

# 1

From the beginning, we understood there was an end.  
Death comes to us all. Even Eliva.  
—From *The Prophecies of Berech*

When the drægon appeared in the gardens, it did so without making a sound. Princess Taliya felt the pressure build in her ears before they popped. The flowers nearby shuddered from the abrupt gust of wind, then suddenly a drægon larger than a house appeared beside them. Juliette, seated beside Taliya and Bryndan, started to scream before sixteen-year-old Taliya slapped a hand over her friend's mouth.

"Hush, it's just Tchyal," she said, trying to ignore her own pounding heart. "We don't want the guards on the wall to hear."

Page Bryndan raised his eyebrows. "Don't we?" he hissed, staring wide-eyed at the drægon.

"And what will they do about it?" Taliya retorted. "Tchyal could kill them without a second thought."

"Taliya, it's a *drægon*," Bryndan whispered. "They're not even supposed to exist. What do we do?"

Juliette pushed Taliya's hand away, her face a thundercloud of fury. But she didn't scream.

"Tchyal, what are you doing here?" Taliya asked, struggling to her feet. It took her a few tries to get up. The sword she now carried on her hip, *Elishalak*, was long and awkward and didn't make her movements any easier. *Would this sword ever stop feeling like a burden?*

Not three hours ago had she fought with Sorcerer Craelyn and defeated him. Barely. She'd *barely* defeated him after he'd hurled a bookcase at her using his magic, and her side was still throbbing from where it had struck her. He would have won the battle had the pixie, Pernasia, not joined the fight. But Craelyn was gone, and he'd kidnapped the drægonelle—leader of all magical creatures—and escaped into another world.

Juliette, still scowling, helped Taliya to her feet before helping Bryndan to his. Of the three, only Juliette had not been involved in the fight against Craelyn. Juliette's student frock was clean and kempt, and her long curly hair looked freshly washed. Page Bryndan and Princess Taliya, on the other hand, looked like they'd been clobbered in the training arena. Bryndan had large bruises under his eyes, his lips were cracked and bleeding, and his clothes were dirty and torn. He wavered slightly before he managed to stand on his own. Taliya's short brown hair was sticking to her neck, and she didn't even want to think about the state of her gown. She'd worn it for at least the past couple of days now, including on two trips through the woods on her horse, Holjack. The gown covered enough of her body to be decent, but that was it. It had been an earthy green when she'd first donned it, but now it was more of a brown shade for all the dirt soiling it. Her dancing slippers—meant for a ballroom floor, not running wild through the forest—were in no better shape.

Tchyal the dragon looked down his long blue nose at her. She wondered what he saw when he looked at her. Did he see her cropped brown hair, golden eyes, and skinny stature and think she was a true Guardian? Or did all humans look the same to him? As they examined each other, Taliya realized she suspected she knew why Tchyal had chosen to forsake the underground kingdom to come here.

"I'm taking you to the underground kingdom," he replied, his voice flat.

Taliya tried to work out what he was feeling as he said that. Was that a threat? Or was he trying to help her? She hadn't spent much time around the elusive dragons, and what little time she had spent had been trying to convince them not to kill her. They had lived in their underground kingdom for centuries, so long that most people on Eliva considered them extinct. And they weren't exactly friendly towards humans.

"Why?" Bryndan demanded.

Tchyal ignored the small page.

"What do you want with Taliya?" Bryndan insisted.

Juliette had procured a knife from somewhere within her gown and was glowering at the dragon, looking like she wanted to take a

swipe at him. For all that Taliya's two friends had never seen a dragon before, they were being quite brave.

Before Tchyal's abrupt appearance, the three friends had been swapping stories of what had happened to each of them over the past few days. While Taliya had traveled to the underground kingdom to try and broker a peace between her people and the brawynns, Bryndan had walked to Korign, Kilarya's capital city, to convey the king's declaration of war on those very same creatures. However, while in Korign, an unknown assailant had stabbed Bryndan. He couldn't remember who had stabbed him or how he'd wound up in Sorcerer Craelyn's private chambers afterwards. The page also claimed not to remember what Craelyn had done to him before Taliya had returned in time to save him, but he'd shivered slightly as he'd danced around the topic, and Taliya had a sick feeling that he remembered that part all too vividly. Instead of pushing Bryndan to talk about it, Taliya had quietly grabbed his hand, and Juliette had jumped in, sharing all the news she'd heard through the castle gossip chain during that time. She had just gotten to how Taliya's cousin, Erok, was faring after he'd been caught in the fire in the ballroom during the Spring Festival when Tchyal had suddenly appeared.

"Tchyal, what is it?" Taliya asked. Her throat was suddenly dry.

A guard up on the wall shouted the alarm, then more guards started shouting. Tchyal looked up at the wall and hissed. It extended higher than the trees in the garden, and as such, Taliya couldn't see the guards through the summer foliage, but she had no doubt what they were shouting about.

"You're to come, now," Tchyal snapped. "You face the Drægon Meet for the drægonelle's loss."

"I can't come!" Taliya protested. "Tchyal, I'm sorry. But I can't. I have to tell my parents about the peace I brokered with the brawynns before they attack those creatures. I must—" Then she grunted. All the air was forced from her lungs as Tchyal scooped her up in one of his large paws and launched into the air. Taliya only had time to see the guards racing into the gardens to surround Bryndan and Juliette, who were staring after her with mouths agape.

"Bryndan! Juliette!" Taliya tried to scream, but her words only came out as a squeak. Then suddenly, Tchyal was above both the

trees and the battlements, and before she could draw another breath, they'd left the castle behind.

A flurry of emotions passed through Taliya. She was exhausted and sore and confused and angry. But mostly she was angry. "You can't just kidnap me!" she rasped at T'chyal, her short brown hair whipping around in the wind as the dragon flew her over the forest towards one of the underground kingdom's hidden entrances. The trees blurred beneath her, they soared so quickly. The wind on her body was cold, but the paw that enveloped her was surprisingly hot. It wasn't hot enough to burn, but hot enough that Taliya felt as if she were sitting a little too close to the fireplace.

If T'chyal heard her, he ignored her. Taliya pounded at the long claws that encircled her to get his attention, but he ignored that too. Or maybe he didn't even notice, as small as she was compared to him. After a moment, she settled for quietly seething as she tried to pull her thoughts together.

They weren't in the air long before T'chyal dropped into a small clearing amongst the trees. Taliya squeaked in terror as her stomach lurched. At the last moment, T'chyal slowed, setting Taliya down neatly on the grass. She wobbled for a step or two and nearly fell to her knees, but somehow, she was able to lock her joints together and remain on her feet. She glanced around, but the trees around her just looked like trees. There was nothing distinctive that screamed "secret entrance to the long forgotten underground kingdom!" That is, until the ground rumbled and a large gaping hole appeared in the ground before her, revealing a tunnel that sloped downward until it was swallowed by darkness.

"Follow," T'chyal ordered, heading into the tunnel.

Despite his formidable size, he barely made a sound as he padded along the stone floor of the tunnel. His tail swished slightly from side to side, reminding Taliya of a cat on the prowl. But his gait looked like that of a horse, and she reminded herself that dragons were kin to horses, which made her feel a little better. They were also kin to brawynns, but Taliya was trying hard not to think about that. Her stomach churned as she stared into the tunnel's endless blackness.

"What's going to happen at the Dragon Meet?" she asked in a small voice, twisting the ring on her finger.

Tchyal turned and stretched his neck towards her until Taliya was staring into one of his blue eyes. He stared at her unblinkingly, and Taliya felt disconcerted by his gaze. Did dragons blink? She hadn't noticed one way or another, but the longer Tchyal stared, the more Taliya's eyes started to water as she silently willed him to blink. A bird chirped from a nearby tree, and a squirrel answered, chittering angrily as if to scare off Tchyal and Taliya.

