

SHINING IN DARKNESS

BETS DAVIES

CHAPTER ONE

“We live for Eldrin.”

“We die for Eldrin.” The chorus did not miss a beat.

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Within the flames swirled a garnet heart a child might have cut out of paper. Firelight flicked the glass orb on its stand. She sighed. Storm gave Firelight one of these humanistic glass balls every chance she got. Storm must have gotten a—what? Fire sprite, earth sprite, both—to make this thing.

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“Joshua was Eldrin’s human half brother. Joshua was a magician and powerful but—what, Autumn?”

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Every night, in her fluffy bedroom, Firelight had nightmares the balls attacked her—rolling at her en masse. This one—Firelight flicked the ball again—she almost might like if Storm had not given it to her. Speaking of Storm—Firelight glanced around her cave of table legs and starched tablecloth. Firelight should join her own seventeenth birthday party. She wrinkled her nose and tried to ignore the anxiety aching in her stomach. She had never been off Hill before. Her breath heaved with conjured images of Floods sucking her down as soulless humans sliced her apart. She couldn’t believe Storm had organized this picnic off Hill.

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“But Joshua wanted more. He wanted Godhood. The sprites had nearly disappeared, and their Goddess was weak. He needed a sacrifice. One who followed this old religion.”

“We live for Eldrin.”

“We die for Eldrin.”

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“Ayan!” The curse slammed into the ground outside Firelight’s tablecloth. She chewed her nail and then risked peeking out. Rapids grabbed marzipan figures so fast he crushed them as he got them back onto the plate. When his eyes flickered up, he flailed backwards. “Ayan.” He laughed so that his long, blue and white swirled face slipped over in crested waves of water. “You gave me a start. What are you doing under there? Storm is looking everywhere for you.”

“That is what I am doing under here.” Firelight raised her eyebrows.

“All right.” With a grin, Rapids brushed dirty white spindrift hair out of his face. “I won’t tell.”

Firelight jerked at a purpling bruise that near split his swollen cheek. Storm might be a monster of a mother, but Firelight couldn’t help the cool relief running through her veins that Storm had turned her into a princess, and not an indentured worker like Rapids and Glory. She fought to keep pity out of her voice when she asked him, “how is Glory?”

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“So Joshua sought to sacrifice Eldrin. Why, Ember?”

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“She couldn’t come.” With a stiff shrug, Rapids stuffed down a candy dragon. “She wanted to, but she had to work.”

“I’m sorry.” Firelight’s lungs hissed with surprise that she was sorry. She sat there in her white party gown as her party spread across a mowed meadow while Rapids, with his bruises and his toiling job, told her kind lies.

Of course, Firelight was always alone. “I could have her sent for—”

Even as he stiffened, she stiffened. Then he was the orphan that Storm had farmed out to be a boy of all work at eight. Firelight was the orphan that Storm had adopted. Guilt curdled her skin.

Rapids shook in a rainbow spray of drops that caught the sun. A bare smile edged up his lips. “We do all right, Firelight.”

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“Eldrin was Elven—a human and sprite mix. He followed the Old Ways—the sprite ways. Joshua hunted Eldrin and his lover, the warrior, Sahetu. Their friends, Andrew the human Bard, Tamor the Wolf, and Cherish the Love Dragon, traveled with them as family. But Joshua kidnapped Eldrin. His friends came to save him but—”

“Ember,” Hawthorn laughed. “Take a breath. We live for Eldrin.”

“We die for Eldrin.”

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Firelight’s throat hurt. Even on her seventeenth birthday, anyone could make her feel like a child. “So.” She pushed a smile. “This is something. I don’t think I’ve been off that mound of dirt since the Floods.” She glanced up to where the meadows speckled into scrubby brush as the vegetation ascended the rolling hills.

“You are seventeen.” Rapids shrugged. “It is a sprite’s special day. Storm would do anythi—”

Firelight froze.

She sank.

Her soul sank.

