



PROLOGUE

Who am I? For what purpose do I exist?

Kailar recorded in his notebook. He paused and sighed. The sigh that left him was layered, difficult, and full of things he could not name. He shifted his weight as his eyes naturally drifted to the scenes around him. Looking around, studying the capital he had once thought of as the jewel of the realm, memories of bygone days flashed before his eyes. He had only been in the capital for three days, but he had seen enough of the place. The once gleaming capital, Constaria, was completely desolate. It was a stark contrast to what he remembered.

The orderly streets, the well-dressed citizens, the shining buildings had all been replaced by devastation. Filth littered the walkways, and only vagrants roamed the streets openly. Others hid under their cloaks as they wandered by. Kailar grimaced and slammed his fist against the wall. He picked up his notebook and began writing again.

I did all that I could. I tried so very hard to show others the light. Out of my efforts, I learned only one truth. People are disappointing. They are not like the characters I watched in plays, nor the ones I read about in novels. People are stupid, vile, and above all, selfish. What is my purpose now? I wanted to strive for a better humanity. Now I ask myself, is there any worth to it? Is there any point striving for those who do not deserve it? I hope I am able to come to a resolution about this soon. Otherwise, I fear the worst. I am purposeless — I might as well die.

– Kailar 1823 LC

The scratching of his quill ceased. A sound broke his rhythm — one he knew all too well. The rhythm of marching boots, the dull clatter of armour, the distant mutterings. They all signalled the approach of guards. Their presence reminded him of the only reason he had left.

Vengeance.

Kailar waited for the guards to pass by. He had been studying their movements for three days. This was the last rotation. They were making their way up to the palace to relieve the others already stationed there. Those stationed above would now be making their way down, and there, in that turning of paths, a gap would open. A short one but enough — just enough — for him to slip through.

They did not look at him at all. His tattered cloak had served him well. In the past, wearing such a thing, in such a place, would have drawn every eye. But things were different now. His unkempt attire allowed him to vanish into the nameless, faceless crowd and appear ordinary, invisible. Someone to be passed over. Forgotten.

A cluster of similarly cloaked figures moved close to the guards. Kailar slipped into their midst and let their bodies conceal him. As he joined the crowd, he gazed at the shimmering backs of the armoured men. Their polished iron breastplates, rounded helmets, and long swords were a sight very familiar to him. He had been one of them not so long ago.

These soldiers were what remained of the royal guard, the sworn protectors of the realm, yet they had stood idle as it fell to ruin. In truth, they too were merely puppets of those whose actions, or lack thereof, had brought about

this decay. The sight of them, and of the city itself, made Kailar wince.

We make a mockery of the old traditions of the ancient empire. We are unworthy to be called their descendants. We have turned our backs on all that the glorious empire once stood for. Virtue, piety, justice. All is lost in our present world.

The guards turned a corner and continued along the road leading to the Palace grounds, the place he had once called home. The crowd he had been following began to move in the opposite direction, and so, he parted from them, trailing the guards at a distance. Though the city had changed in its appearance, the layout of its streets and passageways had not. He knew them well, better than most.

He slipped behind a building by the side of the road and made his way through a damp, narrow alleyway he had passed through many times before. The passage led to a flight of side stairs that climbed toward the palace gates. For the past two days, he had observed the guards carefully. They always took the winding main road up. He knew he would not be disturbed on the stairway. It would take them twice as long to reach the top, giving him more than enough time to find a way inside.

Kailar hurried up the overgrown steps, ascending several at a time. Midway, his foot slipped on a loose rock, and he

nearly fell backward. He steadied himself just in time and looked down, wincing at the thought of falling. His concern was not for injury but for failure. He had waited three long days for this opportunity, and he could not afford to waste it. The Palace, he had seen, was loosely guarded.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, he was relieved to see that the lesser-known entrance was unguarded. He crawled out from the rose bushes that overgrew the path and ran toward the hidden entrance of the Palace. The grounds were deserted. He had expected emptiness, yet the quietness felt strangely out of place. There was not a single soul about. Only birds called from the trees, and insects hummed from the hedges. The sky bowed toward dusk, and then, from behind a stupendous cloud, she emerged. Selene, the moon. She, who had been his guide and constant observer, stepped out into the world as she often did during moments that mattered. He pictured the moon as an eye, an eye for the gods to observe the world — eternally distant yet ever-present. Her bright white light washed his face, and he clenched his fist. *I must do this. I must kill him.*

Kailar ran his hand along the cold stone wall, searching for the hidden switch among the ordinary stones. He remembered it from long ago, marked by a faint trace of

moss that set it apart from the rest. His fingers brushed against it at last. He pressed firmly, and the brick sank inward with a soft clink. He pushed at the wall beside it, but it held firm — bound by the stubborn growth of twisting vines. Stepping back, he drove his heel into it. The concealed door shuddered as it gave way, vines snapping as they tore free. It slammed open with a heavy thud, the sound echoing down the unseen corridor beyond.

