

TIMOTHY BOND

PREQUEL TO
THE TRIADINE SAGA



PROPHECY'S QUEEN

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Prequel to The Triadine Saga
by Timothy Bond

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Table of Contents

[Copyright Page](#)

[Foreword](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-One](#)

[Twenty-Two](#)

[The End](#)

[Also by Timothy Bond](#)

[About the Author](#)

Foreword

In this prequel novella to the epic fantasy series *The Triadine Saga*, we follow the Elven Princess Rozlynn as she struggles with her role in The Prophecy and what she must do to keep the world from falling into darkness.

This is a story of love and conflicts, personal growth, and freedom to choose your own destiny. The world of Elves, Dwarves, and humans, is inexorably tied to magic, wizards, and dragons, as the battle of good versus evil, light versus darkness, wages on.

Will Rozlynn make the sacrifices and the choices necessary to ensure that The Prophecy stays on the right path? Will her sister, the Elven Queen, prevent her from making her own choice? Will Rozlynn's love for an Elven Hunter betray her and lead her astray?

Join Rozlynn and a number of your favorite characters from *The Watcher's Keep* and *The Dragon Rises* to find out how it all began.

One

"And I forbid you even talking about it!" Queen Lilliene was furious with her sister for bringing up the same topic again. The Princess was stubborn, but it ran in the family.

"All the signs point to this being the right time, Sister," Rozlynn argued.

"The signs, the signs," the Queen echoed, tired of the argument. "You and your sorceress are the only ones who think the time is now."

Rozlynn roughly pushed her chair back from the table and rose with a sigh. She walked to a tower window and looked out across the placid alpine valley.

"And if we are the ones who are right? What happens then?"

"You know I am not a Prophecy Scholar," Queen Lilliene began, trying to soften her tone. "Will you present your case to the Council at least?"

"That bunch of old fools?" Rozlynn was still worked up. "I don't know why you even meet with them! You know the King has no respect for their decisions at all."

"Theinial agreed that the decisions of the Council would be honored and respected," the Queen retorted.

"But not followed. Not if they went against his own wishes. He lets the Council sit here in Alpenvail and make decisions such as how much silk will be required next season, or if we will secretly trade with the humans, but nothing that ever affects Kalystra. He would never follow the word of the Council when it came to running his city."

The Queen had long ago given over the daily activities of running the Elven city of Alpenvail to the Council of Nine. This was a group of respected, wise, and ancient Elves who settled in the hidden alpine valley centuries ago. They honored the old ways, and more than most, they understood the reason for this city to exist in the first place. The Council had accepted the responsibility of securing the Earlach Stone after The Breaking of the World at the end of the First Age.

The Earlach Stone was the centerpiece of a magical talisman created through the combined efforts of Elves, Dwarves, humans, and the Nordae-Grandia. The Triadine, as it was called, was instrumental in ending the war. It was an extremely powerful weapon, and no one wanted to see it used again. In the

process of defeating the Dark Wizard's armies, mountains were leveled and new mountains were raised. The earth was shattered, reformed, and then shattered again. Only the inner strength of the Princess Symerna prevented the Triadine from completely destroying the world.

Rozlynn understood on some level what the Queen was feeling. Sometimes you had to make sacrifices for the greater good. Symerna understood that when she volunteered to wield the mighty weapon. She died shortly after the end of the war, her soul shattered after what she endured through the power of the Triadine. The Queen was never able to come to grips with her death, even after nearly a thousand years.

Princess Rozlynn was the most beautiful of the three sisters. Thus far, she had not married and spent much of her time in scholarship—though she did not lack for suitors. Even if she had not been of royal blood, there would have been dozens of Elven men pursuing her. Hair of gold that flowed to her waist framed a perfect face with almond-shaped blue-green eyes set just the right distance apart. Her Elven features were pronounced, with high cheekbones, pointed ears, naturally sculpted eyebrows, and a slightly pointed chin. Her nose was dainty but was perfect for her face, with a gentle uplift at the end.

She was slim like most of her kind, though strong and fit. She preferred walking to riding a horse, though she was an excellent rider. With all the research she did throughout the region, she spent much of her time dressed in nondescript traveling clothes and walking the forest roads of the Aren. Though men and Elves were no longer in formal contact with one another, she did keep open communication with the Julean Abbey in Caergana, where arguably the best writings on Prophecy were maintained.

The sisters were currently in the Queen's private study, high in a tower in Alpenvail. The castle complex contained two grand towers—Queen's and King's—connected by a delicate bridge. This city of the Elves located high in the Lumin Mountains was something of a magical place. With the aid of the Earlach Stone, its days were spent in perpetual spring no matter the season. The power of the stone directed the energy of the sun into the surrounding valley using a form of magic now lost to the Elves. This most powerful earth stone was secured in an impregnable tower in the center of the valley, protected by powerful magic as well as the isolation of the Elves.

The city was overflowing with flowers and fruit trees of every type imaginable. The higher elevations of the valley would see the necessary frost to set the fruit on apple, cherry, and pear trees, while the lower levels grew every form of citrus known. Vegetable gardens were abundant. Sheep, pigs, and domesticated red deer provided a year-round supply of livestock. Peacocks,

chickens, geese, pheasant, ducks, and pigeons supplied a diverse enough mix of poultry to satisfy any chef. The lakes that dotted the valley were home to two species of trout whose population was well managed by the efficient Elves.

One side of the valley was covered in silkworm farms, the mulberry trees supporting millions of cocoons. Silk in various forms was the dominant fabric used in everything from coveralls for working in the fields to fine gowns for celebrating the dozens of holidays that called for feasts in the Elven city.

Life was easy for the Elves of Alpenvail, and in their isolation, they wanted nothing to do with The Prophecy or anything in the outside world. Rozlynn knew that presenting her case to the Council of Nine was a total waste of time and that the result was predetermined.

"I will be leaving in the morning," she announced to the Queen. "I'm going to the Abbey to meet with Brother Hewin. He recently received several volumes of Goblin prophecy, newly discovered in ruins above the Northwood. He finished translating most of them, but there are still some things he needs my help with."

"You are going back out among the humans?" the Queen questioned. "Don't you have enough to study in Kalystra? Rykee is very proud of the work he has done on The Prophecy."

"I've been over every volume in the Royal Library a dozen times or more," Rozlynn replied. "And though Rykee has organized the volumes well, he is no Prophecy Scholar."

"You know I don't like it when you go out among the humans, even if it is just to the Abbey. You be careful, Sister," Lilliene said firmly, "and take Darius with you."

"I always am, and I always do, My Queen," Rozlynn replied with just a little sarcasm in her voice. Roz loved her sister, but she told herself this was the last time she would debate The Prophecy with her.

The two women embraced as only sisters could in the midst of an argument, as one of the Queen's servants arrived in the doorway on the far end of the room.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," the white-haired Elf said, bowing nearly double. "You have a visitor in the garden."

"In the garden?" she asked, raising one eyebrow. "Send them up!"

"I, ah, Majesty, well, I don't think," the servant stammered, not knowing exactly how to reply.

"You don't think what?" she snapped, a little terser than she wished.

"It is ... it is a Dwarf, My Queen," he finally managed to say.

Rozlynn looked at her sister and laughed. "Bandefin," she said with a smile on her face.

"Who else?" Lilliene replied. "Tell him I will be right down," she instructed her servant.

* * *

The Dwarf was admiring several carved stone pieces adorning the Queen's garden when Lilliene entered from a small door at the base of the tower.

She strode across the northern end of the high-walled arboretum and stood before the heavily bearded little man. "How DO you get in here without my Elven Hunters noticing?"

"The day that a Dwarf cannot evade an Elf is the day the sun will stop rising, the birds will stop singing, and the honey-mead of the Elves will turn to vinegar!"

The Dwarf took both of the Queen's hands in his and bowed his head in respect. "It is good to see you again, Lilliene," he greeted her in his deep rumbling voice.

"Well met, Master Dwarf," the Queen replied formally. "Someday I will figure out how you get into my valley without my Elven Hunters knowing about it. What brings you to my city in the mountains?"

"Someday I will tell you of the secret ways I travel, Queen Lilliene, but not today. Today, I have several more tiella birds for you," he replied, motioning to a small hooded cage on the ground nearby. "These are bred for the cold, and though they will return to me without guidance, you should be able to send them anywhere you wish at any time of the year and not worry about them freezing when leaving your valley."

The tiella bird was the ancient messenger bird of royalty in the Aren. In the past, all the races had communicated over great distances using these marvelous little birds. They could listen to a message and speak it back to the recipient as long as it was not too complicated. This was not their only amazing talent. They could locate a person, any person, anywhere in the Aren. If you could describe them in a way that the little bird could understand, it would eventually find them.

"Thank you, Bandefin," she said in earnest, "but I really do not know how useful these birds are any more. There are so few of us left who can speak with them."

"The breeding is something I was doing anyway," he said softly, "and as you say, so few of us can speak with the messenger birds ... where else would I take them? It made sense to bring you another batch of these sturdy fliers."

The ability to speak with the birds was now lost to humans and all but Bandefin's family of Dwarves. He was a direct descendent of King Vargas

Silverbeard, the last Dwarven King who died in the Great War. Queen Lilliene, Princess Rozlynn, and Lilliene's daughter Lynntania were the only Elves remaining who could speak with the messenger birds. The use of the birds was now very limited.

"Bandefin!" Princess Rozlynn greeted her friend as she came running across the garden. "It is so good to see you!"

"Princess," the Dwarf replied, bowing formally.

"How long are you staying?" she asked. "At least stay for dinner. We are roasting a goose that got into my Sister's vegetable garden and made a huge mess of things. I've just been to the kitchen, and it smells wonderful."

"I'm afraid I cannot stay, Princess," the Dwarf replied, "as I don't want to be caught in the mountains after dark."

"You just don't want my Elven Hunters to know how you get in and out of here without being seen," the Queen said, only half-joking.

"That too, Your Majesty," the Dwarf replied and winked. "Seriously, I have far to travel and really must be going. I only wished to drop these birds off and maybe get one mug of your fine honey-mead before I go."

As if on command, a kitchen servant appeared in the garden with a tray of light snacks and three mugs of the Elven honey-mead.

"Your wish is my command, Master Dwarf," Lilliene replied and smiled. "Please, enjoy a little respite before you leave."

"I think I can manage that," Bandefin replied with a grin. The Dwarf did love his honey-mead.

Two

The trip from Drianna's cottage to the valley where the Wizard Posh had built his tower would have taken the sorceress nearly three weeks if she had not traveled by the Wizard Ways. Though she was not an expert in The Ways, she knew the requirements for navigation in the tunnels below the earth. Without the proper spells and runes, the entrance to The Ways appeared to be a smooth wall of stone amid some ancient ruins.

The Ways were once used by the Nordae-Grandia to travel great distances in very short periods of time. This helped them in their role as peacekeepers throughout the land. Many passages were destroyed in The Breaking, but those that were still working could be used by mages who knew the correct runes.

The challenge of traveling The Ways was compounded by the fact that at each junction the direction you took the last time might not take you to the same place this time. You needed to draw the rune that represented your destination, speak the Words of Travel, and then follow the rune to your desired goal. Travel time between two points was nearly constant despite the distance, which never ceased to amaze the sorceress.

There was an entrance to The Ways near the sorceress' small cottage. She had built her home in the deep woods above the village of Caergana on the northeastern edge of Lake Estonan. She interacted very little with the villagers, though some sought her out for healing and simple magical aids. Though the Church considered the practice of magic blasphemous, they had no real power to control what the sorceress did. She kept mostly to herself so there were no issues. The people were more practical when they needed her, though many called her a witch and felt threatened by her presence when they were not seeking her help.

Emerging from The Ways into a valley deep in the mountainous area known as the Dragon's Teeth, Drianna surveyed her surroundings. The Wizard Posh was a recluse by choice, and though he protected his valley with wards and other magical devices, she would easily bypass his security and walk the short distance to the tower.

"Mylan, it is good to see you looking so healthy," Drianna greeted the single servant that Posh kept. He was human, long lived for one of his species, and the

sorceress suspected that Posh was experimenting on his manservant with longevity spells. The wizard himself was more than a thousand years old. Mylan's family served him for much of that time, though Mylan was the last of his line.

"Drianna, it is always a pleasure to see you," the old servant said, smiling as he rose from tending a small vegetable garden at the base of the tower. "What brings the Gaerwitch to see my Master on this fine day?"

The sorceress embraced Mylan, and then taking his arm in hers, she led him to the tower door. "I have need of your Master's assistance with a couple of challenging spells."

"You think he will help you after the last time?" Mylan asked, pushing the door open and letting the lady enter ahead of him.

"I have something to bargain with this time," Drianna replied, smiling, "and I think Posh will be more than happy to help when he sees what I have to offer in return."

Mylan laughed as the two climbed the stairs to the main rooms in the tower. "You two make quite a pair, Drianna. If you would spend more time around my Master, I think the two of you might actually become close friends."

The sorceress laughed lightly before replying, "You know Posh and I could never be together in that way. His love of Bethany will keep him from being with any other woman until his last breath."

"I do know that," Mylan said solemnly. "He thinks of little else these days, I'm afraid. His obsession with bringing her back has completely taken control of his life."

"I know, and though I wish there was something I could do to ease his burden, it is one he alone must bear."

The two emerged from the stairs into a large semicircular study where the Wizard Posh sat behind a large desk covered in scrolls and books of all shapes and sizes. His jet-black hair was unkempt as usual. It appeared he had not slept in days.

"You have a visitor, Master," Mylan announced.

"Go away!" the wizard barked without looking up. "I will see no one today!"

"You will see me, you grumpy old buzzard!" Drianna barked back.

"Drianna, you old Witch!" Posh yelled across the room. "You dare come back here after the way your last visit ended?"

When Drianna had last visited the wizard, she had sought his advice on several magical issues, and in his haste to get rid of her, he managed to cast a particularly nasty variation of a spell that triggered a Vision Rage. These fits were extremely dangerous and could kill anyone close to the wizard when one

took him. An uncontrollable Vision Rage had resulted in the death of Bethany and the total destruction of the city of Barren Tor on the coast of the Arithe Ocean. These rages were why Posh lived alone in this isolated valley. The tower's protective magic channeled the destructive power of his rages into the surrounding mountains until they played themselves out.

"I have something to bargain with, Posh," Drianna stated, standing her ground. "Something that you will want very badly."

"There is nothing you can offer me of your Wiccan magic that I cannot already match or exceed with my own," Posh said without looking up. "I say again. I am accepting no visitors. Good day, Drianna!"

"You will want to read this, Posh," Drianna said quietly, holding out a yellowed scroll bound with a new green and red ribbon.

"And what is that?" Posh looked across the great desk. "I have plenty of scrolls and books already as you might have noticed."

"Not like this one," Drianna replied. She stepped up to the desk and handed the scroll across to the wizard. "Just one thing before you open it," she continued. "If you wish to keep that scroll, you will help me with the spells I came here to speak with you about."

"I cannot imagine you have anything that I would find valuable"—Posh accepted the scroll, its aged parchment flaking ever so slightly in his hands—"however I give you my word."

The wizard carefully opened the scroll and started reading. His mouth fell open, and he looked up at Drianna before turning back to the words without speaking. Pushing aside several books on his desk and knocking several more to the floor, he stood and bent over the scroll, gently unrolling more and more of it on his desk.

"Do you know what this is?" He gasped at last, looking up at the sorceress with wide eyes.

"I do," she replied.

"No, I mean do you really know what this is or do you just guess?"

"I know, old man," she said calmly. "Though I could not read most of it, as the language is ancient, and it was dead long before I was born. I was able to determine it is a treatise on the resurrection of the dead, written by one of the Nordae-Grandia at a time before the creation of humans. It references only Elves and Dwarves as the lesser races, so I suspect it pre-dates even the Lesser Wizards."

"I can read only a fraction of the text," Posh said quickly, "but I have volumes that have been translated from this form that I will be able to use as cross-reference material to translate this document as well. It is as you say, or

appears to be, at any rate. It may take years of study to understand the finer points."

Posh was lost in the scroll now, and Drianna let him wander deeper into its possibilities before interrupting him.

"My price, Wizard," she said at last.

"Yes, yes," Posh replied, looking up impatiently. "What minor spells are you struggling with where you need my help?"

"I have a few things I need your help with, and you must give me your complete attention and apply your full talent to the effort. Not like the last time."

She held out her hand in an obvious attempt to take back her scroll; however, Posh left it where it lay and walked around the desk instead. He stood face to face with the sorceress.

"What you have brought me may be the key to a lifetime of effort." He looked deeply into her eyes. "There is nothing I would not grant you for this boon."

"As I hoped," she said, smiling. "Let us go over what I need and get to work right away. The sooner we finish, the sooner you can get to work translating those writings."

* * *

It took the two mages most of the next three weeks to put together the necessary spells. The runes and the words of power needed were complex and required them to push themselves beyond their normal limits. The spells wove Wiccan and Wizard magic together in subtle ways that were likely never before attempted.

Both of them were exhausted when the task was complete, but Drianna was satisfied that she now had what she needed and could leave the wizard in peace.

"Thank you, Posh," she said as she embraced him outside his tower. He smelled of musk and sweat, which quickened Drianna's heart. Though the two were never going to be openly close, the residue of the magic they worked with for the last three weeks was still strong and nearly prevented her from leaving.

"These spells cannot be reversed," Posh repeated for the hundredth time. "Be very sure when you cast them that you are ready for the consequences."

"That is the intent," Drianna replied, still holding the wizard's hand in her own.

"Please do not come back here again," Posh choked on the words, the tears welling up in his eyes.

"I understand, and I will leave you alone," the sorceress replied. "You will realize someday the importance of what we have done, but for now, just accept my thanks."

"The price you paid is worth more to me than anything." He absently rubbed the locket he wore around his neck. "This may indeed be the key to bringing back my Bethany."

"Good luck to you, Posh," Drianna said quietly. She released his hand and walked down the valley to the Way Gate entrance, her own eyes filling with tears and her sobbing nearly uncontrollable.

Three

Nearly three weeks had passed since Rozlynn arrived at the Caergana Abbey. She and Brother Hewin were still working through the translation of the book on Goblin prophecy recovered from the ruins of an old Goblin enclave in the Sikyu Mountains.

The Goblins were once known for their scholarship, though that was centuries ago. This volume was actually written before The Breaking of the World. Though it appeared to have several sections devoted to The Prophecy, it was difficult to determine which passages were speaking about the original use of the Triadine, and which may be referring to the present day.

"Princess?" Brother Hewin was absently rubbing his bald pate. "Will you please translate this passage for me? I think my first interpretation might have been incorrect."

Rozlynn took the translated sheets and started to read through Hewin's version.

"If you would not mind," he interrupted her, "would you work from the original and not be influenced by what I've already done?"

She glanced up in annoyance at the frail-looking monk, who often went days without eating while lost in his research. Though he was thin and pale, he could scamper up the library's ladders to the top shelves faster than any acolyte. She had to smile just a little.

"I will start fresh, Brother," she said calmly. "Both pages?"

"If you don't mind, Princess."

Brother Hewin was always polite, and when the Princess was here to study, he gave her his undivided attention. Rozlynn settled in to translate the Goblin text, though the age of this document meant that much of what the two of them understood would be in error. The written language of the Goblins was full of metaphors that were based on Goblin history, and that made any translation awkward at best and often incorrect.

The work was tedious, and Rozlynn worked through the first several paragraphs finding nothing of interest. Then she stopped, crossed out the words she had just written, and started the section again.

Bane of darkness. Born of short and long of life. Two are one, opposite and identical. Barak's scourge. Griswold's regret. The impossible is possible. When the ??? rise from spawn ???, the ??? will be the ones to ??? into the void forever.

After she finished as much of the translation as she could, she read this one section aloud. Hewin gave her his complete attention as she continued.

"Most of this text is a repeat of earlier sections," she announced, "and though it applies to the future of the Goblins, I don't think it pertains to The Prophecy. This one section however might be applicable. There are a few words I cannot do anything with."

"Barak?" Brother Hewin asked, "Isn't that the name of the Dragon Lord who served the Dark Wizard at the end of the First Age? Does that put this prophecy into the realm of those of the First Age?"

"It does, though I don't think it is accurate to say he served the Dark Wizard. I believe that the dragons were serving their own interests, and that just happened to align with Khollaran, that's all."

"Griswold?" Hewin asked for clarification. "I don't recognize that name either."

"You do, you just know him by another," Rozlynn suggested. "He was the last Goblin King in the North, after The Breaking."

"You mean Grash-nold?" Brother Hewin asked.

"They are one and the same. Goblin prophecy always refers to him this way. They superstitiously believe that they cannot name their leaders in prophecy. They believe if they use real names that the prophecy will not come true. Having him named in this passage clearly puts it after The Breaking."

"You know, most Goblin prophecy was recorded by the seers directly." Brother Hewin was off on an academic tangent now. "Goblins with the gift of prophecy were venerated members of society. They lived a life of relative luxury and used several drugs to enter the trance-like state where they could prophesize. They—"

"Thank you for that lesson," Rozlynn interrupted, trying to get the monk back on track, "but I don't think it's relevant to our work."

"Of course, of course." He absently rubbed his head while reading the rest of Rozlynn's translation. "I think your version is more accurate than mine, Princess, thank you. I believe I can fill in some of the gaps."

Hewin took the pages and began to copy them. Both he and Princess Rozlynn kept copies of the volumes that the Princess deemed interesting. She would keep just the portions that applied to The Prophecy, adding them to her notebook. Brother Hewin would keep the entire translated volume in the library.

"What do you think this section means?" Rozlynn asked, pondering the short piece that felt otherwise out of place in the document.

