hair. “You worked your magic to repel the magical creatures attacking the palace, so Talon told me. But can you destroy the Shadow Planet?”

Berech’s mouth twitched into what almost appeared to be a sneer before he smoothed out his facial expressions. His voice remained calm as he spoke. “Using magic to repel creatures of magic is no small feat, but to destroy an entire planet, one that’s strong enough to destroy Eliva itself? Impossible—except for me. There’s a small chance I can do it and save you.”

“What do you need?” the king asked slowly, and Quand felt his heart sink at the words.

Berech was a deceiver, and Quand didn’t trust a single word the man said. Even his appearance of a thirty-year-old man was a deception. Though Quand had Imasdain blood in his veins and his people didn’t show age the same way a Kilaryan did, his lifespan was still that of a normal human. But Berech had to be ancient despite his appearance.

Quand was horrified King Allandrex was rolling over in submission so easily. He hadn’t thought the king to be such a fool.

“If I have access to the Source of Eliva’s magic, I can probably save you.”

The king shook his head, frowning. “I don’t even know what those words mean.”

Berech pressed his lips together in annoyance. “We must talk, Your Majesty. Call together your Council of Lords—or whomever you trust—and we’ll talk within the hour. For now, I must rest and eat. Fighting off the magical creatures was no easy task. Captain”—Berech jabbed his finger at Talon—“lead me to the kitchens.”

Talon stiffened and glanced at the king.

The king ignored Berech and turned to Talon. “My people will be rioting in the street. See to it, Talon, that they are told to remain calm and shelter in place until we have this all sorted. Tell them *nothing* of this.” He turned back to Berech and pointed to a guard behind him on his right. “Gord here will escort you to the dining hall and stay with you until we summon you.”

Gord stepped forward, his lips pressed together tightly. He gestured his head for Berech to follow him.

The king and Talon held back until Berech was out of earshot.

“There’s something about him, Your Majesty,” Talon said quietly, his gaze on the doorway where Berech had disappeared into the castle.

The king glanced at Talon. “He’s a mighty sorcerer, indeed, Talon. Kilarya is blessed he came to us at such a time as this.” Although his tone was reassuring, his eyes looked wary as he looked at Talon, then up at the black sky. King Allandrex subtly made a fist, then pointed his hand to the ground and held out three fingers in the “okay” symbol.

Talon glanced down at the subtle signal and tightened his jaw. He put his weathered hand over his chest and repeated the “okay.” The guards surrounding the king frowned and shifted their stances, their hands tightening on their weapons. Quand wasn’t familiar enough with Kilaryan signals to know what that had meant, but he took some solace in the thought that maybe—just maybe—Berech hadn’t yet deceived the Kilaryans into trusting him entirely.

Talon, his hand now fisted on his chest, bowed in the manner Kilaryans used when taking leave of royalty, then turned and raced up the stairs to the outer battlements two at a time. He shouted orders to his men, while the king and his entourage of guards entered the palace, presumably to gather the Kilaryan Council. Quand would never be invited to such a meeting, and he wouldn’t want to go either way. He didn’t want to catch Berech’s eye; he had a feeling Berech would be able to tell that Quand could see right through him.

He began to retreat to the gardens when movement caught his eye and made him pause. Forgotten at the edge of the clearing was the princess’s friend, Juliette. She was curled up near some bushes and hugging herself, covering her face with her arms as she rocked back and forth as if in shock, her long black hair cascading down her back. Had she been there the entire time?

Quand hesitated for a moment, then went over to her. His body vibrated with the need to get on the road immediately, but there was something about the girl’s helplessness that hurt his heart, so he made the difficult decision to spare a few extra seconds to assist her. “Best get inside, Lady Juliette,” he said kindly. “You’ll feel safer in there.”

