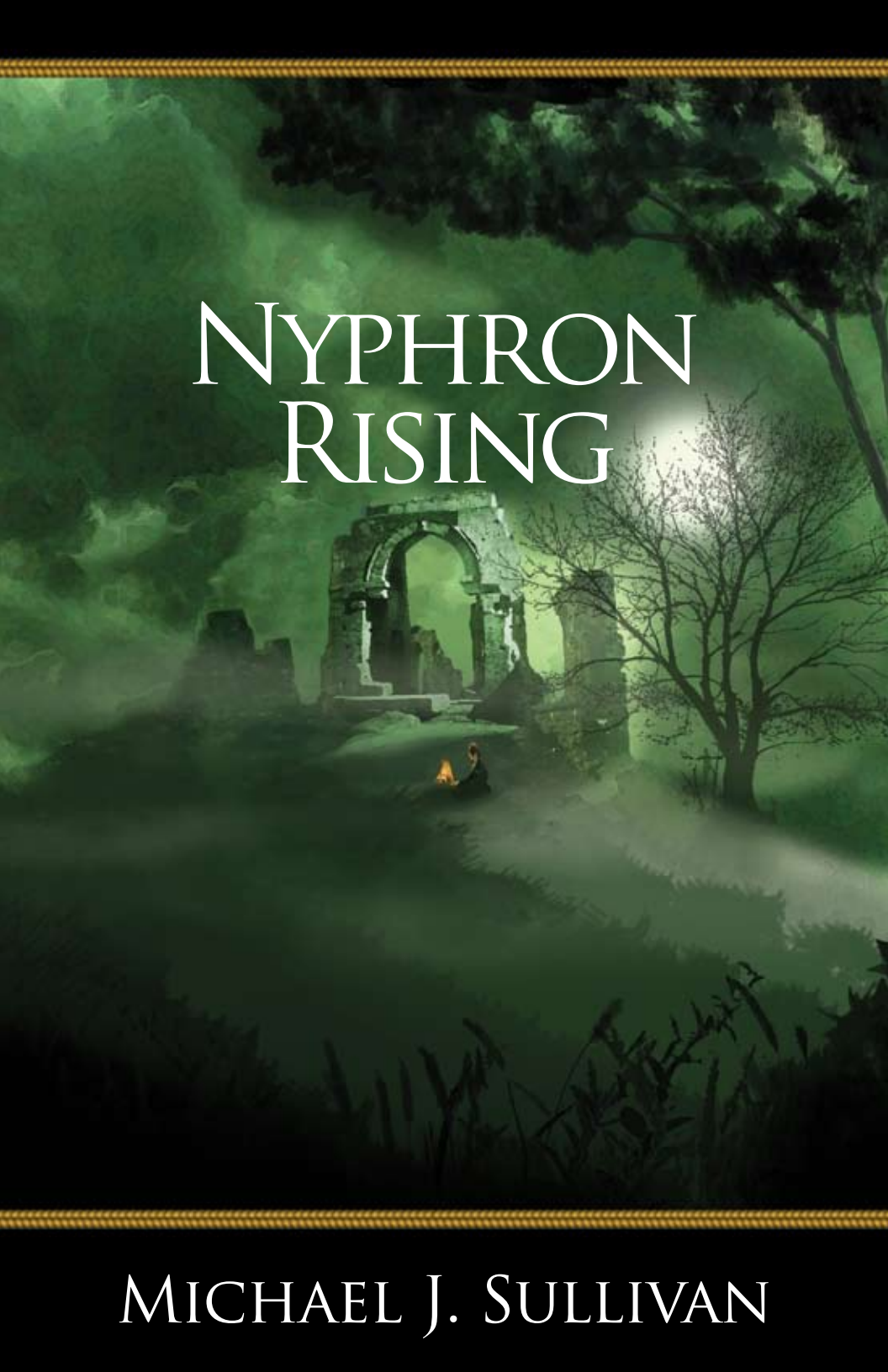




NYPHRON RISING

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

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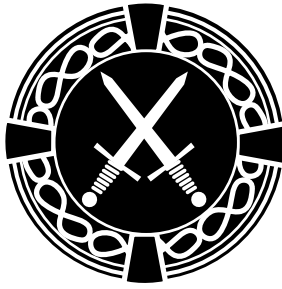
Editing by Robin Sullivan, Heather McBride, & Christine Cartwright

ISBN: 978-0-9796211-4-7

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

First Printing: November 2009

NYPHRON RISING



BY
MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN



PRAISE FOR MICHAEL SULLIVAN'S RIYRIA NOVELS

"Another absolutely riveting installment in The Riyria Revelations series! Once again, Michael J. Sullivan did not disappoint. There was suspense, humor, action, treachery, and even a tiny bit of love thrown in."

— Heather McBride, Ramblings & More

"A fast paced and riveting fantasy."

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"Michael Sullivan is a gifted storyteller. He comes up with likable characters and twisty plots."

— Tia Nevitt, Fantasy Debut

"Thrilling, Captivating, Amazing are some of the first words that came to mind."

— Cindy Hannikman, Fantasy Book Critic

"There are so many layers to this story that to explain it in a few words is nigh impossible."

— Tamara Baff, Front Street Reviews

"Michael J. Sullivan has written a book I will read over and over again and it most definitely will always reside on my favorite's shelf."

— Danelle Drake, ReaderViews Reviews

*To Robin, who breathed life into Amilia, gave comfort to
Modina and saved two others from death.*

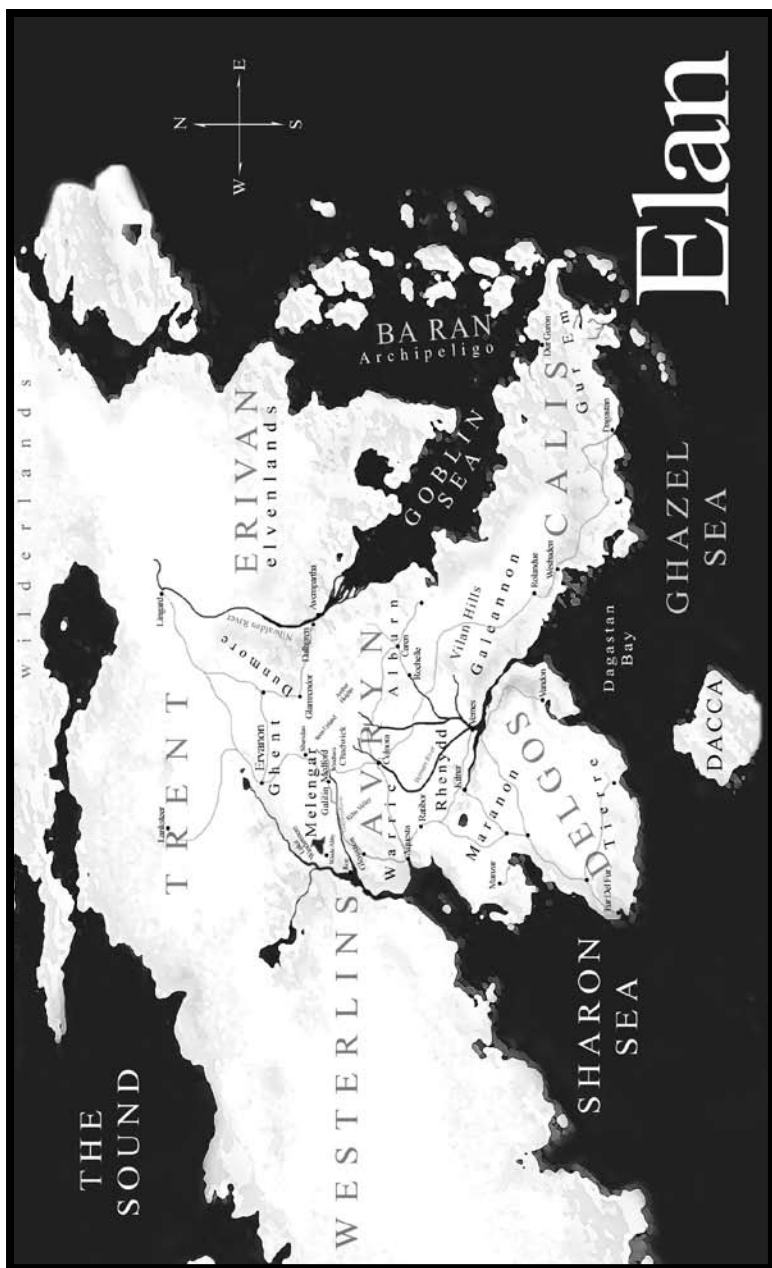
To Steve Gillick my first sounding board.

*And to the members of goodreads.com who supported
the series and invited others to join the adventure.*



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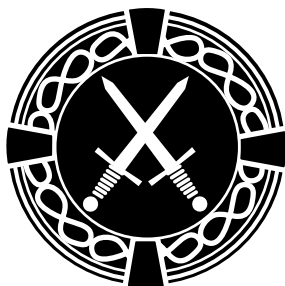
World Map of Elan

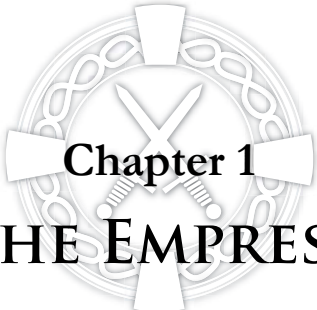


Detail Map of Avryn



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Chapter 1

THE EMPRESS

Amilia made the mistake of looking back into Edith Mon's eyes. She never meant to look up, never meant to raise her gaze from its place on the floor, but Edith startled her. The head maid would see it as defiance, a sign of rebellion in the ranks of the scullery. Amilia never looked in Edith's eyes before and for that brief instant, she wondered if a soul lurked behind them. If so, it must be cowering or dead and Amilia imagined it rotting like a late autumn apple—that would explain the smell. Edith had a sour scent, vaguely rancid as if something had gone bad.

"This 'ill be another tenent withheld from yer pay," the rotund woman said. "Yer diggin' quite a hole, ain't you?"

Edith was big, broad, and missing any sign of a neck. Her huge anvil of a head sat squarely on her shoulders. By contrast, Amilia barely existed. Small and pear-shaped with a plain face and long, lifeless hair—she was part of the crowd; one of the faces no one paused to consider—neither pretty nor grotesque enough to warrant a second glance. Unfortunately, her invisibility failed when it came to the palace's head maid, Edith Mon.

"I didn't break it." *Mistake number two*, Amilia thought to herself.

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A meaty hand slapped her across the face, ringing her ears and watering her eyes. “Go on,” Edith enticed with a sweet tone, and then whispered in her ear, “lie ta me again.”

Gripping the washbasin to steady herself, Amilia felt the heat blossom on her cheek. Her gaze now followed Edith’s hand and when it rose again, Amilia flinched. With a snicker, Edith ran her plump fingers through Amilia’s hair.

“No tangles,” Edith observed. “I can see how ya spend yer time, instead of doin’ yer work. Ya hopin’ ta catch the eye of the butcher? Maybe that saucy little man who delivers the wood? I saw ya talkin’ ta him. Know what they sees when they looks at ya? They sees an ugly scullery maid is what. A wretched filthy guttersnipe who smells of lye and grease. They would rather pay fer a whore than get ya for nothin’. You’d be better off spendin’ more time on yer tasks. If ya did, I wouldn’t have ta beat ya so often.”

Amilia felt Edith winding her hair, twisting and tightening it around her fist. “It’s not like I enjoy hurtin’ ya.” She pulled until Amilia winced. “But ya have ta learn.” Edith continued pulling Amilia’s hair, forcing her head back until only the ceiling was visible. “Yer slow, stupid, and ugly. That’s why yer still in the scullery. I can’t make ya a laundry maid, much less a parlor or chambermaid. You’d embarrass me, understand?”

Amilia remained quiet.

“I said, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Say yer sorry for chippin’ the plate.”

“I’m sorry for chipping the plate.”

“And yer sorry for lyin’ ’bout it?”

“Yes.”

