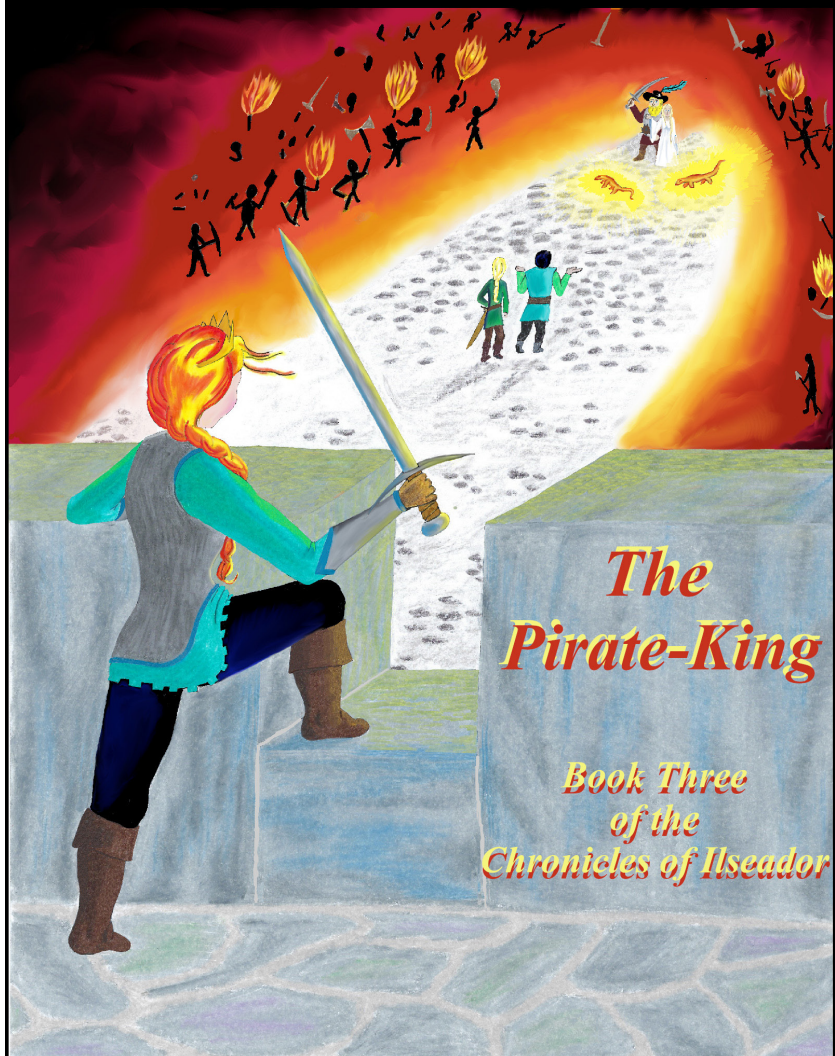


AUTHOR OF A NOT-SO-SACRIFICIAL MAIDEN

MANGALA MCNAMARA



The Pirate-King

*Book Three
of the
Chronicles of Ilseador*



“Thank you, Captain.

“You and your men are to stand guard at the entrances to this hall. Do not enter until Sir Loveress lets you in. If that takes longer than a full day and night... inform Duke Elsevier that he is to support King Jason in all ways.”

Sir Tim was shocked. “Damien... my King... you can’t be serious...”

“You have your orders, Captain Ancellius,” Adam Loveress growled.

“Yes, sir!” Sir Tim responded automatically to his former Captain.

As the echo of the doors closing faded away, Adam turned to. “So, you think none of us are going to make it out of here alive?”

“No,” Genevieve said firmly, “exactly the opposite.”

“So, what am I here for then?” Adam demanded.

“This...” the king held out a gem on a slender chain to Adam, “will end what life is left in my body that remains.”

Adam, in the act of reaching for the proffered jewel, froze. “*What?*”

Damien swallowed. “I need to access the Realm at a deeper level than I have since the very first time it Bound me. And it nearly consumed me then. Our people don’t need a breathing body of a king withering away without a soul. The jewel will stop my heart without leaving any external marks. No one will know what you did.”

“And you just carry this thing around all the time just in case?” Adam muttered, staring at the now-ominous-looking faceted red stone.

Damien glanced back at him. “No. I altered that pendant on the way here from the Council chamber.”

He put his arms around his silent wife. “I’m sorry,” he whispered to her, then turned to Adam.

***“This is why you have to be in here, Adam. There’s no one else I trust for this. But the part about you not coming out – that was just to scare Tim into moving.
“Nothing should happen to you.”***



*THE
PIRATE-KING*

*Book Three of the
Chronicles of Ilseador*



MANGALA MCNAMARA

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, places or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

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For my husband, always.