Her body oozed through the ground as if it was a sieve, and she was a thick, mutinous liquid. She dry heaved as she came back to herself. But she didn't come back to the same place. Smoke roiled the air, and with it the smell of blood and cooked flesh.

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"Smoke, I see you don't even mouth the words. What is next?"

"Hey, come on. This has nothing to do with me. And I don't die for anyone."

"Smoke."

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Rapids scrambled to his feet. He reached a hand down to Firelight. "Ayan! Humans!" He yanked Firelight to her feet on the new, barren earth. The gloppy cake of a party flamed. With sucking holes where their eyes should be, gray humans bared yellow teeth. One slashed through a wood sprite's stomach, releasing a gout of blood and foul smelling gastric juice. Loops of cut innards escaped even as the sprite tried to hold them in.

A human riding a twisting, gray loop laughed as hundreds of the creature legs' caught a wind sprite's dress before she could take flight.

"The Hill." Rapids barely breathed. His cold, wet hand crushed Firelight's.

The winding road up to the city seethed. Smoke turned the flames dull red. Screams shattered the air.

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"The Prophecy has nothing to do with me. The farther I stay from it, Hawthorn, the better."

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"The woods!" Rapids pointed to the twisted thicket. Already a moon sprite fought into the branches.

"The woods!" The shout came out a dull squeak from somewhere in the slaughter.

Firelight took a step forward, but a bull muscled human stood in their way. Rapids grabbed a carving knife.

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"I know you don't think you have anything to do with the Prophecy, Smoke. Since you speak of the Prophecy, let's hear it."

"How many times do we have to recite this tale? All right, all right. But Joshua's spell had already begun. He slit Eldrin's throat just as Sahetu slit his. Reality cracked."

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Rapids plunged his knife into the human's gut. It spewed gray goo. An undulating, massive centipede raised its head and raced in their direction. Firelight picked up the glass orb and hurled it. It lit to splatter molten glass over the centipede. The centipede screamed and reared.

"Come on!" Rapids grabbed her hand.

She ran. Her heavy skirts tangled. She lost Rapids' hand. She exploded her skirts into flame. She ran. She hurtled a weakly waving tree sprite, half burned away. Her foot landed in a slip. A sharp pain struck her instep. She skidded to her balance with only a brief glance at the brains and crushed skull she had stepped in. She ran. Ahead of her, Rapids went liquid and melted through thick underbrush. Firelight struggled to light. Her side cramped.

She ran.

Pain radiated all the way to her hip as if the splinter in her foot had speared through her whole body. Brains. Skull in her foot. Her gut rejected the information, but she clamped her jaw to keep from vomiting, and ran. Her body raved with fear. Her mind spun light, and above her.

Her whole body lifted. Her soul soared. The world vibrated.

Then her mind and soul crashed into her shaking body. She lay shuddering on a thick pile of red moss.

A cold, distant section of her mind noted the moss had appeared. So had the night. A soul-shuddering howl sang with moonlight.

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"We live for Eldrin."

"We die for Eldrin."

"What happened when They died?" Hawthorn prompted.

Autumn shuffled his feet. "They did not die. Joshua had intended to become a God by sapping the power from the weak Sprite Goddess. He used the death of the Sprite Goddess's servant Eldrin, but Joshua's plan backfired."

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Firelight pulled herself to a shaking kneel. Then she toppled. A white wolf stood, watching her. She pulled power and a ball of flame appeared in her hand with such a whoosh it burned her eyelashes. She stared. The wolf stared. It gave a rusty laugh.

Another wail pulsed through the night. The wolf turned, and then there was no wolf. Firelight stayed so still she forgot to breathe. The wolf could have left, or it could be right in front of her. But the cool air stayed heavy around her. She forced herself into action. If the magic wolf attacked her, so be it. Sitting like a lump wouldn't help.

With a hiss, she cradled her bloody and brain infested foot. The spike of skull peeked out from her arch. She grabbed it, but her hand slid from the slick surface. Fear and panic pounded at her eyelids. But agony strove through her foot with each frantic attempt. The skull slit her palm. She retched flaming vomit.