Edith roughly patted Amilia’s burning cheek. “That’s a good girl. I’ll add the cost ta yer tally. Now as for punishment...” she let go of Amilia’s hair and tore the scrub brush from her hand, measuring its

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weight. She usually used a belt—the brush would hurt more. Edith would drag her to the laundry, where the big cook could not see. The head cook took a liking to Amilia, and while Edith had every right to discipline her girls, Ibis would not stand for it in his kitchen. Amilia waited for a fat hand to grab her wrist, but instead Edith stroked her head. “Such long hair,” she said at length. “It’s your hair that’s gettin’ in yer way isn’t it? It’s makin’ ya think too much of yerself. Well, I know just how to fix both problems. You’re gonna look real pretty when I—”

The kitchen fell silent. Cora, who was incessantly plunging her butter churn, paused in mid-stroke. The cooks stopped chopping and even Nipper, who was stacking wood near the stoves, froze. Amilia followed their gaze to the stairs.

A noblewoman adorned in white velvet and satin glided down the steps and entered the steamy stench of the scullery. Piercing eyes and razor-thin lips stood out against a powdered face. The woman was tall and, unlike Amilia’s hunched posture, stood as straight as a shaft of light. She moved immediately to the small table along the wall where the baker was preparing bread.

“Clear this,” she ordered with the wave of her hand, speaking to no one in particular. The baker immediately scooped up his utensils and dough into his apron and hurried away. “Scrub it clean,” the lady insisted.

Amilia felt the brush thrust back into her hand, and a push sent her stumbling forward. She did not look up, and went right to work making large swirls of flour-soaked film. Nipper was beside her in an instant with a bucket, and Vella arrived with a towel. Together they cleared the mess while the woman watched with disdain.

“Two chairs,” the lady barked, and Nipper ran off to fetch them.

Uncertain what to do next, Amilia stood in place watching the lady holding the dripping brush at her side. When the noblewoman caught her staring, Amilia quickly looked down, and movement

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caught her eye. A small gray mouse froze beneath the baker's table, trying to conceal itself in the shadows. Taking a chance, it snatched a morsel of bread and disappeared through a small crack.

"What a miserable creature," she heard the lady say. Amilia thought she also saw the mouse, until she added. "You're making a filthy puddle on the floor. Go away."

Before retreating to her washbasin, Amilia attempted a pathetic curtsy. A flurry of orders erupted from the woman, each pronounced with perfect diction. Vella, Cora, and even Edith went about setting a table as if for a royal banquet. Vella draped a white tablecloth, and Edith started setting out silverware only to be shooed away as the woman carefully placed each piece herself. Soon the table was elegantly set for two, complete with multiple goblets and linen napkins.

Amilia could not imagine who could be dining there. No one would set a table for the servants and why would a noble come to the kitchen to eat?

"Here now, what's all this about?" Amilia heard the deep familiar voice of Ibis Thinly. The old sea cook was a large barrel-chested man with bright blue eyes and a thin beard that wreathed the line of his chin. He spent the morning meeting with farmers, yet he still wore his ever-present apron. The grease-stained wrap was his uniform, his mark of office. He barged into the kitchen like a bear returning to his cave to find mischief afoot. When he spotted the lady he stopped.

"I am Lady Constance," the noblewoman informed him. "In a moment I will be bringing the Empress Modina here. If you are the cook then prepare food." The lady paused a moment to study the table critically; she adjusted the position of a few items then turned and left.

"Leif, get a knife on that roasted lamb," Ibis shouted. "Cora, fetch cheese. Vella, get bread. Nipper, straighten that woodpile!"

"The empress!" Cora exclaimed as she raced for the pantry.

"What's she doin' comin' here?" Leif asked. There was anger in

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his voice as if an unwelcome, no-account relative was dropping by and he was the inconvenienced lord of the manor.

Like everyone, Amilia had heard of the empress but never saw her—not even from a distance. Few had. She was coroneted in a private ceremony over half a year ago on Wintertide, and her arrival changed everything.

King Ethelred no longer wore his crown and was addressed as regent instead of Your Majesty. He still ruled over the castle, only now it was referred to as *the palace*. It was the other one, Regent Saldur, who made all the changes. Originally from Melengar, the old cleric took up residence, and set builders working day and night on the great hall and throne room. It was also Saldur who declared new rules that all of the servants had to follow.

The palace staff could no longer leave the grounds unless escorted by one of the new guards, and all outgoing letters were read and approved. This latter edict was hardly an issue, as few servants could write. The restriction on going outside the palace, however, was a hardship to almost everyone. Many with families in the city or surrounding farms chose to resign because they could no longer return home each night. Those remaining at the castle never heard from them again. Regent Saldur had successfully isolated the palace from the outside world, but inside, rumors and gossip ran wild. Speculations flourished in out-of-the-way corridors that giving notice was as unhealthy as attempting to sneak away.

The fact that no one ever saw the empress ignited its own set of speculations. Everyone knew she was the heir of the original legendary Emperor Novron and therefore a child of the god Maribor. This was proven when only she was able to slay the beast that slaughtered dozens of Elan's greatest knights. The fact that she was previously a farm girl from a small village confirmed that in the eyes of Maribor all were equal. Rumors concluded that she ascended to the state of a spiritual being. It was believed that only the regents

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and her personal secretary ever stood in her divine presence. That must be who the noblewoman was. The lady with the sour face and perfect speech was the Imperial Secretary to the Empress.

They soon had an array of the best food they could muster in a short time laid out on the table. Knob the baker and Leif the butcher disputed the placement of dishes, each wanting their wares in the center. “Cora,” Ibis said, “put your pretty cake of cheese in the middle.” This brought a smile and blush to the dairymaid’s face and scowls from Leif and Knob.

Being a scullion, Amilia had no more part to play and returned to her dishes. Edith was chatting excitedly in the corner near the stack of oak kegs with the tapster and the cupbearer, and everyone was straightening their outfits and running fingers through their hair. Nipper was still sweeping when the lady returned. Once more, everyone stopped. She was leading a thin young girl by the wrist.

“Sit down,” Lady Constance ordered in her brisk tone.

Everyone peered past the two women, trying to catch the first glimpse of their god-queen. Two well-armored guards emerged and took up positions on either side of the table. But no one else appeared.

Where is the empress?

“Modina, I said sit down,” Lady Constance repeated.

Shock rippled through Amilia.

Modina? This waif of a child is the empress?

The girl did not appear to hear Lady Constance and stood limp with a blank expression. She looked to be a teenager, delicate and deathly thin. Once she might have been pretty, but what remained was an appalling sight. The girl’s face was white as bone, her skin thin and stretched, revealing the detailed outline of her skull beneath. Her ragged blonde hair fell across her face. She wore only a thin white smock which added to the girl’s ghostly appearance.

Lady Constance sighed and forced the girl into one of the chairs at the baker’s table. Like a doll, the girl allowed herself to be moved.

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She said nothing and her eyes stared blankly.

“Place the napkin in your lap this way.” Lady Constance carefully opened and laid the linen with deliberate movements. She waited, glaring at the empress who sat oblivious. “As empress, you will never serve yourself,” Lady Constance went on. “You will wait as your servants fill your plate.” Lady Constance looked around with irritation when her eyes found Amilia. “You—come here,” she ordered. “Serve her eminence.”

Amilia dropped the brush in the basin and, wiping her hands on her smock, rushed forward. She wanted to mention she had no experience with serving, but said nothing. Instead she focused on recalling the times she watched Leif cutting meat. Taking up the tongs and a knife she tried her best to imitate him. Leif always made it look effortless, but Amilia’s fingers betrayed her and she fumbled miserably, managing only to place a few shredded bits of lamb on the girl’s plate.

“Bread,” Lady Constance snapped the word like a whip and Amilia sliced into the long twisted loaf, nearly cutting herself in the process.

“Now eat.”

For a brief moment, Amilia thought this was another order for her and reached out in response. She caught herself and stood motionless, not certain if she was free to return to her dishes.

“Eat, I said.” The Imperial Secretary glared at the girl who continued to stare blankly at the far wall.

“EAT DAMN YOU!” Lady Constance bellowed and everyone in the kitchen, including Edith Mon and Ibis Thinly jumped. She pounded the baker’s table with her fist, knocking over the stemware and bouncing the knives against the plates. “EAT!” Lady Constance repeated and slapped the girl across the face. Her skin-wrapped skull rocked with the blow and came to rest on its own. The girl did not wince. She merely continued her stare, this time at a new wall.

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In a fit of rage, the Imperial Secretary rose, knocking over her chair. She took one of the pieces of meat and tried to force it into the girl's mouth.

"What is going on?"

Lady Constance froze at the sound of the voice. An old white-haired man descended the steps into the scullery, his elegant purple robe and black cape looking out of place in the hot, messy kitchen. Amilia recognized Regent Saldur immediately.

"What in the world..." Saldur began, as he approached the table. He looked at the girl, then at the kitchen staff, and finally at Lady Constance, who at some point had dropped the meat. "What were you thinking...bringing her down here?"

"I—I thought if—"

Saldur held up his hand, silencing her, then slowly squeezed it into a fist. He clenched his jaw and drew a deep breath through his sharp nose. Once more, he focused on the girl. "Look at her. You were supposed to educate and train her. She's worse than ever!"

"I—I tried, but—"

"Shut up!" the regent snapped, still holding up his fist. No one in the kitchen moved. The only sound was the faint crackle of the fire in the ovens and the bubbling of broth in a pot. "If this is the result of an expert, we may as well try an amateur. They couldn't possibly do worse." The regent pointed at Amilia. "You! Congratulations, you are now the Imperial Secretary to the Empress." Turning his attention back to Lady Constance, he said, "And as for you—your services are no longer required. Guards, remove her ladyship."

Amilia saw Lady Constance falter. Her perfect posture evaporated as she cowered and walked backward, nearly falling over the upended chair. "No! Please, no," she cried as a palace guard gripped her arm and pulled her toward the back door. Another guard took her remaining arm. She grew frantic, pleading and struggling as they dragged her out.

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Amilia stood frozen in place holding the meat tongs and carving knife, trying to remember how to breathe. Once the pleas of Lady Constance faded, Regent Saldur turned to her, his face flushed red, his teeth revealed behind taunt lips. “Don’t fail me,” he told her and returned up the stairs, his cape whirling behind him.

Amilia looked back at the girl who continued to stare at the wall.



The mystery of why no one saw the empress was solved when a soldier escorted the girls to Modina’s room. Amilia expected to travel to the eastern keep, home of the regents’ offices and the royal residence. To her surprise, the guard remained on the service side and headed for a curved stair across from the laundry. Chambermaids used this stairwell to service rooms on the upper floors. But here, they went down.

Amilia did not question the guard, her thoughts preoccupied with the sword that hung at his side. His dark eyes were embedded in a stone face, and the top of her head reached the bottom of his chin. Each of his hands was the size of two of hers. He was not one of the guards that took Lady Constance away but Amilia knew he would not hesitate when the time came.

The air turned cool and damp as they descended into darkness cut only by three mounted lanterns. The last dripped wax from an unhinged faceplate. At the bottom of the stairs, a wooden door stood open leading to a tiny corridor with more doors on either side. In one room Amilia spotted several casks and a rack of bottles dressed in packs of straw. Large locks sealed two others and the third door stood open, revealing a small stone room empty except for a pile of straw and a wooden bucket. When they reached it, the soldier stood to one side, his back to the wall.

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"I'm sorry..." Amilia began, confused. "I don't understand, I thought we were going to the empress' bed chamber?"

The guard nodded.

"Are you saying this is where her eminence sleeps?"

Again, the soldier nodded.

As Amilia stared in shock, Modina wandered forward into the room and curled up on the pile of straw. The guard closed the heavy door and began fitting a large lock through the latch.

"Wait," Amilia said, "you can't leave her here. Can't you see she's sick?"

The guard snapped the lock in place.

Amilia stared at the oak door.

How is this possible? She's the empress. She's the daughter of a god and the high priestess of the church.

"You keep the empress in an old cellar?"

"It's better than where she was," the soldier told her. He had not spoken until now, and his voice was not what she expected. Soft, sympathetic, and not much louder than a whisper—his tone disarmed her.

"Where was she?"

"I've said too much already."

"I can't just leave her in there. She doesn't even have a candle."

"My orders are to keep her here."