Kailar leaned forward and peered into the void. Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and with it came a flood of memory. He saw himself in the past, slipping through that same path with laughter echoing behind him. The vision faded as quickly as it came, leaving only the ache of remembrance. A sudden melancholy took hold of him, and he smiled faintly, remembering all that had been lost.

He walked through the winding, dark corridors of the Palace. The air was heavy with dust and decay. Some of the windows were broken and boarded up with crooked planks of wood. He passed them without a second glance. His purpose was fixed. He was searching for a single room — the source of all corruption in Albion.

Just as he was about to step into the main hall, something in him stirred. A distant urging from the depths of memory pulled him toward another corridor. He stopped and looked down the dimly lit hallway, uncertain

for a moment. Then, as if compelled by a force beyond reason, he followed it.

His pace quickened as he moved deeper into the passage. Shadows pressed close around him, and with each step, memories began to seep through the cracks of his mind. The sounds of those who had once lived within these walls rose faintly in his ears — their voices, their light conversations, the simple joys of a life that was once his. He had been happy then. They all had been.

The warmth of recollection turned into anger. That time was all gone now, scattered into the dusts of memory. Nothing of his past remained. That part of his life was finished, and he knew that it would never return.

As he walked the corridor toward his old room, a strange haze fell over him. His mind wavered between dream and waking thought, and for a fleeting moment, a single lucid thought pierced through. *Why am I here? What force has brought me back to this decaying place?*

He knew the answer. It was the burning thought that had haunted him since the great battle, the same fervour that refused to die. It was not chance, nor fate, but a will that blazed within him and would not let him rest.

It was the belief that he, above all others, bore the duty to restore order to a world that had lost its way. That duty began here, in a nation that was not even his own. The

land's decay, its chaos and ruin, all of it stemmed from the deceit of a single man. In him, Kailar saw the source from which every shadow had spread. If he could destroy him, then everything else would correct itself. He knew this to be true, not by reason, but by an unshakeable conviction that rose from the depths of his being.

But this was not the time to be lost in reverie. The memories that tugged at him from the dark corners of the Palace and beyond were nothing but shadows now, meaningless fragments of a life that could never return. What was he hoping to find here? The city's silence had already told him the answer. Those who might have once greeted him with warmth and kindness were gone. Some had fled. Others had perished. None remained. Only he was left. And so he had nothing to lose. The path ahead, however grim, was the only one that remained to him. His purpose was clear.

With a steady breath, Kailar turned sharply and began to walk back the way he had come, his steps echoing softly through the hollow corridors of the Palace.

Slowly, clarity returned. The trance that had held him for days, perhaps weeks, loosened its grip, and Kailar felt the world come back into focus. The Palace was empty in a way that no ordinary absence could explain. Those who belonged here were not merely gone — their presence had

been erased. Yet this place was not completely abandoned — the seat of power remained, evident by the attendance of the guards outside. From that, Kailar had his answer. The man who had broken the land would not abandon the throne. If he were here, he would be nearby. If he was nearby, then only a handful of guards would lie between Kailar and him. That meant the task was possible.

He thought of various methods and dismissed them all in turn. Slit the throat from behind. Bash the skull with his bare hands. Stab the heart. Stab the throat. Drive his knife into the skull. Each image rose and fell like a tide. None felt right. He did not yet know the shape of the kill, but he trusted that the moment would reveal the method when it came. For now, he had to move — to find the room that contained the vile man.

When he reached the throne room, the sight of it halted him. Time had not dimmed its darkness. That same malignant presence seeped from every stone, every arch, every symbol that adorned the distant walls. The room was designed to look like a cathedral. Arches rose and folded into one another, supported by tall columns whose carved facades caught the waning light. High above, round stained panes scattered colour into the marble, looking like glowing eyes peering into the hall. A broad staircase led to a dais where the throne stood, austere on its platform — a

worn crimson carpet ran down the steps like a river of blood frozen mid-flow.