"I don't know," he said finally, and Taliya remembered she'd asked about the Dragon Meet. "But we have no choice in the matter."

"Don't we?" Taliya asked. "I could just ... not go."

"And has that worked for humans before? Avoiding your version of a Dragon Meet?"

Taliya considered it. "I suppose ... if someone tried to run away from a human tribunal, they would be captured and forced to stand trial anyway. But the outcome would be worse."

"Indeed," Tchyal said.

"Will my friends be harmed?"

"They are not standing before the Dragon Meet."

"That's not an answer."

"Isn't it?" Tchyal asked. His voice was measured, but Taliya could sense his patience was paper thin. Maybe it was the way he shifted from foot to foot or that the end of his tail had started to thrash the same way a cat's did when it was irritated.

"Then they'll be safe? No matter the outcome of the Dragon Meet?"

"No," Tchyal said. Before Taliya could say anything, he continued. "No one is safe in such a time as this. Now follow of your own will, or I will drag you before the Dragon Meet."

There was no menace laced in his voice, as if Tchyal didn't care one way or the other how Taliya arrived before the Dragon Meet. So she squared her shoulders and followed Tchyal into the underground kingdom.

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“You *must* let me speak to the king and queen!” Bryndan begged. “I swear to you on my life, Taliya has brokered a peace with the brawynns. We *must* call off the war.”

Talon, Captain of the Guards, raised an eyebrow in disbelief. “And who witnessed such a monumental achievement?” As Bryndan opened his mouth to answer, Talon added, “Besides you?” He glanced at Juliette, who shook her head.

Bryndan rubbed his arms as if he was cold, but the summer sun warmed the shady gardens even this early in the morning. When the guards had arrived in the gardens just seconds after Taliya had been carried away by the large dragon—Bryndan still couldn’t believe he’d actually seen a dragon!—they hadn’t quite believed the princess had even been there. Apparently, all they’d seen was a large and potentially dangerous creature in the gardens and had sounded the alarm to investigate, thinking it was a brawynn who had managed, oddly, to break through Sorcerer Craelyn’s protection spell. Juliette and Bryndan had tried to explain it was a dragon and that it had whisked Taliya away, but they’d been met with outright disbelief from the guards. However, the two friends must have sounded desperate enough that a guard had sent for Talon. The Captain of the Guards towered over Bryndan, and when he folded his arms across his chest, it made his muscles pop in a way that Bryndan could only envy. The man’s dark-brown eyes appeared almost black in the shady gardens, and Bryndan had to remind himself that Talon was on their side. “Juliette wasn’t there,” Bryndan repeated, exasperated. “But I’m telling the truth! The brawynn came and Taliya negotiated a permanent peace with him.”

“The brawynn that arrived at the castle under magical cloud cover? A creature as big as a horse managed to weave through Craelyn’s defenses unseen by all my men patrolling the battlements, then squeeze inside a tiny window to speak with the princess, who has been missing for days?”

When Talon put it that way, it did sound rather crazy. Bryndan took a deep breath and glanced over at Juliette for support.

Bryndan remembered Taliya’s last words of concern about the king and queen not knowing about the peace she’d made with the brawynns. He knew she’d want him to stop the war, and the only

people with the power to do that were Taliya's parents. But there was no way the king and queen would even consider holding an audience with a lowly page like Bryndan unless someone important requested it on his behalf. Someone like Talon. But looking at Talon's closed face, Bryndan felt his hope fading.

Juliette stepped forward and grabbed his hand, which made Bryndan feel infinitesimally better. "I didn't see the negotiations," Juliette confirmed, her voice firm as she tossed her long raven hair over her shoulder. "But I was in the gardens just now when the dragon came and took Taliya. It said she was to return to the underground kingdom to face some sort of meeting for ... for something she'd done."

"For letting Craelyn take the dragonelle," Bryndan muttered, running his hands through his disheveled brown hair.

"What does Sorcerer Craelyn have to do with any of this?" Talon asked, gazing hard at Bryndan, his words laced with annoyance.

Bryndan wanted to scream in frustration but kept his tone even. "I already told you. The sorcerer is gone. He went ... somewhere. Into another world, I think. How else could the brawynns have breached the castle? Or the dragon? Craelyn's protection magic must have disappeared when he did."

Talon uncrossed his arms to rub his face and let out a sigh. With that slight change in stance, Talon went from looking angry to looking ... defeated. Bryndan shifted, feeling suddenly awkward. Talon only ever exuded confidence and competence. Seeing him so vulnerable now made Bryndan feel just as uncomfortable as the time he'd accidentally eavesdropped on the king.

"Look, I know you believe this story, boy. I know you both think you saw Taliya and spoke to her. And maybe you did. But I trust my men. Most have served me for many years. Nobody else saw the princess, let alone the brawynn or that so-called dragon you speak of. Sorcerer Craelyn's powers are legendary. Not just in Kilarya, but in all Eliva. I just can't see a brawynn breaking through the defenses the sorcerer laid out to protect us."

"But Craelyn is *gone*. His magic must be, too. I *told* you."

Talon raised his eyebrows, his shoulders tensing. "Soften your tone, page," Talon grunted. "You forget yourself."

Bryndan ran a hand through his hair, fighting back tears of frustration.

Talon shook his head in what might have been pity and shifted his weight, softening his stance. “Look, whether any of this occurred or not, I take my orders from the Crown. If you convince the king of your story, then you’ll have convinced all of us.”

“Then you’ll ask him to grant me an audience?” Bryndan asked, his voice raised in hope.

“No,” Talon said gently. “But I will take your word that the brawynns—and a drægon—*may* have somehow infiltrated Sorcerer Craelyn’s defense systems and gained access to the castle grounds.” Talon paused as if considering his next words carefully. “I appreciate your warning that things may not be as they seem.”

“Why don’t you believe him?” Juliette asked stubbornly.

Talon looked surprised at the question. “Because I see a page who looks like he had a close brush with death and is barely able to stand on his own two feet. The mind does curious things when the body has been damaged. What I do trust is my men, who saw something large and threatening they had trouble describing in the gardens. But whatever that creature was or what it was doing here, it’s gone now.”

“Large,” Juliette scoffed. “It was bigger than a *house*. And it was blue. No way they could mistake that for a brawynn if they had any brains about them.”

Talon ignored her. “I’ll report this matter to the king and advise him that the sorcerer’s defense spells may not be working as they should. I’m sure the king will have Sorcerer Craelyn look into this problem immediately.”

“Good luck with that,” Bryndan muttered under his breath.

“I’ll include your words in my report to the king,” Talon said. He was clearly deliberately ignoring them both now. “If he chooses to speak to you personally about these matters, I’ll send one of my men to find you. Beyond that, I suggest you get some rest and consider seeing a shyliac to see if you need healing.” He gave a sharp nod to Bryndan and Juliette without quite looking at them and then turned on his heel and left.



“What are we going to do now?” Juliette asked, her shoulders hunching slightly.

Bryndan mulled it over. “Prince Damin would believe me ... so might Sir Quand or Prince Alastar. Maybe they can speak on my behalf to the king and queen.”

Juliette snorted. “Foreigners? Why would the king and queen stake the safety of the kingdom on the word of any foreigner?”

“Prince Alastar is engaged to Taliya,” Bryndan reminded Juliette, trying not to feel defensive. “Surely the king would believe his future son-in-law.”

“Maybe,” Juliette said doubtfully. “He’d be your best bet, at least. The king has no love for Prince Damin, and being a refugee, he really doesn’t hold any standing in court. But what about your training master, Lord Jeo?”

“I ... I don’t think Lord Jeo likes me very much,” he said, swallowing nervously and avoiding eye contact.

“What makes you say that?”

Bryndan shrugged. He couldn’t bring himself to tell her that Jeo had told him he likely wouldn’t make it through the Choosing Ceremony and become a knight.