Amilia stared at him. She could not see his eyes. The visor of his helm and the way the shadows fell cast everything above his nose in darkness. "Fine," she said at last and walked out of the cellar.

She returned a moment later carrying the wax-laden lantern from the stairwell. "May I at least keep her company?"

"Are you sure?" he sounded surprised.

Amilia was not but nodded anyway. The guard opened the door.

The empress was lying huddled on the bed of straw, her eyes open, staring, but not seeing. Amilia spotted a blanket wadded up

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in the corner. She set the lantern on the floor, shook out the wool covering, and draped it over the girl, kneeling beside her.

“They don’t treat you very well, do they?” she said, carefully brushing back the mass of hair that lay across Modina’s face. The strands felt as stiff and brittle as the straw that littered it. “How old are you?”

The empress did not answer, nor did she stir at Amilia’s touch. Lying on her side, the girl clutched her knees to her chest and pressed her cheek against the straw. She blinked occasionally and her chest rose and fell with each breath, but nothing more.

“Something bad happened, didn’t it?” She ran her fingers lightly over Modina’s bare arm. Amilia could circle the girl’s wrist with her thumb and index finger with room to spare. “Look, I don’t know how long I’m going to be here. I don’t expect it will be too long. See, I’m not a noble lady. I’m just a girl who washes dishes. The regent says I’m supposed to educate and train you, but he made a mistake. I don’t know how to do any of that.” She petted her head and let her fingers run lightly over her hollow cheek, still blotchy from where Lady Constance struck her. “But I promise I won’t ever hurt you.”

Amilia sat for several minutes searching her mind for some way to reach the girl. “Can I tell you a secret? Now don’t laugh...but...I’m really quite afraid of the dark. I know it’s silly but I can’t help myself. I’ve always been that way. My brothers tease me about it all the time. If you could chat with me a bit, maybe it would help me. What do you say?”

Still no reaction. Amilia sighed. “Well, tomorrow I’ll bring some candles from my room. I have a whole bunch saved up. That will make things a bit nicer. You just try to rest now.”

Amilia was not lying about her fear of the dark. But that night it had to stand in line behind a host of new fears as she struggled to find sleep huddled beside the empress.

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The soldiers did not come for Amilia that night and she woke when breakfast was brought in, or rather skipped across the floor on a wooden plate that spun to a stop in the middle of the room. On it was a fist-sized chunk of meat, a wedge of cheese, and thick-crust bread. It looked wonderful and was similar to Amilia's standard meals, courtesy of Ibis. Before coming to the palace, she never ate beef or venison, but now it was commonplace. Being friends with the head cook had other advantages as well. No one wanted to offend the man who controlled their diet so, with the exception of Edith Mon, Amilia was generally well treated. Amilia took a few bites and loudly voiced her appreciation. "This is sooooo good. Would you like some?"

The empress did not respond.

Amilia sighed. "No, I don't suppose you would. What would you like? I can get you whatever you want."

Amilia got to her feet, grabbed up the tray and waited. Nothing. After a few minutes, she rapped on the door and the same guard opened it.

"Excuse me, but I have to see about getting a proper meal for her eminence." The guard looked at the plate confused but stepped aside, leaving her to trot up the stairs.

The kitchen was still buzzing over the events of the previous night, but it stopped the moment Amilia entered the kitchen. "Sent ya back, did they?" Edith grinned. "Don't worry, I done saved yer pile of pots. And I haven't forgotten about that hair."

"Hush up, Edith," Ibis reprimanded with a scowl. Returning his attention to Amilia he said, "Are you alright? Did they send you back?"

"I'm fine, thank you, Ibis, and no I think I'm still the empress' secretary—whatever that means."

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“Good for you lassie,” Ibis told her. He turned to Edith and added. “And I’d watch what you say now. Looks like you’ll be washing that stack yourself.” Edith turned and stalked off with a *humpf*.

“So, my dear, what does bring you here?”

“I came about this food you sent to the empress.”

Ibis looked wounded. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing, it’s wonderful. I had some myself.”

“Then I don’t see—”

“Her eminence is sick. She can’t eat this. When I didn’t feel well my mother used to make me soup, a thin yellow broth that was easy to swallow. I was wondering, could you make something like that?”

“Sure,” Ibis told her. “Soup is easy. Someone shoulda told me she was feeling poorly. I know exactly what to make. I call it Seasick Soup. It’s the only thing the new lads kept down their first few days out. Leif, fetch me the big kettle.”

Amilia spent the rest of the morning making trips back and forth to Modina’s small cell. She removed all of her possessions from the dormitory: a spare dress, some underclothing, a night gown, a brush, and her treasured stash of nearly a dozen candles. From the linen supply she brought pillows, sheets, and blankets. She even snuck a pitcher, some mild soap, and a basin from an unoccupied guest room. Each time she passed, the guard gave her a small smile and shook his head in amusement.

After removing the old straw and bringing in fresh bundles from the stable, she went to Ibis to check on the soup. “Well, the next batch will be better, when I have more time, but this should put some wind in her sails.”

Amilia returned to the cell and, setting down the steaming pot of soup, helped the empress to sit up. She took the first sip to check the temperature then lifted the spoon to Modina’s lips. Most of the broth went down her chin and dripped onto the front of her smock.

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“Okay, that was my fault. Next time I’ll remember to bring one of those napkins that lady was all excited about.” With her second spoonful, Amilia cupped her hand and caught most of the dribble. “Ah-ha!” she exclaimed. “I got some in. It’s good, isn’t it?” She tipped another spoonful and this time saw Modina swallow.

When the bowl was empty, Amilia guessed most of the soup was on the floor or soaked into Modina’s clothes, but she was certain at least some got in. “There now, that must be a little better, don’t you think? But I see I’ve made a terrible mess of you. What say we clean you up a bit, eh?” Amilia washed Modina and changed her into her own spare smock. The two girls were similar in height, however, Modina swam in the dress until Amilia fashioned a belt from a bit of twine.

Amilia continued to chatter while she made two make-shift beds with the straw and purloined blankets, pillows, and sheets. “I would have liked to bring us some mattresses but they were heavy. Besides I didn’t want to risk too much attention. People were already giving me strange looks. I think these will do nicely, don’t you?” Modina continued her blank stare. When everything was in order, Amilia sat Modina on her newly sheeted bed in the glow of a handful of cheery candles and began gently brushing her hair.

“So, how does one get to be empress anyway?” she asked. “They say you slew a monster that killed hundreds of knights. You know, you really don’t look like the monster slaying type—no offense.” Amilia paused and tilted her head. “Still not interested in talking? That’s okay. You want to keep your past a secret. I understand. After all, we’ve only just met.

“So, let’s see...what can I tell you about myself? Well first, I come from Tarin Vale. Do you know where that is? Probably not. It is a tiny village between here and Colnora. Just a little town people sometimes pass through on their way to more exciting places. Nothing much happens in Tarin. My father makes carriages and he

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is really good at it. Still, he doesn't make much money." She paused and studied the girl's face to try to determine if she heard any of what she was saying.

"What does your father do? I think I heard he was a farmer, is that right?"

Nothing.

"My da doesn't make much money. My mother says it's because he does *too good* of a job. He's pretty proud of his work, so he takes a long time. It can take him a whole year to make a carriage. That makes it hard because he only gets paid when it's done. What with buying the supplies and all, we sometimes run out of money.

"My mother does spinning and my brother cuts wood, but it never seems like enough. That's why I'm here, you see. I'm not a very good spinner but I can read and write." One side of the girl's head was now free of tangles and Amilia switched to the other.

"I can see you are impressed. It hasn't done me much good though, well except I guess it did get me a foot in the door, as it were.

"Hmm, what's that? You want to know where I learned to read and write? Oh, well thank you for asking. Devon taught me. He's a monk that came to Tarin Vale a few years ago," her voice lowered conspiratorially. "I liked him a lot and he was cute and smart—*very smart*. He read books and told me about faraway places and things that happened long ago. Devon thought either my dad or the head of his order would try to split us up, so he taught me so we could write each other. Devon was right of course. When my da found out he said, 'There's no future with a monk.' Devon was sent away and I cried for days."

Amilia paused to clear a particularly nasty snarl. She tried her best to be gentle, but was sure it caused the girl pain even if she did not show it. "That was a rough one," she said. "For a minute I thought you might have a sparrow hiding in there.

"Anyway, when Da found out I could read and write he was so

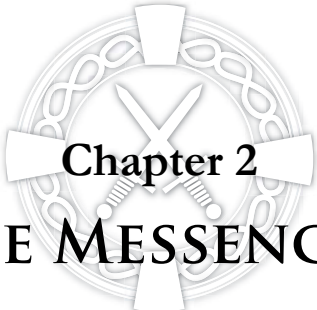
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proud. He bragged about me to everyone who came to the shop. One of his customers, Squire Jenkins Talbert, was impressed and said he could put in a good word for me here in Aquesta.

“Everyone was so excited when I was accepted. When I found out the job was just to wash dishes I didn’t have the heart to tell my family, so I’ve not been home since. Now, of course, they won’t let me go.” Amilia sighed but then put on a bright smile. “But that’s okay, because now I’m here with you.”

There was a quiet knock and the guard stepped in. He took a minute to survey the changes in the cell and nodded his approval. His gaze shifted to Amilia and there was a distinct sadness in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss, but Regent Saldur has ordered me to bring you to him.”

Amilia froze, then slowly put the brush down and with a trembling hand draped a blanket around the young girl’s shoulder. She rose, kissed Modina on the cheek and in a quivering voice managed to whisper, “Goodbye.”



Chapter 2

THE MESSENGER

He always feared he would die this way, alone on a remote stretch of road far from home. The forest pressed close from both sides, and his trained eyes recognized that the debris barring his path was not the innocent result of a weakened tree. He pulled on the reins, forcing his horse's head down. She snorted in frustration, fighting the bit—like him, she sensed danger.

He glanced behind and to either side scanning the trees standing in summer gowns of deep green. Nothing moved in the early morning stillness; nothing betrayed the tranquil facade except the pile before him. The deadfall was unnatural. Even from this distance, he saw the brightly colored pulp of fresh-cut wood—a barricade.

Thieves?

A band of highwaymen no doubt crouched under the cover of the forest watching, waiting for him to draw near. He tried to focus his thoughts as his horse panted beneath him. This was the shortest route north to the Galewyr River, and he was running out of time. Breckton was preparing to invade the Kingdom of Melengar, and he must deliver the dispatch before the knight launched the attack. His commander as well as the regents had personally expressed the

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importance of this mission before he embarked. They were counting on him—*she* was counting on him. Like thousands of others, he stood in the freezing square on Coronation Day just to catch a glimpse of Empress Modina. To their immense disappointment she never appeared. After many hours an announcement explained she was too consumed with the affairs of the New Empire. Ascended from the peasant class, the new ruler obviously had no time for frivolity.

He removed his cloak and tied it behind the saddle, revealing the gold crown on his tabard. They might let him pass. Surely they knew the Imperial Army was nearby, and Sir Breckton would not stand for the waylaying of an imperial messenger. Highwaymen might not fear that fool Earl Ballentyne, but even desperate men would think twice before offending Ballentyne's knight. Other commanders may ignore a bloodied or murdered dispatch rider, but Sir Breckton would take it as a personal assault on his honor, and insulting Breckton's honor was tantamount to suicide.

He refused to fail.

Brushing the hair from his eyes, he took a fresh grip on the reins and advanced cautiously. As he neared the barricade, he saw movement. Leaves quivered. A twig snapped. He pivoted his mount and prepared to bolt. He was a good rider—fast and agile. His horse was a well-bred three-year-old and once spurred, no one would catch them. He tensed in the saddle and leaned forward, preparing for the lurch, but the sight of imperial uniforms stopped him.

A pair of soldiers trudged to the road from the trees and grudgingly peered at him with the dull expression common to foot soldiers. They were dressed in red tabards emblazoned with the crest of Sir Breckton's command. As they approached, the larger one chewed a stalk of rye while the smaller man licked his fingers and wiped them on his uniform.

"You had me worried," the rider said with a mix of relief and irritation. "I thought you were highwaymen."