"The words you are missing are part of an earlier translation I did on another section of the document. Let me see if I can put the last part together. '*When the Orc rise from corrupted spawn, the children will be the ones to cast darkness into the void forever.*'"

"I think this is the most accurate translation of the last part, Princess," Hewin stated. This hit home with Rozlynn, as it was confirmation of several other passages that she and Drianna agreed directly applied to the world today.

"What are Orc?" she asked the monk.

"I don't know precisely," he replied, "but the name originated with the Nordae-Grandia, and is related to failed experiments by the Lesser Wizards in the First Age. They were trying to create a race of beings and bring life into existence by themselves. This was the exclusive realm of the Gods and any attempt to do so resulted in abominations. 'Orc' is not a Goblin word, but they use it directly in the text. It's always associated with the Lesser Wizards."

"And how do you come up with '*children*' and '*cast darkness into the void*' in this context?" she asked.

"I am unsure if this means '*children*' or '*child*,' but it could also mean '*twin*' based on my understanding. As for '*cast darkness into the void*,' that is also just a little bit more than a guess, but it seems to fit the earlier translations as well. The Goblins rarely name the Dark Wizard, but refer to him as the darkness. Casting him into the void is their way of eliminating him, as they believe he is immortal and cannot be killed."

Rozlynn looked over the finished translation that Brother Hewin created the first time he dissected these pages. His version was very nearly identical to what she pulled from the ancient Goblin text.

"I think we are finished for the day," Hewin interrupted her study of the text. "How about a meal?"

"I think a meal sounds wonderful!" Darius exclaimed from the other side of the room. The Elven Hunter spoke for the first time in many hours. He was assigned to protect Princess Rozlynn whenever she left the Elven Cities of Kalystra or Alpenvail. "I swear, both of you can live on words and air when the rest of us need food and water!"

"I'm sorry, Darius." Rozlynn meant it, and as she stood, the stiffness now settled into her joints. "Let us go down to the kitchen and see what we can find to eat."

"Dinner was many hours ago," the hungry Elven Hunter stated, "but I'm sure that Brother Andre will have something for us still on the stove."

As the three of them left the library section devoted to prophecy and descended from the tower to the lower level where the kitchen was housed, Rozlynn was beginning to harden herself to the task ahead. She felt certain that it was time for her to act. It was time to help The Prophecy along the path that would preserve the world, lest it fall into darkness for a thousand years.

* * *

"Aunt Rozlynn?" the voice was in her head, as Rozlynn was awakened from a light sleep in the pre-dawn morning.

"Yes, Lynntania, is something wrong?" Rozlynn replied.

"It's just that Mother is very upset, and is on her way to Kalystra. She was up all night packing, and she called to me moments ago using the mirrorstone. I wanted to let you know, not exactly to warn you, but you know how she can be."

Lynntania had the ability to scry with virtually any of her people, a once common trait among Elven royalty that was virtually unknown today. Her ability was augmented by green earth-stones cut from emeralds mined by the Dwarves. Each Elf living in Kalystra wore a small green stone around their neck for just this purpose.

Rozlynn absently fingered her own pendant as she replied to her niece.

"Thank you, Lynn, I appreciate the warning. I will be returning shortly, but will no longer debate The Prophecy with your mother. I know the path that I must take, and there is nothing she can say or do to stop me."

"Be strong, Aunt Rozlynn," Lynntania spoke in her mind. *"If I can do anything to help—"*

"I will not pull you into this, dear," she replied, *"but your support means a lot to me. Thank you."*

The link was broken, which meant that Lynntania was either finished or had been interrupted. Either way, it did not matter. The message was clear, and Rozlynn's resolve was set even more firmly than before. The Queen would not interfere with her next steps, but Rozlynn would not engage with her either. Let her think she was winning. Fate would keep them on the right path now.

Four

King Leondis Tarbane was a handsome man with strong shoulders that sat on a study frame. He was in his mid-thirties, and recently came to power when his father died a quiet death from old age. Old King Adon was loved by his people, and they passed along that unconditional love to his only son.

Leondis was not skilled in warfare, as the Kingdom was at peace both internally and with its neighbors for many decades. He was a trained diplomat, as his father felt diplomacy was going to be the key to ruling for Leondis' time as King. He was a skilled hunter however, and enjoyed spending time on horse or afoot, hunting with spear and bow in the lands surrounding Solenta.

The capital of the Kingdom was situated on the coast of the Arithe Ocean, just north of the Estonan River. The Great Rift Valley leveled out for several miles before the river met the sea, and this delta was home to flocks of migrating water fowl in both the spring and fall. This spring, the hunting was particularly good as flocks of migrating waterfowl were more numerous than in years past.

"Has Your Majesty done well today?" the castle cook asked, as the King entered the castle through the kitchen doors. Entering through the kitchens would be unusual for most Kings but not for Leondis.

"Lord Randolph was the better man today, I'm afraid," Leondis said in his booming voice. "I managed to bring down six of the black ducks, but Randolph bested me with nearly twice that number!"

Lord Randolph was right behind the King as they came in the servant's entrance, his ever-present smile lighting up the room.

"I did bring down ten of the flyers," Randolph admitted, "but then I was in a better position than His Majesty in the blind."

"Ha, you do try to curry favor!" Leondis laughed at his oldest friend, slapping him on the back as he pinched a kitchen maid with his free hand. She squealed and only slightly inched away, giving the King the look that said she would not mind being called to his chambers later.

His entourage today included nobles from all across the Aren, as well as courtiers who wished to curry favor with the young King. Most of these were simply too pompous for the practical Leondis; however, he enjoyed seeing them

traipse through the marshes in their finery and attempt to act as though they enjoyed these outings.

"Here, Randi," the King grabbed a small loaf of warm, fresh bread and tossed half to his friend. "This is all you get to eat tonight after showing me up!"

"It is a small price to pay, Your Majesty, for the enjoyment that bragging rights bring me," Randi quipped in reply.

The two men laughed together as the servants entered the kitchen carrying more than twenty ducks for the evening meal. The cook took over and shooed everyone out so the staff could get busy preparing the bounty. Leondis was a gentle King, but he did insist that his meals were on time and for the celebration of a successful hunt, that the day's game was the centerpiece for the evening.

"Come now, Randi." Leondis ushered his friend ahead of him. "We must clear the kitchen before the cook gets out her wooden spoon!"

Both men laughed at this, remembering when they were children and this same cook regularly chased the young Prince and his best friend from the kitchens at the end of her spoon. Taking one look at her now, Randi could imagine her doing it again, even to the King.

* * *

In the sitting room off the front entrance to the castle, in what was known as the Eastern Throne Room, King Leondis Tarbane sat in his hunting clothes with Lord Halford Randolph and shared another mug of Elven honey-mead.

"Where is it you say you get this stuff?" the King asked Randolph, slightly slurring the words.

"I trade with the monks from the Abbey in Alnen," Randolph admitted. "I'm not sure how they learned to make this, or if they even make it themselves, but it is the finest mead I believe I've ever had."

"I would have to agree, Randi," Leondis admitted, "but after a half a dozen mugs, can you really tell the difference anymore?"

The friends laughed and clanked their silver mugs together, enjoying the companionship that came from a lifetime together.

"My King," Randolph said a little more seriously. "I do believe it is approaching that time, Sire."

"And what time might that be?"

"Why, time for you to take a Queen, Highness." Randolph again urged his friend to end his bachelorhood.

The King shifted the kitchen maid off his lap and stood, walking to a side table with finger foods arrayed for the small group to enjoy. A servant offered to

put a plate together for the King, but he waved him away and simply picked at the table as he stood silently.

"I know you are right, Randolph," he said at last. "I do enjoy the ladies, and there are so many maidens in the Kingdom who have not tasted of my manhood." He smiled at the now abandoned kitchen maid as she blushed and bowed herself back into a corner near the serving table.

"The Kingdom needs a Queen," Randi went on, "and it's time for you to father an Heir."

Leondis sighed and took a bite from a pork pie, the warm juices dripping into his beard and down his chin. The serving man quickly attempted to hand him a finely made napkin, but Leondis was already wiping his chin on the sleeve of his jacket.

"The King needs an Heir, and the Kingdom needs a Queen," he echoed his friend. "I do believe I've been practicing at the first item"—a wry smile crossed his lips—"but I also admit I've not given the second very much thought. You can choose one for me, my friend. Choose me a Queen who will make the Kingdom proud, and I'll keep practicing making an Heir until I get it right!"

At that, Leondis swept across the room and scooped up the kitchen maid in his big arms, causing her no end of delight. As she squealed, Randi rose and just shook his head. "You enjoy yourself, my King, and I will begin the search for likely candidates to be your Queen. There are political alliances that may be made, both inside and outside the Kingdom. I am certain that with a little work, I can find a suitable Lady who will be both the proper mother for your Heir, and a proper Queen for the people."

"You do that, Randi," Leondis agreed with his friend, "and I will go practice with this little maiden right now!" He hoisted the giggling maid onto his shoulder and strutted from the room—the servants quickly opening the double doors in time for him to pass easily through.

Randi stood staring as his friend, and King, strode boldly down the hall, petticoats flying out behind his broad shoulders, and not a care in the world.

"Yes, my King," he said to himself, draining the last of his mead. "It is definitely time you settle down with a fine woman and fulfill the role your father prepared you for."

Five

"Do you believe in fate, Lord Randolph?" The man asking the question was of average build with long grey hair tied back in a ponytail. He sported a full grey beard and wore nondescript robes. He sat quietly in the corner of the inn where Randi was to meet with his old friend Karoel.

"What do you mean fate?" Randi asked.

"I mean, do you believe that certain men are fated to do certain things in this life," he replied, "and that they cannot avoid those things even if they try."

Randi accepted two mugs of ale from the serving girl and slid one across the table to his companion, taking a seat in the process.

"I would say a man makes his own fate, Rendil," Lord Halford Randolph was speaking now, as a man of some ambition who loved his King and the Kingdom that was his home. He would do anything to make sure that both were safe.

"Interesting," Rendil replied, tugging absently at his beard. Rendil was a wizard. He spent time in many parts of the Aren, and if you asked men to describe him, most would be unable to do so. He passed through the world of men without drawing much attention to himself, though he influenced many a man's destiny in the process.

"What brings you to Solenta?" Randi asked politely. Though he was waiting for his old friend, he and the wizard were also long-time acquaintances, and this was not the first time they had shared an ale.

"I am actually here to see you, though I did not know it until just now," the wizard answered.

"I don't understand?" Randi replied. "How can you be here to see me if you did not know you were coming to see me?"

"A valid question, but then that comes back to my question about fate." Rendil took a long pull on his mug.

"I am afraid you've lost me, Wizard," Randi replied, sitting back in his chair and drawing smoke from a freshly lit pipe. "Maybe Karoel can shed a little light on the subject."

The lanky former soldier from Lands End had entered the inn and approached the table with the two men. "Randi"—he nodded his head towards Lord Randolph—"and Rendil. I'm surprised to see you, Wizard."

"It is good to see you, Karoel," Rendil replied. "I was pleased to hear that you have left the service and returned to stay with your father. I know his health is not very good, and he will be benefit to have you around."

"My service with Duke Haren was finished," Karoel answered, motioning for the serving girl to bring another mug, as he dropped into the chair next to Randolph. "My father is indeed suffering from long service to the Crown. It is only by a twist of fate that I was able to serve in the army out of Northcastle and not as a servant in the castle."

"Ah, fate again," Rendil said quietly, cradling his mug in both hands. "How is Lieutenant Pyke? I understand he was seriously injured on one of your patrols?"

"Lieutenant Pyke is recovering nicely," Karoel replied. "He was very nearly killed in an attack in the Sikyu when we trapped a group of outlaws in a series of ravines deep in the mountains. We lost nearly half the unit, and Pyke's injuries were so severe we had to stay through the winter before we could carry the Lieutenant out to safety."

"I heard the story," the wizard replied, "and I understand that Olman killed a Goblin Commander in that series of raids. That will set them back as they try to establish new leadership."

"I never said anything about Goblins," Karoel replied, looking the wizard in the eye.

"I know what the Fox Hunters were hunting, Karoel, and I know how successful you were at ridding the area around Lands End of their threat. I am only sorry to see the unit disbanded."

"After Lieutenant Pyke's discharge, most of the men decided to end their service when they had the chance." Karoel took a pull on his ale. "How is it you two are here together?" he asked Randi, changing the subject.

"Oh, it's quite by chance, I assure you," Randi replied. "I entered just a few moments ago, and the serving girl informed me that my friend was already here and ordered ale. I thought she was referring to you and followed her straight to this table where to my surprise the Wizard was waiting."

Both men looked to Rendil who simply shrugged his shoulders before replying. "I assure you, I did not know either of you would be entering the inn; however, I did know that the next two men to come through the door would be critical to my mission. I was very pleased to see it was the two of you."

"Now that makes no sense to me," Randi answered, blowing a light blue stream of smoke into the air. "More of that fate talk?"

"Indeed."

"What is your mission, Wizard?" Karoel asked, setting his mug on the table.

"I am here to see that the King takes a suitable bride," Rendil replied. "Do you have any more of that fine tabac, Lord Randolph? It's from up around Eagles Reach, is it not?"

Randi and Karoel looked at each other in surprise, since they were here for the express purpose of discussing the best way to introduce the King to the proper ladies in the Kingdom so that he could choose a Queen. Neither of them wanted to let the King simply marry for political gain. The courtiers were spending all their time attempting to curry favor for their many daughters, sisters, aunts, and cousins, and making sure they gained something from the King's marriage.

Nearly two months had passed since Randi convinced Leondis it was time for him to take a Queen. In that time, Lord Randolph was named the unofficial matchmaker for the King. He was overwhelmed with the task before him. He had been introduced to dozens of ladies from all over the Kingdom. Promises of riches, estates, marriage to younger sisters, and more, accompanied the introductions. All Lord Randolph needed to do was see to it that the King married the correct woman, and all would be his. When Karoel arrived from Northcastle, Randi knew he finally had an ally in this endeavor he could count on, who would not try to curry favor with the King.

"How could you know we were meeting here to discuss this very topic?" Randi asked the wizard.

"Tabac?" Rendil asked again, holding out his empty pipe. Randi pulled out a pouch of the dried herb and passed it to the wizard.

"Well?" he asked again.

After stuffing his pipe and lighting it with a little wizard magic, Rendil settled back, blew a puff of smoke, and smiled. "Fate, as I said."

"That's not an answer, Wizard," Karoel piped up. "You could not have known we were meeting here, since we arranged this meeting only hours ago. I spoke with no one, and with all the problems that my friend here has with the Lords and Ladies of the capital, I'm certain he spoke with no one either."

"Let me tell you both a little story," Rendil replied, taking a deep pull on his ale and settling in with his pipe. "It all started nearly a thousand years ago, at The Breaking of the World."

* * *

When Rendil finished telling his story, the men were well into their ale, had eaten a hearty stew with fresh baked bread, and were facing a deep-dish apple

pie that the cook pressed upon them. The inn was still empty, and she was afraid her baking would go to waste.

"I've heard the story of The Breaking," Lord Randolph said, taking a forkful of the pie. "But The Prophecy? Now that is something completely new to me."

"It's new to me as well," Karoel added, dishing out some of the pie for himself.

"The signs all point to a time where the world will be at serious risk again," the wizard said quietly.

"You keep talking about the signs," Karoel asked. "What do you mean signs? I thought prophecy was all riddles, and its interpretation was just guessing at what these nonsensical writings meant."

"Prophecy Scholars are very scarce these days, I am afraid," Rendil admitted, "but I assure you, prophecy is not nonsense. It can be hard to understand and difficult to interpret, but it is very real. In this case, The Prophecy contains many possible paths. Some lead to ruin, and some to salvation. The key is to follow the right path."

"You still did not answer my earlier question about how you knew that Karoel and I would be here," Randi asked again.

"I did not know. The Prophecy told me I needed to be here to stay on the right path," Rendil replied, lighting his pipe that was now quite cold.

"How can prophecy be that specific?" Karoel questioned.

"There are some things that prophecy will make very clear, and others that may never be fully understood," he said by way of explanation. "Though I did not interpret the path in The Prophecy that put me here right now, it was very clear to the one who did, that I needed to be here to be able to influence the marriage of King Leondis—so here I am."

"Now about that," Randi said, ignoring prophecy for a moment. "I have promised not to choose a wife for the King, but to let him choose from the most qualified ladies in the Kingdom. I have quite a list now, and if you wish to add one to the mix, she will have to pass my criteria."

"I assure you, Lord Randolph," the wizard said calmly, "the woman I have in mind IS the woman the King will marry. All you need to do is to make sure they get a chance to meet—nothing more."

"How can you be so certain?" Karoel asked.

"Prophecy and fate, my friends. Some things are predetermined, and there is nothing anyone can do to change them once the correct path is chosen. We are still on that path, at least for now."

Six

When Bandefin returned to the home of the Dwarves, deep in the Northern Sikyu Mountains, his three sons greeted him. Beorn was the eldest, nearly fifty-eight now, and ready to start developing his own skills in support of the Clans.

His youngest boys, Volin and Jadon, were forty-seven and thirty-seven, just barely old enough to leave their mother's side. Diagora was the love of his life, and Bandefin would do anything she asked. She never raised her voice with the boys. She kept a clean house and was active in the community of the last living Dwarves.

"Welcome home, my husband." Diagora greeted Bandefin with a hug and kiss. Dwarf women were nearly indistinguishable from Dwarf men—unless of course you were a Dwarf—and often sported much nicer beards than their husbands. A man who had a wife with a great beard was proud indeed.

"I plan to take the boys out into the valley later today," he announced. "The Groundpounders have cornered a small herd of elk in the box canyon and plan to capture a few of them. I want the boys to take part in the effort."

"Whatever for?" Diagora questioned. "We are not herders or breeders. The Gemformers are made to craft exquisite treasures from the raw stones that come out of the earth. That is what these boys were born to do, and that is what they will do."

Bandefin was a Gemformer in name only. His father's family was Gemformers, and he was to follow in their footsteps as the leader of the Clan. He, however, had no skill at cutting raw stones into the multi-faceted gems that marked the Clan. He could breed animals of any species and draw out their best characteristics, but alas, he was not of the right Clan to be a breeder.

"You know the old Clan names are no more than that these days," he said gently to his wife. "Most of the Clans no longer have the skills that their name implies. All are still required to pitch in wherever necessary."

"Nonsense," she replied as she moved the stew off the fire and set it on the table. "Sit now and have some lunch. You can tell us about your travels after the meal. We will have no more talk of Clan names today."

When his wife ended a discussion, Bandefin knew that it was really over—at least for now.

"Clean up, boys, it's time for lunch," he announced.

The family gathered around a low table and shared the mid-day meal. Though Bandefin had been out in the world for just over a month, the talk at the table was not of his travels, but instead was dominated by his boys telling of their activities of the last few weeks. Bandefin's time to tell his tale would be later, after the evening meal, as the family enjoyed some time together sitting in the summer sun on one of the many terraces that lined the western-facing walls of the valley.

The Dwarves lived in total isolation, deep in the Northern Sikyu Mountains. These mountains divided the world of the Aren from the Northern Wastes. Their ruggedness also provided the perfect place for the now reclusive Dwarves to live their lives completely removed from the outside world. The cavern complex they occupied was once a Goblin enclave. That was before The Breaking, and all sign of habitation by the fox-faced creatures had been erased by centuries of excavation and expansion by the Dwarves.

These caverns did not have the intricate carvings and decorations of historical Dwarf strongholds. The Dwarves who escaped the Great War were sent north in secret by King Silverbeard. It was a last-ditch effort to save the Dwarves as a species, as it appeared the world would be overrun by darkness at the end of the First Age.

Though the Dark Wizard was banished and his armies destroyed, the entire population of Dwarves from the Southern Rilehorn Mountains was wiped out in the final battle. The only Dwarves left in the world were now living in these Northern Mountains. Dwarves reproduced very slowly, and though their long lives made them seem immortal to humans, they were not. They were also unable to bear more than two or three children in their long lives.

Bandefin and Diagora were blessed indeed to have three sons born so close together.

"Father," Jadon asked after they finished the noon meal, "can we go out and practice weapons? We have no other classes for the next few days. While you were gone, I fashioned several new throwing axes."

"Why no classes for the next few days?" Bandefin asked.

"Besides the capture of the elk," Beorn replied, "the miners opened up a new high-grade vein of emerald last week, and Orin has decreed that all able-bodied adults join in the search."

"Then how are we exempted from helping?" Bandefin asked his oldest son.

"I should have said all but the Gemformers," Beorn answered, a little bit depressed. "He says that if they find the right raw stones, that we will have the hardest job of all, and that we must be rested."

The Gemformer Clan was not large, but there were several decent gemologists in the family. Bandefin's oldest cousin Hearn was among them. Though his results were far shy of what their ancestors could achieve, he was considered the most talented living Gemformer. Should they find the mythical stone that Orin was seeking, it would be up to him to craft the resulting gem.

"Orin really thinks this one might be the one, huh?" Bandefin said a little sarcastically.

"He is fairly certain, Father," Beorn replied. "But you know, he was fairly certain the last two times as well."

The raw stone that the Dwarves were constantly searching for was an earth-stone that would rival the mighty Earlach Stone of the Elves—the heart of the fabled Triadine. The Earlach Stone was crafted by the Dwarves, but it was with the direct assistance of the Nordae-Grandia, whom many considered Gods. The Dwarves worshipped the Goddess, but they did honor the ancient ones for their part in creating the Triadine. Orin was sure that the Dwarves would be able to locate another gem-quality earth-stone and be able to create a talisman of equal power. They would harness the earth magic through this stone and use it to keep the Dwarves safe for all time. This was Orin Cavernmaster's obsession, and at times, it took precedence over nearly anything else the Dwarves were doing.