“But he’s friends with Sir Quand, isn’t he? Lord Jeo?” Juliette persisted.

“Sir Quand’s also a foreigner,” Bryndan reminded her.

Juliette rolled her eyes. “I know that. That’s not what I meant. What if you asked Sir Quand to speak to Lord Jeo on your behalf? Lord Jeo might go before the king at the request of his friend. And Quand saved your life. That has to mean something.”

Bryndan brightened at the suggestion. “That might work! At this time of the morning, he’ll probably either be in the training grounds or taking his breakfast in the main dining hall.”

“Training grounds first?” Juliette suggested. “Since we’re already outside?”

“No, let’s try the dining hall first,” Bryndan countered.

What he didn’t want to say was that at this time of day, there was a significant chance that Lord Jeo would also be in the training grounds given how close they were to the Choosing Ceremony. Lord Jeo barely took Bryndan seriously when he was healthy, and right

now he felt bruised and sore. He ached in places he didn't know could feel pain before now. He couldn't bring himself to face the training master in such a state without an ally by his side. What better ally than the revered Sir Quand?

Juliette and Bryndan made their way through the corridors to the dining hall. There were plenty of people out and about—mostly students and servants as nobles preferred to sleep in later—but nobody gave Bryndan or Juliette a second glance. Just outside the main doors, Bryndan bumped into Trelk's father, Lord Sagar. Trelk was a fellow page a few years older than Bryndan and the biggest bully Bryndan had ever met. Their two families had a long-standing feud that had, most recently, culminated in Trelk's twin sister, Leena, taking her own life. Bryndan had had nothing to do with that tragic circumstance, but Trelk had decided the Gias family needed to pay for their crimes, and Bryndan was an obvious target. When the two boys had faced off in the arena a couple of weeks ago, Trelk had tried to kill him. He'd gotten away without punishment for it, too, because of Lord Sagar's influence and the way he'd played on the tribunal's sympathy over Leena. Bryndan hated Lord Sagar almost as much as he hated Trelk.

Lord Sagar stopped and stared at Bryndan, his hooded eyes inscrutable as his lip curled up in disdain. He tucked his hands into the pockets of his tunic. "How nice to see you up and feeling better, page," Lord Sagar said in a voice that made Bryndan take a step back. "We were so worried when we heard you'd been stabbed."

Juliette grabbed Bryndan's hand and stepped closer to him. "Praise Berech for the skills of our shyliacs," she said with false brightness. Bryndan gripped her hand tightly.

Lord Sagar took a step closer, herding them until they were pressed against the cool stone walls of the corridor. "Praise Berech indeed," he said. Again, his voice didn't match his words, and Bryndan could see his hands moving under his tunic as if he were clutching something. "What monster would think to attack a defenseless page?"

A couple of servants slipped through the main doors as they exited the dining hall into the corridor, but they kept their eyes forward as if they didn't see Lord Sagar standing over Juliette and

Bryndan in a manner that could have been described as threatening. Bryndan heard the cacophony of many voices echoing inside the dining hall, its oak doors just steps away.

“I don’t remember,” Bryndan snapped.

“He’s not defenseless!” Juliette protested at the same time. Both Lord Sagar and Bryndan looked at her. Juliette stuck her chin up in defiance. “He survived being gored with a sword when he was unarmed. I bet the coward never would have done that if he’d been armed.”

Lord Sagar raised an eyebrow at her bold statement. Bryndan squeezed Juliette’s hand in appreciation of her support, although he felt her loyalty was somewhat blinded. There may be a few pages who could hold their own against an adult opponent armed with a sword—Trelk being one—but Bryndan was not.

Lord Sagar turned back to Bryndan. “Right, I remember hearing about that. Unarmed? In the village? Trelk told me Lord Jeo had ordered everyone to carry a sword when delivering the king’s message to the villagers. How ... unfortunate that you didn’t see fit to follow that order. Things might have turned out differently.”

Bryndan could see Lord Sagar’s hand moving under his tunic again, and he felt a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach he couldn’t explain. “Excuse us,” he said through gritted teeth, tugging Juliette through the doors into the dining hall. He could feel the lord watching him as they left.

Once they had disappeared through the large oak doors, Bryndan stopped and let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. He let the welcoming noise of people eating and talking fill his ears. Dishes clattered, and despite all the noise that echoed throughout the large space, it felt almost peaceful, as if the worries of the world were absorbed by the oak doors, allowing those within to rest and enjoy their food in safety.

“What’s wrong?” Juliette asked, putting a hand on Bryndan’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Bryndan tried to gather his racing thoughts. His heart was pounding, but he couldn’t quite figure out why he was so upset. Finally, he turned to Juliette. “I don’t like Lord Sagar. I think we should stay away from him.”

Juliette shrugged. “He’s the same ilk as Trelk. Bullies are bullies, but you can’t let them get to you.”

“Yet the bullies always win,” Bryndan said bitterly.

“Not always,” Juliette said stoutly. “I bet you Trelk doesn’t even get selected in the Choosing Ceremony.”

“Yeah, well, he won’t be the only one.” Bryndan tried to keep his tone light and joking, but his voice cracked.

“What?” Juliette put a hand on his arm. “Why would you say that? Surely Lord Jeo will make sure you’re matched—” Juliette paused mid-sentence as she saw Bryndan’s eyes welling with tears. “Oh. *Oh*. Are you sure? Lord Jeo said he won’t let a knight choose you?”

“Not exactly. He said he didn’t think it was *likely* I would be chosen, and he won’t interfere to force a match if that’s the case.”

“What will you do if you’re not selected?” Juliette squeezed his arm as she asked.

Bryndan leaned into her touch ever so slightly. “Be humiliated?” he said more as a question than a statement.

“Maybe Lord Jeo is wrong. Surely one of the knights will see what I see in you. And anyway, I still say you’re more likely to be picked than Trelk.”

Bryndan shook his head, blinking his tears back. “Trelk is strong. He’s probably the second-best page there is, after Allec.”

“Yes, but everyone knows that he cheated and tried to kill you in the arena.”

“The Tribunal dismissed the charges. He wasn’t even punished for what he did.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Word has gotten around. No knight worth his salt will want such a dishonorable page to train. Have you noticed how even Trelk’s father has fallen from grace?”

Bryndan felt cheered by the thought. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“No, I’m serious. You might not have noticed it, but Trelk’s really isolated right now. His friends have all but dumped him since your fight in the arena, and I bet not a single knight will want to take him on either.”

“How do you know so much?”

Juliette gave Bryndan a smug smile. "I'm observant. You underestimate me, Bryndan."

Bryndan caught her hand and squeezed it. "Never," he said. "I'll never underestimate you, Juliette! Trelk would have killed me in the arena if not for you. You threw the rock that stopped him in time. I'd be dead if not for you."

Juliette blushed. "It was nothing," she said quickly, ducking her head so her long black hair curtained her face.

"That's not nothing, Juliette. You would've been a remarkable page if you'd been a boy."

Juliette shrugged. "It's not a life I would have wanted," she said shyly. She peeked out at him from behind her hair. "Do you ... do you still have the rock?"

"Of course!" Bryndan said, fishing around in his pockets. It wasn't where he remembered putting it, so he started turning his pockets inside out, his search becoming more and more frantic.

"Oh, that's okay, Bryndan. I was just teasing you. It's just a silly rock, after all. I don't mind if you lost it." Juliette sounded a little sad, and she dropped her hand from Bryndan's arm.

"I didn't lose it. Juliette, I swear I didn't lose it. And that's not just any rock. That's our special rock from our first adventure together. We found it by the riverbank when we were helping Taliya. It's shaped like a heart. I still have it. I know I do."

"Don't worry about it, Bryndan. It's no big deal."

But Bryndan could see in her eyes that it was a big deal. After another moment of frantic searching, he had to give up. "I ... I must have lost it somewhere in the woods."