She started and glanced up at him, quickly wiping away her tears. The shadows were long now that the guards had left with all their

torches, but there was enough light from the lanterns lit around the gardens and up along the wall that he could easily make out her face. He offered her his hand, and she used it to help herself up, shaking out her skirts. "It's not safe anywhere, it seems." Juliette sounded lost as she stared into nothing. She turned blank eyes towards him, but then her gaze turned sharp as she examined his clothes. "You're going somewhere."

Quand shrugged in answer. He didn't owe her an explanation, or an apology. Annoyed with himself that he'd stopped at all, he dropped her hand and stepped back. "I suggest you get inside and find something warm to drink. It'll help you feel better," he said firmly.

"Nothing will help me feel better," she said bitterly. She opened her mouth and took a deep, shuddering breath as if she was about to speak. But then she snapped her mouth shut and shook her head a little, her lips pressed together in anger.

Quand gave her a perfunctory bow. She no longer looked lost and scared, and that was good enough for him. He couldn't waste any more time on Juliette. She was as safe as she could be, and the gardens had enough lanterns lit she'd have no trouble making her way back inside the castle. He needed to go find Taliya.

Quand returned to his steed, grabbed the reins, and guided the horse to the outer gate. Then someone stepped into his path, leading a saddled horse by its reins.

"Where are we going, sir?" Trelk gave him a reproachful look.

Quand shook his head at his squire. "You'll stay here and follow Talon's command," he ordered, already brushing past the large boy.

"No," Trelk said stubbornly.

Quand stopped and turned to face him, raising an eyebrow. Squire Trelk Sagar was the second squire Quand had ever accepted. He kept his hair shorter than the other pages and squires, and it did him no favours, making his head appear bulbous. He was large for his sixteen years and had small, squinty eyes that assessed everything. Quand had once dismissed Trelk as a dull-witted page who used his size to bully his peers, but after Trelk's father, Lord Sagar, had made a deal that had forced Quand to take Trelk on as a squire, he'd come to appreciate that the boy was quite clever and, unlike his despicable father, entirely redeemable.

Trelk clenched his jaw and raised his chin, his fingers tightening on his reins. "I'm your squire. Where you go, I go."

"Even if I'm not returning?"

"Where you go, I go," Trelk insisted. "You took a vow," he reminded Quand.

Quand inwardly flinched. "Alright then. I expect you to keep up."

"That won't be a problem," Trelk said. "Where are we going? Back to Imasdan?"

Quand hesitated, then opened the outer gate to the garden and gestured for Trelk to go first.

"No, we're going to an old river crossing on Upper Koris River. Do you know it?"

"Never been," Trelk admitted. "Why are we going there?"

"I'm hoping to meet someone there, and that's all you need to know right now."

"How will we find our way in this darkness?" Trelk asked.

Quand snagged two lanterns hanging on the outside of the gate. They hadn't been lit yet, but he had brought flint and steel. He handed Trelk a lantern. "We'll use these sparingly, and only if we must. I don't want to announce our presence to anyone—or anything—out in the woods." As he lit just one lantern, he wondered how far Taliya had gotten before the darkness had taken over and what she was doing now. He doubted she had any means of light with her. Would she have stopped where she was or let her horse take her home? It would be easy to get lost in the darkness. They needed to leave quickly and try to find her before she accidentally turned up at the gates.

Trelk shivered. "Do you think those magical creatures can see in the dark?" he asked, sounding alarmed.

"They've lived underground for centuries. This blackness will be a comfort for them, I'm sure. Come on."

Trelk and Quand mounted their horses and swiftly trotted across the field towards the forest. As they got further from the castle and Quand's eyes continued to adjust to the dark, he glanced at the stars for reassurance and swallowed hard when he realized they were ... wrong. He had spent endless nights looking up at the dark sky, admiring the Silk River that was named such because it contained so many thousands of stars it looked like a river flowing through the

sky. But the Silk River looked dimmer than it had been before, dimmer than it *should* have been on such a dark night. And where was the constellation Big Horse? Little Horse was still there, indicating the path north to Imasdan, but Big Horse, which proudly stood west of Little Horse, was missing. And Sword and Warrior—reliable southern constellations that normally twinkled brightly on the edge of the Silk River—had fewer stars than usual and were hard to distinguish.