There was complete silence inside the hall. Every footfall answered back. Every breath lingered in the air. Kailar paused at the threshold and lifted his gaze to the blood-red cross of Lucerian that loomed above the throne.

The sight of it drew his mind to Constarius, the man after whom the city was named. Yet Constarius was nothing beside Kaisar of Ascania. Kaisar was the root of kingship, of power, of rule itself. He was the mould from which all rulers since had been cast, though none had filled it completely. Kailar thought of him now and wondered if his own name drew its origin from Kaisar, or whether it was merely another one of those strange cosmic coincidences which had haunted his life thus far.

He remembered the paintings he had seen in Hestrisis — Kaisar seated proudly on a makeshift throne on a battlefield, his arrogant, unyielding gaze fixed upon his fallen enemy. There was something divine in that posture, something that made all lesser men bow, not out of fear, but reverence.

That is the essence of authority, he thought, the purest form of masculinity — to command not only through strength, but through certainty of purpose.

In that image lives the idea of brotherhood, men united under one will, bound by a cause greater than themselves. That is what drives humanity forward — the belief in something higher beyond desire or comfort. The bond of those who serve a worthy ideal is the greatest bond there is. Men who belong to such ideals will turn away from comforts they might have once worshipped, for they have found something greater to die for. And yet the harmony and light that women bring into the world is what all of this is for. It is the very joy of life that makes it worth living.

In this world most women are twisted from a very young age, raised to believe they stand alone and are not part of a greater sisterhood. They are taught that they are beneath men, that god is singular and a man, and that women are his mindless servants. The Ascanians did not see it in that way. Women too were Gods, some of the wisest, the most powerful. Flora... Venaria... Dianaria... Mineserva... Too few women remain who embody their ideals. Instead, in this world, women are objects, bred to claw and scheme and stumble over one another in the worship of vanity.

Kailar winced and dug his nails into his palm.

It need not be that way! The lies that have kept the world asleep must be shattered! Truth must prevail!

Humanity must open its eyes! True brotherhood, true sisterhood... that is still possible... is it not?

A darkness overcame his mind and so he shifted his thought to more impersonal matters. He thought then of Kaisar's enemy, Velmorix, and how, when surrounded, he and his men sent away all of their women so that they might stand undistracted against Kaisar's unstoppable legions. Only one man since had come close to that aura of destiny, that irresistible command over the hearts of men and women. L'Aigle of Hestrisis. Others had risen in small kingdoms, had held power for fleeting moments, but their strength never reached beyond their borders.

Only a few, such as Kaisar and L'Aigle, had shaped the world itself through sheer force of will. And then there was Relith — the man nearest to his own age — who had dared to resurrect the fallen traditions of ancient Ascania. He too had fallen, spectacularly, but not before turning the world upon its head within the span of mere decades.

Yet even Kaisar and L'Aigle had failed. They all had. Even Iskandar of Makedonia, that god clothed in mortal flesh, who, in one blazing lifetime, achieved what countless men could not in a thousand.

They had all fallen before they reached the full height of what they were meant to be.

All great men throughout history have failed, Kailar realised. But I cannot. I will not. The gods will not allow it. My story is only just beginning. Or is it?

For an instant, doubt entered him. *Is this conviction merely something I tell myself to keep me moving through these ruins?*

He stared up once more at the terrible crimson cross, at its shadow cast across the empty throne, and wondered if destiny still watched him — or if it had already passed him by.

Kailar moved on from the throne room and began to search the adjoining chambers. Each door he opened revealed the same emptiness, rooms that were either ransacked or left completely undisturbed. Then he came upon one he had never before entered, though something about it seemed strangely familiar to him.

Only when his eyes caught the gleam of swords and spears mounted on the walls did he realise. This was the room of that formidable man, that invincible, brilliant man. *Are you dead now, Sir, like everyone else?*

A faint shimmer of light slipped through a crack in the shutter and fell across the low bed, dividing the room in two. For a moment, Kailar could almost see him there, seated at the edge, sharpening his gladius. Always in

armour. His dark hair falling across his face until he raised his head, revealing his deathly gaze.

The light, and the vision that accompanied it, dissolved as quickly as they had come, leaving only darkness. The room was empty.

Kailar stepped further in and looked around. This room, it seemed, had escaped the ruin that had consumed the rest. Everything was remarkably preserved as if the ghost of that invincible man still guarded this place.