There was no King among the Dwarves, or even a single leader for the surviving Clans. There was a Council, which met when needed to deal with any major issues, but individual Clans controlled the day-to-day operations of Dwarven society. The nature of Dwarves meant they automatically did things for the betterment of all. Orin was responsible for managing the excavation and cavern construction projects, and was given a little leeway whenever a new vein of emerald, or earth-stones, was found.

"You say you forged a new throwing axe?" Bandefin asked his youngest son.

"Not just one, Father, but a dozen!"

"A dozen? How is that possible?"

"Jadon is very talented at the forge, Father," Volin explained. "He's been working there every time he gets a spare moment. Gorin Forgemaster says he can apprentice in a few years if you allow it."

Jadon looked hopefully at his father.

"We will see," Bandefin said. "You heard your mother earlier. She is adamant you boys will be working with gems."

"But we are horrible, Father," Volin protested. "And Jadon is the worst of all!"

"I know, and I said we will see," Bandefin said again. "It is several years before you will be expected to become apprentices. None of you are even sixty

yet."

"Beorn is nearly sixty," Volin replied.

"Nearly, but not yet. Don't try to grow up too soon." Bandefin loved his sons, and as with most Dwarf parents, he was very protective. "Come. Let's go outside and see how well you boys have learned to throw the small axe."

The boys ran off and gathered their weapons as Bandefin sat at the low table and thought about all he heard and saw on his trip to the outside world. If what he heard was correct, there may not be many years of peace left in the world. The Gaerwitch was certain the time was nearing when The Prophecy would be in play. The races would again need to come together to defeat the Darkness. The Wizard Rendil agreed with her, and had sworn Bandefin into service in a secret group charged with the protection of the as-yet to be born, Children of the Prophecy. No one knew exactly who these children would be, or when they would come into the world, but the survival of all depended on their safety.

The Guardians had their first few members, and Bandefin found himself right in the middle of it all. This was happening at a time when his people believed they were successful in their isolation and would never again become involved in the world of Elves and men.

How would Bandefin persuade his people to come out of isolation to aid the Elves and humans in the coming battle? The Dwarves felt that both races betrayed them, and since the disbanding of The Watcher's and the abandonment of the Keep where the races once observed the Dark Wizard Khollaran, there had been little or no contact with the outside world.

Seven

"When you did this, Darius, was there much pain?" Rozlynn questioned the Elven Hunter, her features showing her concern.

"Princess," he replied quietly, "what the Sorceress did to me does not even approach what she plans for you."

The two were sitting in the Bower House, a collection of rooms at the very top of one of the enormous trees that grew in the Elven city of Kalystra. The Princess loved to study her journals here, since very few people would bother her. The gentle swaying of the rooms, from the breezes coming off the lake, made this place very relaxing.

Rozlynn was preparing to undergo a procedure where her Elven features would be changed so that she appeared to be human. Darius went through a similar process decades ago when King Theinial decided to regularly send him out into the world of men to gather information—a spy for the Elves among men.

The magic the sorceress used on Darius was an ancient form of Wiccan magic that only slightly altered his appearance. He lost most of the points on his ears, his high cheekbones were eased a little, and he was able to bulk up more like a human instead of having the slender, lithe body typical of the Elves.

What the Princess would do now, however, was significantly more of a change than what the Elven Hunter went through. Although Darius' appearance would fool the casual observer, he was still obviously an Elf to anyone really paying attention. Since most humans did not believe that Elves even existed—thanks in large part to the Church—this made hiding among humans not really all that difficult. Rozlynn was to undergo changes that would need to pass the closest of scrutiny by her future human husband.

"Will you stay here with me through it all?" she asked the Elven Hunter. Her eyes were slightly misting, and though she would not admit that Darius was in love with her, she did know he was loyal and would do anything she asked.

"There is nowhere else I would be, Princess," he replied, slightly bowing his head.

The Bower House rocked with a motion counter to its swaying from the wind, and this announced the arrival of Drianna.

"I will never understand why you choose to stay up here in the top of this blasted tree!" she proclaimed as she entered the sitting room. "I almost did not come all the way up!"

The sorceress complained every time she made the trip into the treetops, and both Darius and Rozlynn knew this time her complaint was as much to make things seem normal, as it was to express her displeasure.

"Thank you for humoring me and coming up here, Drianna," Rozlynn replied. "Are you ready to proceed with the change?"

"I am ready, Princess," the sorceress said, while taking a seat next to her. "Are you ready?"

Rozlynn looked at Darius standing only a step away and held out her hand for him to hold. She looked over at Drianna. "I will never be ready, but it is time."

Drianna nodded her head and removed a small pouch from her robe. She knelt on the floor and poured out a white powder, spreading it into a circle in front of her. Inside the dusting of powder, she began to draw sigils of power, which she had learned from the Wizard Posh. These were to amplify the Wiccan magic and bind it to the Princess. She drew the runes carefully, having practiced them for weeks. Each one must be perfect. In some places, they overlapped one another to form more complex structures.

At one point, she wiped her hand through the powder, cursed in a language that Darius did not recognize, and dusted the surface again. She started over, drawing one rune after another until finally she was satisfied.

"You must stand in the center of the runes, Princess," she announced. "Step in carefully, and do not disturb the drawings."

"How am I supposed to do that?" she demanded.

"It is a critical part of the process, Roz," she said, using her familiar name for the Princess. "You must step into the center of the drawing and not break any of the runes."

Princess Rozlynn removed her slippers and stood before the circle. She lightly stepped into the center of the drawings on the floor.

"Okay, I'm here."

Drianna turned to the Elven Hunter. "It is time for you to leave us."

"No!" Rozlynn insisted. "Darius will stay." She held out her hand again for him to hold, and he stepped right up to the edge of the circle to take her hand in his.

"I'm not sure this will work, Princess," the sorceress stated her concern. "The Wizard said nothing about having someone hold your hand."

"It must work, Sorceress," she replied, "as I will have Darius by my side through this."

"Very well. It will be as you say."

The breeze seemed to stop blowing as the sorceress began singing softly. The room darkened around the three occupants, as Darius recognized the beginning of the Wiccan spell that Drianna used on him years before. He squeezed the Princess' hand, and she returned the gesture, though she did not take her eyes off the sorceress.

"Keep your feet perfectly still now," Drianna warned. Her song increased in volume and tempo. The words were coming fast and in a language foreign to the Elves. The familiar Wiccan spell forms were now gone, and in their place was a harsh sounding, more powerful form of magic. Waves of energy seemed to pulse upward from the runes in the floor. They started to glow, first light blue, then with tinges of red. They turned orange and yellow, and finally the intensity of the runes was too much to discern any color.

Rozlynn shuddered and squeezed Darius' hand with enough force to cause the Hunter to wince. He held steady. She started to twist in place though her feet were affixed firmly to the floor.

"Don't move your feet!" Drianna warned.

"Arghhhhh!" the Princess finally screamed. She bent over double and released Darius' hand, grasping both sides of her head in pain.

"Stay back!" Drianna warned Darius. "Do NOT touch her now."

The Elven Hunter froze in place, ready to assist his Princess at the first sign of need.

"Arghhhhh!" she screamed again, holding her hands to her face. Tears poured from her eyes and wet her fingers, and still she held her face tightly and did not move her feet.

"It's almost over!" Drianna yelled. "Hang on!"

"Arghhhhh!" she screamed once more, this time falling backward out of the circle. Darius caught her and eased her onto the bed, where she sobbed into the coverlet as she curled into a ball in obvious pain.

"Princess?" he asked, bending down to try to look into her face.

"Please, Darius," Drianna said, taking his arm, "don't push her. It's over now, and she must rest."

Drianna stepped between Darius and Rozlynn, forcing him back. She laid her hands on the Princess' and started to sing softly. Soon, Rozlynn's breathing came more easily and her body relaxed. Drianna covered her up with the silk bedding and pulled away from the bed.

"She will sleep now," Drianna said, showing significant signs of exhaustion herself. As she stumbled a little, she asked, "How am I supposed to climb down from here?"

"Come, Drianna"—Darius took her by the arm—"Rest in the next room until you are strong enough to descend."

"I think I will just sit on the edge of the bed in the next room for a bit," the sorceress said quietly. "I am a little tired."

Drianna collapsed onto the bed and immediately fell into a deep sleep. Darius returned to the Princess and pulled up a chair as close to her bed as he was able. He would sit here until she woke.

The love of his life was now on a path that would take her away from him, forever.

Eight

"Enough already!" King Leondis nearly pushed his butler back into the wardrobe, as the man was showing the King yet another set of clothes for him to approve. Leondis needed something stunning to wear at the Royal Ball being held tonight in the castle.

"Your Majesty," the patient servant quietly insisted. "You must look your best for the ball."

"And why is that, exactly?" the King barked. "I am the one choosing a bride; the bride is not choosing me!"

"Leondis, my King." Lord Randolph stood in the doorway to the King's private chambers, hardly able to contain himself at his friend's discomfort. "There will be many ladies from the Kingdom here tonight, and all will be thrilled to see you in whatever you wear."

"You see, man!" Leondis nearly shouted at his butler. "I do not need these fancy trappings at all!"

"But, Your Majesty should look the part," Randolph continued, "and since these ladies will be dressed in their finest, you would not want to look the pauper next to them, I am sure."

Randolph smiled but Leondis did not see any humor in the situation.

"Oh, get out of here, Randolph, before I exile you to the Broken Isles!"

"At once, Your Majesty." Lord Randolph bowed deeply and backed his way out of the doorway.

"Wait a minute!" the King ordered. "Stay and help me choose something to wear!"

"As you wish, Majesty." Randolph smiled even broader, as he stepped all the way into the room. "I think that blue outfit on the bed is splendid."

"The blue it is then!" Leondis agreed. "Now that wasn't so hard." Looking at his butler, he added, "Why couldn't you have just said that?"

Randolph burst into laughter. "I will leave you two to figure out how to get dressed, and then get down to the ball within the hour. The guests have actually all arrived and are anxiously awaiting your entrance, Your Majesty."

* * *

When King Leondis burst into the Royal Ballroom, the sheer number of people shocked him. Though he had attended hundreds of events in this grand hall when his father was King, none of them compared to the magnitude of this one.

"Is everyone in the Kingdom now jammed into my ballroom?" he demanded of Minister Nolan, who was standing stoically by the entrance.

"No, Your Majesty," the minister replied, nonplussed, his features showing nothing out of the ordinary. "These would be only the ladies on Lord Randolph's list, along with their parents or guardians. There are a few servants here as well from the more affluent households. I could not expect them to be here without —"

"Oh, never mind, Nolan. Where is Randolph?"

"He is standing by the doors to the garden, Your Majesty, with one of his guests."

The King nearly stormed across the ballroom on a direct heading to Randolph. He was standing with a man that Leondis should know, but one he could not quite name. Several fathers in the room attempted to intercept him and present their daughters, but the King was set on his target.

"Randolf!" Leondis yelled when he was halfway there. The room quieted as those assembled realized the King had entered, though the musicians continued to play on the small stage opposite the elevated throne in the center of the room.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Lord Randolph replied, looking only slightly amused.

"You call this blue outfit suitable for a King?" He spun around, and the short tail on his surcoat flapped like the wings of some great shorebird.

"I assure you, Majesty," he replied. "That style is all the rage in the Southern Free Cities. The ladies will adore your fashion sense."

"Ugh!" Leondis grunted. He grabbed a mug of ale from the tray being balanced by a nearby servant and nearly drained it in one pass. "Well, let's get on with this then."

"My King," Lord Randolph said formally. "I have a program all arranged, and it starts with a receiving line where you will greet your guests, then with dinner, and afterward, some light dancing so you may get to know some of the ladies a little better before the evening ends. This way, Sire."

Leondis allowed Randi to lead him to the head of the receiving line. The man with Randolph did not follow but stayed by the garden entrance, seemingly uninterested in the proceedings.

The ladies and their patrons passed by the King one by one, making introductions. By the time the line was pared down by half, Leondis was clearly bored and no longer wanted anything to do with this event.

"Must we continue, Randolph?" He nearly begged his matchmaker to end the evening early.

"Yes, we must, Your Highness. These are the most eligible ladies in the Kingdom, and you must spend some time getting to know them so you may choose a future Queen."

"Can't you just pick one for me and get it over with?" the exasperated King asked, as he accepted the dainty hand of a sweet maiden who appeared to be ready to swoon right in front of the King.

"We agreed that you would choose your own Queen, Sire. My task was to assemble the eligible maidens who best fit the role, and you would take it from there."

"Yes, but I expected a small handful of women, not an entire room full of them! I need to step out for some air."

He dropped the hand of the maiden before him, without so much as looking at her, and strode to the doors to the garden. The man who was standing with Randolph earlier was nowhere to be seen, but a servant at the door was holding a tray of ale. Leondis scooped a mug off the tray on his way past.

"Duke Haren," the King said to a man standing just outside the doors. "Are you here to press your daughter on me as well?"

"Good evening, Your Highness," the Duke greeted the King, with a twinkle in his eye. "As much as I think my daughter would make a wonderful Queen, alas, she is only six weeks of age, and that rascal Lord Randolph did not feel she qualified to be part of your ball this evening."

It took Leondis a moment before he realized that the Duke was joking, but when he did, his response was quite genuine. "I believe, Duke, you may be the only noble in the Kingdom that is not actively trying to get me to marry his daughter, at six weeks of age or not!"

The two men laughed and turned their backs on the doors, gazing out across the grand gardens. They were still in full bloom, though the season was late, thanks in large part to the underground hot springs that were piped beneath the flowering beds and fruiting trees.

"I do enjoy your garden, Your Majesty," Duke Haren said quietly. "Your Father's architect was quite brilliant to situate the castle here and use the natural heat from the earth not just to warm the castle and create the magnificent city baths, but to also create this enchanting garden. I only wish my wife were here with me to enjoy it."

"Where is that lovely bride of yours, Duke?" Leondis asked in earnest.

"She is not fully recovered after the birth of our daughter, I am afraid. My physician has yet to pronounce her fit to travel. She insisted that I attend the

selection of your Queen, however, and when she insists, well, you will learn someday who runs the castle between man and wife."

"I am afraid you are right there," Leondis laughed, taking a deep pull on his ale. "My good friend Randolph says that I need a woman to keep me in line and to run my Kingdom when I'm too busy to pay attention!"

"A Queen is what the Kingdom needs, Your Majesty, if you will excuse my boldness. A Queen and an Heir or two will ease the minds of the people. Should any King die without an Heir, his Kingdom would be thrown into chaos and possibly be open for attack from outside."

"You mean from the Free Cities?" Leondis asked.

"I understand from my agents that Al-Ashal has grown significantly in the last decade, and that they are beginning to build quite an army. They say it is simply for defense against the savages from the deep south across the Great Desert. With a sizable army, they may set their sights north, given the right circumstances."

"How would you like to move to Solenta and be my military advisor, Duke Haren?"

"Ha, now that would be quite difficult, I am afraid, Your Majesty. You see, my wife has made it very clear to me that my role in the Kingdom is as Steward of Northcastle. There I will stay until I draw my last breath. You remember what I said about who is really in charge!"

"Indeed, Duke, indeed."

"Besides, Your Majesty," the Duke continued, "when your father named me Duke of Lands End, I gladly accepted the role alongside my duty as steward. The Haren family will honor both commitments against the day that the King may choose to move the capital back to the North."

"I do not believe that day will ever come, Duke," Leondis replied, "however the Crown respects and appreciates your loyalty."

The men continued their small talk, while Minister Nolan stood patiently in the doorway, ready to resume the events of the evening, which he and Lord Randolph had so carefully orchestrated.

"Your Majesty. Please excuse the interruption," a man spoke from the shadows just beyond the light streaming through the doors.

"Yes?" Leondis replied, not afraid of the voice in his garden, but not sure to whom he was speaking.

"Forgive me, Sire, but may I introduce to you the Lady Rozlynn."

The man stepped forward into full view. He was nondescript in simple though presentable clothing and wore a well groomed but long beard. On his

arm was a golden-haired maiden with the most enchanting set of almond-shaped, blue-green eyes the King had ever seen.

"My Lady," Leondis stepped forward, then gently cradled Rozlynn's offered hand in his own. For some reason, he felt a need to defer to this woman. He found himself bowing his head in a way that was not really befitting a King.

"Your Majesty," Rozlynn replied sweetly, stepping close to the King and holding his gaze as he lifted his head.

Rozlynn wore a simple blue gown, not over revealing and quite complimentary to her shapely figure. Her hair was loose and hung nearly to her waist, practically glowing in the flickering light of the torches. The two were now so close that no light could be seen between them. There was nothing obscene or rude about the way they were standing, but the closeness clearly made Minister Nolan uncomfortable.

"Ahem," the Minister interrupted. "My King, you really must return to the receiving line."

Leondis turned his head and looked over at the Minister before giving his attention back to Rozlynn.

"I really must be going inside, Lady Rozlynn," he apologized. "Will you be joining the ladies at the ball?"

"I am afraid not, Your Majesty," Rozlynn replied, slightly lowering her eyes. "You see, I am not here for the Choosing. I wished only for a chance to meet Your Majesty, before you decided on the woman who will share your life forever."

"Are you already married? Are you betrothed? For what possible reason would you not be part of the Choosing?"

"Your Majesty?" Minister Nolan was now by his side, insisting that he return to the ball.

Leondis turned from Rozlynn to address his minister, as the Lady pulled back and walked away into the darkness of the garden.

"Lady?" The King called after her. She did not stop and with her bearded companion rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

"Your Highness?" Randolph was now standing in the doorway calling to his King. "You really must return to the receiving line."

Leondis turned back toward the doors, glanced once more behind him into the now vacant garden, sighed, and started toward the noise and mass of humanity inside.

"Duke Haren?" The King stopped for a moment to speak to the Duke who was observing it all. "Please see that the Lady Rozlynn does not leave before I get a chance to see her again."

"As you wish, Sire," the Duke replied, bowing slightly to his monarch.

* * *

"What were you thinking?" Drianna was furious with Princess Rozlynn, as she met with Rendil and the Princess in one of the private recesses in the garden.

"You did not speak the words!"

"Easy, Drianna," Rendil said soothingly, before the Princess had a chance to answer. "I'm sure there is a very good explanation for why Rozlynn did not set the spell in motion." He turned to the Elven Princess and let his eyes ask the question.

"I simply did not think it was the right thing to do," Rozlynn replied quietly. "I ... well, I think the King should have a chance to get to know me first, before, well, before—"

"The time for trepidation is long past, Roz!" Drianna was not happy at the current situation. "What we have done, the sacrifices that both of us have made, you cannot possibly believe we are doing the wrong thing!"

Rozlynn stood quietly, knowing that what the sorceress sacrificed was unknown to Rendil. The changes in Rozlynn were physically evident, but the changes in Drianna were only recognizable by those who knew her intimately.

"I still believe we are making the right choice," Rozlynn replied. "But it wasn't the right time."

"Lady Rozlynn?" Duke Haren stepped around the corner and stopped the sorceress from another rant. "May I have a word with you? I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Please, it is no problem. Forgive me, but I don't know who you are, sir," Rozlynn replied smoothly.

Looking more than a little surprised, the Duke made an elegant bow and introduced himself. Rendil smiled, as Duke Haren was well known throughout the Kingdom and would be chagrined to meet a Lady who professed not to know him at all.

"I am pleased to meet you, Duke Haren," Rozlynn replied. "Let me introduce my dear friend Drianna, and my advisor Rendil."

"I am pleased to meet you, Lady Drianna. I know the Wizard Rendil," Haren replied, turning momentarily to the wizard. "The last time I saw him, he did not appear as he does tonight." Rendil nodded to Haren, though he was surprised the Duke recognized him. Most would not see the wizard in the man who appeared here tonight.

"What might I do for you, Duke Haren?" Rozlynn gave him her full attention.

"The King wishes to see you again later, before you leave. He asked me to make sure that happens, and as my monarch, his wish is my command. I hope you are not planning on leaving any time soon. The ball will go on for several more hours, I'm afraid."

Rozlynn turned to Drianna with a knowing look on her face before replying to the Duke.

"I was not certain what I was going to do before your arrival, but now that you have delivered this message from the King, I imagine I will be staying until after the ball."

"Splendid!" The Duke was genuinely pleased. "May I accompany you into the ballroom then? The music will be quite entertaining, and there is food from every part of the Kingdom for our enjoyment."

Without looking at her companions, Rozlynn answered easily. "I am afraid not, Duke Haren." The Duke was completely taken aback. "My companions and I will simply spend the time here in this remarkable garden until such time as the King wishes to speak with me again. If you could arrange for light refreshments to be sent out, that would be much appreciated."

Surprised by her answer, but composed again almost immediately, Duke Haren bowed to the Lady before replying.

"I will see to it at once, Lady Rozlynn. Please do enjoy the gardens. They are quite spectacular. I expect you to honor your word and remain until such time as the King may see you again. If he should change his mind before the evening ends, I will personally let you know."

"Thank you, Duke Haren." Rozlynn stepped forward and took the Duke's hands between her own. "You are more than kind."

Holding his gaze for a little longer than he liked, Rozlynn released his hands and let him bow his way out of the small alcove in the garden.

"What was that all about?" Drianna inquired.

"Just acting the part of a Queen," Rozlynn replied.

"You are not Queen yet," Rendil reminded her.

"That is just a formality."

"We will stay until the King comes back to see you?" Drianna confirmed.

"No, we will not," Rozlynn stated.

"But you gave your word."

"No, I said, 'I imagine I will be staying.' I don't believe that was any sort of commitment. Come, we must be off."

"Can't we at least stay for something to eat?" the always hungry wizard pleaded.