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The smaller one smiled. He took little care with his uniform. Two shoulder straps were unfastened, causing the leather tongues to stand up like tiny wings on his shoulders. "Did ya 'ear that, Will? He thoughts we was thieves. Not a bad idea, eh? We should cut us some purses—charge a toll as it were. At least we'd make a bit 'o coin standin' out 'ere all day. 'Course Breckton would skin us alive, if'n 'e 'eard."

The taller soldier, most likely a half-wit mute, nodded in silent agreement. At least he wore his uniform smartly. It fit him better and he took the time to wear it properly. Both uniforms were rumpled and stained from sleeping outdoors, but such was the life of an infantryman, and one of the many reasons he preferred being a courier.

"Clear this mess. I have an urgent dispatch. I need to get through to the Imperial Army command at once."

"Here now, we 'ave orders too, ya know? We're not ta let anyone pass," the smaller said as the larger strolled over and joined them.

"I am an imperial courier you fool!"

"Oh," the sentry responded with all the acumen of a wooden post, and glanced briefly at his partner, who maintained his dim expression. "Well, that's a different set of apples, now isn't it?" He petted the horse's neck. "That would explain the lather you've put on this 'ere girl, eh? She looks like she could use a drink. We got a bucket and there's a little stream just over—"

"I have no time for that. Just get that pile out of the road and be quick about it."

"Certainly, certainly. You don't 'ave ta be so rough. Just tell us the watchword and Will and me, we'll haul it outta yer way right fast," he said, as he dug for something caught in his teeth.

"Watchword?"

The soldier nodded. He pulled his finger out and sniffed at something with a sour look before giving it a flick. "You know, the

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password. We can't be lettin' no spies through 'ere. There's a war on after all."

"I've never heard of such a thing. I wasn't informed of any password."

"No?" The smaller soldier raised an eyebrow as he took hold of the horse's bridle.

"I spoke to the regents themselves and I—"

The larger of the two pulled him from his horse. He landed on his back, hitting the ground hard and banging his head. A jolt of pain momentarily blinded him. When he opened his eyes, he found the soldier straddling him with a blade to his throat.

"Who do you work for?" the large sentry growled.

"Whatcha doing, Will?" the smaller one asked still holding his horse.

"Trying to get this spy to talk, that's what."

"I—I'm not a spy. I'm an imperial courier. Let me go!"

"Will, our orders says nothin' about interrogatin' 'em. If'n they don't know the watchword, we cuts they's throats and tosses 'em in the river. Sir Breckton don't 'ave time ta deal with every fool we get on this 'ere road. Besides, who ya think 'e works for? The only ones fightin' us is Melengar, so 'e works for Melengar. Now slit 'is throat and I'll 'elp you drag 'im to the river as soon as I ties up this 'ere 'orse."

"But I *am* a courier!" he shouted.

"Sure ya is."

"I can prove it. I have dispatches for Sir Breckton in the saddlebag."

The two soldiers exchanged dubious looks. The smaller one shrugged. He reached into the horse's bags and proceeded to search. He pulled out a leather satchel and withdrew a wax-sealed parchment and promptly broke the seal, unfolded, and examined it.

"Well, if'n that don't beat all. Looks like 'e is telling the truth, Will. This 'ere looks like a real genuine dispatch for his lordship."

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“Oh?” the other asked as worry crossed his face.

“Sure looks that way. Better let ’im up.”

The soldier sheathed his weapon and extended a hand to help him to his feet, his face downcast. “Ah—sorry about that. We were just following orders, you know?”

“When Sir Breckton sees this broken seal, he’ll have your heads!” he said, shoving past the large sentry and snatching the document from the other.

“Us?” the smaller one laughed. “Like Will ’ere said, we was just followin’ ’is orders. You were the one who failed ta get the watchword afore ridin’ ’ere. Sir Breckton, ’e is a stickler for rules. ’E don’t like it when ’is orders aren’t followed. ’Course you’ll most likely only lose a ’and or maybe an ear fer yer mistake. If’n I was you, I’d see if’n I could heat the wax up enough ta reseal it.”

“That would ruin the impression.”

“Ya could say it was hot and what with the sun on the pouch all day the wax melted in the saddlebag. Better than losing an ’and or an ear, I says. Besides, busy nobles like Breckton ain’t gonna study the seal afore openin’ an urgent dispatch, but ’e will notice if’n the seal is broken. That’s fer sure.”

The courier looked at the document flapping in the breeze and felt his stomach churn. He had no choice, but he would not do it here with these idiots watching. He remounted his horse.

“Clear the road!” he barked.

The two soldiers dragged the branches aside. He kicked his horse and raced her up the road.



Royce watched the courier ride out of sight before taking off his imperial uniform and turning to face Hadrian he said, “Well, that wasn’t so hard.”

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“Will?” Hadrian asked as the two slipped into the forest.

Royce nodded. “Remember complaining yesterday that you’d rather be an actor? I was giving you a part: Will, the Imperial Checkpoint Sentry. I thought you did rather well with it.”

“You know, you don’t need to mock *all* my ideas.” Hadrian frowned as he pulled his own tabard over his head. “Besides, I still think we should consider it. We could travel from town to town performing in dramatic plays, even a few comedies.” Hadrian gave his smaller partner an appraising look. “Though maybe you should stick to drama—perhaps tragedies.”

Royce glared back.

“What? I think I would make a superb actor. I see myself as a dashing leading man. We could definitely land parts in *The Crown Conspiracy*. I’ll play the handsome swordsman that fights the villain, and you—well, you can be the other one.”

They dodged branches while pulling off their coifs and gloves, rolling them in their tabards. Walking downhill, they reached one of the many small rivers that fed the great Galewyr where they found their horses still tied and enjoying the river grass. The animals lazily swished their tails, keeping the flies at bay.

“You worry me sometimes, Hadrian. You really do.”

“Why not actors? It’s safe. Might even be fun.”

“It would be neither safe nor fun. Besides, actors have to travel and I’m content with the way things are. I get to stay near Gwen,” Royce added.

“See, that’s another reason. Why do you keep doing this? Honestly if I had what you do, I would never take another job.”

Royce removed a pair of boots from a saddlebag. “We do it because it’s what we’re good at, and with the war Alric is willing to pay top fees for information.”

Hadrian released a sarcastic snort. “Sure, top fees for us, but what about the other costs? Breckton might work for that idiot Ballentyne,

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but he's no fool himself. He'll certainly look at the seal and won't buy the story about it softening in the saddlebag."

"I know," Royce began, as he sat on a log exchanging the imperial boots for his own, "but after telling one lie, his second tale about sentries breaking the seal will sound even more outlandish, so they won't believe anything he says."

Hadrian paused in his own efforts to switch boots and scowled at his partner. "You realize they'll probably execute him for treason?"

Royce nodded. "Which will neatly eliminate the only witness."

"You see, that's exactly what I'm talking about," Hadrian sighed and shook his head.

Royce could see the familiar melancholy wash over his partner. It appeared too often lately. He could not fathom his friend's moodiness. These strange bouts of depression usually followed successes, and frequently led to a night of heavy drinking.

He wondered if Hadrian even cared about the money anymore. He took only what was needed for drinks and food and stored the rest. Royce could understand his friend's reaction if they were making a living by picking pockets or robbing homes, but they worked for the king now. It was almost too clean for Royce's taste. Hadrian had no real concept of filth. Unlike Royce, he had not grown up in the muddy streets of Ratibor.

He decided to try and reason with him. "Would you rather they find out and send a detachment to hunt us down?"

"No, I just hate being the cause of an innocent man's death."

"No one is innocent my friend. And you aren't the cause...you're more like..." he searched for words, "the grease beneath the skids."

"Thanks. I feel *so* much better."

Royce folded the uniform and, along with the boots, placed it neatly into his saddlebag. Hadrian still struggled to rid himself of the black boots that were too small. With a mighty tug he jerked the last one off and threw it down in frustration. He gathered it up and

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wrestled his uniform into the satchel. Cramming everything as deep as possible, he strapped the flap down and buckled it as tight as he could. He glared at the pack and sighed once more.

"You know, if you organized your pack a little better it wouldn't be so hard to fit all your gear," Royce said.

Hadrian looked at him with a puzzled expression. "What? Oh—no, I'm...it's not the gear."

"What is it then?" Royce pulled on his black cloak and adjusted the collar.

The fighter stroked his horse's neck. "I don't know," he replied mournfully. "It's just that—well—I thought by now I'd have done something more—with my life, I mean."

"Are you crazy? Most men work themselves to death on a small bit of land that isn't even theirs. You're free to do as you choose and go wherever you want."

"I know, but when I was young I used to think I was—well—special. I used to imagine that I would triumph in some great purpose, win the girl, and save the kingdom, but I suppose every boy feels that way."

"I didn't."

Hadrian scowled at him. "I just had this idea of who I would become, and being a worthless spy wasn't part of that plan."

"We're hardly worthless," Royce corrected him. "We've been making a good profit, especially lately."

"That's not the point. I was successful as a mercenary, too. It's not about money. It's the fact that I survive like a leech."

"Why is this suddenly coming up now? For the first time in years, we're making good money with a steady stream of *respectable* jobs. We're in the employ of a king for Maribor's sake. We can actually sleep in the same bed two nights in a row and not worry about being arrested. Just last week I passed the captain of the city watch and he gave me a nod."

"It's not the amount of work; it's the *kind* of work. It's the fact

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that we're always lying. If that courier dies, it'll be our fault. Besides, it's not sudden. I've felt this way for years. Why do you think I'm always suggesting we do something else? Do you know why I broke the rules and took that job to steal Pickering's sword? The one that nearly got us executed?"

"For the unusual sum of money offered," Royce replied.

"No, that's why *you* took it. I wanted the job because it seemed like the right thing to do. For once I had the chance to help someone who really deserved to be helped, or so I thought at the time."

"And becoming an actor is the answer?"

Hadrian untied his horse. "No, but as an actor, I could at least *pretend* to be virtuous. I suppose I should just be happy to be alive, right?"

Royce did not answer. The nagging sensation was surfacing again. He hated keeping secrets from Hadrian and it weighed heavily on his conscience, which was amazing because he never knew he had one. Royce defined right and wrong by the moment. Right was what was best for him—wrong was everything else. He stole, lied, and even killed when necessary. This was his craft and he was good at it. There was no reason to apologize, no need to pause or reflect. The world was at war with him, and nothing was sacred.

Telling Hadrian what he learned ran too great a risk. Royce preferred his world constant, with each variable accounted for. Lines on maps were shifting daily and power slipped from one set of hands to another. Time flowed too fast and events were too unexpected. He felt like he was crossing a frozen lake in late spring. He tried to pick a safe path, but the surface cracked beneath his feet. Even so, there were some changes he could still control. He reminded himself that the secret he kept from Hadrian was for his friend's own good.

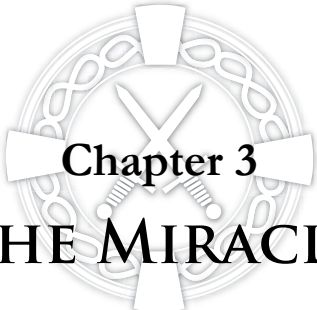
Climbing on Mouse, his short gray mare, Royce thought a moment. "We've been working pretty hard lately. Maybe we should take a break."

"I don't see how we can," Hadrian replied. "With the Imperial

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Army preparing to invade Melengar, Alric is going to need us now more than ever.”

“You’d think that wouldn’t you? But you didn’t read the dispatch.”



Chapter 3

THE MIRACLE

The Princess Arista Essendon slouched on the carriage seat buffeted by every rut and hole in the road. Her neck was stiff from sleeping against the armrest and her head throbbed from the constant jostling. Rising with a yawn, she wiped her eyes and rubbed her face. An attempt to straighten her hair trapped her fingers in a mass of auburn knots.

The ambassadorial coach was showing the same wear as its passenger, having traveled too many miles over the last year. The roof leaked, the springs were worn, and the bench was becoming threadbare in places. The driver had orders to push hard to return to Medford by midday. He was making good time, but at the expense of hitting every rut and rock along the way. Drawing back the curtain, the morning sun flashed through gaps in the leafy wall of trees lining the road.

She was almost home.