He lingered, touching the surfaces, opening drawers, tracing his fingers across the dust that veiled the man's possessions. There was nothing of sentiment here — no tokens, no letters, no sign of a life once lived, only the ordinary instruments of a soldier's existence.

He crossed to the far cupboard, fingers skimming blindly along its cluttered edge until they struck the back of a large wooden frame, faced away. Kailar stilled, then leaned in and held the corners gently, both hands steady, careful, reverent, as if handling something sacred. Slowly, he turned it over.

Immediately, a hollow pain formed in his chest — a sudden, long-forgotten sadness arrived without warning and left behind a chasm in some unreachable part of him.

The frame contained a striking painting.

The painting was both dark and luminous. It was rendered in shades of deep green, ghostly blue, and black. It was the most extraordinary image he had ever seen. The knight stood there, one arm upon the shoulder of a woman dressed in dark green. There was light in his eyes, a subtle joy in his face — so unlike the man Kailar remembered.

Kailar let his gaze linger on the woman and the proud knight beside her. There was an unspeakable power in her face. Perhaps it lay in the depth of her green eyes, or in the faint tilt of her gaze. Whatever its source, something in her expression reached straight into his soul and awoke within him an old, familiar ache. He thought of his own lover, of how deeply he cared for her, of how her eyes too had carried that same calm fire. The resemblance was unbearable. He grimaced and closed his eyes, letting the tide of indescribable feelings surge through him until it nearly broke him. He stared down at the painting, chest trembling, fighting back tears that threatened to shatter his resolve.

What is this feeling? Who is this woman, and why does it seem as though I know her? The question drifted through his mind until, at last, he understood.

He was slipping into the consciousness of another. The boundary between himself and the man who had once stood here was dissolving. He realised then that all true

men are bound by a silent brotherhood that transcends time, and their loves, their losses, their longings are but variations of the same eternal song.

He was feeling what the knight had once felt — the same devotion, the same fragile love. The woman in the painting had been as precious to that man as his own lover was to him. A profound sadness swelled within him, not only for the knight but for all men who had loved and lost, each condemned to bear the same grief beneath different stars.

He stood before the painting for a long while, unable to look away. As he gazed upon it, a forgotten feeling began to stir within him, one he had not felt since his earliest days in his homeland.

It felt as though the land of his birth itself was calling to him, whispering through the air, through the blood in his veins. Yet was it truly his homeland that he remembered? Or another place — older, deeper — existing beyond the reach of human memory? He could not be certain.

The feeling was not a single image or thought. It was vast yet subtle, minute yet immense — a longing rising from the mountains, from the trees, from the soil, from the very pulse of the people. It was the voice of belonging. It was the voice of the Aereth.

He felt it then as a point suspended in time, small as a spark yet encompassing the whole of existence. That feeling drew him toward his land, toward his destiny. It was the same light that had once touched him in dreams — the light he believed he had been born to emit.

It could only begin there, in the land of his birth. He had to save the world from the destitution it was falling into. From there he would lead men and women toward the radiance he carried within himself, a radiance meant to pierce through the ever-darkening world.

He had to do it. There was no one else.

He lowered the painting gently, his hands trembling. The image lingered in his vision long after he had turned away, its colours burned into his mind like the afterglow of a flame. The ache in his chest remained, but it was no longer the soft ache of sorrow — it had hardened, refined itself into will.

The silence of the Palace pressed in on him again. He could feel the weight of all those who had walked these halls before him, their voices folded into the stones, their eyes watching from unseen corners. For a moment, it seemed as though the whole of history was leaning over his shoulder, waiting for what he would do next.

He straightened, drew in a slow breath, and felt his heart steady. The longing that had once paralysed him now pointed him forward. He had seen what he needed to see.

The time for memory was over.

The time for action had begun.

He turned from the room, his steps measured, deliberate. The corridors ahead were dark, but lit up by the faintest trace of light which guided his way, spilling through the cracks in the old stone. The air itself seemed to shift around him, thinner now, charged, as if the world were holding its breath.

Kailar's purpose had crystallised. What he was about to do was no longer solely vengeance, nor even justice. It was necessity.

And in that necessity, he felt the calm of a God.

Kailar paused. He could hear footsteps drawing near. The first signs of life he had encountered within the Palace. Two distinct sets. He braced himself and slipped behind a door, breath held still. Through the narrow slit, he watched.