Nine

"I wish to see the Lady again, Randolph." King Leondis and Lord Randolph were eating a quiet breakfast together in a small dining room off the Central Throne Room.

"Which Lady is that?"

"You know the one. The Lady Rozlynn." The King wasn't sure if his friend was toying with him or not. "Why did she think she was not invited to the ball?"

"She wasn't," Randolph replied, stabbing another slice of smoked ham before continuing. "The Lady Rozlynn has no noble background that I can determine. She is from a small village on the northeastern end of Lake Estonan and has nothing to offer the Kingdom."

"You know, she left the castle before I could meet her a second time," Leondis said absently. "I instructed Duke Haren to make sure she did not leave, but somehow she managed to slip by the Duke, get past my own guards, and return to her inn in the city before the ball ended. I expected to take her, Randolph. I expected her to be in my bed this morning. I did not expect to be sleeping alone."

"You wish only to bed the woman?" Randolph questioned. "That is your reason for wanting to see her again last night?"

"Yes, I mean no, I mean ... I don't know what I mean," the King stammered. "Damn it, man, she refused to come when I sent a servant to bring her last night!"

"You sent a servant after the Lady Rozlynn?"

"Yes," Leondis replied. "When she was absent from the garden, I had Nolan find out where she was staying, and I sent a servant to fetch her to me. She refused!"

"And can you blame her? What were you thinking, Leondis?"

"Watch your tone, Lord Randolph."

"Forgive me, my King." Randolph hated it when his old friend used his position to bully him. "I only meant that the Lady could not be expected to answer your call in the middle of the night, now could she? Would a future Queen of the Realm do that? Would she come running like a common whore?"

"Perhaps you are right," the King replied. "I'm sorry, old friend. I am simply worn out from the night's activities, and not in a good way."

"None of the Ladies last night captured your interest, Your Majesty?"

"Only the Lady Rozlynn. I really would like to see her again. Can you arrange that, Randolph?"

"I will do my best, Sire."

"Good! Dinner tonight in my private dining room with the Lady will be acceptable. Have Nolan arrange the details."

* * *

"And how do you expect to see the King now?" Drianna asked Princess Rozlynn, as the two of them sipped tea on the terrace of their second-story room at the River Delta Inn.

"He will send for me," she replied, more certain than she felt.

"Sending that servant away last night will not sit well with the King," Drianna stated coolly.

"You would rather I jump at his call and leap into his bed?"

"You forget why we are here?" the sorceress questioned.

"Of course not," Rozlynn snapped in reply. "However, you act like I have never had any dealings with men."

"Rozlynn, you do not have to win this man. You only have to touch him and speak the words to initiate the spell, and then he will be yours forever. Do you forget what is at stake?"

"Please, just let me do this my way. If it comes down to having to use the magic to get the King to notice me, believe me, I will. I know better than anyone what is at stake here."

"I'm sorry, Roz." Drianna was still quite impatient, but she knew how stubborn the Princess could be. "I do not want to lose this chance. If the King should name another woman as his future Queen—"

"He will not," Rozlynn assured her, "at least not yet."

"You ladies need not be overly concerned about the King," Rendil interrupted as he walked onto the terrace. "It seems he was quite taken with the Lady Rozlynn after all. This arrived by Royal Courier just now." He held out a scroll showing the broken seal of the King.

"Read it aloud, Wizard," Drianna ordered.

The scroll's parchment was exquisite, and the writing was clear and bold.

"To the Lady Rozlynn, from his Royal Majesty, King Leondis Tarbane,

Your attendance has been requested this evening for a private dinner with the King in his personal dining room.

The attire will be formal, and you are permitted to bring one attendant with you.

Dinner will begin promptly one hour after sundown. Please be punctual.

With regards,

Minister Nolan Milkwatt, for His Royal Majesty, King Leondis Tarbane, First of his Name, Long May He Reign."

"Well, that is certainly an unexpected twist," Drianna replied. "We now have another chance."

"Not unexpected to me," Rendil stated.

"Nor to me," Rozlynn added. "Did the courier wait for a reply?"

"I told him to wait," the wizard responded. "I assume you will accept."

Rozlynn looked first to Rendil, then to Drianna before answering.

"Tell the Minister that I will not be attending dinner with the King tonight," she finally said.

"What?" Drianna practically leapt from her chair. "Of course, you will! You cannot turn down a request like this from the King."

"Of course, I can, and I will. If Leondis wishes to have me join him for dinner, he will have to do more than simply tell his minister to send me an invitation and request that I am *punctual*. Wizard, if you will write a response from me to the Minister, please."

* * *

Rendil chuckled quietly as he walked from the terrace with the letter to the minister. It was written on the back of the scroll from the King, which inferred the invitation was not all that interesting to the Lady.

He would love to be a fly on the wall when Leondis was told the Lady Rozlynn turned him down for dinner, and sent him a counter-proposal instead.

* * *

"She what?" Lord Randolph was in Minister Nolan's office when the reply from Lady Rozlynn arrived.

"The Lady replied that she is unavailable tonight and must decline the dinner invitation from the King."

Randolf knew of course that the Lady was the handpicked maiden that Rendil brought to meet the King. He thought of what the wizard said about fate and prophecy, but had no idea what it all meant. If Rendil intended for this woman to marry the King, why would he keep her from actually spending time with Leondis? Didn't he know that the King had no patience for these games?

"Does the Lady say anything else?" Randolph asked the minister.

"She does. She suggests perhaps the King might consider a ride on horseback in the country on this coming seventh-day, perhaps sometime in the early afternoon."

"A ride in the country?"

"Yes, Lord Randolph."

Randolf was even more confused than before.

"She means to ride a horse, with the King, in the countryside?"

"That's what it says, my Lord."

"Very well. I will take the message to the King. You begin the arrangements, Nolan. The entourage should be small. In fact, it would be best if it included myself, several King's Elite, and no one else. No courtiers need to know this is going to happen. We do not want this to turn into a spectacle. Is that understood?"

"Do you believe the King will agree to this ride in the country then?" The minister was quite surprised to hear this from Randolph.

"He will agree," was all that Randolph said. As he turned and left the room, trying to figure out how he was to break this news to the King, he muttered to himself, "Fate and prophecy."

Ten

For the past three weeks, the King and a small group of companions spent seventh-day afternoons riding in the countryside with the Lady Rozlynn, her close friend Drianna, and occasionally a man named Darius from Rozlynn's village who was introduced to Lord Randolph as Rozlynn's bodyguard. Why a small village girl from Lake Estonan would need a bodyguard did not come up in conversation, but this woman was increasingly mysterious to the King.

"Lord Martin, good of you to come," Randolph greeted the King's spymaster. They were meeting in a small food stall selling soup and fresh bread, at a busy corner in the central market in Solenta.

"I came as soon as I received your message, Lord Randolph, but I'm afraid I have nothing interesting to report."

Randolph had asked Lord Martin to activate his network of informants and find out anything he could about the mysterious Lady Rozlynn. The King was smitten, this much was obvious, but the Lady was nothing like any woman Randolph had ever met. She was sophisticated, educated, well-traveled and occasionally seemed much older than the mere thirty-three years she claimed. The King just passed his own thirty-fourth birthday, and he found the slightly younger Lady Rozlynn the perfect companion.

"She cannot just have appeared from nowhere," Randolph said in exasperation. "She must have a history. Someone must know about her. She is not a simple country girl brought up in the back of a milking parlor!"

"Please, Lord Randolph"—Martin reached out a hand to quiet the man—"I wish no attention drawn to this *chance* meeting of two of the King's advisors."

"I'm sorry, but I am concerned about the King."

"The Lady seems perfectly charming to me," Lord Martin replied, "though her companion Drianna is something else altogether."

"Have you found out anything about her?"

"She is from Caergana as expected, on the northeastern end of Lake Estonan. Many villagers from the area believe she is a witch," Martin said without emotion.

"That she's a what?" Lord Randolph gasped.

"You know, one of those Wiccan healers who use chants and songs or spells to heal minor ailments," Martin replied smiling. "I've not been able to attribute anything more serious to the woman, but the superstitions of the lake people run high. She is a midwife and a minor healer from what I can tell, nothing more."

"That damn Wizard," Randolph said beneath his breath.

"The what?" Martin asked.

"The Wizard Rendil introduced the Lady Rozlynn to the King, and now I cannot find him anywhere."

"Typical," Martin replied, sampling the soup before him on the small table. "I've never been able to figure that one out. He seems harmless enough most of the time, but I don't like him around the King."

"Do you miss the days when there was a mage as advisor to the King?"

"Not since King Adon was still in Northcastle have we had a mage in the Royal Court. With the proclamation from the Church against all things magical or fanciful, I cannot see that changing any time soon. But yes, I do miss having a mage around for times like these."

"Anything else you can clarify for me?" Randolph was going to walk away from this meeting with nothing.

"Only the bodyguard, the man Darius," Martin said, dipping a chunk of bread into the hearty soup. "He goes by another name as well."

"Really?"

"He has been known by more than one of my agents as a trader named Brewster. I believe he does some level of intelligence gathering, but I've never known for whom. Now that I see him with the Lady Rozlynn, it does lend credence to your concerns that maybe she is more than what she seems."

"Interesting," Randolph replied pensively. "Perhaps I will arrange to spend a little more time with this man, Darius, and see what I can discover."

"You planning on entering my service, Lord Randolph?" the spymaster asked, smiling.

"Hardly," Randolph replied, laughing. "I have already sent Darius an invitation to join me on a hunt, and I will simply insist that he do so, that I may get to know him better."

"Be careful." Lord Martin set down his spoon and took the full measure of Lord Randolph. "If he is more than just a bodyguard for the Lady, he may have instructions to deal with anyone he might see standing in the way of a union between the Lady and the King. I would hate to see you have a hunting accident."

"Noted, with thanks," Randolph said quietly.

* * *

"Do we ride again today?" Darius asked the Lady Rozlynn, as he returned from an early morning walk through the lower section of the city. Rozlynn was dressed in a new split-legged riding skirt and a top that was a little more revealing than what she normally wore on these outings with the King. The weather was cooling off as fall progressed toward winter, and she would be covered with a smart riding jacket—but still, the woman was striking in appearance and Darius could not help but feel jealous.

"I will be riding with Leondis today, yes," Rozlynn replied, "however, I wish for you to return to Kalystra."

"What?" Darius was taken aback. "Why return now? Surely you still need my protection, you must—"

"No, Darius," the Princess replied. "I am no longer in need of your protection, and the number of questions arising about your duties—why I would need a bodyguard, what my background really is, are you more than a protector—well, they are starting to become awkward. I would like you to leave today."

Darius was crushed, but he knew this was coming eventually. "At once, Princess," the Elven Hunter replied, bowing his head to conceal the moisture forming in his eyes.

Walking quickly from the room, Darius nearly knocked Drianna over in the hallway.

"Easy, Darius," the sorceress warned. "You almost plowed right into me. I take it the Princess has released you from service."

"You knew this was coming?"

"Of course," Drianna replied. "I was the one who advised her to do so. Your attachment to the Princess is quite obvious to any but the most casual observer. It is time for you to go and for her to finish her commitment to the task at hand."

Darius was steaming, but he knew better than to challenge the sorceress. He said nothing and turned to enter his own room to pack his things.

* * *

"You say these ruins were once home to more than one hundred thousand people?" King Leondis asked the Lady Rozlynn, to be sure he heard correctly.

"Yes, nearly so," she replied. "The city was called Barren Tor and was one of the jewels of the Aren."

"Why that is larger than the population of my entire Kingdom!" Leondis exclaimed. "All in just this one city?"

"Yes, indeed, Your Majesty," she went on. "Barren Tor and its sister city Ramon Tor to the south, were of equal size and grandeur. In these two cities, nearly a quarter of a million people lived together. Elves were living side by side with Dwarves and humans and sharing in commerce, tradition, and culture in these shining examples of civilization."

"Elves and Dwarves living with humans, you say?" Leondis could not help but show his delight. "Why, Lady Rozlynn, I did not know you were such a story teller. Here I thought you were sharing history with me, and now I find your stories are only flights of fancy! Elves and Dwarves indeed! Ha, ha, ha."

"I assure you, Your Highness," she replied, her features maybe more stern than necessary. "Elves, Dwarves, and humans did indeed live in harmony in this region prior to the end of the First Age. That is not a flight of fancy, but is in fact history. I am quite—"

"My Lady," Drianna interrupted, nearly bumping Rozlynn from her horse as she rode between the King and the Princess. "You really must not spin these wild tales. Why, King Leondis will think you are daft!"

Leondis pulled his horse back to give the two ladies some room, laughing again at being so easily duped by the Lady into believing that there could have been so many people living in these old ruins, and that Elves and Dwarves could possibly have been among them. He pulled Lord Randolph aside, and they spoke quietly together.

"What are you doing!" Drianna demanded of Rozlynn. "You are not here to lecture the King on the history of Elves in the First Age. Focus on the task at hand, before you force me to take action myself!"

Rozlynn started to reply, but pulled up short and simply nodded her head. She straightened in the saddle and directed her stunning white gelding over to be next to the King.

"... and I do believe I will ask her tonight," Leondis was saying, as Randolph sat with his mouth agape.

"You will ask what of whom?" Rozlynn inquired.

"My dear Lady Rozlynn." Leondis smoothly turned toward the Lady and bowed his head slightly. "I have a boon to ask of you, and I hope you find my invitation pleasing."

"And what is that, Your Majesty?"

"I have arranged for a special dinner this evening in your honor," he began. "It will be with just a small group of special guests in the castle. Until today, you have rejected my every attempt to have you join me for dinner, but tonight, the dinner is in your honor, so there is no way you can turn me down. While we have been out riding, I had a gown sent to your inn, and I will send a coach to

collect you this evening at sundown. I have arranged for a number of special treats from all over the Kingdom, as well as wine from the Free Cities to accompany our meal."

"I would be delighted, Your Majesty," Rozlynn answered smoothly, as if she had never rejected his invitations in the past.

"Splendid!" Leondis nearly shouted his response. "Let us return from our little ride so that we may both prepare for the evening!"

The King turned his horse to the south, and without waiting to see if anyone followed, he spurred the animal on toward the castle. Several of the King's Elite guard scrambled to keep up.

"Lady Rozlynn." Lord Randolph stopped the Lady from immediately following the King. "May I have a word?"

"Why of course, Lord Randolph," she replied. Drianna sat her horse immediately beside Rozlynn, clearly staying to hear everything they said.

"Let me get right to the point, Lady Rozlynn," Randolph announced. "Please don't expect the King to make a decision on whom he will chose for a Queen, after just a few afternoons riding with him in the countryside."

"Why, Lord Randolph," Rozlynn replied unflustered, "I assure you that it is I who am judging the King, and whether he is worthy of being my husband, and not the other way around."

This completely sat Randolph back in his saddle, taking him totally off his guard.

"My Lady?"

"I witnessed the spectacle at the ball last month, Lord Randolph, where the King was fawned over by dozens of beautiful maidens, each of whom were more qualified than me to be Queen. If you recall, later that evening, he sent a servant to fetch me to his bed. Now honestly, is that a man any woman would wish to be her husband? I know that the King is not chaste; however, any man that I marry, King or not, will take no other to his bed as long as we are wed. Is your King capable of that level of commitment?"

Randolph was speechless for what seemed like several minutes, though in reality mere seconds passed in the flow of conversation.

"I honestly do not know, Lady Rozlynn," he said at last. "The King's history is one of, shall we say, an extreme appetite for experiencing the fairer sex."

"He is promiscuous," Rozlynn interrupted, "yes, I am aware of that fact, and it concerns me greatly."

"I am not certain he will be faithful to one woman in marriage," Randolph admitted, "and I am not even certain he would consider that a condition of marriage, to be perfectly honest."

"You ride on ahead and tell your King, that should he wish my hand in marriage, that will be one of the stipulations." Rozlynn sat tall in the saddle, making her appear even more stately than normal. Lord Randolph found himself deferring to her and agreeing with her concerns.

"I will pass along your message, Lady Rozlynn," he said at last. "I hope that it does not end your chances of becoming my Queen," he added suddenly. "I do believe that you would not only be good for Leondis, but for the Kingdom as well."

The Lady dipped her head slightly toward Randolph as he bowed deeply in return, turned his horse, and rode after his King.

"Now that went well," Rozlynn said to the stunned Drianna, who could say nothing in return.

Eleven

"Your coach has been waiting for more than an hour, Princess," Drianna said in exasperation. "We should be going."

"Just a little longer, Drianna," Rozlynn said, as she studied several more pages in her Prophecy Journal.

"Do you really think that's wise?" The sorceress was finding it very hard to stay composed.

"Wise in the ways of love, yes," Rozlynn answered without looking up.

The owner of the inn was once again standing outside the Lady's door, hesitating before knocking. He had been ordered upstairs by the King's Elite accompanying the carriage, so he dared not disobey.

Knock, knock, knock. "Lady Rozlynn, it's Larkin again," he spoke through the closed door. "I'm sorry, but the soldiers downstairs, they are insisting that—"

Rozlynn opened the door and stood just inside, her gown spread out well past the edges of the doorway. She had altered the dress slightly where the bodice was cut too low to suit her tastes, sewing a separate piece of cloth across the low-cut opening where her breasts would have been quite exposed. The look was still stunning, and the innkeeper stood speechless in the hall.

"We are ready now, Mr. Larkin," she said sweetly. "Please inform the coachman that we will be down momentarily."

With that, she closed the door on a stunned Larkin, who turned and nearly ran down the stairs to the common room to announce the Lady was coming.

Another quarter hour passed before Rozlynn and Drianna came through the common room and exited the inn, stepping lightly into the coach with the assistance of the stoic King's Elite.

"It should be interesting to see how Leondis reacts to our late arrival," Drianna said quietly as the coach pulled away.

"He will be more than pleased to see me, I assure you," Rozlynn said casually, though deep inside she too wondered how far she could push the man hiding inside the King.

* * *

"Do you think she changed her mind, Randolph?" King Leondis asked his old friend. The King nervously paced at the far end of the hall, absently sloshing wine over the edge of his silver goblet. An elderly servant stepped up and removed the drink from the King's hand, without protest from the King.

"She will come, Your Majesty," Lord Randolph replied, though not with total confidence.

"It is not a private dinner after all," Leondis was rambling, "but a dinner in her honor. The guests are all assembled to meet her and growing restless it seems."

"She will come, Sire. Just a little while longer. I am sure."

The Lords and Ladies assembled were those whom the King felt deserved to meet the woman that he would make his Queen. When Randolph informed Leondis that the Lady assumed he would stay completely faithful once they spoke their vows, the King was a little taken aback. He was going to marry this woman, and if he needed to promise faithfulness to do so, well, he could always break that promise later. He was the King after all.

The guests quietly spoke among themselves. Most of the conversations suggested that the Lady Rozlynn was not very courteous. What was she thinking? Leaving them all standing around waiting for her to arrive. The undertone in the room was that she must think very highly of herself to do this, and who did she think she was?

The King pulled a ring from his vest pocket, in a move he had repeated every few minutes for the last hour.

"Do you really think it wise to propose to the Lady tonight, Your Majesty?" Randolph asked him for the tenth time today.

"I do, Randolph," Leondis replied, looking absently at the ring before returning it to his pocket. "She completely captivates me, Randi. When I am not with her, I wish only to be by her side. She is smart, witty, and regal without being stuffy. She makes me laugh. She drives me crazy with her stories, but she tells them with such conviction that I almost believe them to be true. I've never met another like her, and I know I never will again. I must have her, and there is nothing anyone can say to stop me."

"And if she should say no, Your Majesty?" Randi asked quietly.

Leondis stopped pacing, and the look on his face turned to sheer panic.

"What do you mean, if she should say no?" he said quickly as he grabbed Randolph by both lapels. "You think she could say no?"

Lord Randolph gently eased the King's grasp from his surcoat and turned him away from the guests milling about the room before replying. "I think it's a possibility, Your Majesty, though not very likely."

"Why would she turn me down?" Leondis said, his eyes wide. "She cannot possibly—"

"The Lady Rozlynn, and her companion the Lady Drianna!" Minister Nolan announced, as the two ladies entered the room though the doors on the opposite end from where the King stood with Lord Randolph.

Leondis turned to face the woman he would make his Queen. As she swept into the room, all the air left his lungs and all thought fled his brain. He stood with his mouth hanging partly open, the last words he was to speak not forming on his lips.

"She is ... stunning," he managed to say, to no one in particular.

As Rozlynn entered the room, a broad smile on her face, the grumbling from the guests quickly faded. The blue-green gown the King sent her hugged her body and showed off her curves, before flowing out into a hooped skirt that only served to accent her figure. With her golden hair coiled in a bun on top of her head, and a simple green stone set in a gold chain around her neck, she looked the part of a Queen already.

To Randolph, she looked like she honestly belonged here as she moved from guest to guest, introducing herself and taking their hands in her own. Once she looked them in the eye and thanked each of them for coming to dinner, all of the earlier complaints seemed to simply vanish from the room. The Lady Rozlynn captivated them all within minutes.

"Your guests seem quite happy to meet the Lady," Randolph finally said to Leondis, who had not been able to move from his spot since Rozlynn entered the room.

"What? Ah yes, they do seem to be welcoming her easily, don't they. Randolph? Do you really think there is a chance she will say no?"

The King was clearly shaken by the early words from his friend, but after Rozlynn set down the condition to Randolph earlier in the day, he really felt she could say no, if asked.

"Perhaps tonight is not the right time to ask her, Your Majesty," Randolph offered. "You might want to just feel her out over dinner. Let her mingle awhile and meet your guests, then just, well, just see how things go during the evening."