Dirt, floating in the flickering light that revealed the interior of the coach, coated everything in a fine layer of dust. A discarded cheesecloth and several apple rinds covered a pile of parchments spilling from a stack on the opposite bench. Soiled footprints

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patterned the floor where a blanket, corset, and two dresses nested along with three shoes. She had no idea where the fourth was and only hoped it was in the carriage and not left in Lanksteer. Over the last six months, she felt as if she had left bits of herself all over Avryn.

Hilfred would have known where her shoe was.

She picked up her pearl-handled hairbrush and turned it over in her hands. Hilfred must have searched the wreckage for days. This one came from Tur Del Fur. Her father gave her a brush from every city he traveled to. He was a private man and saying “I love you” did not come easy, even to his own daughter. The brushes were his unspoken confessions. Once, she had dozens—now, this was the last. When her bedroom tower collapsed she lost them and it felt as if she lost her father all over again. Three weeks later this single brush appeared. It had to be Hilfred, but he never said a word or admitted a thing.

Hilfred had been her bodyguard for years, and now that he was gone she realized just how much she had depended on him, and took him for granted.

She had a new bodyguard now. Alric personally picked him from his own castle guards. His name began with a T—Tom, Tim, Travis—something like that. He stood on the wrong side of her, talked too much, laughed at his own jokes, and was always eating something. He was likely a brave and skilled soldier, but he was no Hilfred.

The last time she saw Hilfred was over a year ago in Dahlgren when he nearly died from the Gilarabrywn attack. It was the second time he suffered burns trying to save her. The first was when she was only twelve—the night the castle caught fire. Her mother and several others died, but a boy of fifteen, the son of a sergeant-at-arms, braved the inferno to pull her from her bed. At Arista’s insistence, he went back for her mother. He never reached her, but nearly died trying. He suffered for months afterward, and Arista’s father rewarded the boy

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by appointing him her bodyguard.

His wounds back then were nothing like what he suffered in Dahlgren. Healers had wrapped him from head to toe and he lay unconscious for days. When he woke, to her shock, he refused to see her. He left in the back of a wagon without saying goodbye, and at Hilfred's request, no one would tell her where he had gone. She could have pressed. She could have ordered the healers to talk. For months, she looked over her shoulder expecting to see him, waiting to hear the familiar clap of his sword against his thigh. She often wondered if she had done the right thing in letting him go. She sighed at yet another regret added to a pile that had been building over the last year.

Taking stock of the mess around her increased her melancholy. This is what came from refusing to have a handmaid along, but she could not imagine being cooped up in the carriage with anyone for so long. She picked up her dresses and laid them across the far seat. Spying a document crushed into a ball and hanging in the folds of the far window curtain, made her stomach churn with guilt. With a frown, she plucked the crumpled parchment and smoothed it out by pressing it in her lap.

It contained a list of kingdoms and provinces with a line slashed through each and the notation *IMP* scrawled beside them. Of course, the likes of Chadwick and King Ethelred were the first in line to kiss the empress' ring. She shook her head in disbelief. It happened overnight. One day nothing, the next—*bang!* There was a New Empire and almost all of Warric and Rhenydd had joined. They pressured the small holdouts like Glouston, then invaded and swallowed them. Alburn caved in after a few threats. She ran her finger over the line indicating Dunmore. His Highness King Roswort graciously decided it was in his kingdom's best interest to accept the imperial offer of extended landholdings in return for joining the Empire. Arista would not be surprised if Roswort was promised Melengar as part of his

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payment.

It all happened so fast.

A year ago, the Empire was merely an idea. She had spent months as ambassador trying to strike alliances. Without support, without allies, Melengar could not hope to stand against the growing colossus.

How long do we have before the Empire marches north, before—

The carriage came to a sudden halt, throwing her forward, jerking the curtains, and creaking the tired springs. She looked out the window, puzzled. They were still on the old Steward's Road. The wall of trees had given way to an open field of flowers, which she knew placed them on the high meadow just a few miles outside Medford.

"What's going on?" she called out.

No response.

Where in Elan is Tim, or Ted, or whatever the blazes his name is?

She pulled the latch and, hiking up her skirt, pushed out the door. Warm sunlight met her, making her squint. Her legs were stiff and her back ached. At only twenty-six she already felt ancient. She slammed the carriage door and, holding a hand to protect her eyes, glared as best she could up at the silhouettes of the driver and groom. They glanced at her, but only briefly then looked back down the slope of the road ahead.

"Daniel! Why—" she started but stopped after seeing what they were looking at.

The high meadowlands just north of Medford provided an extensive view for several miles south. The land sloped gently down, revealing Melengar's capital city, Medford. She saw the spires of Essendon Castle and Mares Cathedral and farther out the Galewyrr River marked the southern border of the kingdom. In the days when her mother and father were alive, the royal family would come here in the summer for picnics and enjoy the cool breeze and the view. Only today the view was quite different.

On the far bank, in the clear morning light, Arista saw rows and

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rows of canvas tents, hundreds of them, each flying the red-and-white flags of the Nyphron Imperial Empire.

“There’s an army, Highness,” Daniel found his voice. “An army is a stone’s throw from Medford.”

“Get me home, Daniel. Beat the horses if you must, but get me home!”



The carriage had barely stopped when Arista punched open the door, nearly hitting Tommy—or Terence, or whoever he was—in the face when he foolishly attempted to open it for her. The servants in the courtyard immediately stopped their early morning chores to bow reverently. Melissa prepared for the onslaught as soon as she spotted the coach. Unlike Tucker—or Tillman—the small redheaded maid had served Arista for years, and knew to expect a storm.

“How long has that army been there?” Arista barked at her even as she trotted up the stone steps.

“Nearly a week,” Melissa replied, chasing after the princess and catching the traveling cloak as Arista discarded it.

“A week? Has there been fighting?”

“Yes, His Majesty launched an attack across the river just a few days ago.”

“Alric attacked them? Across the river?”

“It didn’t go well,” Melissa replied in a lowered voice.

“I should think not! Was he drunk?”

Castle guards hastily pulled back the big oak doors, barely getting them open before the princess barreled through, her gown whipping behind her.

“Where are they?”

“In the War Room.”

She stopped.

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They stood in the northern foyer, a wide gallery of polished stone pillars, displayed suits of armor, and hallways that led to sweeping staircases.

“Missy, fetch my blue audience gown and shoes to go with it and prepare a basin of water—oh and send someone to bring me something to eat, I don’t care what.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Melissa made a curt bow and raced up the stairs.

“Your Highness,” her bodyguard called chasing after her. “You almost lost me there.”

“Imagine that. I’ll just have to try harder next time.”



Arista watched as her brother, King Alric, stood up from the great table. Normally this would require everyone else to stand as well, but Alric suspended that tradition inside the council chamber, as he had a habit of rising frequently and pacing during meetings.

“I don’t understand it,” he said, turning his back on all of them to begin his slow, familiar walk between the table and the window. As he moved, he stroked his short beard the way another man might wring his hands. Alric started the beard just before Arista left on her trip. It still had not filled in. She guessed he grew it to look more like their father. King Amrath had a dark, full beard, but Alric’s light brown wisps only underscored his youth. He made matters worse by drawing attention to it with his constant stroking. Arista recalled how their father used to drum his fingers during state meetings. Under the weight of the crown, pressures must build up until action sought its own means of escape.

Her brother was two years her junior, and she knew he never expected to wear the crown so soon. For years she had heard Alric’s plans to roam the wilds with his friend Mauvin Pickering. The two

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wanted to see the world and have grand adventures that would involve nameless women, too much wine, and too little sleep. They even hoped to find and explore the ancient ruins of Percepliquis. When he tired of the road, she suspected he would be happy to return home and marry a girl half his age and father several strong sons. Only then, as his temples grayed and all of life's other ambitions were accomplished, did he expect the crown would pass to him. All that changed the night their Uncle Percy arranged the assassination of their father and left him king.

"It could be a trick, Your Majesty," Lord Valin suggested. "A plan to catch you off your guard."

Lord Valin was an elderly knight with a bushy white beard known for his valor and courage, but never for his strategic skills.

"Lord Valin," Sir Ecton addressed the noble respectfully, "after our failure on the banks of the Galewyr, the Imperial Army can overrun Medford with ease, whether we are on or off our guard. We know it and they know it. Medford is their prize for the taking whenever they feel comfortable getting their feet wet."

Alric walked to the tall balcony window where the afternoon light spilled into the royal banquet hall of Essendon Castle. The hall served as the Royal War Room out of the need for a large space to conduct the defense of the kingdom. Where once festive tapestries hung, great maps now covered the walls, each slashed with red lines illustrating the tragic retreat of Melengar's armies.

"I just don't understand it," Alric repeated. "It's so peculiar. The Imperial Army outnumbers us ten to one. They have scores of heavy cavalry, siege weapons, and archers—everything they need. So why are they sitting across the river? Why stop now?"

"It makes no sense from a military stand point, sire," Sir Ecton said. He was Alric's chief general and field commander, a large powerful man with a fiery disposition. Ecton was also Count Pickering's most accomplished vassal, and regarded by many as the best knight in

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Melengar. "I would venture it is political," he continued. "It has been my experience that the most foolish decisions in combat are the result of political choices made by those with little to no field experience."

Earl Kendell, a pot-bellied fussy man who always dressed in a bright green tunic, glared at Ecton. "Careful with your tongue and consider your company!"

Ecton rose to his feet. "I held my tongue, and what was the result?"

"Sir Ecton!" Alric shouted, but his voice sounded high-pitched and feminine. "I am well aware of your opinion of my decision to attack the imperial encampment."

"It was insanity to attempt an assault across a river without even the possibility to flank," Ecton shot back.

"Nevertheless, it was my decision." Alric squeezed his hands into fists. "I felt it was...necessary."

"Necessary? Necessary!" Ecton spat the word as if it were a vile thing in his mouth. He looked like he was about to speak again but Count Pickering rose to his feet and Sir Ecton sat down.

Arista had seen this before. Too often Ecton looked to Count Pickering before acting on an order Alric gave. He was not the only one. It was clear that although her brother was king, Alric failed to earn the respect of his nobles, his army, or his people.

"Perhaps Ecton is right," the young Marquis Wymar spoke up. "About it being political, I mean," he added hastily. "We all know what a pompous fool the Earl of Chadwick is. Isn't it possible the earl ordered Breckton to hold the final attack until Archibald could arrive? It would certainly raise his standing in the imperial court to claim he personally led the assault that conquered Melengar for the New Empire."

"That would explain the delay in the attack," Pickering replied in his fatherly tone that she knew Alric despised. "But our scouts

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are reporting that large numbers of men are pulling out, and by all accounts are heading south.”

“A feint perhaps?” Alric asked.

Pickering shook his head. “As Sir Ecton pointed out, there would be no need.”

Several of the other advisers nodded thoughtfully.

“Something must be going on for the empress to recall her troops like this,” Pickering said.

“But what?” Alric asked to no one in particular. “I wish I knew what kind of person she was. It’s impossible to guess the actions of a total stranger.” He turned to his sister. “Arista, you met Modina—spent time with her in Dahlgren. What is she like? Do you have any idea what would cause her to pull the army back?”

A memory flashed in Arista’s mind of her and a young girl trapped at the top of a tower. The princess was frozen in fear but Thrace rummaged through a pile of debris and human limbs looking for a weapon to fight an invincible beast. Was it bravery or was she too naive to understand the futility? “The girl I knew as Thrace was a sweet, innocent child who wanted only the love of her father. The church may have changed her name to Modina, but I can’t imagine they changed her. She did not order this invasion. She wouldn’t want to rule her tiny village, much less conquer the world.” Arista shook her head. “She is not our enemy.”

“A crown can change a person,” Sir Ecton said while glaring at Alric.

Arista rose. “It is more likely we are dealing with the church and a council of conservative Imperialists. I highly doubt a child from rural Dunmore could influence the archaic attitudes and inflexible opinions of so many stubborn minds who would strive to resist, rather than work with, a new ruler,” she said, glaring at Ecton. From over the knight’s shoulder she saw Alric cringe.