Her head throbbed. She made herself breathe. She needed to find other sprites. A scream gurgled to a halt. Grating laughter morphed into a howl. If there were any other sprites. She swiped her eyes. Then she yanked on one of her puffed sleeves till it singed free. She folded it around her foot. With an

awkward hop to stand, her foot pounding with blood, she bumbled onwards. If only she had any control like a real fire sprite, she could singe through anything in her way.

She balanced one foot ahead of another. Storm had punished her many times for her inability to control her magic. She would light the woods ablaze and trap the other sprites, or simply combust. She walked only on the ball of her foot.

Movement flashed to one side of her. Her jaw clenched. She gave up her pain to the God the sprites never had, and ran. Brush slammed into the arm she held before her. Sinkholes hungered to break her ankle. She ran. A grating chuckle followed her, herded her. She crashed into a bush. Then fell. Her knees slammed into rock. Her muscles collapsed. The cold, flat stone murmured beneath her skin.

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“Because Eldrin prayed while Joshua chanted,” Ember inserted, “because as Joshua drove his knife in, as Sahetu drove her sword through, the Sprite Goddess rent in two.”

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“There’s another!” A grim voice moved towards her. “Firelight?”

In a daze, Firelight rolled over to stare at a corpulent moon where there should be an afternoon sun. Lark Song’s dusky blue face appeared in Firelight’s vision.

“Are you hurt?” The healer asked.

Firelight managed to sit up and touch her impromptu bandage, but her mouth was empty of words. Relief spiraled through her. A handful of sprites meandered or hunched across a broad road of smooth, black stone. All through the forest beyond, flickers of movement formulated into smiling, white wolves, which then disappeared.

“Firelight.” A gray-blue hand crushed Firelight’s shoulder, driving into the nerves.

Firelight winced. That was as close as Storm got to a hug, and for once Firelight was glad of any familiarity.

“You have been through such trials!” Her adoptive mother stroked Firelight’s hair. “Look at that.” Her fingers dug in deeper. “You have lost control and burned your dress. We must get you another one immediately.”

Firelight choked on a laugh but then her eyes fell on a fire sprite that beat her head into the stones as flames of tears streamed down her cheeks.

“My baby,” the sprite keened, “my baby, my baby.” Over and over as if she could never leave those stones, never leave that chant, never leave the moment.

Queen Crystal knelt with a hand to the sprite’s back, but she kept shaking it off. Crystal stared with quartz eyes. Firelight had not known the young queen had come to the party. Firelight’s dizzy brain found that delightful. Queen Crystal touched a hand to the stone, and then fell flat on her face. She shook herself, but her fingers caressed the stone.

Lark Song hissed. “I think Firelight has more pressing problems than her attire.”

“You must fix this.” Storm stuck her hand in the wound. Firelight writhed, but she was too tired to scream. With a raised nostril Storm withdrew her hand and, with an embroidered handkerchief, wiped the blood clean. “Firelight, what have you done?”

“I stepped in a crushed head.” The words meant nothing to her now. Her pain had subsided to numbness.

“What do you expect me to do, Storm?” Lark Song’s tone was brisk, but when she turned to Firelight, her tone went gentle. “I can try to pull it out, but that will start the blood flowing. Can you cauterize it yourself?”

Firelight nodded, but Storm grabbed her chin. “Firelight has too little control to—”

“I see little choice.” Crystal knelt, her muscles loose. Then her jaw dropped. She threw out a hand to catch her balance, but her careful eyes never left Firelight.

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Hawthorn took up the chant: “We live for Eldrin.”

“We die for Eldrin,” Smoke choked. When she stared at him, he spat the words. “The Sprite Goddess’s death suffused the air with magic. Joshua became a God Incarnate, with No Soul, to a new race of humans—with Bodies, but no Souls. Eldrin became a God with Soul, but no Body, to a new race of sprites. His Lover, His Life, Sahetu, as well as the Wolf Tamor, the Bard Andrew, and the Love Dragon Cherish became Immortal Souls.”