"I ... I guess you're right." Leondis seemed to have lost much of his color. "I just never thought—"

"Come, Sire." Randolph laid a guiding hand on his shoulder. "Let us go down now and greet the Lady ourselves."

* * *

The King remembered nothing of the actual dinner. The Lady Rozlynn sat to his left, in the position his Queen would eventually occupy. The guests seemed to think this perfectly appropriate, as they nearly all accepted the Lady as the King's Consort. Talk around the room seemed to be on the timing of the upcoming Royal Wedding, though Rozlynn ignored this and tactfully changed the subject should anyone address this to her.

Lord Randolph was to the King's right, accompanied by the Lady Anne from Eagles Reach. This did not go unnoticed by Minister Nolan, who recorded most of what transpired in the castle in his private journal. The Lady Anne would be invited to other events where the Lord Randolph was to be in attendance.

After the meal, the musicians changed from background music to songs more appropriate for dancing. The guests patiently waited for the King and his Consort to dance the first dance, when Lord Randolph finally rose with the Lady Anne and kicked off the after-dinner events.

Leondis and Rozlynn were intent on each other for the next hour—deep in conversation and oblivious to what was happening around them. Drianna moved to a position near enough to hear the louder portions of their conversation, but not so near as to be intrusive.

"And I hear nothing about King Adon's Queen, your mother," Rozlynn was saying. "I also do not see a woman's hand in the decor within the castle, so tell me about her."

"My mother died before my father moved the capital to Solenta," Leondis replied. "She had complications in childbirth, losing two children before I was born, and another after. I would have been the third child, second son, and Heir to nothing if she had been a more robust woman. I really did not know my mother, nor was she an influence in my life. She died when I was still quite small."

"I am sorry to hear you did not know your mother," Rozlynn said earnestly, placing her hand on the King's arm. "The memories I have of my own mother are quite special and something I will always treasure."

"I think it is different for a woman and her mother," Leondis said, sitting up slightly in his chair. "A man needs only his father to teach him all he needs in life. A Prince has many teachers in Court, men and women both, and lacks for nothing should he not have a mother around."

"That cannot be, Your Majesty." Rozlynn pulled back her hand and smoothed the sleeve of her dress. "A mother's love cannot be matched by a maid or a teacher at Court. A mother's love is unique in the world, and anyone who grows up not knowing that love, suffers even if they know it not."

Leondis looked at Rozlynn with a slightly furrowed brow, but relaxed when he saw that she was not making sport of him, but truly feeling the loss that she was certain he felt.

"I assure you, Lady Rozlynn, I have suffered not for the love of a mother. My father was a deeply devoted man, who made sure that I wanted for nothing, including the care of women and a well-rounded education."

"Still, it somewhat explains your attitude toward women," Rozlynn interrupted, "and in turn, your attitude toward your future Queen."

"What do you mean?" he replied, nonplussed.

"Simply that you treat all women as property," Rozlynn said a little more loudly than she intended, "and that goes for your approach to selecting your Queen as well. You want only to own a Queen, and not to have a Queen of the Realm. Do you see your future Queen as an equal in power? Do you see her as an advisor in all things related to the Kingdom? Do you see her as someone whose trust and love you must earn, or simply one who will come at your beck-and-call, at any hour, to service your carnal needs?"

No one spoke to Leondis like this, not even a woman he was considering as his future Queen. The more Rozlynn spoke, the more red in the face the King became.

"You overstep your bounds, Lady Rozlynn," he said at last, controlling his temper, but just barely.

"Perhaps it is you who overestimate your own," she replied. Without waiting for leave from the King, she daintily dabbed the corner of her mouth with a silken napkin, pushed her chair back from the table, and announced to Drianna that it was time to go.

"Wait!" the King ordered.

"Thank you for the lovely dinner, Your Majesty." She bowed slightly to the King, ignoring the order. She turned and taking Drianna's arm in her own, walked calmly though quickly to the exit.

Minister Nolan looked to the King for guidance, who stood motionless on the dais behind his seat at the table. The musicians still played, though most of the guests no longer danced. Lord Randolph and the Lady Anne were still arm in arm; however, they too stopped the dance and simply stared after the Lady Rozlynn as she left the room.

* * *

"Would you mind explaining your behavior just now?" Drianna demanded of Rozlynn as they rode from the castle grounds in the ornate carriage.

"I would have thought that by now, you of all people would understand what it is I do," the Princess replied.

"Enlighten me, please. I see a woman who is not going to be chosen as Queen, and who seems to be very pleased with herself at the prospects."

"Quite the opposite is true, Drianna, and in your short-sightedness, you still don't see it. I will explain. You and I both know that before I can bear Leondis' child, I must activate the final spell. It not only will cause the King to fall madly in love with me, desiring me over all other women, but according to your own words, it will allow me to conceive The Children of the Prophecy—the ultimate goal of this union after all. Without that magical assistance, there is virtually no chance of Elf breeding with human. Is that not correct?"

"That is correct, yes," the sorceress agreed.

"Would not the people find it strange, if I walked in and Leondis immediately became so enthralled with me that he could see no other, could be with no other, and immediately afterward, I was with child? This is a man, who from a very young age became intimately familiar with as many maidens as would grace his bed. Could I simply step in, an unknown Lady from nowhere, and change him overnight?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Drianna replied.

"I know, and that's why we are doing this my way," Rozlynn said again. "Leondis must work to get me to accept his proposal. I cannot be seen to be too anxious, or too eager to be Queen. It is a balancing act, I know, but in the end, he must want me as an equal, a Queen of the Realm, and not simply as a woman to bear him an Heir. I am to live this life as well, Drianna, and I will not simply be a broodmare for the King."

"You play a dangerous game, Princess."

"Perhaps," Rozlynn replied, settling back in her seat. "I do believe I know men however, and Leondis will not run away from me quite yet."

Twelve

"My sister is being irresponsible, irrational, impulsive, immature, irritating and, and—"

"Irresistible?" Rendil offered.

"Illogical!" Queen Lilliene nearly screamed.

The wizard sat in the throne room in Kalystra, in conference with the King and Queen of the Elves as well as a number of their advisors.

"Did you know that after she went through the Change, neither Lynntania nor I can scry her anymore? It's as if she is no longer even an Elf!"

"Lilliene," King Theinial said soothingly, "you knew this was coming, and there was nothing any of us could do to stop her. The Prophecy has consumed her thoughts for decades, and she believed strongly in the signs."

"The signs, the signs. Is that all anyone can say?" Lilliene was in the Elven capital city for the first time in nearly fifty years. She preferred to stay in Alpenvail, however to meet with anyone from outside the hidden valley, she needed to come down from the secret mountain retreat. This time of year, the passes were sometimes blocked by snow, and as that was the case now, she would be stuck here either until an early melt-off or until spring. She was not pleased, but neither was King Theinial to have his wife living in the city with him again. It was much more peaceful when she was not around.

"I think we need to get past this," Rendil was saying, "and start to discuss the next steps. If she should be successful in marrying Leondis and having a child, or even more telling, twins, then we can only assume The Prophecy is in play and the time for action approaches."

"So many conditions must be met for this to occur, Wizard, I do not think we need be preparing now," Theinial stated. "Even if Rozlynn manages to have a child with the human King, that is no guarantee it has anything to do with The Prophecy. Elves and humans have interbred many times over the centuries without prophetic results."

"Have they, Your Majesty?" Rendil asked pointedly. "I know of only a few, and each time another stage of The Prophecy could be seen as coming to conclusion. You remember Easal, of course?"

"Yes, of course I remember Easal," Theinial admitted, "but that was hardly conclusive."

"As I recall," Rendil continued, "the Prophecy path as deciphered by Drianna was something like, '*The last Elf to sit as a Watcher, will turn out to be a half-blood, putting an end to the vigil forever.*' Given that Easal was the last Elven Watcher assigned to the Keep, and the circumstances around his death, he certainly ended The Watchers forever."

"Father," Princess Lynntania spoke for the first time in the meeting. "I don't believe everyone here knows how Easal died. I think it's important in this discussion that all know the real truth."

The King sighed and looked around the room at those assembled. As much as he did not want to discuss this, if he was to get proper advice from those present, his daughter was correct.

"You may tell the tale, Lynn, but please be brief."

"Thank you, Father." The Princess stood and addressed the room. "Easal was a gifted seer who came to us from one of the trading families living in the south. I think most of you know—even if we don't discuss it—that we have been trading goods with the humans both around the lake and in the area known as the Free Cities, since The Breaking. Our isolation has never been complete, but we are discreet and limit that contact."

"Is that relevant, Lynntania?" the King asked.

"I believe it is, Father, please bear with me," she replied. "The reason I bring this up is Easal's family was from a small group who lived in Ramon Tor before The Breaking. They stayed even after it was totally destroyed at the end of the First Age. *The Waste*, as we call it today, is a harsh place, but some Elves still live there and trade with us as well as the humans in the cities of Al-Ashal and Al-Fikri to the South.

"At any rate, Easal's mother was an Elf, but his biological father was a human. His mother was raped and became pregnant. Although these births are rare, they do happen occasionally. His Elven father refused to acknowledge the boy, and in an act of desperation, his mother brought him here to be raised by a foster family. As he grew, he displayed a talent for prophecy, but kept that hidden, as he was afraid to be chastised for yet another difference. We only found this out later, after his death.

"When he was still quite young, he requested to be assigned to the Watcher's Keep. The Council eagerly granted his request. The assignment, as you might imagine, was not one that many Elves were interested in taking.

"Not long after accepting the duty post, Easal killed the human and Dwarf who served as Watchers, then leaped from the rift canyon rim to his death. Why

he did this was never discovered, but eventually, a Prophecy journal was found among his possessions. He apparently had nightly prophetic dreams that haunted him his whole life."

"Princess?" one of the advisors asked. "Why did this end the duty of the Watchers? There were several Watchers from every race stationed at the Keep at any one time."

"When Easal took his life," Lynntania explained, "he apparently took the only key to the tower with him. No one could enter the actual Keep again, and as such, the task of Watching could no longer be accomplished. The key was never recovered, and neither was Easal's body."

"Could not the door be opened by force?"

"No," Rendil answered. "The door to the Watcher's Keep is magically sealed by the power of the Triadine itself. It cannot be opened by any means we currently possess. Perhaps if we were to reassemble the ancient talisman—"

"Absolutely not!" The objection came from King Theinial. "That weapon will not be rebuilt under any circumstances!"

"There is one circumstance that may require us to do so, Your Majesty," the wizard replied.

"Though that may yet come to pass," Theinial admitted, "we will not use that weapon to open the Keep. The Dark Wizard remained inactive for centuries while we kept watch. There is no reason to believe he is not still simply living out his life in the total isolation of his mountain prison."

"The end of the Watchers, by one of half-blood, was one of the key signs of The Prophecy that led Princess Rozlynn down her current path," Rendil explained, bringing together the ends of the story. "If she is correct, and her current action results in the birth of another half-breed child, or even more critical, half-breed twins, then I think it is safe to say she was correct, and The Prophecy is in full motion."

"You believe we are again approaching the End Days, Wizard?" Laurentis asked. The white-haired Elf was acknowledged by all to be the oldest living Elf. He stayed out of all politics in the Elven Kingdom and spent his life in quiet service to the Goddess Phayle, mother of all creation. His presence here only served to underline the importance of this meeting.

"I do believe that Princess Rozlynn and the Sorceress Drianna may have interpreted the signs correctly," the wizard replied, "and that we are now on the final path that could lead to another major conflict with the Dark Wizard. Whether that is really the End Days, well, that will depend on which fork the path takes."

The room started to buzz as disbelief mixed with denial and disapproval made the rounds. Rendil sat back and said nothing more, simply watching the Elven advisors make first one argument and then another over what should be done. He had witnessed an event like this more than once in his lifetime, and there would be no easy answers coming from this group.

Laurentis slowly rose from his seat, and speaking a quiet word to the King, excused himself to the temple to pray. Rendil would meet up with him later, for special insight that only the ancient Elf could provide.

"We will not make a decision tonight," King Theinial announced. "This group will come together again tomorrow at mid-day and finish discussing what role the Elves will play in the event that Princess Rozlynn gives birth to half-breed children. For now, this discussion is over."

* * *

"You believe it's true, Wizard?" Princess Lynntania sat cross-legged on the floor of Rendil's quarters, looking up at the wizard pacing the room.

"It is true, Princess," Rendil replied. "The only question is what are we going to do when the children are born."

"The only question?"

"The first major question would be a better way to put it, I suppose."

"Obviously, they need to be taken away from the humans and raised by the Elves," Lynntania said, very matter-of-factly.

"That won't work, Princess," Rendil replied, turning away from the window to look down on the Princess. "The children must grow up as humans. They must represent the humans at the end, and not the Elves. Even though they are of half-blood, they must think of themselves as human first, and not Elves."

"Did that come from The Prophecy as well?" Lynntania asked, puzzled.

"Very clearly, yes."

"If the human King is not likely to lend assistance to our effort, how can we possibly allow the children to be raised in his household?"

"I did not say the children should be raised as royalty," Rendil explained, "only that they need to be raised by humans."

"So you are suggesting that we take the children away from my Aunt and give them to another family to raise?"

"I'm suggesting that they be raised by someone other than King Leondis," Rendil replied, not answering the Princess' question completely.

Thirteen

"If you are not more quiet, Your Majesty, we will never get close enough to the boar for a kill." Randolph walked behind Leondis, who crashed through the brush like a stampeding herd of elk chased by a pack of wolves.

"What's that you say?" The King turned to look at Randolph, a hunting spear held loosely in one hand.

"I say you do not appear to be into the hunt today, Your Highness," Randolph replied. "That was the third time we came close to the boar, only to scare him away and not get an opportunity for the kill. The dogs will corner him again, but as they tire, I fear for their safety if we keep driving the boar without taking him soon."

Leondis stared blankly at Lord Randolph as if he did not even hear what the man was saying, before turning and tossing his spear to a servant. "Enough hunting for today! Bring me my horse!"

Both the King and Randolph's mounts were made ready, and the men were off toward the capital. They were hunting a half a day's ride to the southeast, below the granite quarry at Boring, where the population of wild boar were known to be plentiful.

"Send a couple of archers with the dog handlers," Randolph informed the Master of the Hunt. "See if you can bring back at least one animal for the King's table tonight."

"Yes, my Lord," the man replied knowingly. Leondis would be happier this evening if there were boar on the table, even though his own attempts to kill an animal were unsuccessful.

Randolph caught up with the King and his personal guard as they rode back toward Solenta.

"What is on your mind, Sire?" he asked knowingly.

"It's that blasted woman, what else?" he barked in reply. "I've heard nothing from her in more than two weeks."

"Have you considered going to see her, Your Highness?"

"What? Me go to see her? Of course not!"

"You might consider it, Sire, if indeed you are really serious about making her your Queen." Randolph knew he was on shaky ground but he had never seen

his friend so unsettled, not even after the death of his father.

"The King does not go crawling to any woman!" Leondis insisted. "Why should I go to see her? She is the one who should be coming to see me, begging my forgiveness for walking out on the event that I threw in her honor!"

"Was it truly in her honor, Your Majesty?" Randolph asked warily. "Or were you showing off your *prize* to the nobles in the Kingdom?"

The King started to speak and the words seemed to catch in his throat. Though no one other than Randolph could get away with speaking to him this way, in this case, he may have pushed a little too hard.

Finally, Leondis managed to speak, his voice low and threatening. "You overstep your bounds, Lord Randolph."

"As your friend and advisor, Leondis," Randolph said carefully, "I may not have said enough. As just one of your nobles, Your Majesty, I have said too much. It is up to you to determine how you wish to take my words."

Without waiting for the King to reply, in an act that might prove his undoing, Lord Randolph kicked his horse hard and jumped out in front of the procession heading back to the capital. He would not be able to push his horse like this for long, but he would not ride alongside or even behind a monarch who would not recognize when he was wrong.

To Randolph's great surprise, Leondis came up right alongside him on his black warhorse, driving the animal hard. The King glanced toward his friend as he passed by, a twisted grin on his face. Randolph understood and rose to the challenge, urging his own stallion to take up the chase.

At breakneck speed, the two men raced up the road with the King's Elite in haphazard pursuit. No one was able to match the extreme to which the King and his closest friend pushed their animals. Several hard minutes of riding later, the road dipped into a low area with a shallow reed-filled swamp on both sides. Randolph slowed his horse, knowing that the road was rough in places and not wanting to risk the bay. Leondis, however, kept on at a breakneck pace, leaving Randolph behind by a dozen lengths in the blink of an eye.

Not willing to let his friend simply win by default, Randolph again kicked his mount forward to the chase. While he closed the distance only slightly, the pounding hooves of both horses threw large quantities of wet dirt into the air behind both men as they put the swamp behind them.

Finally, Leondis eased off on his horse, the animal starting to show signs of tiring. Randolph rode up alongside and matched the slower pace, the mounts snorting and huffing with the exertion of the race. The men were laughing nearly uncontrollably. No guards could be seen on the road behind. The two were as alone as when they were boys playing in the fields around Solenta.

"That was exhilarating!" Leondis exclaimed. "And I am still a better rider than you!"

"You sit a finer mount," Randolph replied, smiling, "but as to whether you are the better horseman, there is more to that challenge than simply outpacing me on a groomed road with a world class warhorse. Your Majesty," he added at the end.

Leondis howled in laughter. "Always keeping me honest, eh, Randi?"

"Just trying to keep you grounded, Sire."

"You made your point," the King said, grinning, "though I don't think in the way you intended. We will go at once to see the Lady Rozlynn and find out whether or not she is worthy to be my Queen!"

"Now, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, now, though I guess I should have said to see whether or not I am worthy to be her husband, not whether or not she is worthy to be my Queen, eh?"

"As you say, Your Majesty."

* * *

"You have a guest, Lady Rozlynn. It's him. It's, it's the King, my Lady!" The innkeeper stood in the hallway, having just knocked so hard on the Lady Rozlynn's door that he practically shook it from its hinges.

"Tell the King I will be down momentarily, Mr. Larkin," she replied, standing coolly on the other side of the threshold.

"I'm sorry, my Lady?"

"I don't know why you would be sorry, Mr. Larkin," she replied. "Simply deliver my message to the King. I will be down shortly." With that, she closed the door in the startled innkeeper's face.

"You seem to have been correct," Drianna acknowledged, as Rozlynn took a seat in front of a dressing mirror to apply some subtle face paint before going down to meet the King.

"It was a risk," she admitted, "but he is just a man after all. If you give in too easily, they tire quickly. Push back a little, and they will pursue. Push back too much, and you might lose out to another. The line is one you must carefully walk if you wish to hook one deeply."

"I still do not understand your reasoning, Princess," the sorceress said with some exasperation evident in her voice. "How much longer will you play this game?"

"That is entirely up to the King," she replied, adding the final bit of color to her lips. "Let us go down and greet the man."

The ladies stepped from the room to find Mr. Larkin approaching from the direction of the stairs.

"Oh, I'm glad to see you," Larkin stammered. "The King, well, he is not used to waiting."

"He will wait for me," Rozlynn replied, stepping past the innkeeper and pulling Drianna behind her.

As the ladies entered the common room, the first thing that Rozlynn noticed was none of the other guests in the inn were present. Typically, at this time of evening, the room was bustling with guests as they sat down to enjoy a meal and a mug of ale at the end of the day.

"Where are the other guests?" she inquired of the innkeeper, trailing behind the ladies on the stair.

"My Lady?" he questioned.

"The other guests staying in the inn," she stated again. "Why are there no guests in the common room? This time of night it should be quite full."

"The other guests? Why, we removed them, my Lady. It is not appropriate that they remain here while the King is here."

"Nonsense, Mr. Larkin," she stated. "You get them back in here and tell them to go about their normal business. I will not have their meal and evening interrupted simply because the King has arrived to speak with me. Go now, before they are too far removed for you to gather them back."

"But, my Lady."

"Now, Mr. Larkin."

"Yes, my Lady." The innkeeper glanced once at the closest of the King's Elite standing in the room, apparently the man who ordered the room cleared when the King arrived. He simply looked at the Lady Rozlynn and said nothing. Larkin disappeared out the back door to the common room.

Rozlynn glided across the floor to where the King was standing with Lord Randolph near the fire, where a wide-eyed kitchen boy turned a spit of mutton.

"So nice of you to come by, Your Majesty," she greeted the King, holding out her hand for him to kiss. "Good to see you again as well, Lord Randolph."

"My Lady," Randolph replied, as Leondis brushed his lips against the back of the Lady's hand.

"I came to see you," Leondis stated awkwardly, "to ask you to join me for dinner, tonight. I wish to speak with you without the trappings of royalty around—just you and me."

"That sounds lovely," Rozlynn said, to the surprise of the King.

"Mr. Larkin," she called to the innkeeper who was now hovering in the doorway that led to the kitchen.

"Please have Mrs. Larkin prepare plates for the King, Lord Randolph, the Lady Drianna, and myself. I think the mutton on the fire is ready, and I would like some of that wonderful soup from the noon meal if there is any remaining. I've smelled her baking all afternoon and would love some of that rye bread Mrs. Larkin is known for as well. We will take this corner table near the fire, if that is acceptable."

She strode to the corner and slid across the bench where her back was to the window and the wall to her right. Drianna joined her, and the ladies looked to the men to join them.

Lord Randolph suppressed a smile as he turned to the King. "Your Majesty." He indicated that Leondis should sit opposite the Lady Rozlynn.

"Mr. Larkin," Rozlynn called out to the innkeeper, still standing in the doorway to the kitchens.

"Yes, my Lady," the nervous man replied.

"Please see that the men who accompanied the King are also fed, and charge the cost of their meals to my room."

