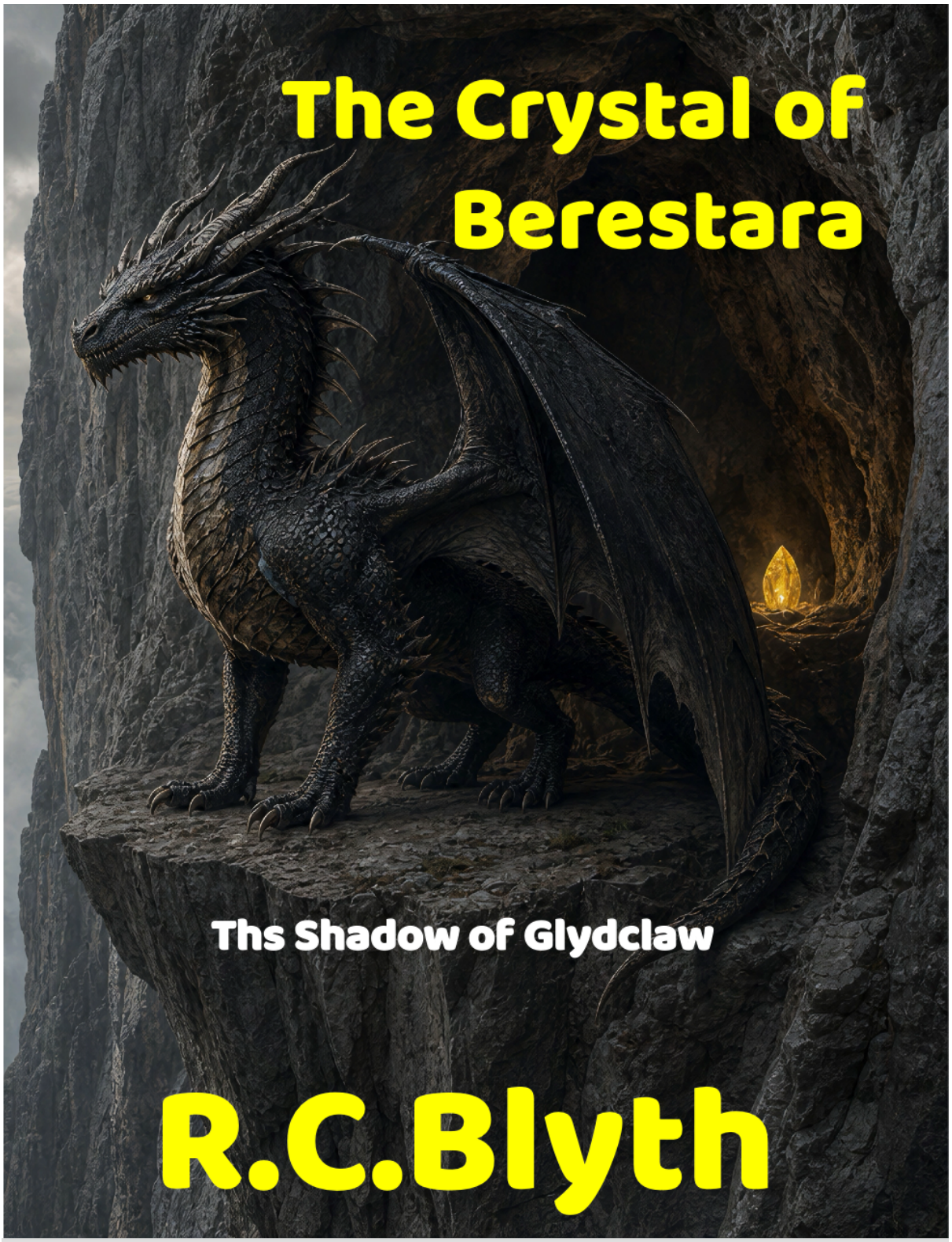

The Crystal of Berestara
Ths Shadow of Glydclaw
R.C.Blyth

R.C. Blyth steps away from his usual genres to deliver this enchanting Christmas quick read. Drawing on his childhood love of obstacle-filled quests, he follows Princess Kalithra and Quinrex, her loyal shapeshifting hound, as they brave perilous heights to steal the magical Crystal of Berestara from a fire-breathing drake. Unexpanded for now—though one never knows how the author's mind might bend!