Two men passed, fat noblemen swathed in dark garments. Their voices were low, muttering to one another in haste. Kailar's nostrils flared. He did not recognise them, but he knew them all the same. From their posture, their manner, their glinting rings and soft flesh, he saw them for

what they were. The enemy, the enemy of humanity whom he despised. *Vermin who grow fat off the suffering of others. They must be eliminated.*

He nearly lunged at them then. But his will was stronger than his fury. He reminded himself of the greater purpose and let them pass. These men were pawns — he would strike only when he reached the hands that moved them.

Fading into the stone shadows of the corridor, Kailar followed. They were speaking Falarian, that thin, coiling tongue he had always found displeasing. There was worry in their tone. Their steps hurried. Panic clung to them like a scent. Through the main hall they fled, and Kailar moved with the darkness, patient as a viper.

They entered a chamber.

The chamber.

His heart pounded. His veins burned. He reached beneath his cloak and found his curved knife, the one he trusted the most. His fingers tightened around its hilt. Inside the room, he heard other voices. Frantic. Alarmed.

Kailar approached the open door and peered in. His eyes were wide, alight with wrath. He looked like a demon conjured from the void — scouring the living for souls to quench his killing thirst.

A cluster of figures stood within. Foreign nobles by their appearance, dressed in the same shadowed attire, men

from distant nations who lived nameless, but walked with borrowed power. Power gifted by the man Kailar willed to destroy.

Four guards stood near them, watchful. Kailar's eyes flicked across the chamber, memorising every detail. Then he saw it.

The bed in the centre of the room.

Upon it lay that vile man. His eyes were shut, his face pale, lips parted as if even in death he would utter commands. Beside him, a thin man wept bitterly, clutching the man's long, spindly hand as if that alone might anchor the world crumbling around them.

'He fought the poison for many days,' the man choked, 'the dream of Almany dies with him. Now we must all vacate this place. The great lords will arrive soon, and with them they bring judgement, and death. The court is now absolved. Return to your estates, in Albion and beyond.'

There was a moment of stillness.

Then a voice broke it, low and sly.

'We will return,' whispered a cloaked figure with a hooked nose, though even he seemed unsure whether he meant it.

Others began to turn, shifting restlessly. Some glanced at the guards, others at the door. There was no unity now. Only the sliver of self-preservation.

Their benefactor was dead. And without him, they were nothing.

Kailar's grip on his knife tightened. Then it struck him.

Like a hydra, more heads would rise from the death of this one man. The corruption would not die with him, as Kailar had so naively believed. The thought tormented him. His fury wavered. The wrath, the unyielding anger, the righteous purpose that had carried him across ruined lands and broken cities vanished in an instant. Destiny had mocked him again. The satisfaction he had waited for, the reckoning he had imagined, had been snatched from him right before his very eyes. Even after the death of the wicked man, these other men would live on and continue to spread their poison throughout the world. His purpose had been flawed from its inception. The destruction of one was not enough — it could never be enough.

He could not alter the fate of the world alone. He required more.

He needed a cause vast enough to unite all true people — a vision relentless in its pursuit of perfection, an obsession devoted to the annihilation of evil.

Kailar's entire being trembled as his undying wrath returned — a wrath searing enough to destroy a god.

I MUST DESTROY EVIL WHERE I SEE IT! I WILL END ALL OF THEM HERE!

His inner voice, the last thread of reason, tried to restrain him. He would not survive. There were four guards within, trained men, armed with swords and spears. He could perhaps bring down one. Maybe two. But that would be all. His death would follow swiftly.

Still, he did not falter.

He readied himself. The knife in his hand pulsing like a second heart. His killing intent rose again, called forth from the deep well within him. His body steadied. His mind emptied. He took a step.

And then —

A single white feather fell from the air.

It drifted downward, weightless and calm, guided by the unseen currents in the air.

Kailar froze. A reverence unlike anything he had known coursed through him. A voice stirred in his mind. It bore the shape of his beloved's, but it was not hers. It was older. Higher.

A god was speaking.

Do not step forward. Do not proceed. The words were soft, serene, final.

He obeyed.

His feet pulled back. His grip loosened on the blade. Slowly, he sheathed it and turned away from the doorway.

He moved swiftly, without noise, retracing the path he had taken. The corridor felt different now, as though the air itself had changed. Something had descended upon him. Or risen from within.

What was that? Where did the feather come from? There was no place it could have fallen from — I was inside. W—what was that voice?

Panic took him by the throat. His breath shortened, and he broke into a dead sprint.