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Firelight might wonder about Crystal’s gaze. Too much work. Crystal jerked and shook herself. “Coal’s Heart won’t be much good, I’m afraid.”

“No! Let go! I have to go back! Glory! Please, no, I have to—”

Despite the strain of the shouts, a wave of relief went through Firelight. Rapids had made it. Then his words sank in, and a spasm of grief struck her. Glory. Firelight had hated Glory, but could not stand the feeling she would never have a chance to hate Glory again. Rapids fought between a young wood sprite and a dirt streaked air sprite. Then Rapids’ body went still, and drip by drip, he oozed for the ground.

“Ayan it.” Crystal strode over and set a hand beneath his chin till her rock magic had solidified him again. She gave his chin a vicious shake. “No one is going back. The Hill is gone. All we have is this wood, and this road. So we follow the road.”

“Glory.” Rapids gushed tears.

Firelight looked away. For once she was glad she had known so few people. She stared at the stones as if they might tell her something. She did not turn at the sound of Storm’s berating. Of Rapids sobbing, “Glory”. Of Coal’s Heart screaming, “my baby”.

“Listen.” Crystal’s solid stone voice drew Firelight’s attention. The rock sprite once more knelt to the stones. She touched her tongue to the stone. A wolf flickered into view at the side of the road. Its dark eyes stilled on Crystal. Then it was gone.

Crystal stood, and swept her hands over the small group. Firelight’s eyes swept with them, and for the first time, a burning tear seared her cheek. Fourteen. She counted each of them, and then counted them again. Then she closed her eyes so that she would not count them the rest of her life.

“My baby, my baby!”

Firelight had counted no children.

“We have fallen into deep magic.”

Firelight pried her eyes open at Crystal's voice. Firelight burped with laughter. Storm kned her in the back of the neck. Firelight bent her head.

"We take the road." Crystal bent to caress the road again, and her pink crystalline skin shone. "Up hill."

"We go back." Storm loomed over Crystal. "The Hill is our home. What of the wounded? We are in the lowlands. Do you forget the Floods?"

"No." Crystal's word cracked like granite snapping. "Never. Never do I forget the Floods. But the Hill did not save us from the humans and their beasts. There will be no wounded there. Only dead. These are my people. I am responsible for them. The Hill has been our home only sixteen years. We found it, and we will find home again. This road will bring us to it."

Storm snorted. "When have you led these people? Without me, you—"

"And that ends here." Crystal stood tall.

Firelight dissolved into laughter again. She had never seen the young queen—or anyone—stand up to Storm. Storm's eyes whirled gray. Firelight hunkered down. She did not want to leave the road, either. It pulsed beneath her as if it sang lullabies to soothe away what had been. At the side of the road, a wolf growled as it appeared. Storm picked up one foot after the other as if the road burned her. But she sniffed. "This road stretches two ways. How do you, pray tell me, know which way to walk?"

Crystal stroked the stone. "The road was not made by humans. The road was not made by sprites. Its stones were not mined. The road is of old, powerful magic. The road wants us to walk up hill. Does that satisfy you, Storm—that we head towards higher ground? If you wish, you may go consult the wolves instead. They are not welcome on this road."

Up ahead, shouts broke out. Firelight strained to see. The road and the air above it roiled.

"You said we were safe!" Lark Song backed till a wolf snapped behind her.

The night air rent in two, and six shadows stood where simple road had been. Four shadows flanked a brilliant shimmer of a tall sprite, holding up a cold ball of light. His hard, glowing face surveyed the scene. Clinking chain armor, almost as brilliant as his body, covered him. Then the breathless scene bowled into motion as a sunlit shadow behind the rest slammed into the warrior.

"Rapids! Ayan you—I told you! I told you the truth! That's Rapids! Let me go! I'm here! I'm all right!"

"Glory?" Rapids shook off his minders and took a stuttered step.

"Ayan! You idiot!" The sunlight billowed as she bounced around the five sprites. "Of course! Rapids! Are you all right?"