The Quest

Fearing her uncle, Lord Malakar, and the imminent usurpation and absolute destruction of her family, Princess Kalithra knew direct confrontation would be suicide. The kingdom of Vandrelis stood upon the precipice of ruin.

Once a realm of sun-drenched cornfields, emerald valleys, and peaceful trade routes, it was now choked by the creeping frost of treason. Her father, King Oryndor, lay confined to his bedchamber, his once-robust constitution poisoned slowly by a draught administered in secret. Behind this treachery stood his own blood: Lord Malakor, a man consumed by an insatiable hunger for the crown, whose spies and cutthroats infested the royal citadel's stone corridors.

Malakar's grip on the city guard tightened with each sunset. As the ancient scrolls of the citadel archives whispered, salvation lay beyond their shores—not in distant mortal alliances, but in the sunken, mythic realm of Exotara, a civilisation resting beneath the restless waves of the Sapphire Sea. To reach Exotara, one needed passage through the watery veil, and that passage required the legendary Crystal of Berestara.

Entrusted with this desperate quest, Princess Kalithra sought the counsel of the blind Augur of Akhavan. The seer gave her two vital boons: the sacred Rod of Blackthorn, a slender talisman that could knit shattered bone and restore failing breath, and the sworn companionship of Quinrex.

Quinrex was no ordinary beast. To the court of Vandrelis, he was simply the princess's white hound, a magnificent, formidable creature of uncanny intelligence who had guarded her since her ninth year. But Quinrex was a shapeshifter of ancient lineage. While his primary form was a heavy-coated, wolf-like canine, he could mould his flesh into the shapes of a bird, a fish, an ape, or a mole. He could swim the deepest trenches, scale sheer cliffs, burrow through bedrock, and soar on the high thermals of the sky.

With only Quinrex and two battle-hardened royal guard loyalists—Gavan, a swordsman of grim resolve, and Toren, an expert archer whose fingers itched to draw his bowstring—Kalithra stood at the edge of the world, staring up at the jagged, snow-capped teeth of the Mountains of Itulin.

The Forest of Mahorock

Determined, Princess Kalithra jutted out her jaw in defiance at the task ahead. 'How in Headdon will I reach the dragon's lair?' she murmured, staring up at the towering monoliths of stone that scraped the bruised belly of the clouds.

Kalithra glanced back at the two warriors who had accompanied her. Both looked deeply uncertain, their eyes darting nervously between the dense, hostile foliage of the Mahorock Forest and the dizzying heights above. Neither man knew the full extent of Quinrex's nature. To them, the great white beast panting softly beside the princess was merely a loyal hound, albeit an unusually large and attentive one. Though Quinrex could speak in Kalithra's tongue within the private chambers of her mind, bridging the barrier between species, he kept his voice silent in the presence of mortals, offering only low, resonant growls that Kalithra alone could interpret. 'I can take to the skies and seek out the cave from above,' the broken, gravelly resonance echoed directly in the princess's consciousness.

Reaching the Mountains of Itulin would be a tedious, punishing task. The fabled crystal did more than unlock the pathway between Vandrelis and Exotara; it possessed two distinct, miraculous properties. First, it would suspend Kalithra's mortal ageing. Time moved with cruel, accelerated swiftness in Exotara's underwater dominion, compared with the sunlit fields of Vandrelis, and without the crystal's ward, she would wither into dust before her embassy could even begin. Second, its magic would permanently alter her blood chemistry, enabling her lungs to draw oxygen from water and sustain her at bone-crushing oceanic depths. Yet two terrifying concerns plagued Kalithra's mind: how exactly did the crystal's arcane transference work, and how on earth would they survive the guardian of the hoard? The crystal lay under constant watch, day and night, by Glydclaw, an ancient, armoured drake whose cruelty was as legendary as his appetite.