Quand shuddered and tore his gaze away from the sky. “*The Alirith Clash*,” Berech had called it. The end of Eliva. Quand forced the thought aside and focused on what he could do now. There were enough stars that he could recognize the constellations and use them as a guide, and he knew where Taliya had been heading before the sun blinked out.

Like most Imasdains, Quand didn’t spend much time thinking about the gods. He had never even prayed before. He had always believed they existed, but he didn’t think they cared much about people, and as such, he had chosen to match that energy and not care about them, either. But on this dark day, he sent up a prayer to Mother Jualis of Light that She would restore the sun to them. It couldn’t hurt, after all.

* * *

It hadn’t taken Damin long to light some makeshift torches from nearby tree branches and build a small fire from the flint and steel he had tucked into a pocket of his breeches. The brawynns had left them without any explanation. Bryndan had been horrified they’d abandoned them in the middle of their mission to return them to Taliya, but Damin had shrugged it off, saying the brawynns were fickle allies at the best of times, and their tribal nature meant they only cared to look after their own.

Once it was confirmed they’d been abandoned, Bryndan and Damin didn’t need to discuss what to do: they had been on their way to help Taliya, so they would continue their quest on foot. Damin knew the woods reasonably well, and he felt confident he could lead them back to the old river crossing on Upper Koris River. From

there, he could lead them back to the castle in Korign, Kilarya's capital city. Bryndan wasn't looking forward to crossing the river again, this time in the dark and without Sir Tim's help. Bryndan missed the knight who had been Damin's bodyguard. Tim had stayed behind in Glenifer to be with his family and help Glenifer enter their new democratic phase. It had been the right thing to do, but Bryndan missed the friendly knight. Tim had bard's blood in him and always had an entertaining story to share that passed the time and helped Bryndan forget his worries. Damin wasn't a storyteller. Damin preferred not to talk at all as he led the way through the woods.

Bryndan gripped his torch silently, chewing his lip as he privately worried they would never find Upper Koris River. Curse those brawynns for abandoning them! Damin had seemed confident enough in his skills as he examined trees for moss and foliage to guide them, but it was slow travelling by foot. What if Taliya needed them now?

The dancing flames created illusions of shadows and Bryndan had to watch the ground carefully to avoid stumbling over rocks and tree roots. He tried to move as stealthily as the Gleniferite. A loud crack of branches to their left had Bryndan and Damin both turning towards the sound, hands flying to their weapons.

"Praise Father Kilmar of Life!" a familiar voice exclaimed.

"Prince Alastar!" Bryndan said, shocked, as the crown prince of Aminthia rode out from the bushes. He looked haggard as he clung to his horse.

Damin and Bryndan quickly ran over to Alastar.

"What happened? Where's Taliya?" Damin demanded, grabbing the horse's reins.

Alastar's chest heaved and he shivered, his eyes wide and frightened. "Did I really make it? Am I really here?" he asked, his voice cracking as he collapsed forward over the horse's neck. He started to fall off the saddle, but Damin quickly caught him and helped him safely to the ground.

Alastar's legs gave out, and he collapsed in a heap, gasping for air as if in the midst of a panic attack. His thick dark hair was wet with sweat, and his eyes looked haunted.

Bryndan had never seen the unflappable prince look so vulnerable and felt his own eyes prickling with tears as he stared at

Alastar. "You're safe, lord," Bryndan murmured quietly. "You're safe. It's okay."

Damin glanced at Bryndan and raised a sarcastic eyebrow, but Bryndan ignored him. They needed to find out what had happened to the prince—and Taliya.

Whatever Alastar had been through, his horse looked rather calm. It appeared to be an old farm horse, but it didn't look nearly as haggard as Alastar. Even as Bryndan examined it, the horse lowered its head and began munching greedily on some grass.

