

Untitled Fantasy #1

by

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In the magical land of Evenkine, a terrible evil has taken hold upon the land. Argan, the wicked sorcerer, has trapped the beautiful Princess Felicity and the fair Prince Elbreeding in an enchanted slumber, leaving the land in the conjurer's terrible grasp.

In a shadowy clearing in the woods, a group of three friends — Kelaris, the good half-orc warrior; Romble, the gruff old dwarven mage; and Ansibi, the Snakekin rogue — awaited the return of Elbaz, the Birdling priest, sticking to the darkness to avoid the detection of Argan's scouts.

Finally, after hours of waiting, Ansibi's sharp eye spotted the shadowy form of Elbaz returning.

They were alone.

“We’re fucked,” Elbaz said.

“Hey hey hey,” Kelaris said, rising to her feet to meet her friend as they entered the campsite. “Language check, Elbaz. You know what the Prophecy says: ‘The four heroes, virtuous in their language, something something something, we save the day and everyone’s happy.’ Ergo: Watch your language.”

“What’s the point?” Elbaz said, refusing to be calmed. “The Prophecy is broken. Which, according to the Prophecy itself, means that Argan will take over the kingdom for a century-long reign of terror. Ergo: By the Lights, we’re fucked.”

“How do you know that the Prophecy is broken?” Romble said, hauling himself to his feet and going to Elbaz. Romble had always been able to soothe Elbaz’s moods better than anyone else.

“Well,” Elbaz said, “I went to the spot we thought the kid was supposed to show up. The three tall trees, right? ‘Where the Great Triumvirate presides, shall the Spark of the Resistance be found, one borne upon the trees from realms unseen, not yet a traveler of a dozen years’?”

“Indeed, indeed,” Romble said. “So. You are saying the child did not appear?”

Elbaz scoffed. “I wish I could say that. The kid showed up, all right. Took one look at me and started screaming. I tried to calm him down, but he started running before I could convince him I wasn’t some terrible monster. Next thing I know, he’s gone, probably back to his home dimension, never to be seen again.

“So, like I said: By the Nine Lights, which guide our hearts and our minds, we’re fucked.”

“...Well, maybe it is not so bad that the Prophecy is broken,” Romble said.

Kelaris winced.

“Come again?” she said, stepping towards Romble.

“Well, I mean, perhaps the Prophecy was wrong. Perhaps the real key to defeating Argan all along has been inside of—”

“No,” Kelaris said, cutting him off. “No, I’m sorry, but the Prophecy has to be right. The Prophecy is what brought us all together, right? The Prophecy foretold that Argan would separate Felicity and I on our wedding day, and that he would destroy Elbaz’s home forest, and that he’d flood Romble’s family’s mines with water, and then fill them with hungry sharks, and that... Uh, what did the Prophecy say Argan would do to you again, Ansibi?”

Ansibi glared at Kelaris. “Really?” she said, pointing to her eyepatch as she spoke.

“Ah, shit, I forgot,” Kelaris said. “Sorry. ...And wow, not having to feel like shit every time I cuss is a nice feeling!”

“Could we get back on track, please?” Romble said.

“Right!” Kelaris said. “The Prophecy! It foretold all of that! And then it said that I, the good half-orc, would need to go slay the Dragon of Enviteran — alone, mind you — and fashion one of his fangs into a spear. Guess what? I killed a dragon with my own two hands, and now I’ve got a badass spear. But if the Prophecy is broken, then I might as well grind the fang into a powder and sprinkle it in our food, hoping it’ll make us big and strong! Argan is absurdo-powerful, and even dragonsteeth won’t be enough to beat him without some major help!”

“Well... Then maybe the Prophecy missed a few details,” Romble said. “Or maybe we need to find a different triumvirate. I, for one, am not ready to give up on us just yet.”

“...Or maybe we’ve been fudging the Prophecy a little bit for a while now,” Ansibi said.

Kelaris looked over at her. “...What?”

“Listen, you did all the heavy lifting on the dragon, sure, but do you really think you took that thing down solo?”

“Of course I did,” Kelaris said. “What are you implying?”

“Romble?” Ansibi said.

Kelaris turned to Romble. “I, uh...” the dwarf said. “Listen, it was just a little confusion spell, just enough to make it fair, and...”

Kelaris let out a pathetic groan. “Oh my God,” she said, sinking towards the ground.

“What is the matter, friend? I did not want you to die!”

“You broke the Prophecy, Romble!” Kelaris said. “It’s completely broken! I mean, you wouldn’t say, ‘Oh, I’m not supposed to break this egg, but I’m sure a little crack won’t hurt it.’ You know what happens when you break a little bit of an egg, Romble? You get a broken egg! Everything pours out! There’s no undoing that!”

“I... Well, I...” Romble sputtered.

“That wasn’t the first time the Prophecy was broken, Kelaris,” Elbaz said. “And you know it.”

Kelaris looked up at Elbaz, genuinely confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The good half-orc and the Birdling priest’s bond shall be unshakable, ne’er to be tested or tried’? Sounds to me like that means you should cover my drink tab when I forget my coinpurse!”