And for Piers Anthony, who inspired and encouraged me to write the stories that I needed to.

A note to sensitive souls:

Ilseador is a land that has been misruled for eighty-three years by a tyrant who was also an evil sorcerer in every sense of the word. Up to four generations cannot remember a time before the old king assumed the throne... and the morals (or lack thereof) of a country often develop - intentionally or not - from the example at the top. This is particularly true of the upper echelons of society, which this story focuses on. The result is that it's basically an entire nation of traumatized people who have seen that greed and cruelty and o'erweening ambition are rewarded. The old king's Apprentice is still around to cause trouble as well...

Five years into King Damien's more compassionate reign, there are still far too many scars...

Proceed with caution...

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PROLOGUE

a few months earlier

“**Y**OU’RE GOING TO TELL ME TO wait, *again*,” the huge man growled.

The small, slim, slip of a girl shook her head, her knee-length fall of white-blond hair waving slowly behind her as she did.

“No. You’ve waited long enough. *I’ve* waited long enough. I’m not dependent anymore on the caution – or whims – of old men to get what I want.”

The large man glowered down at her, briefly unsure whether she was including *him* in that statement. He was easily old enough to be her father – not quite old enough to have *sired* her father.

But no, the pale, little sorceress was still seething about how her former master had held back her ambitions. It had nothing to do with himself.

And thank the Gods for that. The old sorcerer had disappeared entirely as far as he could tell and it was only reasonable to assume that it was the work of his jealous Apprentice – this wisp of a maiden who looked barely old enough to wed. This ruthless creature residing in the skin of a pretty maiden with manners as fine as any princess.

She made the man’s blood run cold and his balls shrivel along with.

If there were any other way to retrieve what he’d been promised – and then had ripped from him so cruelly, so very long ago. The girl he should have married. The son that should have been his to raise and love. Vengeance on his grandfather and the woman the old man had *forced* him to wed at far

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too young of an age. Vengeance on the cousins who had promised to aid and then left him to suffer his fate.

Oh, aye, he'd do something about all of that.

Though it was too late for vengeance on his grandfather – he was one of the old men the pale little sorceress had referred to.

And the cousins who had betrayed him – they were gone, too. But they'd left a son, and he'd be a fit target. After all, that son had the *other* thing the man lusted for, nearly as much as he lusted for his girl and the love of his son.

So, aye, he'd work with this dangerous slip of a girl for now.

And if the rumors were true, once he had all the things he wanted, he'd have the Power to break with her then. The Power his grandfather had wielded well enough to keep her and her old master at bay for so long, delaying and delaying and delaying...

“So, all your pieces are in place now?” he demanded.

Her smile was the spontaneous, happy expression of the girl she should've been. “The duke is ready to move, yes. And I've had confirmation from my colleagues in Deltheren. They are beginning their part and it should be well-set on its way by the time we're in position. The day after the wedding, if all goes according to plan.”

Ah, yes, the *wedding*.

“I'd rather it were the day *before*,” he complained.

For all that the day would recognize his son in the position to which he had been born, did anyone but know it. The *wedding* would make it exceedingly difficult to continue on the dynasty.

And given his own hurtful history, it was impossible to believe that this wasn't all being done in despite of his son's wishes. Likely in despite of his groveling and begging for freedom.

His fists tightened. He'd free his son from the bondage. A king could declare a marriage null and void, couldn't he? And he'd be twice a king.

“Evan, my dear, we can't have *everything* our way, now can we?” the girl – or was she really a demon in girl-form? – said with a chuckle. “The news we've gotten is that the king is going to tax his abilities greatly on some frivolous displays. He'll be much more vulnerable after that, as I've told you before.”

She smiled. “I will remove the Sorcerer-King from his throne and see that you have your lady in your arms. You can take it from there, I trust.”

Evan growled unhappy assent. Better to do it right and win – and *then* fix things for his son – than to make the attempt and have to retreat with

his tail between his legs. He was putting all his political capitol into this venture... he'd never be able to manage it again, White Witch of the South at his side or not.

The girl nodded. "Go prepare your fleet. I will join you before we make the assault. And remember..."

Her beautiful, silky, chilling voice caught the man as he began to turn away.

"...I can see you wherever you are, Evan. I am helping you with this so that I get what *I* want and I will not interfere with your quest to retrieve your *'lost love'* and the son you've never met and the crown you covet. But do not seek to betray me in this."