"It's not your fault, Bryndan. You were wounded! And like I said, it was just a silly rock. It doesn't mean anything."

"It meant all Eliva to me, Juliette. I'm sorry I lost it."

Juliette wiped away a tear trickling from the corner of her eye and laughed. "It's okay. *Really*, I mean it. I don't know why I'm getting emotional over a stupid rock. I'm forgetting what's important." She straightened her shoulders. "Taliya."

"Right, Taliya." Bryndan reached for Juliette's hand and squeezed it. "You're a loyal friend, Juliette. I'm lucky to have you by my side. So's Taliya."

Juliette's smile faltered. "Loyal?" she asked. "Do you really think I'm a loyal friend?"

Bryndan smiled at her. "You are one of the most loyal people I know. You've stuck by Taliya's side through thick and thin, haven't you?"

The light in Juliette's eyes died and she pulled away.

"What's wrong? What did I say?" Bryndan asked, confused.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm just worried about Taliya. Do you think she's okay?"

"Taliya defeated the most powerful sorcerer in all Eliva. She could face a thousand dragons with no problem," Bryndan said reassuringly.

Juliette's lips twisted at the mention of the dragons. "I wonder what else she'll face down there in the underground kingdom?"

"I don't know, but she survived her first visit to the underground kingdom when nobody else before her had done so. I'm sure she'll survive it again."

"I hope so," Juliette said. "But we don't know when she'll come back, and we still have to fulfill our promise to her. If we don't, there will be a war with the brawynns."

Bryndan ran a hand through his disheveled brown hair, taking a deep breath. He could smell the sweet scent of the soap that Juliette used to wash her hair, and he took a step back to try and center himself and refocus on his task. Juliette also took a deep breath, then they both turned to look around the dining hall.

"Look, there's Sir Quand. You were right." Juliette pointed to a dimly lit corner in the otherwise bright dining hall. She hesitated. "I don't think I should go with you. I mean, if you want me to I will, of course. It's just ..."

Bryndan's shoulders slumped slightly. "It's better if I go on my own," he agreed glumly. "You're right. Quand doesn't know you, and you weren't there when Taliya spoke with the brawynn. He won't respect me if I need someone by my side to support me."

"I can wait for you here?"

"No, that's okay. I don't know how long we'll be. I'll find you later?"

Juliette gave him a quick peck on the cheek, then yanked herself back as her cheeks brightened to crimson. “Good luck, Bryndan,” she said looking firmly at the floor. She turned and fled before Bryndan could do more than stare at her in open-mouthed shock.

He put a hand to the cheek she had kissed as he stared after her for a moment, then shook himself and squared his shoulders. He approached Sir Quand as confidently as he could manage, moving slowly to hide his limp as he wove his way around the large tables and benches. The dining hall was less than a third full. Bryndan passed a few other pages wolfing down food, their bodies half turned to the exit as if they were itching to get outside to the training grounds. He didn’t see any of his friends. No doubt they were already outside. Most of the people there were clustered in small groups, chatting quietly with each other. A group of girls around Taliya’s age were alternating between whispering and giggling with one another and eyeing the pages, Sir Quand, and the other young men in the dining hall. Bryndan was not exempt from their scrutiny, but he tried his best to ignore it.

Unlike the others dining, Sir Quand sat alone and a little apart from the others, which would make it easier for Bryndan to speak with him privately under the cover of all the noise. The Imasdain was staring into his cup of mead, looking pensive. He glanced up when Bryndan approached and raised his eyebrows. The knight was stocky more than he was tall and was blessed with the classic Imasdain bloodlines that didn’t show age. He looked about twenty years old, and Bryndan knew that was not far off his true age. But Quand had the Imasdain bloodlines in him that meant he would look about twenty years old for the next fifty years or longer.

“You’re alive,” Quand said.

Bryndan couldn’t read the expression that crossed his face. “I am,” he agreed. Bryndan wasn’t sure what else to say, but instinct told him to let Sir Quand guide the conversation.

The knight gestured for Bryndan to sit, and he did so, sliding onto the bench across the table from the Imasdain. “When I heard Sorcerer Craelyn had taken you for questioning ...” Quand’s words trailed off, and one hand swirled his drink.

“Craelyn’s gone.”

“Gone?” Quand spoke in a low voice, but a sudden tension in his shoulders belied his surprise. “How so?”

“Taliya returned to the castle. She—they fought. He escaped, and Taliya thinks he went to another world.”

Quand sat back in his chair. “Well now,” he said, rubbing his chin with one hand. “Well now. Will he be coming back?”

Bryndan started to shrug his shoulders then paused. “Yes, I think he will. But it won’t be good for us when he does.”

“Hmm,” Quand said. He slanted a look at Bryndan. “Who else knows of this?”

“Taliya, and my friend Juliette. I told Talon but I don’t think he believed me.”

“No, indeed,” Quand said quietly.

Bryndan couldn’t tell what the knight was thinking. “There’s more,” Bryndan added. “Taliya managed to negotiate a permanent peace with the brawynns. We need the king and queen to call off their war.”

“I’m sure she’ll be able to convince them if that’s the case.”

“She can’t. She’s ... she’s gone, too. Again.”

“Oh?”

Bryndan felt tension creep into his shoulders, and he began to sweat. “Just now. A dragon came and took her away. It said she needed to face a meeting of some sort. She’s gone again, and I don’t know when she’ll be back.” He tried to swallow but his throat had gone suddenly dry. Glancing at Quand’s cup of mead, Bryndan wished he’d thought to bring his own drink to the table before he’d approached the knight.

“How inconvenient.” Quand’s voice had a strange note to it.

Bryndan couldn’t tell if the knight believed him or not. “I need your help.”

“I had presumed as much when you sought me out.”

“I need to seek an audience with the king and queen, to convince them of the peace with the brawynns before they start a needless war.”

“And you think the king and queen of Kilaritya will listen to a knight visiting from Imasdan?” Quand’s face twisted into a grimace of disbelief.



“No, but they’ll listen to Lord Jeo.”

“Ah.” Quand took a long drink of his mead and then folded his arms across his chest.

Bryndan forged ahead. “I just need to speak to them, to convince them of what happened with the brawynns. But they won’t grant me an audience unless someone with more standing requests it.”

“You’re planning to tell them about Craelyn, too?”

Bryndan hesitated, then shook his head. “They wouldn’t believe me, would they? Best if they discover his absence for themselves. I just want to stop the war. It’s what Taliya wants, too.”

“They may be more convinced to stop the war if they believe Sorcerer Craelyn—and all his protection spells—has vanished.”

Bryndan rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers. “Will you help me?” he pleaded.

“You mean, will I speak on your behalf to Lord Jeo?”

“He trusts you. You’re friends.”

“You assume I believe your story,” Quand countered.

“Don’t you?”

Quand stared at him for a long moment, then sighed and uncrossed his arms. “Aye, I do. Not many would, granted. But not many have questioned Sorcerer Craelyn’s integrity. If Taliya really did make her way to the drægons in the underground kingdom—”

“I swear she did!” Bryndan jumped in. “She must have.”

“Some in Kilaritya would argue that drægons don’t exist, and that the underground kingdom is a myth. I believe the esteemed Lord Kade, brother to the king, is one of them.”

“I *saw* it. The drægon. I think there were two of them, but I didn’t see the other one. Taliya told me Craelyn took the other drægon when he jumped into another world.”

Quand held up a hand to interrupt Bryndan. “Slow down and go back to the beginning, Bryndan. If I’m to speak up on your behalf, I need to hear the whole story. Start with what happened in the village. Somebody wanted you dead, Bryndan, and I’d like to know who.”

“I don’t remember what happened to me in the village,” Bryndan countered. “I know I was stabbed because that’s what I’ve been told. But I can’t tell you who did it or why or when.”