The King sat on the bench opposite the Lady, still in his hunting clothes. He realized that across from him was the most wonderful woman he had ever met. His eyes were filled with her beauty, her grace, her sheer delight at life. He wanted more than anything else in the world for her to be his Queen. Would she accept his proposal? He could only wonder, and hope.

Fourteen

Khollaran sat alone in his chambers, scrolls mounded around him and the ever-present mirrorstone gateway smooth and silent on the wall. It was a reminder of the magic that locked him in his prison nearly an eon ago, but the Watchers long ago abandoned their vigil, and the Dark Wizard had grown strong again over the following centuries.

"Master?" The voice was that of the mighty dragon, Gurkinshka. "You wished to see me?"

The dragon was Khollaran's greatest prize to date. He discovered the egg, lost long ago in the depths of the caverns, and painstakingly hatched it using intricate spells recovered from the ruins of the library at Al-Fikri. The Lesser Wizards of the First Age kept many writings about dragons in Ramon Tor, and those who kept scholarship in Al-Fikri copied the most interesting for their collection. Without those texts, the wizard doubted he could have hatched the dragon egg, but to his great delight, the dragon was now a completely loyal servant.

"My son," he replied. "I need to bind a new servant today—an Elf."

"Elf scum!" The dragon rose up quickly as he spat the words, hitting his head on the low ceiling and causing rubble to cascade down around him.

"Easy, my son," the wizard said calmly, moving some of the more valuable scrolls away from the settling dust. "This Elf came to me to pledge his service, thanks in part to the fact that I saved his life, and in part because he seems to hate the Elves of the Aren nearly as much as I do."

"You saved his life, Master?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Raiders attacked the wagon belonging to his parents, who were silk traders traveling in the wasteland. The family was all killed, and by chance, the raider captain mistook the Elf for a human and spared him. The Elf has no idea that the raiders were doing my bidding." Khollaran laughed at this. "You see, this Elf has human-like features. He grows facial hair, his ears are only slightly pointed, and his cheekbones are not anywhere near as pronounced as they should. He is an Elf, of that there is no doubt, but somewhere in his past, there is definitely a human ancestor. Those traits in him are strong. I suspect he can travel in both worlds without drawing any attention

to himself. I will use him in that way; however, he must be bound first. Do you understand?"

"Clearly, Master." The dragon did not like the idea of an Elf serving his master, but he did not question anything that the wizard did. If the dragon was to bind the Elf in service, then that is what he would do. "When do you wish to do the binding?"

"Now," Khollaran replied. "The Elf is being brought here. I wish to speak with him before the binding and to witness the act. I don't believe I've ever seen an Elf bound before, and I wish to have the experience."

"Of course, Father," Gurkinshka replied, lumbering off to one of the side chambers that was still large enough to hold his bulk.

Soon the rattle of chains and shuffling of feet could be heard approaching, and the dragon watched as two guards marched the chained Elf past the opening to stand before the wizard.

"Why must I be chained so?" the Elf cried as the guards pushed him to his knees before the wizard. "I came to serve you willingly."

"You will address me as Lord-God Khall or Master," Khollaran announced, not getting up from his chair.

"Why must I be chained so, my Lord-God Khall?" the Elf asked again. "I have given myself into your service gladly. I have sworn the oaths, pledged my very soul. These chains are not necessary."

"So you say," Khollaran replied, looking down from the raised dais at the kneeling Elf, "however the only way I can guarantee that an Elf is true to me, is to bind him in service."

"Whatever you require, my Lord-God Khall. I wish only to serve."

The dragon took this as his cue to come out of the side chamber and perform his part in the binding. The guards, humans from the city of Al-Ashal who were already bound, stood silently alongside the Elf, each with one hand on a shoulder.

"A dr, dr, dr, dragon!" the Elf finally managed to say.

"My greatest servant," Khollaran replied, looking at the dragon with what passed as love for the wizard. "Hold out your arms."

The Elf did not move, but stared at the dragon that was easing his way closer, steam escaping his nostrils and the smell of sulfur now strong in the air.

"Hold out your arms!" Khollaran ordered again. The Elf immediately obeyed.

His wrists were bound with rough black steel bands. He held out his arms before him, as the guards turned him to face the dragon.

"You will repeat after me, Elf!" Gurkinshka spoke in his singsong dragon voice, though the Elf was not compelled by the magic.

"My Lord-God Khall?" the Elf pleaded.

"Follow his instructions," the wizard responded.

Gurkinshka trickled tendrils of fire over the bands. They danced around the rough black metal, changing the metal into seamless, obsidian bands of obedience.

"Repeat these words," the dragon instructed. "I am bound for all time."

"I am bound for all time," the Elf repeated.

"To serve without question."

"To serve without question."

"Every whim of my Master," the dragon said.

"Every whim of my Master." The Elf started to shake and quiver under the power of the magic.

"I live but to serve," instructed Gurkinshka.

"I live but to serve."

"My Lord-God Khall!"

"My Lord-God Khall!" the Elf yelled in response. He dropped to the ground in agony, suffering from the worst pain he had ever experienced. He believed his skin was being charred and his flesh consumed by the flames that continued to cover the bands.

"It is done," the dragon said at last. "You are bound to serve our Master until your dying breath."

The pain receded. His flesh was not burned, and the Elf looked adoringly up at the wizard before replying, "I live but to serve, oh mighty Lord-God Khall! How may I please my Master?"

"Tell me your name, Elf," Khollaran asked.

"Turbin, my Lord-God Khall. My name is Turbin."

* * *

Deep in the farthest recesses of the Dark Wizard's prison, Khollaran observed his latest experiment. This section of the old Dwarven stronghold had been sealed away from the Dwarves when they occupied these caverns. During The Breaking, the seals were broken, and Khollaran doubted anyone living knew what was down here.

The wizard gazed at the latest of his creations to emerge from a birthing chamber, as a servant tended to the creature. Weak and ill-formed, life lasted only a few short minutes before the Orc died.

"This one was at least born alive, Master," another man said, studying the hideous corpse before him. "Three more were stillborn this morning."

"I believe I have found a possible answer," Khollaran admitted to the one human who understood that the wizard was not a God. He was one of the first to join the Dark Wizard in this endeavor, and before he burned out his own powers, he was somewhat of a lesser wizard himself.

"Was there something in the latest batch of scrolls, Master?" Jonah asked.

"There were a couple of obscure references, written in the ancient scrawl of the Nordae, that I believe may hold the key," Khollaran admitted. "We need a stronger seed. What we have been using so far is not viable enough as it has yet to come into the world on its own. We need to use an actual infant, born into the world already."

"We have no breeders in the caverns, Master," Jonah reported. "The last of them was killed, um, accidentally by several of the men."

"Gather more then!" Khollaran ordered. "Bring them in already with child, as I do not wish to wait to try out the new spells. If you can locate newborns in the villages, that is even better. They must be very young, however, no more than a few days old."

"Your will be done, my Lord-God Khall," Johan spoke a little louder, making sure that the others in the room heard the devotion.

Khollaran left the birthing room, certain that he was nearing guaranteed success. He had come a long way in the last century. He would bring life into the world without the need for seed before he was finished, but he needed an army now, and would do whatever it took to create one.

* * *

"Sky fire, ancient enemies allies become. Stone burns, Griswold reigns, darkness rises, death certain." — The Goblin Prophecies, Caergana Abbey

Fifteen

"I think it's absolutely splendid news, Lord Randolph," Rozlynn said smiling broadly. "I'm so happy for you both!"

Randolf just announced his engagement to the Lady Anne, with the wedding to be held in the spring. The couple was madly in love, literally glowing, and were unable to be more than a few steps apart when they were in the same room.

"You will be wed here, in the castle," the King announced. It was not a question, and neither Randolph nor the Lady Anne had any intention of arguing.

"We would love that, Your Majesty," Anne said demurely. "Though there is much planning we must do between now and then. We hope to set the date after the snows clear the passes so that more of our friends may attend."

"Fifth-month seems just about right," Randolph added.

"Though that is very little time!" Anne nearly winced as she said this.

The four were seated at the head of the table in the Royal Ballroom for a celebration to greet the new year. The tradition was for dancing and merriment from late in the evening on the last day of Twelfth-month right into the morning of First-day of the new year. Tonight would be no different, with a lively band, good food, and most of the Lords and Ladies of the Kingdom in attendance.

"Lady Rozlynn," Anne asked, "would you please accompany me into the garden? I have a few things I wish to speak about in private." She looked knowingly at both the King and her betrothed as she pushed back her own chair.

A servant came in quickly to help the Lady Rozlynn with her chair, as well as to straighten up the now empty chair of the Lady Anne as the two women descended from the platform, crossed the room, and exited into the garden.

"I think she will say yes," Leondis said to Randolph, "but I still have some doubts."

"You two have been spending so much time together these last six weeks, you must know by now, Sire."

"I feel certain that there is no other man whom she would even consider," the King said nervously, "but by the Gods, Randolph, she is a riddle, wrapped in an enigma!"

"Anne did not want me to announce our engagement tonight, Your Majesty"—Randolf ignored the nervousness of the King—"but I felt that

Rozlynn might actually be more open to your question if she saw how happy Anne and I are, and perhaps, well, perhaps it would help."

"I doubt it will make any difference either way, but I appreciate the thought. Okay, here I go. Wish me luck!"

Randolf had never seen the King this nervous, but it was clearly time he asked for the Lady Rozlynn's hand. Doing so in the privacy of the garden meant that if she said no, he would not be embarrassed in front of the entire room.

Everyone assembled knew, of course, that the King was madly in love with the Lady Rozlynn, and they could also tell that she had eyes only for the King. None was aware that the King had not bedded her yet, as his reputation for passion when it came to women was well known. To this point, however, Rozlynn made it very clear to the King that nothing would transpire between them that any could possibly consider scandalous.

* * *

"What is it you wish to speak with me about?" Rozlynn asked the Lady Anne when they were alone in the garden. The heated garden was still almost a mystical place to Rozlynn, warm even this time of the year with only a light wrap. The magical gardens of Kalystra, heated through the winter by the power of highly tuned earth-stones, were its only equal.

"I need you to come this way first," Anne said, taking Rozlynn's hand and leading her toward a very private section of garden that contained a small fountain and two marble statues.

When they stepped through a neatly arched hedge, Rozlynn was surprised to find Leondis standing next to a statue, wearing a particularly nicely cut jacket that showed off his sculpted upper body.

"Excuse me," Anne said as she released Rozlynn's hand, smiled, and backed out of the small garden enclosure. One of the King's Elite appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, to prevent anyone from accidentally entering the alcove, and the King was effectively alone with the Lady, as was the plan.

"What's this all about, Your Majesty?" Rozlynn asked, as she took a step toward him.

"Please, don't talk," Leondis said, fumbling for something in his vest pocket.

Rozlynn took another step toward the King and was now nearly close enough to touch him. Leondis managed to free whatever was in his pocket, looked Rozlynn in the eyes, and fell to one knee before her. Reaching up to take her hand in his own, he nearly fell onto the paving stones, as she was still just a little

too far away for him to reach her easily. She stepped half a step closer and held his hand in both her own.

"Lady Rozlynn," he began after clearing his throat. "These weeks that we have spent together have been precious to me. Precious beyond words. I feel a bond with you unlike any that I have felt with any of the many women I've been with up 'till now."

Rozlynn raised an eyebrow at this, but the King did not seem to notice.

"If I may have only one thing, one thing only, for the rest of my life, I wish only that you will agree to be my Queen, my wife, my partner in life, to bear my children, bear with me and all of the challenges that I will pose to a wife, and spend every day with me until we both pass from the world."

He lifted the ring in his right hand until it was well over his head.

"Lady Rozlynn, will you marry me?"

Rozlynn looked at the man before her, once the arrogant womanizer who wanted only to bed her in the middle of the night, and realized that she too had fallen for him. This started out as a simple task to make sure that there were as few complications as possible when she finally cast the spell upon the King.

That task turned into much more, and now Rozlynn found there was nothing she wanted more than to marry this man and to be with him, as he grew old and feeble. She would live on long after his death, of course, and that would be something that she would have to deal with, but it was a small price to pay for the years they would have together.

She lifted the King's left hand, signaling him to rise as was befitting a King. When he was once again standing, a head taller than the diminutive Elven Princess, she pulled him down to her level and kissed him passionately, before pulling back and simply replying, "Yes."

Sixteen

When the King and Rozlynn returned to the party, they were hand in hand, and neither could contain their joy. As they walked into the room together, the gathered crowd erupted in applause and congratulations, which caught both of them a little off guard.

"What is this?" Leondis demanded.

"Your Majesty," Minister Nolan was the first to greet them. "The secret of what you planned tonight is probably the worst-kept secret in the history of the Kingdom. Seeing the Lady Rozlynn enter the room with your Mother's diamond ring on her finger, well, that pretty much tells the whole story."

Rozlynn raised her left hand, the back of it facing the room, and wiggled her fingers to show off her engagement ring.

"You did not tell me this was your Mother's ring," she said into Leondis' ear.

"It did not seem important at the time," the King replied.

The two continued into the room, where those in attendance, many who were more than a little bit drunk, subsequently mobbed them.

"Your Majesty." Lord Kreager nearly stumbled into the King, as he came up to offer his congratulations. "On a night such as this, Sire, might not you finally name a Baron of Eagles Reach? The Barony has been without a Lord for more than a year now. Surely on this grand occasion, someone fitting of the title has proven worth."

It was no secret that Kreager sought the title, and for the last six months, he had lobbied the King at every opportunity.

"Splendid idea, Kreager!" Leondis agreed. "I have been too long in naming a Lord to oversee the region, but frankly it was not because I was unable to decide who to name. I made that decision long ago."

Kreager smiled, stumbled a little, and nearly clapped the King on the shoulder before realizing what he was about to do. He turned and took a step to the side to avoid a collision.

"I'm pleased to hear that, Your Majesty," he slurred, and then swept his arm across the room. "I'm sure all assembled here eagerly await the news."

"The reason I delayed, was really one that I simply needed Minister Nolan to help me with. We finalized our work just last week, and I am pleased to say that

Eagles Reach is now a Duchy, and no longer just a Barony."

Applause filled the room. Kreager was beaming, and more than one man present was already congratulating him on what was sure to be his elevation to Duke tonight.

"The people of Eagles Reach will be honored to hear this, Your Majesty," Lord Randolph said in earnest. "They have long felt slighted by being so isolated from their Duke in the North. Though your Father talked of combining the Barony with Alnen and perhaps creating a Duchy centered across the lake, which was also not to their liking. They are a proud and independent people."

"Proud and independent, like their new Duke!" King Leondis said, smiling as he looked around the room. Kreager was straightening his jacket, sure that he was now to be named.

"It gives me great pleasure to announce several things formally tonight, and for this I will return to the dais and ask that you all gather around. Lord Randolph, Lady Anne, and Lady Rozlynn, please join me."

The crowd collected below the dais, the servants distributed drinks, and the King waited until everyone had a drink in hand to offer a toast for his announcements.

"First, the news that started my evening, and something that makes me incredibly happy for one of my oldest and dearest friends." He raised his glass and turned toward Lord Randolph and the Lady Anne. "Tonight it gives me great pleasure to announce the engagement of Lord Halford Randolph and the lovely Lady Anne CadreSean. They are to be married this coming spring—in Fifth-month if I heard correctly. Please join me in a toast to the perfect couple! Say a few words, Randolph!"

Everyone clapped and cheered, and no one in the room was surprised at this. Randolph and Anne's courtship had been quite public. This was a simple marriage, but the friendship between Randolph and the King went back to their earliest childhood days, and the people assembled were genuinely happy for them.

"You honor me too much, my King," Randolph said after standing. "It is true that the Lady Anne and I are to be married in the spring, and we are thrilled to have been here on this night, for a much more important announcement awaits!" He lifted his glass in a salute to the King and sat back down beside his betrothed. She held his hand in her own and smiled in that special way that only lovers smile.

"Hear, hear," Lord Kreager declared, from his position right beneath the dais. "On to the next announcement!"

The King looked down at Kreager and was not amused; however, he ignored the inebriated Lord and continued.

"This next announcement I have been told is one of the worst-kept secrets in the Kingdom." With that statement, the room burst into laughter and applause. The King allowed this to go on for a moment as he looked to Rozlynn. She was smiling and simply glowing with that beauty that only she possessed.

"Tonight, the Lady Rozlynn has agreed to become the next Queen of the Realm, as my wife."

The room practically erupted. Though the nobles expected it, the way Leondis said it, they knew that this was more than just a woman to wear the title and to bear the heir, though both of those things were critical to the future of the Kingdom. Rozlynn was a woman of substance who would rule alongside their King, and that was something the Kingdom had not seen in several generations.

The King let the assembled Lords and Ladies go on for some time, while Kreager simply feigned applause and stood looking smugly at the King. Leondis knew what he wanted, and finally he held up his hands to silence the room.

"Though the Lady Rozlynn and I have not spoken of the date for our wedding, I assure you we too will marry in the spring, and then get busy bringing you an Heir to the throne!"

Rozlynn playfully slapped him on the arm, while many of the Ladies in the room blushed and turned to their partners, some indicating that perhaps tonight they might make heirs of their own. Finally, the King drank deeply from his glass and made the final announcement of the night.

"Last, but certainly not least, I will name the new Duke of Eagles Reach tonight. The paperwork has all been drawn up, and all that is needed is the formal announcement—though the man does not know he is to be named. Minister Nolan, if you will please bring me the sash."

The minister was ready with the newly created sash of the office of the Duke of Eagles Reach and brought it to the King. Accepting this, he motioned Nolan to stand to the side and behind those on the dais. Kreager was ready to step up and accept the position, his bearing showing that in his mind, no one else could possibly be named Duke.

"It gives me great pleasure to announce my decision on the Duke of Eagles Reach. I have been through many hours of consultation with my advisors, including Duke Haren and Lord Berrol, and I assure you this is the most qualified man in the Kingdom. He is known and loved in Eagles Reach and beyond." Kreager was absolutely beaming now. "I know he and I will work very well together to grow the Duchy into something that everyone living there will be proud of."

Kreager side-slipped over to the stairs leading up to the platform, prepared with his acceptance speech—memorized over months of planning for this very

moment.

"With no further delay, let me introduce you all to the new Duke of the new Duchy of Eagles Reach, Duke Halford Randolph!"

* * *

The Sorceress Drianna stood quietly in the back of the Royal Ballroom, watching the proceedings. She did not understand why Rozlynn was so proud in all of this, knowing that ultimately she would have to trigger the magic that would bind the King to her and allow her to bear his children.

She said at one time that she had to live with this decision, and this life in the castle. The Prophecy said otherwise, but Drianna expected that perhaps the Princess did not want that part to come true.

The words haunted the sorceress however, as Rozlynn was her only real friend in the world. Both were long lived, and together they had studied The Prophecy for nearly four centuries. Sacrifices had to be made to save the world; however, Drianna wondered now if the time was truly right and if Princess Rozlynn was truly the one to put them on the correct path.

* * *

"Bringing The Children into the world ends one life, begins two more. Hunted by sire, friend, and foe, death follows where they lead." — The Goblin Prophecies, Caergana Abbey

* * *

"Darling," Anne asked Randolph as they finally left the party well into the morning on First-day. "Why did that man, what was his name? Kreager? Why did he and the King get into that nasty argument?"

The two wandered arm in arm toward the guest wing in the castle. They had finished a light breakfast and were going to spend the rest of the morning snuggling in their bed under the softest down comforter that Randolph had ever felt. The Lady Anne was already having an influence on the new Duke, and he loved it.

"Lord Kreager owns the estate next to our new home, my love," Randolph explained. "He has been standing in as the Baron-in-waiting since the old Baron died. He moved into the Baron's estate, took over the servants and the treasury, and though I don't believe he was doing anything irregular, he certainly expected

to be named Baron. When the King announced that Lands End was raised up to a Duchy, and that I was to be the Duke, it deflated Lord Kreager immediately. Though I was not paying attention, Nolan informed me that Kreager was ready to mount the steps and accept the sash when Leondis announced that I was to be Duke. He nearly collapsed on the floor right there and then."

"So his argument with the King was because you were named Duke and not him?"

"Though he did not say that, exactly," Randolph explained, "that was certainly what he meant when he said that I was not qualified to be Baron, let alone Duke, and that I will flounder without direct assistance. Of course, Leondis took exception to this, and both men were well into their cups at the time. It was more drink than common sense that we were hearing."

"Is this Lord Kreager going to be a problem for you, my Duke?" she asked him, smiling and clutching his arm tightly for emphasis.

"I will talk with Leondis about making him a Baron, though he may have poisoned the King against that idea. If that does not work, I will give him additional lands and title, and make sure he has enough responsibility to keep him occupied. A good man with the energy and desire to be a leader is always one to be developed and encouraged."

"You will make a wonderful Duke, my Lord Randolph," Anne said, smiling at her future husband.

"And you will make the perfect Duchess, my Lady Anne."

Seventeen

"When will Duke Randolph return?" The Lady Rozlynn sat in the garden with the Lady Anne, watching the tiny tiella birds flittering around picking up crumbs left over from an afternoon tea. Rozlynn was fascinated that these birds still lived with the humans, since to her knowledge, they were no longer being used as messenger birds, and no humans remaining could speak with them.

"He is due back any time now, and I miss him terribly," Anne admitted. "It's been nearly five weeks, and though I know travel this time of year can take longer because of the snow in the passes, I am starting to worry since I have not heard anything."

If only the humans could still talk to the little messenger birds, thought Rozlynn, we could send one of them to find the Duke and see where he is.

"I would not worry, Anne," Rozlynn said soothingly. "The Duke is traveling with an escort of King's Elite, and they are all hardy travelers. He really needed to go set things in order in your new estate after all, and that will take some time."