He gave her a curt nod before exiting the black-and-blood-red elegance of her audience chamber. The audience chamber where he had begun meeting with her now-vanished master not all that long ago.

She had said nothing about not betraying *him*, the man noted.



Not so far away, in the city of Emeralsee in Ilseador, King Damien wrestled with his conscience.

To save his beloved, soul-bound Queen and to continue to be able to rebuild his Realm after the damage his grandfather, the Evil Wizard-Tyrant Reginald the Ruthless, had wreaked upon it for eighty-three years, he was having to compromise everything else he held dear:

The honesty that he had always offered his subjects and vassals.

His relationship with the friends who had rescued him, taught him, and placed him on the throne.

His own sense of honor.

It was worth it, he told himself over and over again. The Realm deserved only the best that he could give it, the Healing that only a monarch of the Alsterling line could provide to resolve the damage done by another such. *Genevieve* deserved everything and anything he could give her.

He'd find a way to make it up to Adam and Jason, Ciriis and Lord Aldred.

Making it possible for Adam and Jason to marry – at so long last – was perhaps a start. Though Naming Jason his Heir and Crown Prince was perhaps a step in the wrong direction, since his Champion wanted no such

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role. Though whom else could he so name, when Jason would secretly be the father of Damien and Genevieve's first child? King and Queen might still not survive the magickal demands of the Realm compounded with the soul-bond and Genevieve's weakness after so many miscarriages. There had to be an obvious and unquestioned Regent waiting to support – and rear – the newborn princess.

Giving Jason and Adam the child they – or at least Adam – so desperately wanted was another positive step... even if that came with secrecy and more emotional complications than Damien could really bear to contemplate. Most men – as even Jason had noted, ironically, that first night – usually outgrew their boyhood infatuations.

He had no idea yet how to mend things with Lord Aldred and Ciriis. His father-in-law, banished now from Court for daring to sire a child on Damien's first lover... another potential claimant to the Throne to set against the child that Damien and Genevieve didn't yet have. Aldred was too savvy not to have known better – he was risking another civil war in a Realm not yet a quarter Healed from the last one... which Aldred had also led, though with what must have been a clearer conscience, given that it had been Reginald the Ruthless against whom he had been rebelling.

How could *trying* so hard to do the right thing by Realm, vassals, people, and soul-bound spouse have turned out so badly in just five short years?



Chapter ONE

Anticipation

“**Y**OU’VE... LOOKED BETTER, DAMIEN,” ROSA said with concern as the king wandered out into the Great Hall late the next morning.

He gave her a distracted nod. “Probably.”

She frowned, then handed baby Betha to her husband, and took Damien by the elbow. The former Rebel Countess – and current Duchess of Dalziallest – steered him out of the Great Hall, hopefully before any of the *rest* of his Court that were gathered there noticed.

A number of alarmed-looking young people – members of the Secret Cadre that Rosa hadn’t yet been introduced to, presumably – trailed them out of the room in a disorganized-looking flock. They were ahead of the Royal Guards at least, in tracking down their wayward royal charge... but then again, the uniformed knights of the Royal Guard were likely aware that if *they* looked alarmed as they moved rapidly through the castle it might start a general panic. The whole point of the Secret Cadre – more publicly known as Her Majesty’s ladies-in-waiting and His Majesty’s gentlemen-of-the-chamber – was to ensure that the royal pair *could* be guarded at all times and in all contexts, even those where greater discretion was required.

Exactly *how* Damien had managed to escape his careful (and more than slightly, if justifiably, paranoid) guards of *both* groups simultaneously...

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was a mystery. He was usually careful *not* to do exactly that, being more than slightly (and justifiably) paranoid himself.

“Is Her Majesty awake then?” the clever Lady Alanna managed to get in front of Rosa and the king and sank down in a deep curtsy. Rosa stopped, but Damien – still looking half-asleep – might have tripped over her if Rosa hadn’t pulled him to a halt.

“Hmmm?” The king seemed to have to pull himself back from some distant land. “Genevieve? Awake? I don’t know...” his look became introspective. “Yes. Yes, she is. She’s eating breakfast with... Marianna Loveress and Elaina Solway.” He frowned. “Aren’t any of your people up there, Alanna? The one isn’t trained yet and the other isn’t even on the try-outs list, last I knew.”

Lady Alanna looked askance at his willingness to discuss this in even so public a venue as a hallway empty of any but the Secret Cadre... and Rosa. But she didn’t see how not to answer a direct question from her king. “The Crown Prince asked Lady Aryllis to add Miss Solway to the try-outs last night. Lady Emily and Lord Aaron were supposed to be on duty with the Queen this morning. I would assume they are still up there unless she has dismissed them. Sir Otto and Sir Rodney were on door duty. Your Majesty,” she said with some concern, “One of your knights should surely be at your side. I *cannot* understand how they would have...”