“Then start with what you do remember, from the time you woke up in the castle.”

So Bryndan did. His voice low, he explained to the knight how he had woken up to see Taliya hovering over him with a scary-looking pixie by her side. The pixie had summoned one of the brawynns, and Taliya had convinced the brawynn to agree to a peace treaty.

“And how would one have gotten into the castle?”

Bryndan explained his theory—again—that the spell Craelyn had cast to protect the castle from the brawynns must have vanished at the same time as the sorcerer.

“Those creatures believe in blood-begets-blood. How did it ever agree to a truce?”

Bryndan lowered his voice until it was barely above a whisper. “I think ... I think because there’s a war coming, and the brawynn knows it. Taliya spoke of it.”

“What war?” Quand asked, his face bland. But there was a sharp look in his eyes.

Bryndan bit his lip. Would the knight believe him if he explained that the Alirth Clash—the end of Eliva itself—was coming? Even Imasdains had prophecies about the end of the world. How would Quand take it if he knew the end times were here? Bryndan shook his head. “No, it’s nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Quand said quietly. “What war, Bryndan?”

Bryndan bit his lip and remained mute.

Quand scowled. He released his cup to clasp his hands in front of him, leaning closer as he stared at Bryndan with his dark-brown eyes. “The brawynns wouldn’t care about a war between human nations. They’d rejoice at our destruction. So, what war would they care about?”

Bryndan stared at Quand, his mind racing. He opened his mouth to answer and closed it again. He couldn’t think of any way to describe what he knew without sounding crazy to the Imasdain knight. “Will you help me?” Bryndan asked again. “By speaking to Lord Jeo, I mean?”

Quand crossed his arms, leaning back ever so slightly. “You’re not going to tell me what you mean, are you, Bryndan?”

“I don’t think you’d believe me,” he said in a small voice as he brushed a crumb off the table, avoiding eye contact.

“Yet you’re asking me to speak to Lord Jeo on your behalf.”

Put like that, it did sound awkward. “Yes,” was all Bryndan could say.

Quand sighed. “You ask much of me, Bryndan.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t misuse that word. ‘Sorry’ implies you regret your actions.”

Quand stared into his cup for a long moment.

Bryndan tapped his feet nervously on the floor as he waited for an answer.

Finally, Quand looked up at him. “I’ll consider your request. That’s all I can offer. Maybe if you tell me more about this war you think is coming it will help me make my decision.”

Bryndan narrowed his eyes as his heart thrummed in disappointment. He had thought—hoped—that Quand would trust him enough to speak to Jeo. “I thought you were my friend,” Bryndan said, trying not to sound hurt.

Quand’s face darkened. “I am many things, Bryndan. Don’t try to emotionally manipulate me.”

Tears of disappointment stung Bryndan’s eyes. He jumped to his feet, gave the knight a perfunctory bow, then turned and fled before Quand noticed. As he reached the edge of the room, he bumped into a member of Prince Alastar’s royal retinue from the Isles of Aminthia. “Excuse me,” Bryndan said as politely as possible, trying to walk past the man.

“Quite the conversation you were having with the Imasdain, young page,” the Aminthian said.

Bryndan paused.

“I’ve seen you around a fair bit,” the Aminthian added.

“I haven’t seen you,” Bryndan said before he realized how rude the words sounded.

The man laughed softly, rubbing a finger along his distinguished moustache. He had a slight build and a sly look in his eyes. “Then I’ve been doing my job, haven’t I?”

“Who are you?” Bryndan asked, aware that the question was just as rude as his assertion, but the Aminthian seemed to take no offence.

“My name’s Frederique. I’m one of the trade negotiators. I guess you could say I’m *the* trade negotiator, at least as far as the Aminthians are concerned.”

“Oh.” Bryndan started to walk away. He paused as a thought occurred to him and turned back around. “You would spend a lot of time with Lord Kade then, right? Have you seen him recently?”

Lord Kade was one of Bryndan’s teachers and a brother to King Allandrex, Taliya’s father and the king of Kilaritya. Maybe Lord Kade would help him.

Frederique’s face fell. “I’m afraid I haven’t seen him since that dreadful fire in the ballroom at the Spring Festival. His son, Erok, was badly burned, and Lord Kade has been staying by his side.”

Bryndan sighed in disappointment. “All right, thank you, Lord Frederique.”

Frederique laughed. “Frederique. It’s just Frederique. I’m no lord.”

“Oh, that’s right. Aminthians grant status based on merit rather than birthright, like we did with Talon, our Captain of the Guards.”

“A worthy man, Talon. Kilaritya has many worthy people in the most unexpected places.” Frederique smiled down at Bryndan, who couldn’t help but smile back. “Feeling a bit better?” Frederique asked.

Bryndan hesitated, feeling the question was a bit too personal for a man he’d just met. “Sure,” he said cautiously. “Thanks.”

“I can see you’re on a mission, young page. Don’t let me keep you from fulfilling it.”

Bryndan bowed his head in acknowledgement and slipped through the oak doors into the corridor. He hesitated for a moment, then decided to head to Erok’s room just in case he could catch a word with Lord Kade.

## 2

Silence can cut deeper than any word. It is an underrated weapon, but a powerful one. Use it wisely.  
—Yim Sandish, First Knight of Imasdan

“You’ll not be permitted to speak at the Drægon Meet,” T’chyal warned Taliya. “According to Drægon Law, you’ll die if you say even one word.”

T’chyal was leading her deep underground. As with the last time she was here, a small bubble of light about the size of a small village house surrounded her and allowed her to see a short distance in all directions. She could see T’chyal’s rear, but not his front as he walked ahead of her. The drægon fit easily in the tunnel despite its huge size, but Taliya couldn’t tell how big the cave was as it extended beyond the bubble of light that the magical creature had granted her. The air was warm and smelled like a mixture of ash and wet stone. Any sound they made was swallowed by the stone path. Taliya could hear neither her own footsteps nor T’chyal’s. The sense of being watched was strong, and the back of Taliya’s neck prickled fiercely. She wondered briefly if mice felt the same way right before a cat pounced on them, then she forced her thoughts away from the threat behind her to the one she walked towards.

“How am I—” Taliya squeaked. She cleared her throat and took a deep breath before continuing. “How am I supposed to defend myself at the Drægon Meet if I can’t speak?”

“Perhaps that’s something you should have considered before allowing our drægonelle to be kidnapped.”

Taliya’s mouth dropped open in outrage. “That wasn’t my fault! You can’t blame me for any of that.”

“And yet here you come to stand before our Drægon Meet.”

“You didn’t give me a choice,” Taliya argued.

“There are always choices. What you prefer to forget is that there are also always consequences to those choices. You humans always want the choice without the consequence.”

“But I—”

“Your silence begins now,” T'chyal snapped. “No more poison words from your lips.”

Taliya inhaled sharply. She opened her mouth to snap back at T'chyal, but he seemed to sense it. Before she could blink, he'd whipped around and used one claw to shove her into the wall of the cave. He continued to hold her there as he stuck one eye right up to her face. He was too big for her to see more than the blackness of his pupil surrounded by a blue iris. But she could feel her feet and lower legs start to get warmer and was overpowered by the smell of the smoke as his breath turned fiery. Eyes watering, she clutched at the claw holding her against the wall and coughed on the smoke. She thought briefly of *Elishalak* at her hip. But what would T'chyal do to her if she made a move for the sword? *Elishalak* was supposedly the most powerful weapon on Eliva, and T'chyal had gifted it to her the last time she'd entered the underground kingdom with the expectation that she'd use it to destroy The Other. Would T'chyal feel threatened by it, or was it only powerful against humans?