Thus far, fortune had smiled upon their journey. They had crossed the lowlands where glacial rivers spilt from the highlands into wide, fertile valleys. They had traversed flat fields still heavy with late-season harvests, where weary villagers had offered them meagre bowls of lentil stew, warm bread, and cautious blessings for the royal house.

Now, however, civilisation's safety lay behind them. The Mahorock Forest loomed like a wall of midnight shadows, marking the ragged boundary between the lowlands and the crusted white peaks of Itulin, which jutted like giant canine teeth into the distant, freezing sky. Winter's ice clung permanently to those summits—the cold, unforgiving destination of Kalithra's desperate quest.

Kalithra's thick leather breeches protected her knees as she knelt on the damp earth, pressing her palm flat against the soil to detect the faint, rhythmic tremors that often signalled danger. The Giants of Horlas frequently roamed these foothills, making travel perilous for

any unshielded party. To be caught out in the open by one of these mountain brutes meant certain death; what the giants lacked in visual acuity, they more than made up for with a terrifyingly acute sense of smell.

'Can you detect anything, Quinrex?' she whispered.

Quinrex had attended Kalithra since childhood, and only she and her mother knew the secret of his heritage. Part wolf, part mastiff, he had thick, double-layered white fur that accentuated his already imposing silhouette. He lowered his snout to the damp loam, sniffing the shifting breeze for hostile scents, then let out a low, warning rumble from deep in his chest.

As a shapeshifter, he possessed a versatility that defied mortal understanding. He recalled the princess's childhood declaration that he was worth a hundred warriors. Those words had seared themselves into his consciousness, filling him with profound pride; he had stalked the palace courtyards with his head held high, knowing he would willingly lay down his life for the young royal who now stood before him as a woman grown. Sensing her reckless determination, he projected his thoughts inward, speaking with the steady, protective authority of a father advising a headstrong daughter, while the two human guards remained oblivious to the silent exchange.

'Kalithra,' Quinrex cautioned, his mental voice sharp with anxiety. 'One touch of those outer spines will mean instant death.'

Toren shifted uncomfortably, his bow resting awkwardly across his shoulder. 'Princess, if the thorns don't tear us to pieces, then the stranglers that abound in those trees will capture us. It is said that once entangled in the reaper's branches, you are squeezed until life leaves your bones, leaving nothing behind but an empty shell.'

Quinrex let out a soft huff of agreement.

Placing her hands firmly on her hips, Kalithra pursed her lips in stubborn frustration. 'Every hour we waste puts the people of Vandrelis—and my father—at greater risk. We have no choice. Gavan, Toren, I need you to swear a solemn vow not to reveal what you are about to witness.'

The two warriors exchanged uneasy glances, then nodded obediently, bound by their oath to the crown.

Kalithra dropped to her knees and threw her arms around her companion's heavy, white-furred neck. His brilliant blue eyes gleamed with ancient intelligence.

'Quinrex, I am sorry to place such a burden on you, but if anyone can slip past the drake and retrieve that crystal, it is you. Change into Skyhawk and take to the air. We are far too slow on two legs.'

One of the guards let out a sharp intake of breath, a sound half-stifled in his throat, before stumbling backwards in stark terror.

A shimmering, opalescent light flickered into existence around Quinrex's frame. His dense white fur stiffened, knitting into heavy, interlocking feathers. His neck compressed with a sound like escaping air, his front torso lifting and bending upwards as his forelegs snapped and elongated into the powerful framework of sweeping wings. His hindquarters surged forward, his heavy paws shifting into scaly, speckled legs ending in terrifying, hooked talons. His dark, moist canine snout reformed into a sweeping, curved beak of horn, while his ears

vanished beneath a dense ruff of plumage, his head crowned by a sharp crest of grey, black, and white. He stood transformed: a magnificent, terrifying Harpy Eagle.