“You’re calling *that* a breach of the Prophecy!?” Kellaris said, rising back to her feet. “Don’t be ridiculous! I’m surprised I stuck around after you made such a stink about that; I’d call *that* unshakable!”

“Well, I’m just saying, if you’re going to be sticklers for the wording...”

“Speaking of the Prophecy, though, how come you and Ansibi don’t have qualifiers on your description?” Kellaris said.

“...What?” Ansibi said.

“The good half-orc.’ ‘The gruff dwarf.’ How come we have to have adjectives like that? You two are just... you.”

“...Are you blaming me for the Prophecy?” Ansibi said.

“I’m not blaming you!” Kellaris said. “What makes you think I’m blaming you?”

“Unless,” Romble said, stepping towards Ansibi. “Unless, of course, we should be blaming you.”

Ansibi stepped back in kind, but before she went too far, Kellaris grabbed her by the collar and stared at her. “...Ansibi?” she said, almost daring her captive to blink. “You’re the one that found the Prophecy. I’m not mad, I promise. I just need you to tell me: Have you been deceiving the rest of us for the better part of three months and leading us on a ridiculous goose chase, during which we could have perhaps saved countless lives, Ansibi?”

“No!” Ansibi said with a determination that only comes from a gifted liar or a truth-teller. “No, I told you, I found it tucked into a diary my grandmother gave me when I was home recovering from my eye injury, and...”

Ansibi’s eyes went wide.

“Elbaz. That was the day you came to my family’s inn. It was you who asked about the journal, claiming it had ‘called to you in a dream’ overnight.”

Kelaris released her grip on Ansibi’s collar, smoothing it out as she did, and turned to Elbaz. “...And did you have that dream, Elbaz?” she said, her voice one tick away from a tidal wave of rage more powerful than the Five Realms had ever seen.

Elbaz, for their part, was looking around for an escape avenue, but they knew Romble could drop them with a Sleep spell in a blink.

There was no escape.

There was only the truth.

“No,” they said. “No, I didn’t have that dream.”

“I see,” Kelaris said, now approaching them. “And where did the Prophecy really come from?”

“...I wrote it, and I put it there,” Elbaz said.

The silence that filled the clearing that night could have battled against all the noise of the capital during festival season and won with one arm tied behind its back.

“...Say that again?” Kelaris said.

“I made up the Prophecy,” Elbaz said. “I used to work in the palace, and I saw Argan rising to power. I was scared. I wanted to

assemble a force to go against him. You three seemed like the best candidates, so I wrote a prophecy involving you. Basically, I made up some prophecy-sounding garbage that I knew either had happened — sorry, Ansibi — or that I figured would happen. I had the inside scoop on Argan's plans, so I could get enough info to convince you that it was real, and then...

"Well, up until now, things had been going fine. Surprisingly fine, in fact. Some of the stuff I made happen, but some of it, y'all have just been awesome. I almost started to believe it myself. By now, I kinda didn't figure we'd all still be alive, and I for sure didn't know how I'd be able to get a kid to show up. Just seemed like something that happens in a prophecy.

"So now we're kinda stuck."

As Elbaz's words left the air, the other three wrestled with this new information.

Ansibi's heart pounded in her chest as she remembered how she comforted herself as she nursed her injured face, confident that the final victory would be hers. Comfort that was now shown to be a bitter lie.

Romble wondered if his home was still intact, free from shark infestation. Was his family still alive?

But Kelaris?

Kelaris was fueled by righteous anger.

"You flaming pile of dragonshit," she said, throwing Elbaz to the ground and, in one fluid motion, pinning them with a knee across the top of their sternum, leaning in close so the tips of her hair brushed against the terrified Birdling's face.

“Hey, hey!” Elbaz said, trying in vain to fight the good half-orc off. (The other two, for their part, had taken a few steps back.) “Sorry about the dragon, but I made sure it was at least a fair fight, OK?”

“You think I’m upset about the *dragon!*?” Kelaris spat out the words, throwing them between her and the pathetic figure on the ground as if it was all she could do to keep herself from ramming her skull into theirs. “I trusted the Prophecy, so I let Argan take Felicity. The look in her eyes — the sound of her voice, overflowing with the most hideous shades of disappointment and betrayal — were only remedied by the absolute assurance that we would prevail. That this was the only way the Prophecy would work out. Now that I know the truth? Now that I know I could have tried to save her, and that your stupid Prophecy is what kept me from doing it? Now that I know it could be your fault that she dies, and that to this day she sleeps, believing me to be nothing more than an impotent coward, more concerned about my own skin than hers!?”

“I just want to know one thing, Elbaz. Just one thing. Why Felicity?”

Elbaz blinked hard a few times, chasing away tears of blinding fear. “I... I knew she would motivate you,” they said. “I knew she was the only way I could get you on my side. And I needed you on my side, Kelaris. You’re the Crown’s greatest defender. I’m just a coward who knew a few things.”

Kelaris stared into Elbaz’s eyes, breathing hard to match her fury-fueled heart. Elbaz was sure that Kelaris was about to kill them.

For a moment, Kelaris was sure of it, too.