“Let me out by myself like this?” the king said dryly.

“*Damien...*” Rosa hissed. And pointed at the young lady trapped in her curtsy when he looked at her quizzically.

He flushed slightly. Damien was usually the most courteous and thoughtful of people. “Please rise, Lady Alanna. And please accept my apologies.”

“You don’t seem yourself, Your Majesty,” the young woman said sympathetically, rising as gracefully as if she had not just held that position for far too long. Twenty-five-year-old muscles, the Duchess of Dalziallest thought mournfully... and a body that had never housed another living human being. Not that she regretted having her daughters... she simply missed having her body the way it used to be. Zachary kept telling her she was more beautiful now... which was nice to hear, but didn’t bring back her muscle-tone.

“No, I suppose not.” The king ran a hand through his already ruffled – slept-in, not combed – hair, doing it really no particular damage since it was already such a disaster, then scratched at his short beard. His slight, wry smile was more normal, however, as a pair of knights came dashing up

towards them, apparently having given up and abandoned discretion for haste. “I see. Excellent tactic, milady. Delay me long enough to get a *proper* escort for your erring king.” He nodded politely at the two knights. “Lev. Angelos.”

“Damien, you need a change and a shave,” Rosa instructed him firmly. “A wash if you can squeeze in the time before Council. You *look* like you could use three days’ sleep, but—”

He gave her a poleaxed look. “Before *what?*”

She sighed. “You *do* remember telling everyone that we would resume Council meetings after the coronation.”

“Well, yes, but I didn’t mean the *day* after...”

“Then you should have specified. Besides which, some of the nobles with longer times to travel are planning to leave tomorrow at dawn.” Which should have included herself and Zachary, actually, though they were delaying their own departure to try to spend some time with their old friends. They had seen Genevieve when she passed through in the early Fall with Jason, of course. Rosa had given the Queen back the Heir’s Ring at the time and then felt guilty about it for the next several months after thinking on how dreadfully worn and ill Genevieve had seemed.

At the time, Rosa and Zachary had hoped that having the Ring back in her possession would tame Genevieve’s inclinations to serve as a Warrior-Queen. They were well aware of how many babes she had lost, carrying out her duties to reclaim the Lost Provinces – and they knew both her and Damien well enough to know *he* would never risk his soul-bonded love that way. So, it had to be Genevieve’s own idea, and that meant there was a hope that she could be reminded of the primacy of her *other* duty: bearing an Heir to the Throne.

She’d certainly seemed envious of their own two precious little girls... but when they’d seen that Jason had to practically lift her into the carriage that she was riding in – instead of the warhorse they’d only ever seen her on before – they had begun to rethink the move.

Neither of them had anticipated Damien Naming Jason to the position of Crown Prince and Heir in the absence of a child of his and Genevieve’s own.

Rosa began to steer the distracted and dismayed king back towards his apartments again. “By my estimate you have just enough time to at least make yourself *look* like you’re awake enough to lead a country...”

Damien groaned and rubbed at his hair and beard again, but resisted her pull to turn to the pair of knights trailing them. “Cousin, I have a different

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errand for you. Please let your lord father the Baron know that I'd like to talk to him after the Council meeting."

Sir Angelos Eldridge – Damien's cousin at a few removes on his mother's side – looked warily between Lady Alanna and his king. The Royal Guards had been read quite a lecture by their former-as-of-two-days-ago Captain not all that long ago. The Secret Cadre ranked them, it had been explained in no uncertain terms, because the ladies and gentlemen were able to follow the King and Queen in places that Royal Guards were not. Lady Alanna was standing with her arms crossed and looking disapproving. Sir Adam had *not* explained how to deal with conflicts between royal orders and chain-of-command. Or rather, when Sir Drake had asked about it, Captain Loveress had given him an extremely sardonic look and said "Pray." Which was not helpful at all.

Rosa nudged the king again, and Damien startled as if he had forgotten again that he was supposed to be going someplace. "Don't worry, Angelos. I'll have Lev here. I'm sure he and our lovely Lady Alanna can handle walking me back to my quarters." He looked at Rosa. "I'm sure you have things to take care of before the Council meeting, Your Grace." The king held out his arm to Alanna. "Milady?"

Rosa shook her head as Damien walked off with his official and unofficial Guards. This Council meeting certainly promised to be... less than productive.



Damien fiddled with his pen as one of his vassals droned on and on about... something. It was a baron, he thought, but at the moment he couldn't find the energy or attention to identify the man. Or, really, to care.