'By the gods... what trickery is this?' Stumbling backwards, Gavan caught his heel on a protruding root and crashed hard onto the rocky ground.

Kalithra couldn't quite suppress a smile, though she quickly masked it. The guards had rarely witnessed the raw mechanics of the metamorphosis, which was usually performed in strict seclusion.

'Pick him up, Toren,' Kalithra said lightly. 'It seems our good guard has lost his footing.'

His face flushed crimson; Toren hurried forward to haul his companion to his feet.

'Quinrex has taken to the air,' Kalithra explained smoothly, gesturing towards the towering raptor. 'He will achieve in minutes what would take us days of gruelling climbing.'

Skyhawk's wings spanned an impressive six feet, tipped with primary feathers as rigid as steel daggers. Her talons could exert crushing pressure, easily matching a grizzly bear's grip.

An interesting quirk of Quinrex's avian transformation was a temporary gender shift, which required the great bird to remain hyper-vigilant against the territorial advances of wild male eagles native to the mountains. Mating rituals would temporarily dull his focus and drain his vital energies until he could safely revert to one of his alternate forms. Fortunately, true Harpy Eagles were exceptionally rare in Vandrelis, though lone males were always patrolling the thermal currents. Stretching her magnificent wings, Skyhawk caught the rising mountain draft. Her new raptor eyes swept across the forest canopy below with telescopic clarity, instantly mapping the hidden perils of the timberland. With a powerful downward thrust of her primary feathers, she launched herself into the pale sky. The transformation never failed to leave onlookers awestruck, and the two human guards stood frozen, their mouths agape.

The Ascent to the Lair

Free from the constraints of four legs, Skyhawk felt a surge of pure exhilaration. The sky was her domain, a vast expanse few predators dared to challenge. Below, troops of Howler monkeys swung frantically through the dense upper branches of the Mahorock trees, startled by the sudden appearance of the giant shadow overhead. Skyhawk felt a sharp pang in her gut; she realised she had not eaten a proper meal for nearly half a day. She dipped towards the canopy, her keen yellow eyes locking onto a plump female monkey resting on a broad mahogany branch. But just as she tucked her wings to dive, a piercing, high-pitched shriek echoed down from the mountain heights—a sound so violent it seemed to fracture the very air.

Abandoning the hunt, Skyhawk checked her momentum, snapping her wings wide to catch an updraft. She resumed her steep climb towards the jagged peaks, driven by the urgency of her mission. Below, the monkeys screeched in terror and bolted deeper into the forest's gloom as the giant raptor beat her wings with rhythmic fury, cutting a straight line towards the noise.

As she drew closer to the dark, gaping maw of the mountain cave, the ambient temperature plummeted, frosting her heavy plumage with rime ice. She peeled off from the rocky cliff

face, circling cautiously, scouting for an entry point that would keep her out of the mountain master's direct line of sight.

Kalithra had strictly commanded Quinrex to avoid killing the dragon if at all possible. Vandrelis's delicate ecological balance relied on every creature, great and small, and unnecessary slaughter invited dark karmic retribution. Moreover, a direct conversation with Glydclaw was entirely out of the question; the ancient drake regarded all mortals as little more than spiced appetisers. While travelling on the giant eagle's back would have made for a swift ascent, Quinrex's avian form lacked the structural strength to carry even the princess's slight weight, leaving him to execute this perilous infiltration entirely alone.