“This is your one and only warning, human child. You may think that as the prophet, Elyan, you're above Dragon Law. Let me be perfectly clear: Guardian or not, Elyan or not; we *will* kill you if you break our law. And none of us will shed any tears over it, even if it means our demise. For hundreds of years, we've lived under the drægonelle's rule in our underground kingdom. I'm one of the few who remembers our time in the sun. You think of the drægonelle the same way you think of your human rulers, that if we lose her, we can just select another and move forward with our lives. What you fail to understand is that the drægonelle is much more than that. Her rule is the very essence of who we are. We are not so independently minded as humans nor as tribal as brawynns. Now there is a very real chance the Drægon Meet will find you guilty, and you'll die under Dragon Law today. There are many who feel that without the drægonelle we're all as good as dead, so why should we bother trying to save the rest of Eliva? The least you could do is make it more difficult for us

to find a reason to kill you. But if you want to make it easy, then by all means, speak.”

Taliya’s heart pounded in her chest as she stared at Tchyal. She pressed her lips together and gave a shaky nod. He released her and turned away. She took a moment to catch her breath. When he was almost out of her bubble of light, she scrambled to keep up with him as it appeared he had no interest in waiting for her.

They walked and walked as Taliya’s mind spun. How could she defend herself if she couldn’t speak? Where was Pernasia? The pixie had been crucial in Taliya’s battle against Craelyn and quite possibly the only reason Taliya was still alive. And although the pixie had made it clear she despised Taliya, the princess had gotten the sense that Pernasia was begrudgingly on her side. Would Pernasia speak on her behalf? How could she ask the pixie to support her if she couldn’t speak? And what about Tchyal? Until he had pushed her against the wall, she had assumed he was also on her side, but now she wasn’t so sure.

Eventually Tchyal stopped. He hissed a word and the bubble of light around her expanded to fill a large cavern. If it was the same cavern Taliya had faced the drægons in the last time she’d been to the underground kingdom, she couldn’t tell. Either way, this time the cavern was filled with not just drægons, but a whole host of other magical creatures as well. The cavern was a large dome with enough space that it could have fit Taliya’s entire castle with room to spare. Still, it was crammed with a variety of magical creatures as far as she could see. And until the moment Taliya saw them, she hadn’t heard a whisper from any of them. Taliya and Tchyal stood alone on a large platform that rose above the rest of the room, allowing the magical creatures a full view of Taliya. It reminded her of when she had stood at the top of the staircase about to descend into the ballroom, but there were no stairs here. She wasn’t high enough that a fall from the platform would kill her, but she could certainly break an ankle. Taliya kept well back from the edge. Tchyal stood on the other side of the platform, not quite as far away from her as he could get, but far enough to make it clear that he was not about to show her any support or leniency in the Drægon Meet.

Wouldn't her Uncle Kade just be so fascinated to be here? He'd written a book on magical creatures that they studied in some of her classes, but his knowledge was based on theory and ancient scrolls. And Taliya knew for a fact that he considered some of the species—such as the notorious dragons—as myths and legends rather than real creatures.

The dragons stood at the back of the cavern, with some clinging to the stone walls and even the ceiling. The creatures were every color of the rainbow. They didn't appear so large since they were far back in the cavern, but Taliya knew that, like T'chyal, they were at least the size of a small house. Taliya re-evaluated the size of the cavern in her mind to be bigger than her castle and indeed perhaps almost half the size of Korign itself. All of this existed under the surface, without a single person knowing it was here? The Kilarityans were scared enough of the brawynns. How would they react to knowing what lived beneath them? Taliya shivered despite herself.

Her gaze was drawn to the pixies, which Taliya recognized easily after working with Pernasia. They were the size of Taliya's arm, from her fingertips to her elbow, and their fragile-looking wings shimmered like liquid as they flitted and danced about the cavern. Like Pernasia, they appeared to have trouble sitting still. Taliya squinted, trying to make out Pernasia in their group, but it was like trying to pick out a single bee in a swarm. Taliya couldn't be sure Pernasia was even among them.

In contrast to the ever-moving pixies, the trolls standing beneath them barely moved at all. Twice the height of Taliya and as wide as a horse, the grey, hairy creatures were utterly still. She was close enough to see that every one of their faces was frozen into a stupefied, apathetic expression. They stared at her, unblinking. When Taliya focused on a few, she noticed they started to drool, and she wondered if her attention was making them hungry. She tore her gaze away to the last set of creatures in the underground kingdom and those closest to the front, the warlas. The tallest warlas only reached Taliya's waist. Their skin was a pale, sickly blue, and they had long ears that curled over themselves and long, sharp claws at the end of their fingers and toes. A few grinned and leered at Taliya, showing off two rows of teeth as pointy as a snake's fangs. Unlike the trolls,



the warlas looked sly, and there was an energy about them that made the hairs on Taliya's arms prickle. Of all the creatures in the cavern, the warlas frightened her the most. The pixies appeared harmless, though Taliya knew better after her time with Pernasia, and the dragons at least seemed to have some sense of honor and code. The trolls could have easily snapped Taliya in two with their generous size, but they appeared too stupid and lethargic to bother. But the warlas ... the warlas looked as if they would love to sink their teeth into her flesh and tear her apart. Lord Kade's description of the mythical creatures didn't do them justice. There was something about them that made Taliya feel she would have preferred to face a herd of starving brawynns. Taliya pulled her gaze back to T'chyal, wondering when he would start the Drægon Meet.

As if on cue, the magical creatures before her all turned their attention to the front of the cavern as T'chyal began to speak in a mixture of hisses and clicks. Taliya grimaced. The last time she'd been here, they'd all spoken Kilaryan to her, so much so she hadn't even realized they had another language. But what good was her presence in their Drægon Meet if she couldn't even understand what they were saying?

As if hearing her thoughts, a pixie detached from the group. It fluttered forward and hovered near Taliya's head. The princess's eyes widened as she recognized Pernasia. She opened her mouth to greet Pernasia, but the pixie turned on her with such a scowl that Taliya snapped her mouth shut, remembering her requirement to be silent. Pernasia looked Taliya up and down, giving her a snort of disgust and tossing her long silver-blond tresses over her shoulder in disdain. She carried her wand in her hand, and she flicked it at Taliya's face dismissively. In that instant, Taliya could understand T'chyal's words. It wasn't that he had switched to Kilaryan, for Taliya could still hear him making whistles and clicking sounds; it was just that now she could understand what he was saying.

She glanced at Pernasia, giving the pixie what she hoped was a grateful look for casting a spell that allowed her to understand their language. In return, the pixie curled her lip in disgust and spat at Taliya's feet before darting back to the rest of the pixies. Taliya

watched her go but soon lost track of her among all the other fluttering pixies. She didn't know what to make of Pernasia.

Taliya turned her attention back to T'chyal.

"... And having lost our drægonelle, Rishaal, this human—who calls herself 'Taliya,' is of the Guardian planet and known to be the prophet, Elyan, also called Eliva's Child by some—has voluntarily attended our Drægon Meet and will accept her fate under Drægon Law."

"If we kill Eliva's Child, we kill ourselves!" a drægon perched on the ceiling called out in a deep, rumbling voice. Taliya couldn't tell which one it was, but she was grateful for its interjection.

"We're already dead without Rishaal. Might as well kill her slowly for our last bit of sport before we die," another drægon with a sharp, cruel voice argued. Taliya's heart skipped a beat. Was that Golaet? The last time she'd been in the underground kingdom, the red drægon, Golaet, had tried to eat her. Only the interference of Holjack, her beloved horse, had saved her life.

The volume in the cavern was starting to get louder and louder. The trolls began stomping their feet, and the pixies fluttered about so quickly it created a low buzzing. Drægons scraped their claws along the stone and whipped their tails about furiously. The warlas gnashed their sharp teeth together, and a few began keening a high-pitched cry that hurt Taliya's ears and made her eyes water. The ears on their heads curled and uncurled in agitation.

"Since when have we allowed such an unseemly ruckus during a Drægon Meet?" T'chyal asked quietly but with profound effect.