But the moment passed. Kelaris saw Felicity's face, and she imagined what it would look like as Kelaris explained that she had killed Elbaz. She saw the disappointment in those lovely eyes, and in spite of her boiling rage, she knew what she had to do.

She rose to her feet and turned her back on Elbaz.

"Leave. Leave now, and start running. Or flying, or whatever. Don't turn around for two hours, at least. Or I will find you. And pluck you. And roast you."

Elbaz rose to their feet, brushing themselves off. "...By the Lights, was that last bit really necessary?"

"Excuse me?" Kelaris said, whirling upon them and staring with a rage that sent shivers through the other three gathered in the clearing.

"Right! I'm out! Bye-bye, everyone!" Elbaz said, half-flapping away as they ran.

Silence returned again to the clearing.

A silence of resignation.

Of hopelessness.

But as they looked in each other's eyes, Romble gave a small smile.

They saw something else.

A glint.

A glint of truth.

And friendship.

The three of them looked at each other. Though their bond had been forged by false fires, their friendship was true and

strong. Prophecy or no, each of them knew that any of the three would gladly die for the rest.

“I’m sorry,” Kelaris said at last.

“You are sorry?” Romble said. “For what?”

“I’m the leader, which means I take responsibility,” Kelaris said. “I should have figured out the lies. But more than that, I’m your friend. You deserve an apology from somebody, and I’m the only one in a position to give it. After everything you’ve brought me through, you... Well, you deserve a lot more than that, but we’ll start there. And I’m going to try and do better from now on.”

“For the next two hours before Argan finds and kills us?” Romble said.

“If we’re lucky,” Ansibi said, grinning. “Maybe he turns us into living chamberpots or something terrible like that.”

“Ugh, do not joke about that,” Romble said. “Then the three of us would be literally full of shit. Unlike Elbaz, who is only *figuratively*—”

“‘Shit’ is a bad word.”

The three of them froze.

The voice, belonging to a young girl based on the sound, had come out of nowhere, apparently; the three friends looked around for the source, but the dim night’s light gave them no advantage.

“Who’s there?” Kelaris said.

“I’m Holly,” the voice said, “and I don’t know how I wound up in this tree, but I would appreciate a hand down.”

“...In the tree?” Romble said, approaching what he believed to be the source.

“Yes,” Holly said. “Please, I think I hear this branch cracking, and...”

“Of course, of course!” Kellaris said, approaching the tree that housed Holly. “Uh... Ansibi? I think you’re best qualified of the three of us.”

“Give me a boost?” Ansibi said. Kellaris did so, and Ansibi scampered up to collect Holly and bring her back down to the ground.

“Welcome,” Kellaris said. “We, uh... We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Even though we did not think we were,” Romble said.

“Really?” Holly said.

Kellaris got down on one knee. She was afraid her appearance would frighten her — there were some half-orc children who were afraid of her, after all — but Holly showed no signs of intimidation. “Holly, my dear,” she said. “Tell me, do they have people like me where you come from? With teeth like mine and such?”

Holly frowned as she looked over her new friend’s face. “Only at, like, cons,” she said. “Terra shows me pictures sometimes. She’s my big sister. But this is for-real for-real, isn’t it? ...Unless you’re LARPer?”

“I believe it is, as you put it, for-real for-real,” Ansibi said.

“OK, cool,” Holly said. “And, I mean, y’all are treating me nicely, so that’s more important than what you look like. Am I part of a legend or something?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Kelaris said. “In any case, are you willing to help us save the kingdom from a wicked sorcerer, and maybe his Birdling ex-priest on whom the jury is still out regarding their true loyalties?”

“That sounds totally awesome,” Holly said. “Who are you three, anyway?”

“I’m Kelaris, the good, uh…” Kelaris said, trailing off. “I’m the Princess’s Betrothed. I’m seeking the reclaim her hand from the wicked sorcerer.”

“Glad to meet you, Kelaris,” Holly said.

“I am Ansibi, and I seek revenge for the crimes he committed against me,” Ansibi said, grinning as she spoke. “He mutilated my person, and in return, I intend to mutilate his!”

“OK, that’s hardcore, Ansibi,” Holly said. “What are you gonna do after that?”

Ansibi frowned. “Ah. Well, probably take over my family’s business. We run a combination inn and bakery just outside the capital, and I make a scrumptious Five-Berry Pie, if I may toot my own horn.”

“That sounds delicious,” Holly said, turning to Romble. “What about you?”

“Me?” he said. “I am Romble, and… Well, I guess I am just trying to find out the truth.”

Holly smiled. “Also hardcore. Do y’all have anything to eat?”

“Come join me over here, child,” Romble said, unslinging his backpack from his shoulders. “Do you like jerky?”

Ansibi walked to Kelaris' side as Romble entertained their new guest. "So... what does this mean?" she asked in a low voice. "Does this mean the Great Triumvirate is... us?"

"Maybe," Kelaris said. "But that's not the most important thing."

"If not that, then what?"

Kelaris grinned. "The most important thing," she said, "is that we watch our language from now on. At least until we save the gosh-darn kingdom."

The End