Perched on a jagged outcrop of black basalt fifty paces from the cave entrance, Skyhawk watched the beast. Glydclaw was a nightmare rendered in flesh and scale. His massive, armoured head shifted restlessly in the cramped cavern opening, his long, barbed tail thrashing back and forth to keep him balanced. Rows of impenetrable black steel scales covered his sprawling torso, shimmering with iridescent crimson highlights along the membranes of his folded wings. Heavy, drooping eyelids shielded ancient, jaded eyes, while bladelike bony plates sprouted menacingly from his brow. Jagged spines ran in an unbroken ridge from the crown of his skull down to the very tip of his tail. Beyond his thick, near-impenetrable hide, Glydclaw possessed a horrifying primary weapon: the ability to generate white-hot gouts of chemical fire.

As the giant beast retreated into the cavern's shadows to settle into a sluggish slumber, Skyhawk waited patiently, his stillness born of long discipline. Soon, the drake's deep, rattling snore echoed across the stone ledge, rumbling like the distant footfalls of the Giants of Horlas. Although swift in a stoop, Skyhawk knew horizontal flight was not her greatest asset; smaller falcons could easily outpace her in open air. If she possessed their lightning-fast agility, she could have been in and out of the hoard before an hourglass turned its first grain.

On her first cautious pass, she flared her wings, braking hard against the mountain wind before dropping soundlessly onto the cave's outer ledge, safely concealed in the deep shadow cast by an overhanging slab of rock. Creeping forward on silent talons, she peered past the flickering embers of a heap of heated iron-rich stones burning deep within the cavern. There, resting upon a pedestal of ancient bone behind the sleeping dragon's coiled tail, sat the Crystal of Berestara. It pulsed with a cool, inner luminescence, casting dancing blue reflections across the soot-stained walls.

Knowing her wingspan was far too wide for the low-ceilinged interior, Skyhawk realised she had only two dangerous options: attempt a daring flight straight into the cave to snatch the prize on the fly or revert to her canine form to slip through the narrow gaps between the stone floor and the dragon's massive coils.

The second option carried immense risk. The slightest scrape of claw against stone would wake the beast. Furthermore, Skyhawk understood the dragon's fire mechanics. Glydclaw periodically swallowed raw, iron-rich stones from the riverbeds, breaking them down in his multi-chambered stomach before expelling the mineral residue. The retained iron passed into

a specialised organ that produced hydrogen sulphide gas through complex intestinal fermentation. When mixed with atmospheric oxygen upon exhalation, the pyrophoric compound ignited into an intense, colourless flame. Kalithra had meticulously explained this phenomenon during their planning sessions, noting that the biological reaction required a brief priming delay—a momentary lag before the beast could project flame on demand.

Inside the cavern, the dragon's massive eyelids flickered. A single amber eye rolled in a wide arc, locking instantly on the dark silhouette perched at the threshold. Before the beast could clear its throat or activate its pyrogenic glands, the Harpy Eagle vanished in a shimmering ripple of arcane light.

Dropping instantly to all four paws, Quinrex materialised in his canine form. Moving with lightning speed, he lunged past the colossal coils of the sleeping drake, seized the glowing crystal firmly in his jaws, and bolted for the exit.

The crystal was smaller than he had anticipated—roughly the size of a falcon's egg—and easy to carry between his teeth, though its icy surface hummed with a vibration that made his jaw tingle. As Quinrex scrambled forward, the dragon jerked violently awake. The sudden movement in the cramped cavern produced a grinding, mechanical clatter from the beast's gut, sounding like the water-wheel-driven corn mills of the lowlands.

Glydclaw whipped his massive tail across the cavern floor in a blind attempt to crush the intruder. The blow shattered the stone wall, sending a shower of jagged splinters and chunks of rock cascading like mined coal. Quinrex threw himself sideways, narrowly avoiding the sweeping tail and certain death, and rocketed out into the open mountain air. He knew immediately that he was in mortal peril. To survive the long fall from the ledge, he needed to resume his eagle form instantly. But his stomach was entirely empty, robbed of the energy required for a seamless metamorphosis.