The door to the hall opened and Julian, the elderly Lord

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Chamberlain, entered. With a sweeping bow he tapped his staff of office twice on the tiled floor. "The Royal Protector, Royce Melborn, Your Majesty."

"Show him in immediately."

"Don't get your hopes too high," Pickering said to his king. "They're spies, not miracle workers."

"I pay them enough for miracles. I don't think it unreasonable to get what I pay for."

Alric employed numerous informants and scouts, but none were as effective as Riyria. Arista herself originally hired Royce and Hadrian to kidnap her brother the night their father was assassinated. Since then, their services had proved invaluable.

Royce entered the banquet hall alone. The small man with dark hair and dark eyes always dressed in layers of black. He wore a knee-length tunic and a long flowing cloak and, as always, showed no visible weapons. It was unlawful to carry a blade in the presence of the king, but given he and Hadrian had twice saved Alric's life, Arista surmised the royal guards did not thoroughly search him. She was certain Royce carried his white-bladed dagger and regarded the law as merely a suggestion.

Royce bowed before the assembly.

"Well?" her brother asked a bit too loudly, too desperately. "Did you discover anything?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Royce replied, but his face remained so neutral that nothing more could be determined, for good or ill.

"Well, out with it. What did you find? Are they really leaving?"

"Sir Breckton has been ordered to withdraw all but a small containment force and march south immediately with the bulk of his army."

"So it really is true?" the Marquis Wymar said. "But why?"

"Yes, why?" Alric added.

"Because Rhenydd has been invaded by the Nationalists out of

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Delgos.”

A look of surprise circulated the room.

“Degan Gaunt’s rabble is invading Rhenydd?” Earl Kendell said in bewilderment.

“And doing quite well from the dispatch I read,” Royce informed them. “Gaunt has led them up the coast, taking every village and town. He’s managed to sack Kilnar and Vernes.”

“He sacked Vernes?” Ecton asked shocked.

“That’s a good-sized city,” Wymar mentioned.

“It’s also only a few miles from Ratibor,” Pickering observed. “From there it’s what—maybe a hard day’s march to the imperial capital itself?”

“No wonder the Empire is recalling Breckton.” Alric looked at the count. “What were you saying about miracles?”



“I can’t believe you couldn’t find anyone to ally with,” Alric berated Arista as he collapsed on his throne. The two were alone in the reception hall, the most ornate room in the castle, which, along with the grand ballroom, banquet hall, and the foyer, were all that most people generally ever saw. Tolin the Great built the chamber to be intimidating. The three-story ceiling was an impressive sight and the observation balcony which circled the walls provided a magnificent view of the parquet floor inlaid with the royal falcon coat-of-arms. Double rows of twelve marble pillars formed a long gallery similar to that of a church, yet instead of an altar there was the dais. Built on seven pyramid-shaped steps sat the throne of Melengar—the only seat in the vast chamber. As children the throne had always appeared so impressive, but now with Alric slouched in it, Arista realized it was just a gaudy chair.

“I tried,” she offered, sitting on the steps before the throne

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as she had once done with her father. “Everyone had already sworn allegiance to the New Empire.” Arista gave her brother the demoralizing report on her last six months of failure.

“We’re quite a pair, you and I. You’ve done little as ambassador and I nearly destroyed us with that attack across the river. Many of the nobles are being more vocal. Soon Pickering won’t be able to control the likes of Ecton.”

“I must admit I was shocked when I heard about your attack. What possessed you to do such a thing?” she asked.

“Royce and Hadrian had intercepted plans drafted by Breckton himself. He was about to launch a three-pronged assault. I had to make a preemptive strike. I was hoping to catch the Imperials by surprise.”

“Well, it looks like it worked out after all. It delayed their attack just long enough.”

“True, but what good will that do us if we can’t find more help. What about Trent?”

“Well, they haven’t said no, but they haven’t said yes either. The church’s influence has never been strong that far north, but they also don’t have any ties to us. They are at least willing to wait and watch. They won’t join us because they don’t think we have a chance. But if we can show them some success they could be persuaded to side with us.

“Don’t they realize the Empire will be after them next?”

“I said that, but...”

“But what?”

“They really weren’t very amenable to what I had to say. The men of Lanksteer are brutish and backward. They respect only strength. I would have fared better if I’d beaten their king senseless.” She hesitated. “I don’t think they quite knew what to make of me.”

“I should never have sent you,” he said, running a hand over his face. “What was I thinking, making a woman an ambassador.”

His words felt like a slap. “I could have been disadvantaged in

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Trent, but in the rest of the kingdoms I don't think the fact I was a woman—"

"A witch then," Alric lashed out, "even worse. All those Warric and Alburn nobles are so devoted, and what do I do? I send them someone the church tried for witchcraft."

"I'm not a witch!" she snapped. "I wasn't convicted of anything, and everyone with a brain between their ears knows that trial was a fabrication of Braga and Saldur to get their hands on our throne."

"The truth doesn't matter. Everyone believes what the church tells them. They said you're a witch, so that makes it so. Look at Modina. The Patriarch claims she's the Heir of Novron, the descendant of the god Maribor and everyone believes. I should have never made an enemy of the church. But between Saldur's betrayal and their sentinels killing Fanen, I just couldn't bring myself to bend my knee."

"When I evicted the priests and forbade Deacon Thomas from preaching about what happened in Dahlgren, the people revolted. They set shops in Gentry Square on fire. I could see the flames from my window, for Maribor's sake. The whole city could have burned. They were calling for my head—people right in front of the castle burning stuffed images of me and shouting 'Death to the godless king!' I had to use the army to restore order. It's quiet now, but the people are restless." Alric reached up and pulled his crown off, turning the golden circlet over in his hands.

"I was in Caren at the court of King Armand when I heard about that," Arista said, shaking her head.

Alric laid the crown on the arm of the throne, closed his eyes, and softly banged his head against the back of the chair. "What are we going to do, Arista? The Imperials will return. As soon as they deal with Gaunt's rabble the army will come back." His eyes opened and his hand drifted absently toward his throat. "I suppose they'll hang me won't they, or do they use the axe on kings?" His tone was one of quiet acceptance, which surprised her.

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The carefree boy she once knew was vanishing before her eyes. Even if the Empire failed and Melengar stood strong, Alric would never be the same. In many ways, their uncle had managed to kill him after all.

Alric looked at the crown sitting on the chair's arm. "I wonder what Father would do?"

"He never had anything like this to deal with. Not since Tolin defeated Lothomad at Drondil Fields has any monarch of Melengar faced invasion."

"Lucky me."

"Lucky us."

Alric nodded. "At least we've got some time now. That's something. What do you think of Pickering's idea to send the *Ellis Far* down the coast to Tur Del Fur and contact the Nationalist leader—this Gaunt fellow?"

"Honestly, I think establishing an alliance with Gaunt is our only hope. Isolated we don't stand a chance against the Empire," Arista agreed.

"But the Nationalists? Are they any better than the Imperials? They're as much opposed to monarchies as they are the Empire. They don't want to be ruled at all."

"Alone and surrounded by enemies is not the time to be choosy about your friends."

"We aren't completely alone," Alric corrected. "Marquis Lanaklin joined us."

"A lot of good that does. If we get more help like that we'll go broke just feeding them. Our only chance is to contact Degan Gaunt and form an alliance. If Delgos joins with us, that may be enough to persuade Trent to side in our favor. If that happens, we could deal a mortal blow to this new Nyphron Empire."

"Do you think Gaunt will agree?"

"Don't know why not," Arista said. "It is to our mutual benefit. I'm certain I can talk him into it, and I must say I'm looking forward

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to the trip. A rolling ocean is a welcome change from that carriage. While I'm away have someone work on it, or better yet order a new one. And put extra padding—"

"You aren't going," Alric told her as he put his crown back on.

"What's that?"

"I'm sending Linroy to meet with Gaunt."

"But I'm the ambassador and a member of the royal family. He can't negotiate a treaty or an alliance with—"

"Of course he can. Linroy is an experienced negotiator and statesman."

"He's the royal financier. That doesn't qualify him as a statesman."

"He's handled dozens of trade agreements," Alric interjected.

"The man's a bookkeeper!" she shouted rising to her feet.

"It may come as a surprise to you, but other people are capable of doing things, too."

"But why?"

"Like you said, you're a member of the royal family." Alric looked away and his fingers reached up to stroke his beard. "Do you have any idea what kind of position it would put me in if you were captured? We're at war. I can't risk you being held for ransom."

She stared at him. "You're lying. This isn't about ransom. You think I can't do the job."

"Arista, it's my fault. I shouldn't have—"

"Shouldn't have what? Made your witch-sister ambassador?"

"Don't be that way."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty, what way would you like me to be? How should I react to being told I'm worthless and an embarrassment and that I should go sit in my room and—"

"I didn't say any of that. Stop putting words in my mouth!"

"It's what you're thinking—it's what all of you think."

"Have you become clairvoyant now, too?"

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“Do you deny it?”

“Damn it, Arista, you were gone six months!” He struck the arm of the throne with his fist. The dull thud sounded loudly off the walls like a bass drum. “Six months, and not a single alliance. You barely got a maybe. That’s a pretty poor showing. This meeting with Gaunt is too important. It could be our last chance.”

She stood up. “Forgive me, Your Majesty. I apologize for being such an utter failure. May I please have your royal permission to be excused?”

“Arista, don’t.”

“Please, Your Majesty, my frail feminine constitution can’t handle such a heated debate. I feel faint. Perhaps if I retire to my room I could brew a potion to make myself feel better. While I’m at it, perhaps I should enchant a broom to fly around the castle for fresh air.”

She pivoted on her heel and marched out, slamming the great door behind her with a resounding *boom!*

She stood with her back against the door, waiting, wondering if Alric would chase after her.

Will he apologize and take back what he said and agree to let me go?

She listened for the sound of his heels on the parquet.

Silence.

She wished she did know magic—then no one could stop her from meeting with Gaunt. Alric was right, this was their last chance and she was not about to leave the fate of Melengar to Dillnard Linroy, statesman extraordinaire! Besides, she had failed and that made it her responsibility to correct.

She looked up to see Tim—or Tommy—leaning against the near wall, biting his fingernails. He glanced up at her and smiled. “I hope you’re planning on heading to the kitchens, I’m starved—practically eating my fingers here,” he chuckled.

She pushed away from the door and quickly strode down the corridor. She almost did not see Mauvin Pickering sitting on the

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broad sill of the courtyard-facing window. Feet up, arms folded, back against the frame, he crouched in a shaft of sunlight like a cat. He was still wearing the black clothes of mourning.

"Troubles with His Majesty?" he asked.

"He's being an ass."

"What did he do this time?"

"Replaced me with that sniveling little wretch, Linroy. He's sending him on the *Ellis Far* in my place to contact Gaunt."

"Dillnard Linroy isn't a bad guy, he's—"

"Listen, I really don't want to hear how wonderful Linroy is at the moment. I'm right in the middle of hating him."

"Sorry."

She glanced at his side and he immediately turned his attention out the window.

"Still not wearing it?" she asked.

"It doesn't go with my ensemble, the silver hilt clashes with black."

"It's been over a year since Fanen died."

He turned back sharply. "Since he was killed by Luis Guy you mean."

Arista took a breath. She was not used to the new Mauvin. "Aren't you supposed to be Alric's bodyguard now? Isn't that hard to do without a sword?"

"Hasn't been a problem so far. You see, I have this plan. I sit here and watch the ducks in the courtyard—well I suppose it's not really so much a plan as a strategy really, or maybe it's more of a scheme. Anyway, this is the one place my father never thinks to look, so I can sit here all day and watch those ducks walking back and forth. There were six of them last year. Did you know that? Only five now. I can't figure out what happened to the other one. I keep looking for him, but I don't think he's coming back."

"It wasn't your fault," she told him gently.

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Mauvin reached up and traced the lead edges of the window with his fingertips. “Yeah, it was.”

She put her hand on his shoulder and gave a soft squeeze. She did not know what else to do. First her mother, then her father, Fanen and Hilfred—they were all gone. Mauvin was slipping away as well. The boy who loved his sword more than Wintertide presents, cake, or swimming on a hot day refused to touch it anymore. The eldest son of Count Pickering, who once challenged the sun to a duel because it rained on the day of a hunt, spent his days watching ducks.