"Lord Kreager has agreed to be his First Minister," Anne said in reply. "He ran the estate for the last two years, so that part of the transition should go quickly. I am looking forward to settling in after the wedding," she added. "The old Baron lived without a Baroness for a long time, and I am certain a woman's touch will be needed to make the estate worthy of the Duke."

"You will have a lifetime to put your stamp on the estate, Anne. And when you have children, things will change even more than you can imagine."

"Children," Anne said smiling. "I cannot wait to see Randolph as a father. He will be wonderful."

The Ladies Tea was something Rozlynn started soon after her engagement to the King. It was held every week, in the garden if the weather permitted, and gave the ladies a chance to meet with their future Queen. This served two purposes for Rozlynn. The first was simply to build the relationships with the noble women that she needed for an effective network in the Kingdom. The second was to casually spy on those who might be planning something against Leondis, as things were never quite what they seemed when humans were concerned.

She had grown to really love the human King, in a way that totally surprised the Elven Princess. She still had not given herself to him, and was going to hold out until their wedding night. Short of the act of lovemaking, their passion was strong, and they were already learning the ways of each other as lovers. She started many evenings with Leondis in his rooms, but she slept in her own quarters in the West Wing of the castle, overlooking the Arithe Ocean. Leondis' quarters were in the East Wing, overlooking the capital city and his Kingdom. Many a night she was thankful his quarters were far from her own.

"Have you told the King yet what you plan to do?" Anne waited until all the other ladies had wandered off to their own pockets of conversation in other places in the garden.

"You mean about having a dual wedding?"

"Yes, of course, that's what I mean! What else could I have been dying to ask you all day, but dare not when anyone could hear!" Anne smiled and twisted her scarf around in her hands—a nervous habit that always made Rozlynn smile.

"We started to discuss this last night," she explained, "and then something came up and we did not finish. I will approach him again after the evening meal tonight and make sure he is all right with the decision. I will not ask his permission, since he gave me full authority over all of the wedding plans, but I will need him to tell Minister Nolan, since that man still does not listen to me."

"You know old Nolan means well," Anne defended the minister. "He is not used to having a woman around, that's all. He was King Adon's closest advisor, and Leondis has relegated him to the task of Castle Administrator. That did not sit well with him at first, but he takes his job very seriously, and the castle and the King's estates have never been better managed."

Rozlynn bit her lip before she started to tell about all of the problems she had seen in the way the castle was being run. Having watched her Sister's husband run the Elven Kingdom from Kalystra for several centuries, she knew what needed to be done and what was just window dressing. She would find it necessary to change many things around here, but she had plenty of time to do it.

"Are you still okay with the idea though?" Rozlynn asked again. "I mean, your wedding is your big day, and shouldn't you be married in Eagles Reach?"

"Randolf and I have discussed it at great length," Anne replied, reaching across the small table and taking Rozlynn's hands in her own. "The most exciting wedding of the year will be the Royal Wedding between you and the King. Everyone will want to be here, and of course, Randolf and I would not miss it for anything. If we have our wedding in the spring in Eagles Reach, people will have to make a choice to stay for our wedding or travel here for yours. Can you guess which wedding they will attend? We also want you and the King in our

wedding as I explained, as best man and maid of honor. The only way to guarantee that is to have our wedding here, since travel to Eagles Reach for you and the King so near to your own wedding is not practical. I really don't have any problem sharing my special day, but am more concerned about how you feel about having Randolph and I married alongside you and the King. Are you certain that is what you want?"

"I can think of nothing I would like more, Anne, than to share this event with the two of you," Rozlynn replied, squeezing her hand in confirmation.

"Lady Rozlynn, may I have a moment please?" The voice was that of Drianna, standing in the small door leading to a private parlor the sorceress had taken to occupying as her personal study

"Of course, Drianna," Rozlynn replied. "If you will excuse me, Anne?"

Rozlynn rose and walked over to the small doorway where Drianna motioned for her to come inside. Reluctantly she did so, not really wanting to be lectured by her friend again today.

"Good afternoon, Princess," Rendil greeted Rozlynn as she entered the parlor.

"Rendil," Rozlynn said, smiling, "how nice to see you. What brings you here?"

"To congratulate you on your upcoming wedding, of course," the wizard replied, "and to update you on news from Kalystra."

"He has not told me anything yet." Drianna looked to the wizard with a scowl on her face.

"I thought it best to share the news only once," Rendil replied. "Do you think we could have some refreshments sent in? I am quite famished from my travels."

"Of course," Rozlynn replied and then walked toward the inner door to summon a servant.

"I ordered food and drink already," Drianna interrupted with a sigh. "The wizard does not believe me, but I expect it to arrive shortly."

The Princess opened the door to a startled servant who was just preparing to knock.

"Excuse me, Lady Rozlynn," she stammered, "I was not aware you were here. I brought some food and drink as the woman, um, the Lady Drianna requested, but I will go and get a different selection now. Please, excuse me."

"Wait." Rozlynn stopped the woman from going. "Please leave what you have, and then return to the kitchen for something more substantial for my friend here. He just arrived and will want something more than this."

"Right away, my Lady." The servant left the platter and rushed away to please the Lady. Rozlynn had quickly won the hearts of all the castle staff, and they wanted nothing more than to please their future Queen.

"You see what they bring me?" Drianna said, standing over the small platter of cheese, bread, and dried meat. "I really cannot wait to be out of this place."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Rendil replied as he stacked up several pieces of cheese and meat between slices of the rough wheat bread. "I will need more ale to wash it down, but it will do nicely for now. Thank you."

"The news from Kalystra, Wizard," Drianna demanded.

Rendil waved his hand in the air signaling that his mouth was full, finished the bite, and washed it down with half the mug of ale before speaking.

"The Queen is furious at what you have done, Princess, though that should not come as a surprise."

"No," the Princess replied, dropping into one of the chairs, "not a surprise."

"King Theinial is more understanding, and your niece, Lynntania, is ready to do whatever it takes to protect The Children when they are born. How is that going, anyway?"

"The Children?" Rozlynn questioned, "Are you so certain there will be twins?"

"Of course, aren't you?" the wizard asked, surprised.

"There is no guarantee, of course," Drianna replied, "but if this is the correct Path, then twins are likely."

"You know what that means I hope," Rendil said looking sternly at the Princess. "The twins cannot stay with the King. They must be taken away."

"What?" Rozlynn said in shock. "You cannot be serious? You are not going to take away my children to be raised by the Elves!"

"Not by the Elves, but they cannot be raised by Leondis. Doesn't The Prophecy say something like, *'He will seek them and kill them as they threaten his reign?'*"

"We don't know that refers to Leondis," Rozlynn objected. "That could very well refer to the Dark Wizard. In fact, there are several different interpretations of that very passage."

"We cannot take the risk," Rendil said calmly. "We must be prepared."

Rozlynn rose, walked to the window, and stared out into the garden.

There was a knock on the door, and Rendil announced, "Very good, the food is here!"

Eighteen

The wedding was only a week away. Randolph arrived from Eagles Reach, his second trip since being named Duke. The nobles from Eagles Reach were streaming into the city for the wedding, along with people from all over the Kingdom.

Duke Haren and his wife were arriving later today from Lands End. This was her first trip out of the Duchy since the birth of their daughter. Her health was poor, but she would not miss the Royal Wedding.

Anne and Rozlynn were pleased that they made the decision to have both weddings in the same ceremony. Although the Archbishop was not happy at first, even he came around to the arrangement, and things were coming together nicely.

The wedding was to be held in the large square in front of the castle. Several receptions were planned afterward. One would be in the Royal Ballroom for those very important guests of the King and Queen; one would be in the small ballroom for the Lady Anne and Duke Randolph's invited guests; the third would be held in the square, and the whole city was invited!

Never in the history of Solenta had there been a more magnificent event. This was the first Royal Wedding to be held in the new capital, and the treasury was opened wide. Minister Nolan was beside himself at the cost; however, Leondis was determined to make this the event of the century. No expenses were spared.

"What do you think of all this, Randolph?" the King asked his friend as they strolled the grounds outside the kitchen. Outdoor ovens had been constructed to manage the volume of food that needed to be prepared, and smokers were operating day and night preparing some of the more exotic meat and fish.

"It will be a grand party, Your Majesty," Randolph replied, "as befits the wedding of the King."

"Not just mine, old friend, but the Duke of Eagles Reach is getting married as well you know!" Leondis laughed and slapped his friend on the back.

"True, Your Highness, but only a small number of people will be here because of that. The people are here to see their King joined with a Queen and to watch the next chapter unfold for the Kingdom."

"I hope they don't plan to watch too closely," Leondis said with a twinkle in his eye, "as I plan to make nasty with the Queen shortly after the ceremony!"

Both men laughed in the shared way that old friends do, though Randolph did not doubt the King would start to work on creating an Heir as soon as possible. The Lady Rozlynn was one of the most beautiful and desirable women that Randolph had ever met, and it was clear that she had completely captured Leondis' heart.

"You two rascals should not be here!" The cook came around the corner of one of the large baking ovens, wooden spoon in hand like a dueling sword. "Out of my kitchen, or I'll tan both your backsides!" she announced. The men turned tail and left as quickly as they could, laughing as each of them lifted a piece of fruit from a cart on the way by.

"What is this fruit?" Randolph asked, holding the orange-colored round fruit in his hand. The fruit was heavily skinned, and though he did not know what he grabbed, he followed the King's example as they passed.

"It is called, not surprisingly, an '*orange*,'" Leondis said. "They grow in the region around Al-Ashal to the south, and were sent here in tribute by the leadership council. My Father was working on a number of trade agreements with the Free Cities, and I am determined to see them through. You peel the heavy outer skin, and eat the segmented fruit inside. Watch for seeds though, they are small, hard, and quite bitter if you bite through one."

The men sat at the edge of the kitchen area, just out of sight of the patrolling cook, peeled, and ate their oranges.

"Quite a treat," Randolph said, juice dripping into his short-cropped beard.

"There are enough here for the entire city," the King remarked, "assuming that I don't eat them all before the wedding!"

* * *

"I think perhaps the white vases should go on the left side of the room, and the red vases on the right," Rozlynn instructed the florist. Though no flowers were part of the arrangement yet, their containers were being arranged in all three areas for the receptions.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the little man with the bald head replied.

"I'm not the Queen yet," Rozlynn reminded him.

"No, Your Majesty," the florist replied, bringing a smile to Rozlynn's lips.

"Must you attend to every detail?" The sorceress stood by the doors to the garden, a cup of tea in her hand.

"It keeps my mind occupied," Rozlynn replied, "and helps the time go by. Waiting has never been my strong suit."

"You have never been the patient one, that is certain. Did you speak with Darius?"

"Darius is here?" Rozlynn stopped and looked up at Drianna.

"Yes, I spoke with him yesterday. He is here for the wedding, and, of course, to report back on the festivities."

"I guess I should not be surprised," Rozlynn said, absently re-folding some cloth napkins sitting on a long side table. "I have not left the castle in quite some time, so I would not have run into him."

"He is staying in a room over the Boar's Head Tavern," Drianna offered, "and he wanted me to let you know that."

"Does he think I will be coming to see him?" Rozlynn questioned.

"I don't know what he thinks," the sorceress replied. "I told him I would pass along his message, and I did."

"I sent a bird to my Sister." Rozlynn changed the subject.

"You mean the birds here are still capable of carrying messages?"

"Oh yes," she replied smiling. "They seem to be just waiting for something to do. I have not heard back yet, but it's only been a couple of days."

"What did you tell her?"

"Just that I'm sure I am doing the right thing, and that I love her," the Princess replied.

"I'm certain that will console her," Drianna said sarcastically.

"I needed to say it," Rozlynn replied. The sorceress' sarcasm was not lost on her.

"Another week of this and you will release the spell?"

"I must, yes," the Princess replied, looking absently at the napkin in her hand. "There can be no delay in giving the King an Heir."

* * *

It was nearly midnight when the door to the Boar's Head opened, and a hooded figure entered. There were a few patrons quietly sitting in the common room, and the figure looked them over carefully before proceeding.

Darius looked up from his ale, one he had nursed most of the evening, as the woman came in. She was obviously a woman to his eyes, though he suspected most of the others were not as certain.

"The Princess is not coming," Drianna said, sitting down next to the Elven Hunter, though not removing her hood.

"You told her I wished to see her? That I had a message from the Queen?"

"I told her you were staying here, no more."

"Why didn't you pass along the rest of the message?"

"There is no reason for you to see her before the wedding. You may give me the message, and I will pass it along to her." The sorceress glared out from under her hood. "Though she may not know you are in love with her, it is very clear to me. She doesn't need that in her head right now."

"Though that is not why I am here, what difference would it make if she did know? She is on the path she chose. The magic has bound her to the King as strongly as it bound him to her. Certainly at this point, even if she did love me, it would not matter. The magic would not let her even say it, if what you told me is true."

"She has not released the spell yet," Drianna said quietly.

"What?" Darius was not as discreet. "Why not?"

"You heard me. She has not yet released the magic. What the King feels for her today is genuine, not enhanced by the spell."

"Is she still committed to the task?"

"Yes, completely," Drianna said a little too quickly, "but she felt a need to do it this way, and I did not force her to do otherwise."

The two stared at each other for a while longer, the tension palatable between them.

"She will still do what is necessary," Darius said, not exactly a question, but not a clear statement either.

"Which means she will not be coming here to see you," the sorceress added.

The door to the inn opened and closed silently while the two were deep in conversation. Another hooded figure crossed the room and stepped up to the table.

"Hello, Darius," Princess Rozlynn said from beneath her hood. "It was good of you to come."

Nineteen

"I sent a bird to my Sister," Rozlynn said, sitting now with Darius in his room above the tavern. The Princess dismissed the sorceress who, under protest, left the two alone.

"Apparently, the bird did not arrive before I left the city, Princess," Darius replied, pouring Rozlynn a glass of the local red wine.

"I cannot call off the wedding as my Sister requests, and it does not matter what new information has come to her. She does not believe in The Prophecy, so why would she latch on to these new interpretations?"

"They came from Laurentis," Darius replied.

The oldest living Elf was known to have prophetic dreams; however, he refused to share these with Rozlynn every time she spoke with him. For more than a hundred years of her research, she was unable to get the stubborn Elf to say anything. Now, on the eve of her most important task, he decided to tell her sister about his dreams!

"And you have the details of the new piece of prophecy to tell me?" she asked the Elven Hunter.

"I have it, Princess," he replied. "Though if you would rather not hear it, I will not repeat the message."

Rozlynn rose and walked to the small window. The few lights that still flickered in the city reminded her of how late it was. Darius soon stood behind her, his body not quite touching hers, but his presence strong. His comforting smell washed over her, the scent of pine and deep earthy smells comforting her as they had always done. As she closed her eyes against the feelings rising within, he placed both hands on her shoulders. He spoke softly and gently into her ear.

"You have taken upon yourself a task that will, if successful, ensure the salvation of all who live in the world. Should the Dark Wizard rise again, everything you have learned says evil will prevail, and we will be plunged into a thousand years of suffering."

"Though your words are true," she said, still facing away, "it does not make the task any easier for me."

Rozlynn turned inside the Elven Hunter's arms and pressed her face against his broad chest. She moved her own hands to his shoulders and forced herself not to look into his face. She took several deep breaths and felt his strength as he held her close. They stayed this way for several minutes, the feeling of closeness matched only by the feeling of security. Finally, she pushed him back and looked into his moist eyes.

"This is something I must do, Darius, and though right now I wish for nothing more than to lay in your arms and validate the feelings you have held for me all these years, I must not."

"Princess, I—"

"Shhhh." She pressed a finger against his lips. "I do not wish to cause you any more pain than necessary. This is simply something I must do, and I can let nothing interfere. My personal happiness is not part of my decision, but I am hoping that a life with Leondis is not totally without joy. You know I will live long after he passes, and I must somehow pretend to age along with my human husband and then die. After his eventual death, Drianna tells me the effects of the spell will fade, and eventually I will be able to love another—again. Perhaps then ..."

"That relates to the message the Queen sent me to deliver," Darius said, his eyes reflecting the sadness he felt inside.

"I wish not to hear it," Rozlynn replied. "Just hold me a little while longer, and then I must go."

* * *

Drianna sat in the darkened coffee shop across from the Boar's Head and watched the lights flickering in the upper window. When she saw the outline of the Princess looking out, then the form of Darius outlined behind her, she feared the worst.

It was not long after this when the Princess emerged from the door of the tavern and began the trek back to the castle. The sorceress heaved a sigh of relief. She did not expect that Rozlynn would be gone so quickly if she and Darius were consummating their love. She knew how Darius felt, of course, but Rozlynn's feelings for the Elven Hunter were mixed at best.

Drianna let the Princess disappear up the street, not concerned about her safety, even with the lateness of the hour. Any thugs who thought to cross her would find a woman capable of defending herself in nearly any situation, and one that Drianna knew would be armed with a long and exceptionally sharp dirk.

Entering the building, the sorceress went directly up the stairs and knocked on the Elven Hunter's door.

"Princess? Have you—" Darius interrupted himself as he opened the door to find the sorceress standing in the hall. "What do you want, Drianna?"

"You will tell me the full message from the Queen to the Princess," she stated as she pushed her way into the room.

Darius turned without closing the door and stood with his arms crossed, staring at the woman.

"I will not," he replied, "and you will leave at once."

Drianna held her hands out before her, palms up, and whispered a few words of Wiccan magic. Though he did not know what spell the sorceress was casting, he threw himself across the room to stop whatever it was she was doing. He was too late.

"You will tell me," Drianna said, holding the larger man back within a blue-green sphere that looked like it was made of water. "Or I will leave you locked in this bubble for a month."

Darius stopped struggling against the magic and sat on the floor. The bubble collapsed around him, and he found he could no longer stand.

"You will be quite uncomfortable very soon," she offered, as she crossed the room and closed the door. The spell was tied off and no longer required her attention. "The bubble you see will close in on you as you move around, and once it gets smaller, it cannot be expanded."

In his struggles, Darius only became more tightly bound. He managed to pull his ever-present knife from its sheath and attempted to tear open the bubble. The walls simply opened and closed around the blade, neither resisting nor showing damage.

"What form of magic is this, Witch?" Darius demanded.

"It is simply a binding spell, but one that I can leave unattended for a very long time. I will add another spell that prevents anyone outside of this room from hearing your screams, pay your bill for a month, and walk away from the tavern if you refuse to tell me the full message from the Queen."

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked down on Darius, now forced to sit with his head bent over and one shoulder twisted awkwardly.

"Very well," he replied. "Release me and I'll tell you."

"Tell me, and I'll release you."

Silence greeted the sorceress as the inevitability of the situation finally caught up with the Elf.

"Very well," he began. "The Queen demands that the Princess return to Kalystra at once. Laurentis has agreed to share all of his dreams pertaining to

The Prophecy with her, and together they will chart out a plan for the future. The time is not right for The Children to enter the world, and should she go through with this marriage and attempt to bear these children, she will die in childbirth and The Children will not survive. The Dark Wizard grows powerful in the south, but he is not yet as strong as he needs to be. There is another evil threatening that may be more dire than the wizard. That threat must be assessed and a plan of action put in place. The Queen will give the Princess all of the support she needs; however, she must return to Kalystra at once."

Drianna waited while Darius seemed to be finished, before asking, "Did you tell this to the Princess?"

"No," he replied. "She would not hear it."

"None of it?"

"Only that Laurentis was the source of new information, and that the Queen had ordered her to return."

"You did not speak to her of the likelihood of her death in birthing The Children?"

"No."

Another period of silence, and the tension in the room was now almost physical.

"And did you profess your love to the Princess?"

Darius did not answer right away, but finally he quietly said, "She already knew."

"And did she say ... she loved you?"

"No."

Drianna seemed to be measuring Darius' words, seeking the truth of them. Though there was truth in the statements he made, they seemed to be incomplete. She sighed before continuing.

"You will leave the city in the morning and return to Kalystra. It matters not what your orders are from the King. If I see you again before the wedding, I will take your life. Doubt not that I will do it, or that somehow you may avoid me, as I will not hesitate, and you have no weapons that can harm me. You will die in mere moments, and it will be a very painful death."

She rose from the bed, spoke a single word to release the bubble, and then stepped from the room into the hall beyond.

Darius collapsed on the floor of his room, all his strength gone, his resolve spent. His Princess was lost to him forever, and it appeared there was nothing he could do about it.

Twenty

The wedding was beyond anything that Rozlynn could imagine. People started to fill the square the night before, and everywhere she looked, there were more and more people gathered to witness the grand event. The roofs of surrounding buildings, every balcony, every window, any place where anyone could catch a glimpse of the proceedings, had a person waiting to see their King joined with their new Queen.

The nobles had places of honor, of course, lining the central aisle where Rozlynn would present herself in her wedding dress to those gathered. The dress was incredible, and the royal dressmaker, a new position created just for the Queen-to-be, had crafted a gown of unequalled beauty.

The white satin bodice was snug but not overly tight. It showed off Rozlynn's ample curves, and though the plunge-cut neck did not hide much of her bosom, it was elegantly cut and did not make the Princess feel whorish, as many such dresses had in the past. Her gown flared just above her waist, and the mix of chiffon and satin complemented her every movement with its flowing, almost liquid-like effects.

The train was long, and the pearls that accented the gown from the neckline to the waist flowed in sinuous lines of opalescent reflection. Long enough to require several attendants, the train appeared to sweep along under its own power as the Lady Rozlynn practically floated past the guests.