Refusing to panic, Quinrex trusted fate and the ancient spirits' blessing. The sickening stench of rotten eggs filled the freezing air as Glydclaw expelled a preliminary burst of noxious gas. Quinrex's hyper-sensitive canine nose recoiled violently from the hydrogen sulphide fumes billowing from the cave. Plummeting headfirst into the abyss, he clenched his jaws tighter around the crystal to keep it from slipping, frantically willing his fur to knit back into feathers. The transformation stuttered, slowed by his exhaustion. He tumbled end over end through the empty air, spinning wildly out of control. Without wings to brake his descent, he fell like a stone towards the dark canopy of the Mahorock Forest far below. Above him, Glydclaw roared—a deafening sound that shook the snow from the high crags—and launched his massive, armoured bulk from the ledge, spreading his iridescent crimson wings to give chase.

Spinning helplessly, Quinrex caught a blurred glimpse of the massive drake closing the distance with terrifying speed. With a final, desperate surge of will, Quinrex forced the change. Feathers erupted across his skin, his canine frame stretching and locking into Skyhawk's aerodynamic structure. Her wings snapped open with a sharp crack, immediately stabilising her descent and sharpening her vision into lethal focus.

Behind her, Glydclaw folded his wings into a dart-like shape, minimising air resistance as he plunged downward like an avian missile. Though the dragon was immensely heavy, his raw muscle power allowed him to match the eagle's terminal velocity.

Skyhawk banked hard toward the dense canopy of the Mahorock Forest, weaving erratically between the ancient tree trunks. Below, troops of monkeys scattered in blind panic as the massive shadow of the pursuing drake swept across the forest floor, snapping branches and flattening undergrowth in its wake. The dragon was close now—so close that Skyhawk could feel the scorching backdraft of the beast's priming gizzard.

Fire and Renewal

At the forest edge, Princess Kalithra and the two guards heard the thunderous roar before spotting the desperate pursuit overhead.

Shielding her eyes from the glaring sunlight, Kalithra scanned the sky. She could barely make out her companion's agile, darting form, but Glydclaw's colossal, crimson-winged silhouette was unmistakable.

Gavan whipped out a brass collapsible telescope, snapped the lenses into alignment, following the speeding bird and drake.

'What do you make of it, Gavan?' Kalithra demanded, her voice tight with panic.

'The drake is hunting the eagle, Princess. Quinrex is the quarry of Glydclaw! And—by the gods—I see flame!'

'We do not need a telescope to know the beast breathes fire,' Kalithra snapped, drawing her sword with a rasp as steel met leather. 'By the hand of Headdon, Quinrex has pushed too far.'

Together, they watched in horror as a sheet of incandescent white fire erupted across the cerulean sky, scorching the forest's upper branches in a roaring wave of heat.

Seeing the dense timberland below as an obstruction, Glydclaw made a fatal tactical error. Consumed by blind rage, the drake unleashed a full-throated torrent of fire directly into the canopy, hoping to incinerate his agile tormentor in a single sweeping inferno.

Flames caught fire instantly in the resinous pine needles and dry moss. Within seconds, a wall of fire swept through the trees.

Caught in the concussion wave, Skyhawk was violently knocked out of the air and crashed hard into a thicket of briars. The impact triggered an involuntary, agonising reversal of her transformation. Halfway back to her canine form, Quinrex found his hind legs pinned beneath a mass of charred timber, his white fur badly burned and scorched to a blackened, unrecognisable grey.

Panting heavily, tasting blood and ash, Quinrex clamped the crystal firmly in his jaws. He dragged his paralysed hindquarters inch by agonising inch into the deep, suffocating shadows beneath a rotting log. Every movement sent white-hot agony shooting through his spine.

Heart-rending cries echoed across the burning timberland as wild creatures fled the encroaching wall of fire. As darkness crept into his vision, Quinrex let out a final, muffled whimper and slipped into unconsciousness.

At the wood's western edge, Kalithra clapped her hands to her mouth. 'Did you see where he landed?' she asked, her voice trembling.