Alastar took a deep shuddering breath, and Bryndan could see the tension leaving his body as he forced himself to a calmer state. He climbed to his feet, and Bryndan took a step back so he didn't have to crane his neck so much. Standing side by side, Alastar towered over him. He was taller even than Damin. He rolled his broad shoulders and took one more deep breath, looking more like the confident prince Bryndan remembered.

Without prompting, Alastar launched into his story. "Princess Taliya and I discovered another Guardian, who called himself Ravik. We didn't trust him, but we travelled together as we seemed to have a common purpose. At one point in our travels, Taliya woke me up in the middle of the night, frightened. She said we had to get away from him immediately. I left, but she didn't follow, so I went back for her. She looked frozen in place, unmoving as Ravik menaced her. Ravik, he ... I, I don't know what he did. One minute I was riding towards him ready to cut him down, and the next I was in a cave deep underground." Alastar shuddered. "It was pitch black, but I wasn't alone. There were ... creatures. Not just drægons, but other things, too. I couldn't see them, but I could hear them. Gunner, a warla, was there, too. He's been haunting Taliya's and my journey ever since we left the brawynns. I don't know how he found me down there, but he did. He's been ... hunting me." Alastar paused and glanced nervously over his shoulder. "I couldn't see anything, but I knew I had to keep going. Eventually, I stumbled on a passageway that seemed to be leading upward, so I quickly took it. It led me out here. I thought never to see the sky again."

"Was Taliya there with you?" Damin demanded.

Alastar shook his head, his dark eyes sad. "I didn't see her after Ravik sent me underground. I don't know what happened to her."

"Can you remember where you were when you last saw her? Could you lead us there?" Bryndan asked.

Alastar shook his head. "I doubt she'd still be there. We were headed back to Korign. I think that part of Ravik's story was true, at least. There's something in Korign he needs to find. If he has Taliya, he'd probably take her there." He glanced between Damin's and Bryndan's grim faces. "But she may have escaped," he added softly.

"We're less than a day out from the old river crossing on Upper Koris River," Damin said. "And from there it's only a day's ride to the palace. Probably take us two days on foot."

Alastar looked surprised, then quickly scanned the clearing, which was illuminated by the torchlight, as if he hadn't noticed Damin and Bryndan were on foot. "Where did you lose your horses?" he asked.

"We didn't." Bryndan scowled, insulted that the Aminthian prince would think so poorly of them.

"We were travelling back by brawynn," Damin explained coldly, clearly also insulted. "But they dumped us here when the sun went out."

"You mean when night fell?" Alastar clarified, sounding bewildered as he glanced up at the sky.

"No. I mean when the *sun, went, out.*" Damin gestured to the sky. "It should be midday, by my estimation."

"How could the sun go out? It's the sun. It doesn't just *go out.*"

"But it did," Bryndan insisted. He glanced nervously at Damin, uncertain if he should mention how the prince had screamed in pain when it had happened. Damin pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes at Bryndan, so he changed tactics. "There's no other way to describe it. It didn't set. It didn't hide behind a cloud. It was there and then it wasn't. It's like what it says in the prophecies."

Alastar took a deep shuddering breath and closed his eyes as he started quoting one of the prophecies.

*The sun has gone, not set, but black.
A darkness without day calls forth evil from the earth.
And Elyan, Elyan, where are you?
From the ashes of fire, you rise—and fall.*

The world has ended, obliterated all.

“It’s not the end yet,” Damin snapped. “We need to find Taliya. Let’s keep going.” He turned his back on the other two and began making his way through the forest, using the flickering light of his torch for guidance.

Alastar glanced back over his shoulder nervously. “Gunner is still behind me,” he warned.

“Then the best thing we can do is keep moving,” Damin countered from up ahead.

Bryndan tried to offer Alastar an encouraging smile, but the look on Alastar’s face had him inwardly quaking. He didn’t want to meet this creature called Gunner, not if he had scared the level-headed Aminthian prince so much. Bryndan turned his back on the prince and hurried after Damin.