The Palace blurred past him. He avoided the gates, even the side one he had entered from — he knew the guards would be there by now. Instead, he veered toward the gardens, once beautiful, now overgrown and silent. No one blocked his path.

He reached the rear of the Palace grounds. The golden fence loomed before him, fifteen feet tall and cold, its spear-shaped tips curving outward.

He exhaled briefly and leapt. The fence shuddered under his weight. He caught the highest point he could and wrapped his legs around the thin bars. Swiftly, he climbed. His hand found the upper curve, and with a final effort he hauled himself over. The spear-shaped tips scraped against his side. He steadied, crouched, then pushed off.

He had aimed for the grassy ledge at the cliff's edge, but he misjudged the distance. His foot slipped.

Shit.

He landed at the very edge, but the momentum kept driving him forward. There was nothing to hold. His hands grasped only tufts of grass as his body lurched onwards.

He shouted once.

And fell.

Kailar looked around, unafraid. It was a strange thing to know he was falling — crashing down through the aereth at dreadful speed — and yet feel no fear. The cliff was not a sheer drop but a steep, jagged slope that twisted toward the vast northern forest. He closed his eyes as a strange vigour surged through him. When he opened them, he was at the bottom.

His body ached.

He ran his hands over his limbs and found only a deep gash along his left leg.

Nothing more.

He lay beside a narrow stream whose name he did not know and laughed.

Around him, the world appeared unreal.

In such moments, he oftentimes saw himself through the eyes of another — as if he were a presence hovering nearby. Observing. Watching. It felt utterly real.

He saw his own body, lying by the stream like a child at play, splashing the water around him. A sudden thought struck him. He had fallen all the way down a cliff, and lived, as though he had not been a man at all, but a feather which drifted downward, weightless and calm, guided by the unseen currents in the air.

The scene around him was disturbingly beautiful.

Above, birds weaved through the branches, chirping their melodious tunes. The trees glowed a vibrant green. The sky beyond them appeared a radiant blue, and the clouds rolled vast and white. This corner of the forest, it seemed, had not been touched by the tainted hands of man.

Kailar felt a sting above his eye. His fingers came away bloodied. It dripped into his eyes. As he wiped it away with the edge of his cloak, the world darkened.

Night fell around him instantly.

The stars appeared first, countless, infinite, strewn across the immeasurable dark sky. Arrayed like a script only the old gods could read, they seemed to hum, to pulse with a low sound he could just barely hear. A long, silvered band of assembled light cleaved the sky in two, filled with cosmic clouds and shimmer, like a wound lit from within. A galaxy. Theirs. Every so often, a star broke loose, trailing fire across the heavens, carving brief paths through the darkness before fading into nothingness. They continued in silent succession — lines of light flung like arrows across the night.

Then, peering out from behind the trees, came her. The same, ever-present figure in his life.

Selene.

She peered at him through the leaves, distant, undying, her serene gaze laying directly upon him.

He smiled at her, rising slowly. His legs resisted, but he forced them into motion, staggering forward until he tripped over a stone buried in the shallow stream. His bloodied hands and knees hit the gravel beneath the water, sending an icy jolt through his body.

Still, he rose again.

He walked, following her light through the shadows of the ever-darkening forest. With each step, a surging feeling grew within him. Invincibility. Certainty. He could not explain it, but he was sure of it. Nothing could stop him now.

Then, an unusual shape appeared before him — a manor. Familiar. Warm. Even in the fading light, it glowed with memories so sweet, so pure, so distant. All gone now.

I know this place.

He had never approached it from this side, but his heart recognised it. The manor where it had all begun. Where he had seen her again, after so long.

He went towards it slowly, in unnerving anticipation.

What's left of this place?

Then — a voice called out to him.

It spoke his old name, the one he had discarded.

A chill ran through him.

He drew his great curved blade, holding it by his side.

A figure appeared in front of him, cloaked in dark green. Their face hidden. A brilliant white light emanating from their body.

Then, their hood fell away.

The knife slipped out of his hand.

Kailar dropped to his knees.

Tears filled his eyes, welling and spilling out freely.

He looked at her. He tried to speak.

‘V — ’

But his tongue faltered. She was here. Alive. Pure.

Just as she had been in memory, so she was again.

She approached him, arms wide. He tried to rise, to meet her, but his body failed, and he fell forward.

The darkness rushed in.

The last thing he felt was the warmth of her arms encircling him.

Then her silky, soothing voice, soft as mist, whispering in his ears.

‘I’ve finally found you, my prince.’



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