Gavan stepped forward, his expression grim. 'The bird went down perhaps a hundred yards into the timber, Your Grace. I can try to hack a path through the thorns, but the fire is spreading fast.'

Kalithra's jaw set with the unyielding stubbornness of her royal bloodline. 'We are going in. First, we must find the crystal. Second, Quinrex is too important to leave behind to burn.'

'My lady, it is suicide!' Toren protested, raising his bow defensively. 'If the thorns do not take you, the smoke will.'

'We do this together,' Kalithra commanded, her voice ringing with absolute authority. She hefted her blade and stepped resolutely into the smoking thicket. 'Spread out and search every yard.'

The air inside the burning thicket hung heavy with acrid smoke and the sulphurous stench of dragon breath. Heavy footsteps crunched on the charred ground nearby. Glydclaw methodically trampled the smouldering brush, searching for his prey's remains. Protected by the dark charcoal soot that now coated his white coat, Quinrex lay motionless beneath the rotted log. The crystal remained clamped between his teeth. Darkness pressed against the edges of his consciousness, threatening to pull him under forever.

Through the roaring crackle of the flames, a familiar sound penetrated his failing senses: the rhythmic, hurried crashing of boots through the undergrowth.

With monumental effort, Quinrex lifted his heavy head and blinked through the soot haze, fearing the drake had returned to finish the job. Instead, the sweet, melodic voice of his beloved mistress cut through the noise like a silver bell.

Kalithra dropped to her knees beside the log, her eyes wide with horror as she beheld his shattered, smoking form. 'Oh, Quinrex...' she breathed, tears cutting clean tracks through the soot on her cheeks.

'That bad... eh?' Quinrex croaked weakly, his mental voice barely more than a fading whisper.

Gavan pushed through the smoke behind her. 'Your Highness, we must fall back. There is nothing to be done for the beast.'

Quinrex managed a bitter internal cough. 'A man... you cannot... rely upon...' His chest barely rose, the spark of his life flickering toward extinction.

Knowing time had entirely run out, Kalithra reached for the slender golden sheath hanging at her belt. This would be her first time wielding the legendary talisman the Augur had bestowed.

'What are you doing, Princess?' Toren asked, stepping back in superstitious awe.

Ignoring him, Kalithra drew the Rod of Blackthorn—the caduceus—and laid its cool, metallic surface against Quinrex's mangled, smoking flank.

The scorched skin had retracted like ruined leather, oozing clear serum. But the moment the sacred wood came within an inch of the damaged tissue, the talisman flared with a soft inner radiance, warming and becoming vibrant to the touch.

A miraculous transformation swept over the hound. The weeping wounds closed instantly; new, healthy skin knitted together beneath a rapid burst of pristine white fur. Internal haemorrhaging ceased, and Quinrex's ribcage expanded in a deep, shuddering gasp for air.

His eyes snapped open, the dull film of death lifting to reveal their familiar, brilliant blue depths.

Kalithra threw her arms around his thick, newly restored neck and buried her face in his fur. 'Quinrex! Oh, thank the gods... you made it back to me.'

Regaining his footing with surprising vigour, Quinrex shook the remaining ash from his coat. He opened his jaws and gently set the Crystal of Berestara upon the moss before them.

'The crystal,' Quinrex muttered, his voice strong once more. 'I did not let it fall.'

Kalithra let out a watery laugh and rested her forehead against his broad snout. 'I never doubted you for a second, my old friend.'

Rising to her feet, she turned to the two guards, who stood staring in stunned disbelief at the miraculous recovery. 'Pick up the crystal, Toren. Our quest is not yet finished.'

With the artefact secured, the small, battle-hardened band resumed their march toward the hidden mountain waterfall, where the subterranean passage awaited—the watery gateway leading from Vandrelis down to Exotara's mythic depths. New dangers undoubtedly lurked beneath the waves, but as Princess Kalithra strode forward with her faithful companion at her side, the shadow of despair had finally broken.



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