Every magical creature became so still and silent that Taliya could hear her own ragged breathing. She hadn't realized how close she was to panicking, and she focused on taking deep, quiet breaths until she could feel her heartbeat calm down. Even the pixies were barely moving, although they still fluttered their wings to hover in the air.

T'chyal surveyed the room and gave a slow nod of approval. "The representatives who will speak will now step forward. Anyone else who speaks will be removed from the Drægon Meet."

From the back, a red drægon with a dark-blue rim around one eye flew forward, and Taliya's heart sank when she saw it was Golaet. Golaet was a bit smaller than a small house in Korign, and T'chyal

easily towered over him. But what the red dragon lacked in size he made up for in menace. Golaet snapped his scaly wings and came to an abrupt halt, slamming down on the ground between Tchyal and Taliya, close enough that the resulting wind almost knocked her over as she took a stumbling step towards the edge of the platform before she straightened again. Good thing she hadn't been standing right at the edge. The look Golaet gave her told her he still wanted to eat her. Taliya lifted her chin and curled her hands into fists. If he did eat her, she hoped she would give him the worst stomachache of his existence.

A warla and a troll stepped up to Golaet's side, though Taliya had been too distracted by Golaet to see how they'd arrived on the platform beside her. Had they climbed? Been lifted? Could they fly even though neither had wings?

The warla barely reached Golaet's knees and was less than half as tall as the troll, which stood as tall as a horse. Yet it was the warla that grabbed the troll and shoved it into its place, while the troll stared at Taliya blankly, drooling. A pixie—not Pernasia, Taliya was disappointed to see—also joined them, and had he not been hovering in the air level with Taliya, he would have only reached the princess's knee. His fine golden hair reached to his feet, and his face had the sharp features one might see in a small child.

Taliya briefly wondered if this pixie was as fierce a fighter as Pernasia, who claimed herself to be the best fighter among all the magical creatures. Even after seeing Pernasia hold her own against Sorcerer Craelyn, Taliya still couldn't quite believe Pernasia's boast—how fierce could the tiny pixies be against the sheer size and strength of the dragons?—but neither the dragonelle nor Tchyal had denied it when Pernasia had made her declaration, so Taliya had kept her doubts to herself.

Tchyal spoke once more. “Golaet, as a dragon, has the right of first to speak. We'll follow by age after that. Golaet, you have four dragon heartbeats to make your case.”

Taliya crossed her arms, shivering. It didn't seem fair. Why wasn't Pernasia speaking, or Tchyal? Other than Golaet, she hadn't seen *any* of these magical creatures before, yet they were going to determine her fate?

“We all smell the lies on this human,” Golaet snarled, stomping back and forth in front of his audience in a show of power and menace. “Who’s to say whether she *is* Eliva’s Child or if she’s working for the Other? She lured our drægonelle to the surface, where she knew our dearest Rishaal would be vulnerable. Not even Pernasia, our greatest warrior, could protect the drægonelle from the danger this human put her in, and now Rishaal has been captured by the Other. We drægons will perish without our drægonelle, and where will that leave the rest of you? Without our leadership and wisdom, you will all soon follow on this path of death.”

Taliya saw the warla at the front roll its eyes at that, and the pixie curled his lip in disdain. It gave her a small sense of hope. The troll didn’t so much as twitch an eyebrow, and a string of drool began to slide off its chin as it continued to stare at Taliya.

Golaet continued, his loud voice booming around the chamber. “The only option we have is to sacrifice this human and present her corpse to the Other. If we beg for mercy, maybe the Other will spare us when he returns to kill all the humans of this world.”

Golaet bowed his head in what might have been an attempt to show humility, but it felt to Taliya that he was a stage actor bowing to his audience after a performance.

Tchyal turned to the troll. The troll continued to stare at Taliya without moving. “Wanda?” Tchyal prodded.

The warla rolled its eyes and poked the troll sharply in the stomach, and the troll twitched as if waking from a deep sleep. She finally looked away from Taliya and turned to face their audience. “Other ... deceives, destroys,” the troll said slowly in a surprisingly high-pitched voice. “Elyan ... saves. Trust ... Rishaal.”

Taliya’s breath caught. The troll was on her side? She’d thought it merely wanted to eat her, like Golaet. She silently cheered on the troll, willing Wanda to say more. But it appeared Wanda was finished. The troll let out a long breath, then nodded at Tchyal.

“Pyper?” Tchyal asked, and the pixie bowed to the drægon before turning to his audience.

“Pixies are warriors,” Pyper said, pounding his chest and brandishing his wand in the air like a sword. “We won’t lay down and

wait for the Other to come! We won't wait for Eliva's Child to save us. We will fight! And we will WIN!"

There was a collective roar from the pixies, who began darting about in the air like a swarm of angry hornets.

Tchyal waited for the roar to die down. It took a few minutes. He looked at Pyper. "We don't doubt the bravery or the fierceness of your people," he said gently. "But at this Dragon Meet, we're ascertaining the guilt or innocence of this human in the kidnapping of our dragonelle."

Pyper glanced over at Taliya and sneered. "Pixies don't belong underground. We should go to the surface and join our brawynn brothers! We should fight their fight!" Pyper flew high into the air and lifted his wand above his head. "To the sun!"

"To the sun!" the pixies roared in response.

"To the sun!" Pyper screamed again.

"To the sun!" the pixies responded. They buzzed about in a frenzy, and half of them darted out of the cavern as if making their way to the surface at that very moment.

Taliya grimaced. There had been no magical creatures on the surface of Eliva for centuries, brawynns aside. If the pixies appeared now, looking to pick a fight at that, it would be a disaster. She stared at Tchyal, silently willing him to call the pixies back. Tchyal studiously ignored Taliya's gaze. Pyper fluttered back to the ground, breathing heavily as if he'd just run a race. His eyes were wide and wild, and Taliya wondered if he knew where he was or if he was still caught up in his own battle cry.

Tchyal turned to the warla. "Gunner," Tchyal prompted.

The warla looked at Taliya and gave her a sly look, his ears uncurling as he faced her. "Let the human speak. Let her lies expose the truth of who she is."

"Humans have never before had a voice in the Dragon Meet," Tchyal said sternly.

"Never before has a Dragon Meet been about a human," Gunner countered. "I propose an amendment to the law."

Golaet looked at Gunner, then at Taliya. A slow smile spread across his face, and Taliya felt a chill go through her. She had wanted nothing more than the right to defend herself, but looking between

Gunner and Golaet, she wondered if the warla wasn't setting her up to fail.

Tchyal frowned. "Go on."

"Humans love their words. They use them to lie and twist and deceive. So let her use them to answer our questions and face justice, but with a limit. The Rule of Four."

"Agreed!" Golaet hissed, his large tail thrashing in excitement. Taliya gave Golaet's tail a wary look, but it didn't appear to be at risk of knocking her or anyone else off the platform, not yet anyway.

Tchyal looked at Wanda, who gave a small nod after a moment. Pyper gave a *humpf* and crossed his arms but didn't otherwise weigh in.

Tchyal nodded, then turned to Taliya.

"In a Drægon Meet, we follow the Rule of Four," Tchyal explained calmly. Taliya couldn't tell from either his voice or his posture how he felt about this change in the Drægon Meet rules. "Four representatives may speak their case, each for the length of four drægon heartbeats." He turned to the audience, speaking louder so that all could hear. "The amendment to the rules of the Drægon Meet has been accepted. We will now ask this human four questions, one from each of our representatives. In return, she will give us four words in answer." He turned to Taliya sharply. "That's one word per question, human. Any more words and you will be instantly killed. So I suggest you take care and choose your answers wisely, for remember that we can sense lies."

Taliya stared at him dumbfounded. One word to answer a question?

"Gunner, as the one who proposed this solution, you have the right of first question. We'll go in reverse order from there, with Golaet's question last."