The Lady Anne and Duke Randolph's ceremony completed not long before Rozlynn emerged from the main entrance to the castle. Due to the major pomp and circumstance involved in her own presentation, Rozlynn was unable to be a part of the proceedings for her new best friend. She watched from a small window in Minister Nolan's office, next to the castle entrance, as the Lady and the Duke exchanged their vows. Leondis was by the Duke's side as his best man, and he beamed with delight as his friend was joined forever with the woman who had so completely captured his heart.

Leondis stood at the base of several wide steps at the end of a long red carpet waiting for his bride-to-be. The entire length of the carpet was strewn with rose petals, though it was not clear to Rozlynn where so many could have come from

this early in the year. The weather was pleasant, but the roses around the castle were not yet in bloom.

The Royal Orchestra played a song that was only played at royal weddings, and as a result had never before been heard in Solenta. The music was foreign to Rozlynn, but in a strange way, it was very comforting as she let the satiny rose petals caress her bare feet beneath her gown. Though her dressmaker was horrified that the Lady Rozlynn was not going to be wearing slippers, Rozlynn saw no reason for it, as it would be impossible for anyone to see her feet anyway.

On reaching the steps, Leondis offered the Lady his arm as they mounted the wide steps together to stand before the Archbishop. Randolph stood to one side of the King, smiling broadly for his friend. Anne stood to the side of Rozlynn, still the blushing bride in her demure, pastel gown.

The next few minutes were a blur for the Lady, as the many steps in the practiced ceremony uniting King with Queen were carried out. She spoke the words as appropriate, answered the questions when asked, knelt, stood, knelt again, and finally, when it was all over, she bowed her head slightly to accept the crown of the Queen of the Realm.

The gathered crowd erupted in cheers and applause as Leondis and Rozlynn kissed passionately before them. There was no shame in this in the eyes of the Queen, and her love for this man, this human King she was once to trick into marrying her, was deep, strong and true.

The archbishop announced in a loud clear voice, "And now, by the power of The Trinity and the blessings of the Church, I pronounce you man and wife, King and Queen, Guardians of the Realm, Protectors of the People. Long may you live in blissful harmony, and long may you reign."

The crowd again burst into cheers and applause, as King and Queen stood gazing out over their people, the city, and the realm that they would rule together to the end of their days.

"Let the celebration begin!" Leondis shouted to the joyous assembly. Though it seemed impossible for them to cheer any louder, the roar climbed to unimaginable heights.

* * *

"Where's Randolph?" Leondis bellowed. The reception had been going on for several hours, and Leondis was well into his wine.

"He is still in the small ballroom, Your Majesty," Minister Nolan replied. "He will be joining you here shortly, as was the plan."

"Tell him to come now! I want to dance with that bride of his!" the King shouted in his enthusiasm.

Rozlynn stood just outside the doors to the ballroom talking quietly with Drianna.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself," the sorceress said.

"I am, yes. Why wouldn't I?"

"You have danced with practically every man here by now, I think," Drianna said disapprovingly.

"A human wedding tradition, Drianna," the Queen replied, "nothing more."

"The way some of those men leer at you and look down your dress, I would think your husband would take offense, even if you do not!"

"It is perfectly innocent, I assure you. The nobles are simply trying to gain favor with their compliments and show how well they can dance. I am glad I practiced these wedding dances, as they can be quite complicated."

The Queen was flushed and more than just a little influenced by all the fine wine. The spread of food was spectacular, and as soon as one platter emptied, another one took its place.

"Rozlynn." Drianna softened her tone. "I have a wedding gift for you."

"A gift?" The Queen perked up. "Seriously, Drianna, there is no need for this."

"Nevertheless, I have a gift for you, following the traditions of my people." The sorceress pulled out a small, plain box and handed it to the Queen.

Rozlynn smiled and opened the box, to find a most remarkable bracelet inside. There were two cut stones, one ruby and one emerald, set in a twisted silver wire band. Two heavy wires wove themselves through intricate patterns along both sides of the stones and around her wrist.

"It's spectacular! Thank you, Drianna!" Rozlynn pressed the bracelet over her wrist.

"Wear it at all times, Princess," the sorceress replied. "It will block your sister or her daughter from scrying you, and will augment your own Elven abilities. The Change suppressed many of your gifts, but this bracelet will help bring some of them back."

"Thank you." Rozlynn hugged the Gaerwitch close, her eyes tearing up slightly. "Did you try the dishes from the Free Cities, Drianna?" Rozlynn asked, changing the subject. "One of the new cooks is from there, and she brought her own recipes and spices with her. They are really quite spectacular."

"Yes, I ate," the sorceress replied, more coldly than she intended.

* * *

"Randolf!" Leondis bellowed from inside the ballroom. "I thought you would never get here."

"The Duke and Duchess of Eagles Reach," Nolan announced as Randolf and Anne entered from the main hall.

"Please, Nolan," Randolf said, placing a hand on the minister's shoulder.

"Protocol demands it, Duke Randolf."

"Just this once, Nolan, but please, no more."

Nolan just tipped his head.

"Randolf! Bring that bride of yours over here. It is time she dances with her King!"

Randolf smiled and escorted the Duchess to the middle of the dance floor where the King held court with several of the single ladies in attendance. The Lady Victoria managed just about every other dance with the King, but no one was really paying any attention.

"Your Majesty," Randolf said, bowing, "may I introduce you to the Duchess of Eagles Reach."

Leondis reached out and practically swept Anne off her feet as he pulled her into a dance that was well underway already. Randolf just smiled and seeing the Queen with Drianna out in the garden, approached the two ladies.

"Your Majesty," he said as he approached. "Forgive my interruption, but I believe you owe me a dance."

"It will be my great pleasure, Duke Randolf," Rozlynn replied, smiling at Drianna and taking the Duke's arm in her own.

The sorceress watched them disappear into the ballroom with a sour look on her face.

"It must be tonight, Princess," she said to no one.

"Tonight?" the voice was a man's and came from deeper in the garden.

"Oh it's you." She lowered her hands. She had instinctively raised them in a warding gesture.

"You plan to cast one of your Wiccan spells my way, do you?" Rendil asked the sorceress as he stepped into the light.

"I did not see you earlier." Drianna ignored the question.

"I was below for the ceremony—such an extravagant affair. I'm afraid it is much more than I am used to. I take it from your comment that the Princess has not yet released the spell."

"No, not yet."

"What is stopping her?" Rendil asked, not quite demanding but the urgency obvious in his voice.

"She wished the King to marry for love, but that is over, and now she must proceed."

"Did she get the message from Laurentis? Apparently he suddenly decided he needed to share his dreams with the Queen."

"No, she did not. Darius brought the message here, but she refused to hear it. I forced him to tell me, but she does not know."

"She must suspect," Rendil said quietly. "She has studied The Prophecy longer than anyone else alive. Darius will surely tell her."

"I sent Darius away. She suspects," Drianna replied, "however there are multiple paths where The Children are born, and not all of them—"

"Result in her death?" Rendil interrupted. "Yes, I know. Everything I have confirmed so far however, leads to only one possible result. We must be prepared to take The Children away when they are born. I am counting on your help there, Drianna."

"You will have to find another to help you, Wizard," the sorceress replied. "The Princess made me agree to leave Solenta after she releases the spell."

"She what?"

"She does not want me around her, and I agreed."

"Now that will pose more of a challenge." The wizard pulled a pipe from his sleeve and called up a magical flame to bring it to life. A long pull, followed by a slow exhalation, and the sorceress was standing alone in the garden once more.

"Wizard?" She shook the cobwebs from her head and looked around, but Rendil was nowhere to be seen. "Was he really here?" she asked herself. "I hate wizards."

Twenty-One

"May I introduce my brother? Brother Cadresean of the Abbey in Alnen, meet Queen Rozlynn Tarbane," Anne was arm in arm with a portly monk in brown robes. They stood directly in front of the small table that the Queen used for her weekly Ladies Tea.

"My Queen." The portly monk bowed as deeply as his enormous belly would allow. Rozlynn smiled as the sun reflected off his bald pate.

"Please, call me Rozlynn," she replied. "Pull up a chair and join us, Brother. That is if you are staying." She looked to Anne.

"I am afraid we cannot stay today," Anne replied. "I'm taking my brother to meet with a midwife from Eagles Reach, who came to the city for the wedding. The monks at the Abbey in Alnen do not currently have the services of a midwife, and they wish to have her train someone for them."

"I thought that the Church trained midwives in the Saint Julean Abbey?"

"We normally do," Brother Cadresean replied, "but the Abbey has been going through some remodeling, and there are very few openings at present. I'm afraid we will not be getting our own midwife for quite some time, and there are several women from near the Alnen and Tibouli Abbeys that are going to give birth very soon."

"Then you two run along," Rozlynn said, shooing them away with her hand. "I will catch up with you later, Anne."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Anne said mockingly, bowing to her friend before leading her brother out through the garden's East Gate.

"She seems like a very nice woman," Cadresean said as the King's Elite closed the gate behind them.

"She is a wonderful woman, and a dear friend," Anne replied, smiling. "She will also tame Leondis and bring a woman's touch to the way this Kingdom is run. Something that we need desperately."

"Who needs a women's touch?"

Anne slapped her brother playfully on the shoulder. "Coming from a monk in a celibate order!"

* * *

When Anne and her brother entered the common room of the Motte and Bailey Inn, Rendil, Karoel, Randolph, and two others that Anne did not know were already there.

"Welcome, Brother." Karoel stood and shook the monk's hand, extending a full tankard of mead in his other.

Cadresean was a little confused at the size of the meeting, but he gladly accepted the drink and dropped into a chair.

"Let me introduce everyone," Duke Randolph announced, "since I believe I'm the only one everyone already knows. This is the Wizard Rendil, whom you may know by reputation." Rendil waved his pipe absently in front of him, as Randolph continued. "Next to him is Ornwen, the midwife from Eagles Reach. The man next to her is Woolen, a long time friend and retainer to my family. Ornwen is his sister-in-law. Karoel, a former comrade in arms, served with me out of Northcastle. I believe everyone here knows my wife, Anne, and this is her brother, Brother Cadresean from the Abbey in Alnen."

Acknowledgments and greetings circulated around the table. More mead and some light snacks arrived, and Randolph turned to Rendil and requested he begin. The innkeeper latched the door, and Brother Cadresean realized that the large common room was empty except for their table.

"First, thank you all for coming," Rendil said, tapping out the remnants of his pipe on the sole of his shoe. "Randolf, do you have any more of that fine tabac?"

Randolf dug into his pocket and tossed the wizard a pouch. "Please go on, Wizard."

Stuffing his pipe full and then lighting it with a snap of his fingers, Rendil continued. "I am not sure how well all of you know your history, but I have a story to tell, and trust me when I say that every word is the truth. Please make yourselves comfortable, as this will take a little while."

Cadresean looked to his sister who nodded her head as she took hold of her husband's arm in her own. "Pay very close attention," she instructed. "The future of the world depends on what we decide here today."

* * *

When Rendil finished, he once again lit his pipe and drained his honey-mead, signaling for another. It was now dark outside, with several hours having passed in the telling. Though Karoel, Randolph, and Anne had heard much of what the wizard said before, they were completely enthralled by his story once again.

"I cannot help but think that this is all some fairytale," Karoel said, not for the first time.

"You, of all people, should know better," Rendil replied. "You fought Goblins in the North for many years."

"I get it," Karoel replied, "but it's easy to believe that Goblins exist. They are simply vile creatures who live underground and attack humans when they can. To go from there to Elves, Dwarves, wizards—no offense—dragons, and magical talismans that tear apart the world, that is all just so much harder to accept."

"This Prophecy that you speak of," Cadresean asked. "Just exactly where does it come from? Is this some kind of magic?"

"I am a little surprised you don't know about The Prophecy already, Brother," Rendil replied. "One of the foremost Prophecy Scholars is Brother Hewin from Caergana. He is of your order after all."

"I know Hewin," Cadresean said, "though I've never really spoken with him. He is somewhat of an odd fellow."

"People say that about everyone in your order," Randolph replied, "no offense intended."

"None taken, Duke Randolph," Cadresean replied, smiling. "So the story was interesting, but what does it have to do with us?"

"The part I did not tell you, the part that will draw all of us together in a life and death struggle, is that Queen Rozlynn is in fact an Elven Princess, and it is she who will bear The Children of the Prophecy to the King."

"What?" Cadresean questioned. "The Queen is an Elven Princess? How can that possibly be? If your story is true, and I do not doubt all of it, Elves only look similar to us, not identical. I've been up close to the Queen, and she is as human in appearance as you or I—though much more beautiful, of course."

"She has been altered by a very ancient form of magic to appear human," Rendil replied. "Not only that, but she also has a powerful spell that will enable her to become pregnant through her coupling with Leondis, and it will lead to twins."

"But if that is true," Karoel asked this time, "and the Queen will only become pregnant under the influence of magic, how can that be fate? How can that be part of The Prophecy?"

"The paths of prophecy are not always completely clear, I admit," Rendil replied. "Though as The Trinity gives us the freedom to exercise our free will, so does prophecy allow us to take whatever steps necessary to see that certain paths are followed. Fate controls many things along the path of prophecy, but ultimately, free will controls much more."

"If the Queen is going to bear these twins, The Children of the Prophecy," Ornwen spoke for the first time, "then I don't see the problem. After all, isn't that

one of the steps necessary to keep us on the right, what did you call it? The right path of prophecy to prevent the darkness from coming?"

"The Queen will die in childbirth," Rendil said flatly, "and The Children cannot be raised by the King. They must be taken away and raised in safety. We will be tasked with accomplishing that."

"If the Queen should die," Randolph spoke now, "and I don't know how you can know that, but if she should die, then there is no safer place for them to be raised than in the castle of the King."

"Not according to The Prophecy, Duke Randolph. They must be taken away from the King and raised by humans, but remain hidden from the King at the same time. If they stay with the King, The Prophecy says they will die as well."

Everyone around the table was quiet for a few minutes, when finally Ornwen spoke up. "Then we must plan for how to do this, should the Queen die while giving birth. If she does not die in childbirth, Wizard, then I assume she can raise her own children and they are not these Children of the Prophecy."

"That is correct, Ornwen. If the Queen survives the birthing, then we are not on the path of prophecy where her children play a critical role in saving the world."

"I hope for the sake of my best friend," Anne said, tears now flowing freely, "that she was wrong, and that she is not the catalyst for this path of prophecy. Is it wrong to want that? Is it wrong to want my friend to live and raise her children like any other mother?"

"It is not wrong, Lady Anne," Rendil replied gently. "It is in the hands of the Gods, however."

"And I will be her midwife," Ornwen said stubbornly, "and give her the best possible care. She will not die if I have anything to say about it."

"I would not want it any other way," Rendil replied. "There is one other thing," he went on. "Rozlynn apparently does not know that she will die in childbirth, if we are on the right path."

"Then we must tell her!" Anne insisted.

"No," the wizard said sternly. "We must not. If she should decide not to give birth because of the personal risk involved, and this is the right prophecy path, then all will be lost. We will have no chance of defeating the darkness. I'm sorry, but that is how it must be."

Twenty-Two

It had been just over two months since the wedding, and most, but not all of the guests, had returned to their estates scattered throughout the Kingdom. A few remained to try to gain favor with the new Queen. Gifts for the couple continued to arrive and included some exotic fabrics from the Free Cities, which Rozlynn recognized as Elven silk. The trade between her people and the Free Cities continued, even while both denied the existence of the other.

"You can delay no longer." Drianna sat with the Queen in the sorceress' parlor off the garden. The morning sun streamed through the windows, brightening the room, if not the mood. "There is no reason to delay and every reason for you to move forward, Princess."

"You must stop calling me that, Drianna," Rozlynn said, sipping tea and nibbling on a sweet cake. "I am Queen now, and we do not want anyone hearing you call me Princess, since no one knows of my life before arriving here."

"You want me to go?" the sorceress replied. "Then you release the spell. That was our deal. You release the spell, and I will leave you to live your life with the human."

"His name is Leondis," Rozlynn shot back. "You may address him as the King, His Majesty, or when we are together, you may call him Leondis. Please show respect."

Drianna looked at the Princess with a scowl on her face, though the other woman did not appear to notice.

"You know I can compel you to do this," Drianna said. "It would not be a difficult spell for me, and you would not control when or where it would happen."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"If you do not address this soon, today, then yes, I certainly will dare!"

The women glared at each other across the small table, the tension rising in the room. A knock on the door broke the silence.

"Your Majesty," a woman's voice said from the other side of the door. "The King is requesting your presence at once in his chambers."

Rozlynn rose and started toward the door.

"Today, Princess," the sorceress repeated.

* * *

"You must leave at once?" Rozlynn asked Leondis, as he selected some clothing from his wardrobe for his manservant to pack.

"I decided only this morning that I should attend the new Duke for a tour of the Duchy," the King explained. "He and Anne are ready to return to Eagles Reach, and this seemed like an opportune time to validate his appointment with a Royal Visit as well."

"It's just that we have only been married two months." She stepped up close to him and placed her hands on his shoulder. "I am not ready to let you go quite yet." Her eyes twinkled and Leondis knew exactly what she wanted.

"You are insatiable, my love," he said, pulling her in for a kiss. "The business of the Kingdom goes on however, and I am after all the King." She pushed back playfully and then pulled him after her toward the bed.

"Not now," he said, a little more sternly than he meant, releasing her hands and moving back toward the closet. "Randolf is already packed and waiting for me to join them."

"Then let him wait," she replied. "You are the King, not Duke Randolf."

"Roz." Leondis had naturally picked up the familiar name that Rozlynn lived with her whole life. "Please don't make this more difficult than it already is."

"Then take me with you," she insisted. "If you are to go with Randolf on a tour of the Duchy, then I should be there as well. You can show off your new Queen to the people at the same time."

The King stopped sorting through his clothing and stared into the closet before answering.

"It is also time that you take a leadership role here in Solenta, my love. While I am away on the boring business of the Kingdom, someone will need to run things here. The Queen of the Realm is expected to take that role whenever the King is called away."

The Queen stayed back and let Leondis select several more pieces of clothing, which he tossed on the bed for the servants to pack. She looked toward the one remaining servant and signaled him to leave the two of them alone.

When the room was empty except for the King and Queen, Rozlynn stepped in front of Leondis and took his hands in hers.

"Roz, please," he said again, starting to pull away gently.

"Alnauk-verak, destian-indain." The Queen released the spell.

The light fled the room accompanied by a clap of thunder. Rozlynn's head spun, and it felt like someone had filled it with wool. Her mouth went dry, her ears rang, and her eyes watered.

A warmth then flooded over her, not unlike that magical feeling when two people reach the pinnacle of lovemaking. Wiping her eyes, she saw that Leondis had fallen to his knees in front of her, a look of surprise on his face.

She dropped to her knees to be next to him.

"Leondis?" she said softly, her voice hoarse and her throat dry.

"My love?" He focused his eyes on his Queen. "Wha—"

"Don't speak," she interrupted him. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him fervently. The King responded with passion unlike any that Rozlynn had experienced in her long life. They made love there on the floor, then again on the bed, then across the divan, and finally fell asleep in each other's arms curled up on a great bear rug in front of a cold fireplace.

* * *

When Duke Randolph went to find the King later that afternoon, he was summarily dismissed. The King had changed his mind, would not be traveling to Eagles Reach, and Randolph was to leave at once.

"The King is not joining us?" The question came from the Lady Victoria, one of the women who had tried to win the King's heart at the Royal Ball many months ago.

She was from Eagles Reach, and Randolph was nearly certain Leondis was going to choose her as Queen—until the wizard brought in the Elven Princess, of course.

"He is not coming, no," Randolph said, as he walked forward to the lead carriage he would be sharing with his wife.

Victoria looked longingly up at the castle, as the coachman ushered her inside and closed the door. She continued to stare out her window as the line of carriages made their way through the inner and outer gates of the castle and entered the city of Solenta. She hoped that Leondis would appear, riding after the small caravan on a grand stallion, and join the Lady in her carriage. If she could not be the Queen, she would settle for being the King's mistress. This position she already filled on those nights when the Queen was not willing to see to the needs of her new husband. A month away from the Queen was more than enough time to make their arrangement permanent.

Though she must return to Eagles Reach, Victoria swore she would come back to Solenta to be with the King, in whatever role he would allow her to fill.

* * *

The Lady Drianna rode alone through the gates of the city, leaving once the spell was released, as she had promised the Princess. Though darkness was falling on the city, the sorceress feared no one on the road. She led a sturdy packhorse with the meager possessions she brought with her and those she had accumulated in the ten months she lived in Solenta.

She managed to find some interesting potions and powders in an apothecary shop. These came from the jungles in the far south, past the Free Cities and across the Great Desert. As she rode along deep in her own thoughts, another rider came up beside her. She startled briefly until she smelled the familiar pipe smoke that seemed to always trail from the wizard.

"Rendil," she said to the shape in the darkness.

"Drianna," he replied. "It is done then?"

"It is done," she replied.

"We have more work to do now."

"You have more to do, Wizard. My part is finished."

"You cannot just walk away now, Drianna," Rendil insisted.

"I can, and I will," the sorceress replied. "I've given up much. Much more than you know, and I have no more to give."

"The Prophecy says otherwise."

"I will not let prophecy rule my life," she said, still looking down the road.

"If only we had that option," Rendil replied. "The Prophecy has its Queen and will soon have its Children. None of us can escape what fate has in store for us."

"We can try," Drianna replied, as tears streamed down her face in the darkness.

The End

This ends [Prophecy's Queen](#), the prequel novella to the [The Triadine Saga](#).

In the first book of the series, [The Watcher's Keep](#), we join the twins shortly after their sixteenth birthday. Leondis has discovered the truth about their birth and sent his personal guard to hunt them down. The adventures begin, as The Children of the Prophecy face seemingly insurmountable obstacles on their way to fulfilling their destiny.

Join us as the adventure continues!

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Thank you in advance!

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