“Doesn’t matter,” Mauvin remarked miserably. “The world is coming to an end anyway.” He looked up at her. “You just said Alric is sending that bastard Linroy on the *Ellis Far*—he’ll kill us all.”

As hard as she tried not to, she could not help but laugh. She punched his shoulder, then gave him a peck on the cheek. “That’s the spirit, Mauvin. Keep looking on the bright side.”

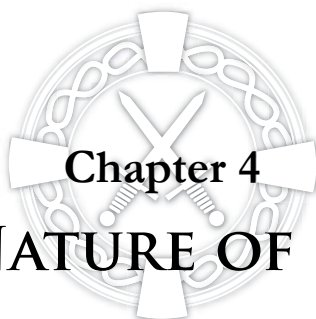
She left him and continued down the hall, as she passed the office of the Lord Chamberlin the old man hurried out. “Your Highness?” he called, looking relieved. “The Royal Protector, Royce Melborn, is still waiting to see if there is something else needed of him. Apparently he and his partner are thinking of taking some time off, unless there is something pressing the king needs. Can I tell him he’s excused?”

“Yes, of course, you—no wait.” She cast a look at her bodyguard. “Tommy, you’re right. I am hungry. Be a dear and fetch us both a plate of chicken or whatever you can find that’s good in the kitchen, will you? I’ll wait here.”

“Sure, but my name is—”

“Hurry before I change my mind.”

She waited until he was down the corridor then turned back to the Chamberlin. “Where did you say he was waiting?”



Chapter 4

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The Rose & Thorn Tavern was mostly empty. Many of its patrons left Medford, fearful of the coming invasion. Those that remained were the indentured, infirmed, or those simply too poor or stubborn to leave. Royce found Hadrian sitting alone in the Diamond Room—his feet up on a spare chair, a pint of ale before him. Two empty mugs sat on the table, one lying on its side while Hadrian stared at it with a melancholy expression.

“Why didn’t you come to the castle?” Royce asked.

“I knew you could handle it.” He continued to stare at the mug, tilting his head slightly as he did.

“Looks like our break will have to be postponed,” Royce told him, pulling over a chair and sitting down. “Alric has another job. He wants us to make contact with Gaunt and the Nationals. They’re still working out the details. The princess is going to send a messenger here.”

“Her Highness is back?”

“Got in this morning.”

Royce reached into his vest, pulled out a bag and set it in front of Hadrian. “Here’s your half. Have you ordered dinner yet?”

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"I'm not going," Hadrian said, rocking the fallen mug with his thumb.

"Not going?"

"I can't keep doing this."

Royce rolled his eyes. "Now don't start that again. If you haven't noticed, there's a war going on. This is the best time to be in our business. Everyone needs information. Do you know how much money—"

"That's just it, Royce. There's a war on and what am I doing? I'm making a profit off it rather than fighting in it." Hadrian took another swallow of ale and set the mug back on the table a little too heavily, rattling its brothers. "I'm tired of collecting money for being dishonorable. It's not how I'm built."

Royce glanced around. Three men eating a meal looked over briefly, and then lost interest.

"They haven't all been just for money," Royce pointed out. "Thrace, for example."

Hadrian displayed a bitter smile. "And look how that turned out. She hired us to save her father. Seen him lately, have you?"

"We were hired to obtain a sword to slay a beast. She got the sword. The beast was slain. We did our job."

"The man is dead."

"And Thrace, who was nothing but a poor farm girl, is now empress. If only all our jobs ended so well for our clients."

"You think so, Royce? You really think Thrace is happy? See, I'm thinking she'd rather have her father than an imperial throne, but maybe that's just me." Hadrian took another swallow and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

They sat in silence for a moment. Royce watched his friend staring at a distant point beyond focus.

"So, you want to fight in this war, is that it?"

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"It would be better than sitting on the sidelines like scavengers feeding off the wounded."

"Okay, so tell me, for which side will you be fighting?"

"Alric's a good king."

"Alric? Alric's a boy still fighting with the ghost of his father. After his defeat at the Galewyr his nobles look to Count Pickering instead of him. Pickering has his hands full dealing with Alric's mistakes, like the riots here in Medford. How long before Pickering tires of Alric's incompetence and decides Mauvin would be better suited to the throne?"

"Pickering would never turn on Alric," Hadrian said.

"No? You've seen it happen plenty of times before."

Hadrian remained silent.

"Oh hell, forget about Pickering and Alric. Melengar is already at war with the Empire. Have you forgotten who the empress is? If you fought with Alric and he prevailed, how will you feel the day poor Thrace is hanged in the Royal Square in Aquesta? Would that satisfy your need for an honorable cause?"

Hadrian's face had turned hard, his jaw clenched stiffly.

"There are no honorable causes. There is no good or evil. Evil is only what we call those who oppose us."

Royce took out his dagger and drove it into the table where it stood upright. "Look at the blade. Is it bright or dark?"

Hadrian narrowed his eyes suspiciously. The brilliant surface of Alverstone was dazzling as it reflected the candlelight. "Bright."

Royce nodded.

"Now move your head over here and look from my perspective."

Hadrian leaned over, putting his head on the opposite side of the blade where the shadow made it black as chimney soot.

"It's the same dagger," Royce explained, "but from where you sat it was light while I saw it as dark. So who is right?"

"Neither of us," Hadrian said.

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“No,” Royce said. “that’s the mistake people always make, and they make it because they can’t grasp the truth.”

“Which is?”

“That we are both right. One truth doesn’t refute another. Truth doesn’t lie in the object, but in how we see it.”

Hadrian looked at the dagger then back at Royce.

“There are times when you are brilliant, Royce, and then there are times when I haven’t a clue as to what you’re babbling about.”

Royce’s expression turned to frustration as he pulled his dagger from the table and sat back down. “In the twelve years we’ve been together, I’ve never once asked you to do anything I wouldn’t do, or didn’t do with you. I’ve never lied or misled you. I’ve never abandoned or betrayed you. Name a single noble you even suspect you could say the same about twelve years from now.”

“Can I get another round here?” Hadrian shouted.

Royce sighed. “So you’re just going to sit here and drink?”

“That’s my plan at present. I’m making it up as I go.”

Royce stared at his friend a moment longer then finally stood up. “I’m going to Gwen’s.”

“Listen,” Hadrian stopped him. “I’m sorry about this. I guess I can’t explain it. I don’t have any metaphors with daggers I can use to express how I feel. I just know I can’t keep doing what I’ve been doing anymore. I’ve tried to find meaning in it. I’ve tried to pretend we achieved some greater good, but in the end, I have to be honest with myself. I’m not a thief, and I’m not a spy. So I know what I’m not, I just wish I knew what I am. That probably doesn’t make much sense to you, does it?”

“Do me a favor at least.” Royce purposely ignored the question, noticing how the little silver chain Hadrian wore peeked out from under his collar. “Since you’re going to be here anyway, keep an eye out for the messenger from the castle while I’m at Gwen’s. I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

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Hadrian nodded.

“Give Gwen my love, will ya?”

“Sure,” Royce said, heading for the door feeling that miserable sensation creeping in, the dull weight. He paused and looked back.

It won't help to tell him. It will just make matters worse.



It had only been a day and a half but Royce found himself desperate to see Gwen. While Medford House was always open, it did not do much business until after dark. During the day Gwen encouraged the girls to use their free time learning to sew or spin, skills they could use for coin in their old age.

All the girls at the brothel, better known as just *The House*, knew and liked Royce. When he came in they smiled or waved, but no one said a word. They knew he enjoyed surprising Gwen. Tonight they pointed toward the parlor where she was concentrating on a pile of parchments, a quill pen in hand and her register open. She immediately abandoned it all when he walked through the door. She sprang from her chair and ran to him with a smile so broad her face could hardly contain it and an embrace so tight he could barely breathe.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered, pulling back and looking into his eyes.

Royce marveled at Gwen’s ability to read him. He refused to answer, preferring instead to look at her, drinking her in. She had a lovely face, her dark skin and emerald eyes so familiar yet mysterious. In all his life and all his travels he had never met anyone like her.

Gwen provided use of a private room at The Rose and Thorn, where he and Hadrian had conducted business, and she never blinked at the risks. They no longer used it. Royce was too concerned that Sentinel Luis Guy might track them there. Still, Gwen continued

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banking their money and watching out for them just as she had done from the start.

They met twelve years ago, the night soldiers filled the streets and two strangers staggered into the Lower Quarter, covered in their own blood. Royce still remembered how Gwen appeared as a hazy figure to his clouding eyes. “I’ve got you, you’ll be alright now,” she told him before he passed out. He never understood what motivated her to take them in when everyone else had the good sense to close their doors. When he woke, she was giving orders to her girls like a general marshalling troops. She sheltered them from the mystified authorities and nursed them back to health. She pulled strings and made deals to ensure no one talked. As soon as they were able they left, but he always found himself returning.

He was crushed the day she refused to see him. It didn’t take long to discover why. Clients often abused prostitutes, and Medford House was no exception. It did not matter if he was a gentleman or a thug, the town sheriff never wasted his time on complaints by whores. In Gwen’s case the attacker had been a powerful noble. He had beaten her so badly she didn’t want anyone to see.

Two days later, the noble was dead. His body hung in the center of Gentry Square. City authorities closed Medford House and arrested the prostitutes. They were told to identify the killer or face execution themselves. To everyone’s surprise, the women spent only one night in jail. The next day Medford House reopened and the Sheriff of Medford himself delivered a public apology for their arrest, adding that swift punishment would follow any future abuse regardless of rank. From then on Medford House prospered from unprecedented protection. Royce never spoke of the incident, and Gwen never brought it up, but she knew just as she knew he was part elven before he told her.

When he returned from Avempartha last summer, he decided to reveal his secret to her, to be completely open and honest. Royce

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never told anyone about his heritage, not even Hadrian. He expected she would hate him, if not for being a miserable *mir*, then certainly for deceiving her. He took Gwen for a walk down the bank of the Galewyr, away from people to lessen the embarrassment of her outrage. He braced himself, said the words, and waited for her to hit him. He would let her. She could scratch his eyes out if she wanted. He owed her that much.

“Of course you’re elven.” She touched his hand kindly. “Was it a secret?”

How she knew, she never explained. He was so overwhelmed he never asked. Gwen just had a way of always knowing his heart.

“What is it?” she asked again.

“Why haven’t you packed?”

Gwen paused and smiled. That was her way of letting him know he would not get away with it. “Because there is no need, the Imperial Army isn’t attacking us.”

Royce raised an eyebrow. “The king himself has his things packed and his horse at the ready to evacuate the city on a moment’s notice, but you know better?”

She nodded.

“And how is that?”

“If there was the slightest chance that Medford was in danger, you wouldn’t be here asking me why I haven’t packed. I’d be on Mouse’s back holding on for dear life as you spurred her into a run.”

“Still,” he said, “I’d feel better if you moved to the monastery.”

“I can’t leave my girls.”

“Take them with you. Myron has plenty of room.”

“You want me to take whores to live in a monastery with monks?”

“I want you to be safe; besides, Magnus and Albert are there too, and I can guarantee you *they’re* not monks.”

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"I'll consider it." She smiled at him. "But you're leaving on another mission so it can wait until you get back."

"How do you know these things?" he asked amazed. "Alric ought to hire you instead of us."

"I'm from Calis. It's in our blood," she told him with a wink. "When do you leave?"

"Soon, tonight perhaps. I left Hadrian at The Rose and Thorn to watch for a messenger."

"Have you decided to tell Hadrian yet?"

For the first time he looked away.

"Oh, so that's it. Don't you think you should?"

"No, just because a lunatic wizard—" he paused. "Listen, if I tell him what I saw he'll only get himself killed. If Hadrian were a moth, he'd fly into every flame he could find. If I tell him, his reason will disappear. He'll sacrifice himself if necessary, and for what? Even if it's true, all that stuff with the heir happened centuries ago and has nothing to do with him. And there's no reason to think that Esrahaddon wasn't just—wizards toy with people, okay? It's what they do. He tells me to keep quiet, makes a big stink about how I have to take this secret to my grave. But you know damn well he expects me to tell Hadrian. I don't like being used and I won't let Hadrian get himself killed at the whim of some wizard and his agendas."