Golaet looked immensely satisfied by this, and Taliya's heart quivered. She tore her eyes from the red drægon and focused on Gunner.

The warla paused and licked his lips, a nasty grin lighting up his face. His ears curled down to cast a shadow over his eyes. "You, human who calls herself Elyan, why did you allow Rishaal to go to the surface and face off with a servant of the Other?"

Taliya hadn't allowed Rishaal anything; Rishaal had ordered it to be so and refused to listen to Taliya's objections. "Obeyed," she said.

Gunner nodded, but his eyes reflected the slightest bit of disappointment, which gave Taliya some hope.

"Pyper?" Tchyal asked.

Pyper flew around the front of the cavern, his chest puffed out. He flipped his long golden hair back over his shoulder as he approached Taliya.

"Human child," the pixie said, "why do you think you can defeat the Other when you couldn't even defeat one of his servants, the Sorcerer Craelyn?"

Taliya considered it. Could she defeat the Other? Her birth-parents hadn't thought so, but they'd had hope she could. They trusted that her Guardian powers would give her the strength to destroy the Source of Eliva's power, which would destroy the Other. That was assuming she could ever find the Source of Eliva's power *and* assuming she could figure out how to use her supposed Guardian powers.

"Guardian," Taliya said.

Pyper frowned. "Every other Guardian has failed. Why should we believe *you*?"

"One question only," Tchyal countered. The dragon turned to Wanda. When the troll didn't respond, Tchyal gave her a gentle nudge with his tail.

Wanda looked over at Taliya. "Pyper's ... question," she said slowly.

*Rats.* Taliya had been hoping she wouldn't have to answer that one. She fiddled with her ring, twisting it round and round her finger as she frantically tried to think of a word that wouldn't be a lie. If she said "Elyan," would *that* come out as a lie since she wasn't truly Elyan?

"Answer, human child," Tchyal said sternly, and his tail flicked in annoyance.

Taliya held up her hand to show the ring on her finger. She'd sacrificed her ring to Rishaal's mother, and Rishaal had given it back. Taliya hoped that Wanda and the other magical creatures knew this,

hoped they knew that the ring marked her as a Guardian, or else her gesture wouldn't mean much.

"Rishaal," Taliya said, hoping to convey that Rishaal had trusted her. She then lowered her hand to trace the hilt on her sword, *Elishalak*, trying to convey that this was their weapon that T'chyal himself had bequeathed to her.

Wanda sighed and gave a small nod, then closed her eyes.

Taliya turned to Golaet, who had been shifting impatiently from foot to foot the entire time, while his tail thrashed angrily.

"Human," Golaet said with a cunning smile. His entire body stilled. "Tell us, why do you smell of lies?"

Taliya's heart dropped. They would kill her if they found out she wasn't Elyan, even if she was the closest thing there was to the prophet. Her sister, Anaila, the true Elyan, had sacrificed herself to save Taliya when they were children. That sacrifice had allowed Taliya to enter Eliva, although Taliya was to originally have been the sacrifice.

She turned to her silent audience. After looking them over carefully, she fell to her knees, hoping she could convey the truth with her body as well as her words. "Sacrifice," she said quietly.

In the large cavern of the underground kingdom, the magical creatures cried out in an uproar.

\* \* \*

Quand strode through the near-empty corridor with his head held high. The trick to making one look like one belonged was to *act* like one belonged, his knight commander had always told him. So Quand acted like he belonged in the sorcerer's wing of the castle. It was dark here, with few windows. Although there were plenty of lanterns, over half were unlit, as if the servants avoided this part of the castle whenever possible. Still, one never knew when they might encounter someone unexpected, so he kept his right hand discreetly tucked into his tunic, ready to grab his sword at a moment's notice. Quand had learned to always expect the unexpected.

He didn't want to be here, but gods help him, he believed Page Bryndan's wild story. But belief was not enough; Quand needed to



see with his own eyes the sorcerer's chambers, for surely there would be evidence.

He'd only been in this part of the castle once before, to try and snoop on Sorcerer Craelyn and send information to his king, but after Craelyn had nearly caught him, Quand had vowed he wouldn't come back. But now the allure of Page Bryndan's story was too tempting to resist. Quand had to find out the truth. Ahead of him, one wooden door stood wide open. Unlike the other open doors Quand had ignored as he had walked past, the rooms darker even than the hallway, this doorway was different. It stood open like a gaping wound that bled bright light into the eerie hallway. This entire wing belonged to Craelyn, but Quand had a strong feeling all his answers could be found in this one room.

The room itself was in shambles; books from a toppled bookcase were scattered across the room, and another bookcase looked like it had been smashed into the far wall, with bits of wood splayed out around it. But what caught Quand's attention was the grotesquely large window, through which the wind was stirring up the cold ashes from the firepit in the center of the room. No window in the whole castle should have been this large, let alone one in the tower. Yet not only did this one have no glass to bar wind or cold, but it was also large enough for a horse—or a *bravynn*—to fit through.

Quand walked over to the floor-to-ceiling window and looked outside. There was no guardrail or balcony or any other safety mechanism outside, and a fall from this height would kill a man. As far as he looked, he couldn't see any other windows of this size anywhere on the castle walls.

Running his hand around the window ledges, he discovered it was smooth, with no sign that human force had been used to widen the window. It bolstered his earlier suspicion that magic had indeed increased the window's size. Had Sorcerer Craelyn widened the opening? To what end?

The Imasdain took a moment to look around to see if the room could tell him anything more, but all that did was confirm Bryndan's story. Now the problem lay in what Quand was going to do with this information. He would write to his lord king, King Vortimer, immediately. He must know about these new developments. While

Imasdan was no enemy to Kilaria, such a weakness must be considered. Kilaria's army was no match for Imasdan's, and the only thing King Vortimer truly respected in Kilaria was the power of their sorcerers.

But with Kilaria's most powerful sorcerer gone and no successor apparent, Kilaria had lost its greatest weapon. At the same time, once the Gleniferite usurper, Rasin, learned of this weakness, he might be incentivized to declare war against Kilaria. Glenifer was already teetering on the brink of civil war after Rasin's bloody coup, but if Rasin declared war on Kilaria, he might manage to unite his people against a common enemy. While it was unlikely Imasdan would get involved in such a fight, King Vortimer would ensure Imasdan profited either way.

King Vortimer had sent Quand to Kilaria in no small part to spy on the Kilarians, particularly Princess Taliya and Sorcerer Craelyn. Although Quand was working with Lord Jeo to prepare the pages for the impending Choosing Ceremony where they would be matched with their own knight commander, King Vortimer hadn't seen any reason why Quand couldn't also feed information to Imasdan at the same time. And while Quand had great respect for Lord Jeo, and a certain fondness for Page Bryndan and a few of the other boys, he held no loyalty to Kilaria.

Quand scanned the grounds below him once more. He spotted the guards patrolling the outer wall, their gazes scouring the landscape beyond for the enemy. It seemed they hadn't even noticed this magically enlarged window. *Poorly trained*, Quand thought. *Talon should have taught them to look for enemies everywhere, not just where one would expect them.*

Ignoring the birds chirping in the sky, Quand turned on his heel and stepped carefully around the scattered debris as he left, making sure not to disturb anything. He didn't bother to shut the door behind him; let one of the servants discover this room as it stood now when they eventually came to clean. If the Kilarians were smart, it wouldn't take long to work out that Sorcerer Craelyn was gone. If they weren't smart, then that wasn't Quand's problem to deal with. He rubbed his head with one hand, refusing to allow himself the indulgence of a headache, although his tongue wished for a hot cup

of spiced mead. Spying was not the work of an honorable knight, and Quand had no taste for it. He had sworn an oath to his king that he'd stay at the Kilarityan castle until the end of the Choosing Ceremony. Let King Vortimer find someone else to send after that.