"Glory!" Rapids ran forward.

"Ayan." A feathered female voice laughed. "The girl tells the truth. Let her go to her friend."

The sparkling sprite dropped his arm as Rapids slammed into Glory's enveloping sunlight. At the same moment, Crystal slammed into the grim, armored leader.

Above Rapids' and Glory's laughter, Crystal laughed as well. "Star? Don't you recognize me, Star? It's me. It's Crystal. I used to play with your little brother, Phoenix, and you had to get us out of every scrape we got into and I thought I was in love with you, and Phoenix teased us mercilessly. Say you know me, Star!"

Star's stiff face melted to life. "Crystal? Crystal, is it true? We thought you dead! You—you've grown. You are not a Loomite, anymore!"

"It's been sixteen years!" Crystal punched him. Then her face sobered. "We thought you dead."

“It’s been fifteen years for us.” Star held Crystal. His voice softened, but Firelight strained to eavesdrop. “We rebuilt at God’s Mount. We always do. But you—the Soft Lands?”

None of this made sense to Firelight because she was exhausted, and the pain from her foot radiated to her neck. She would not try to solve the puzzle. She would sink into feeling that the road told her these people meant safety.

“Must be, if it has been fifteen to you—”

Star went rock still. His glow seared till he was hard to look at. “Eldrin be blessed.”

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“We live for Eldrin.” Smoke sighed. “We die for Eldrin. Do we have to do this ayan story every day?”

“This is not a story. It is prayer.” Ember spat sparks at him. “It is sacred. Eldrin and Sahetu are forever apart, forever together. She and the other Holy Souls are born each time They die.”

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Star’s black hole eyes stared at Firelight. Crystal turned his chin. This time she spoke so low, Firelight could not eavesdrop. Star’s eyes stayed on Firelight. His mouth set in a thin line. Still, he motioned to the air sprite behind him. She billowed over. Her wafting hair fought against a Healer’s leather headband, set with amber. Firelight let out a breath. Maybe that was all it was. She waited for Storm’s voice, but it didn’t come.

But the air sprite did. She squatted beside Firelight. “Hello. I’m Whirlwind. I hear your name is Firelight, and you’ve been very brave.” A deep and strong voice vibrated in her wisping body. “You are hurt?”

“I stepped in brains.” Firelight held out her foot. She struggled for eloquence over her gag reflex. “The skull bone—”

“Yes.” Whirlwind picked up her foot. “I see. I think it would be best if I cleaned this and wrapped it for the trip. First, I want you to drink a few things that will make all this easier. Do you think you can do that?”

Firelight nodded. Whirlwind ran a hand over her tooled leather belt, covered in tubes to hold her herbs. She pulled out three vials. Firelight glanced at the sigils on the tubes, but didn’t recognize them. Whirlwind unhooked a metal cup from her side. She only glanced at the amounts as she poured each liquid or herb in. With a swirl of the cup, she handed it to Firelight. She slammed it. The cloying, sticky medicine covered the bitter leaves and tart berries that stuck in her teeth.

“That’s good, little one.” Whirlwind pressed a hand to Firelight’s forehead. “That should take care of your pain—from your foot to your memories. I must help others now. It would be best if you lay down.”

Firelight did as she had been told, though she had a fierce thirst from the concoction’s gooey consistency. The pain in her foot eased away. So did the grate of her raw nerves. The goo must ooze through her entire body and coat each muscle, each nerve, each bone. She let go of the bubbling of voices as torches flared. The goo reached her brain, and flowers of black covered her vision.

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“Each time, They are born.” Hawthorn intoned. “Each time, They live. Each time—”

“The War comes,” Smoke’s throat constricted despite himself.

“Each time.” Hawthorn’s pause stretched the air out of shape till Ember burnt a hole in it with his sweet words. “Each time They die.”

“We live for Eldrin,” Hawthorn whispered.

“We die for Eldrin.” Autumn and Ember joined, but Smoke turned away.