Gwen said nothing but looked at him with a knowing smile.

"What?"

"Sounds like you are trying to convince yourself and you're not doing very well. I think it might help if you consider you're one kind of person and Hadrian is another. You are trying to look out for him, but you're using *cat's eyes*."

"I'm doing what?"

Gwen looked at Royce, puzzled for a moment, then chuckled quietly. "Oh, I suppose that must be a common saying only in Calis. Okay, let's say you're a cat and Hadrian's a dog and you want to make

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him happy. You give him a dead mouse and are surprised when he isn't thrilled. The problem is that you need to see the world through the eyes of a dog to understand what's best for him. If you did, you would see that a nice juicy bone would be a better choice, even though to a cat it's not very appealing."

"So you think I should let Hadrian go off and get himself killed?"

"I'm saying that for Hadrian, maybe fighting—even dying—for something or someone may be the same as a bone to a dog. Besides, you have to ask yourself, is keeping quiet really for his sake—or yours?"

"First daggers, now dogs and cats," Royce muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing." He let his hands run through her hair. "How did you get so wise?"

"Wise?" She looked at him and laughed. "I'm a thirty-four-year-old prostitute in love with a professional criminal. How wise can I possibly be?"

"If you don't know, perhaps you should try seeing with my eyes."

He kissed her warmly, pulling her tight. He recalled what Hadrian had said and wondered if he was being stupid for not settling down with Gwen. He noticed for some time a growing pain whenever he said goodbye and a misery that dogged him whenever he left. Royce never meant for it to happen. He always tried to keep her at a distance for her own good as well as his. His life was dangerous and only possible so long as he had no ties, nothing others could use against him.

Winters had caused him to crack. Deep snows and brutal cold kept team Riyria, idle in Medford for months. Huddled before the warmth of hearth fires through the long dark nights, they grew close. Casual chats turned into long intimate conversations; conversations

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changed to embraces and confessions. It was impossible to resist her open kindness and generosity. She was so unlike anyone, an enigma that flew in the face of all he had come to expect from the world. She made no demands and asked for nothing but his happiness.

It was Gwen who led to his and Hadrian's longest imprisonment six years ago. It was in the spring, and they received a job sending them all the way to Alburn. The thought of leaving her dragged on him like a weight. On top of everything, Gwen was sick. She had a spring flu and looked miserable. She pretended it was nothing, trying to be brave to make it easier on him, but she looked pale. He almost did not go, but she insisted. He could still remember her face as he left her with that brave little smile that quivered oh so slightly at the edges.

The job went bad. His concentration suffered, mistakes were made, and they were left rotting in the dungeons under Caren. All he could do was sit and think about Gwen and whether she was all right. As the months stretched out, he realized that if he survived he had to end their relationship. He resolved never to see her again, for both of their sakes, but the moment he returned, the moment he saw her again, felt her hands and smelled her hair, he knew it was impossible. Since that time, his feelings only increased. Even now, the thought of leaving her, even for a week, was agony.

Hadrian was right. He should quit and take her away somewhere, perhaps get a small bit of land where they could raise a family. Somewhere quiet where no one knew Gwen as a prostitute or himself as a thief. They could even go to Avempartha, that ancient citadel of his people. The tower stood vacant and would likely remain that way indefinitely, far beyond the reaches of anyone who did not know its secrets. The thought was appealing but he pushed it back, telling himself he would revisit it soon. For now, he had people waiting, which brought his mind back to Hadrian.

"I suppose I could look into Esrahaddon's story. Hadrian would

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be a fool for dedicating his life to someone else's dream, but at least I'd know it was genuine and not some kind of wizard's trick."

"How can you find out?"

"Hadrian grew up in Hintindar. If his father was a Teshlor Knight, maybe he left behind some indication. At least then I would have someone else's word instead of just Esrahaddon's. Our job is taking us south. I could make a stop in Hintindar and see if I can find something out. By the way," he told her gently, "I'll be gone a good deal longer than I have been. I want you to know so you don't worry needlessly."

"I never worry about you," she told him.

Royce's face reflected his pain.

Gwen smiled. "I *know* you will return safely."

"And how do you know this?"

"I've seen your hands."

Royce looked at her confused.

"I've read your palms, Royce," she told him without a trace of humor. "Or have you forgotten I also make a living as a fortune teller?"

Royce had not forgotten, but assumed it was just a way of swindling the superstitious. Not until that moment did he realize how inconsistent it would be for Gwen to deceive people.

"You have a long life ahead of you," she went on. "Too long—that was one of the clues that you weren't completely human."

"So I have nothing to worry about in my future?"

Gwen's smile faded abruptly.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me," he persisted, gently lifting her chin until she met his eyes.

"It's just that—you need to watch out for Hadrian."

"Did you look at his palms, too?"

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"No," she said, "but your lifeline shows a fork, a point of decision. You will head either into darkness and despair or virtue and light. This decision will be precipitated by a traumatic event."

"What kind of event?"

"The death of the one you love the most."

"Shouldn't you be worried about yourself then?"

Gwen smiled warmly at him. "If only that were so, I'd die a happy woman. Royce, I'm serious about Hadrian. Please watch out for him. I think he needs you now more than ever. And I'm frightened for you if something were to happen to him."



When Royce returned to the Rose and Thorn, he found Hadrian still seated at the same table only he was no longer alone. Beside him sat a small figure hooded in a dark cloak. Hadrian sat comfortably. Either the person sitting next to him was safe, or he was too drunk to care.

"Take it up with Royce when he gets here," Hadrian was saying. "Ah!" He looked up. "Perfect timing."

"Are you from—" Royce stopped as he sat down and saw the face beneath the hood.

"I do believe that is the first time I've ever surprised you, Royce," the Princess Arista said.

"Oh no, that's not true," Hadrian chuckled. "You caught him way off guard when we were hanging in your dungeon and you asked us to kidnap your brother. That was *much* more unpredictable, trust me."

Royce was not pleased with the idea of meeting the princess in the open tavern room, and Hadrian was speaking far too loudly for his liking. Luckily, the room was empty. Most of the limited clientele preferred to cluster around the bar, where the door hung open to admit the cool summer breeze.

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"That seems a lifetime ago," Arista replied, thoughtfully.

"She has a job for you, Royce," Hadrian told him.

"For *us*, you mean."

"I told you." Hadrian looked at him, but allowed a glance at the princess as well. "I'm retired."

Royce ignored him. "What's been decided?"

"Alric wants to make contact with Gaunt and his Nationals," Arista began. "He feels, as the rest of us do, that if we can coordinate our efforts we can create a formidable assault. Also, an alliance with the Nationalists could very well be the advantage we need to persuade Trent to enter the war on our side."

"That's fine," Royce replied. "I expected as much, but did you have to deliver this information yourself? Don't you trust your messengers?"

"One can never be too careful. Besides, I'm coming with you."

"What?" Royce asked, stunned.

Hadrian burst into laughter. "I knew you'd love that part," he said, grinning with the delight of a man blessed with immunity.

"I am the Ambassador of Melengar, and this is a diplomatic mission. Events are transpiring rapidly and negotiations may need to be altered to suit the situation. I have to go because neither of you can speak for the kingdom. I can't trust anyone, not even you two, with such an important mission. This meeting will likely determine whether or not Melengar survives another year. I hope you understand the necessity of having me along."

Royce considered the proposal for a few minutes. "You and your brother understand that I cannot guarantee your safety?"

She nodded.

"You also understand that between now and the time we reach Gaunt, you will be required to obey Hadrian and myself and will be provided no special treatment because of your station?"

"I expect none. However, it must also be understood that I am

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Alric's representative and as such speak with his voice. So where safety and methods are concerned you are granted authority and I will follow your direction, but as far as overall mission goals are concerned I reserve the right to redirect, or extend the mission if necessary."

"And do you also possess the power to guarantee additional payment for additional services?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you client and escort," Hadrian said with a grin.

"As for you," Royce told him, "you'd better have some coffee."

"I'm not going, Royce."

"What's this all about?" Arista asked.

Royce scowled and shook his head at her.

"Don't shut her up," Hadrian said. He turned to the princess and added, "I have officially resigned from Riyria. We are divorced. Royce is single now."

"Really?" Arista said. "What will you do?"

"He's going to sober up and get his gear."

"Royce, listen to me. I mean it. I'm not going. There is nothing you can say to change my mind."

"Yes, there is."

"What, have you come up with another fancy philosophical argument? It's not going to work. I told you I'm done. It's over. Look at my face. I'm not kidding. I've had it." Hadrian looked suspiciously at his partner.

Royce simply looked back with a smug expression. At last Hadrian asked, "Okay, what is it? I'm curious now. What do you think you could possibly say to change my mind?"

Royce hesitated a moment, glancing uncomfortably at Arista, then sighed. "Because, I am asking you to—as a favor. After this mission, if you still feel the same, I won't fight you and we can part

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as friends. But I am asking you now—as my friend—to please come with me just one last time.”

Just then, the barmaid arrived at the table.

“Another round, Hadrian?”

Hadrian did not look at her, but continued to stare at Royce and sighed.

“Apparently not. I guess I’ll take a cup of coffee, strong and black.”

BOOKS IN THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

The Crown Conspiracy

Avempartha

Nyphron Rising

*The Emerald Storm**

**Forthcoming*

THE RIYRIA REVELATIONS

If you enjoyed this novel, you will be happy to learn that...

Nyphron Rising is the third in a six book series entitled the Riyria Revelations. This saga is neither a string of sequels nor a lengthy work unnaturally divided. Instead, the Riyria Revelations was conceived as a single epic tale told through six individual episodes. While a book may hint at building mysteries or thickening plots, these threads are not essential to reach a satisfying conclusion to the current episode—which has its own beginning, middle, and end.

Eschewing the recent trends in fantasy toward the lengthy, gritty, and dark, the Riyria Revelations brings the genre back to its roots. Avoiding unnecessarily complicated language and world building for its own sake; this series is a distillation of the best elements of traditional fantasy—great characters, a complex plot, humor, and drama all in appropriate measures.

While written for an adult audience the Riyria Revelations lacks sex, graphic violence, and profanity making it appropriate for readers thirteen and older.

About the Author

Born in Detroit Michigan, Michael J. Sullivan has raised in Novi. He has also lived in Vermont, North Carolina and Virginia. He worked as a commercial artist and illustrator, founding his own advertising agency in 1996, which he closed in 2005 to pursue writing full-time. His first published novel *The Crown Conspiracy* was released in October 2008. He currently resides in Fairfax, Virginia with his wife and three children.

Awards for Riyria Books

2009 National Indie Excellence Award Finalist

2008 ReaderViews Literary Award Finalist

2007 Foreword Magazine Book of the Year Finalist

Fantasy Sites Recognition

Named one of the Notable Fantasy Books of 2009

— Fantasy Book Critic

Named one of the top 5 Fantasy Books of 2009

— Dark Wolf's Fantasy Reviews

Named a Notable Indie of 2008 — Fantasy Book Critic

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A PUPPET IS CROWNED.
THE TRUE HEIR REMAINS HIDDEN.
A ROGUE'S SECRET COULD CHANGE EVERYTHING.

War has come to Melengar. To save her kingdom, Princess Arista runs a desperate gamble when she defies her brother and hires Royce and Hadrian for a dangerous mission. As the power of the Nyphron Empire grows, so does Royce's suspicion that the wizard Esrahaddon is using the thieves as pawns in his own game. To find the truth, he must unravel the secret of Hadrian's past—what he discovers could change the future for all of Elan.

"The Riyria Revelations is shaping up to be one of the most original and entertaining fantasy series I've seen in years."

— King of the Nerds Fantasy Reviews

"Another absolutely riveting installment in The Riyria Revelations series! Once again, Michael J. Sullivan did not disappoint. There was suspense, humor, action, treachery, and even a tiny bit of love thrown in." — Ramblings & More

"Mr. Sullivan continues to impress. In Royce and Hadrian he has created some of the best characters the genre has seen in some time, and in Avempartha he shows that he knows what to do with them."

— Speculative Fiction Junkie