He knew his posture of almost aggressive disinterest bothered the members of his Council of Peers and Vassals. This wasn't what they'd seen out of their king these last five years. Damien had been careful to always show them attention, strength, and a cast of supporting characters who backed him up even when they disagreed with him.

Genevieve wasn't here now, and the Council couldn't be allowed to know why.

Jason and Adam were enjoying the morning after their wedding night, he assumed.

Aldred and Ciriis were up in Cloudcroft, her pregnancy proceeding well by the reports he was receiving, though their relationship had grown somewhat rocky.

Sir Tim was here, in his role as Captain of the Royal Guards, as well as a new, albeit extremely minor, Peer of the Realm. But Tim was a relative unknown to most of the nobles and a harmless-seeming fellow to the rest. Hardly a match for the architects of the king's reign or the Rebel Duke and Duchess. And the few who knew either Tim or Damien well enough to guess there must be more to this cheerful, mild-mannered fellow... were not likely to challenge the king in any regard.

Those included his Dukes and Duchess of Siovale and Dalzialest. Tomas Elsevier, Duke of Siovale, as the most senior, had begun directing the meeting when Damien left them all waiting for his permission to move on. That presumption had caused a few raised eyebrows, but the king hadn't cared. Perhaps it would even have some positive fallout, a distant part of him wondered, when he backed up the Duke of Siovale's actions. Perhaps *at last* they could be done with this air of suspicion.

The baron continued to drone on... or perhaps it was a different one.

Something was stealing *all* of Damien's attention.

Something to do with the Realm, thank the Gods, not Genevieve... though it seemed half his attention was always with her these days. More than half... she'd seemed to be *glowing* to his perceptions these last three days, and he hadn't dared ask if anyone else noticed. If it was real to others. By the lack of commentary during and after the wedding he'd guessed *not*.

He couldn't remember her *glowing* in the past.

The Realm.

He dragged his attention back.

The Realm, but not a part of it Bound to anyone in this room – and that covered most of the Realm. Jason's investiture as Heir had been a welcome break after the harvest was in and before the winter snows bound them all up in their own demesnes, so most of the country's nobility had shown up, though it had taken fast riders indeed to get the word out to the farther flung provinces in time for them to travel to Emeralsee. Who was missing?

Countess Solway of course, but Brindlewell was enfeoffed to Elaarwen again, and had been bound to Emeralsee while Aldred – and Genevieve – rebelled and Damien's grandfather ruled. Damien was nearly as Bound to Elaarwen as Genevieve, and his direct bonds to Emeralsee would never really fade as long as the Castle and Throne claimed him, despite both now being Bound to his Named and Confirmed Heir. It wasn't something in Brindlewell, though things were not *well* there exactly.

He ran through the list of all his vassals who hadn't made it, testing his connection to their lands absently, but sure in his heart that it wasn't any of them. They were all represented here today by their immediate liege-lords or -ladies anyways, who were magickally Bound to their lands as well, so it shouldn't matter that the lesser vassals weren't present.

It had to be one of the Lost Provinces, and since the Realm hadn't yet demanded he do anything about Farivera or Everfields, it had to be...

"Elendria!"

The baron looked offended and startled as the king's hands slammed down on the table, interrupting whatever it was he'd been saying. All eyes focused on Damien, but he barely noticed. The force of his movement had propelled him out of his chair – which had only not fallen with a great crash due to Sir Tim's quick reflexes at his side.

"Your Majesty?" Tomas Elsevier, Duke of Siovale ventured. His very slightly raised eyebrow suggested that the king had better have some explanation or it would be a political mess. "Baron Rivencour *was* just explaining how trade with Elendria will impact his people in Flowerdell."

Damien shook his head.

"There's an ice-storm out of Deltheren just starting to hit Elendria *now*. It will be *here* by evening. By morning there will be an inch to two inches of ice coating *everything* in its path." He frowned. "The winds are wrong..."

"Hail?" Tomas had started out of his chair.

Damien shook his head again, then hesitated. "I can't tell. Freezing rain, sleet... *An inch or more of ice coating everything*. We're going to lose a lot of trees to this." His heart grieved, but this was not the time. "If we're lucky, we won't lose *people*. Or animals."

The king looked around at his Bound and Sworn vassals. They knew the map of the Realm as well as he did, knew what fiefs lay between Elendria and the capitol. Damien named them off anyways, giving them estimated times before the storm hit. Their faces paled as he did so.

And then he gave them an instruction he had hoped he'd never have to. He knew Adam – and perhaps even Genevieve – would be wroth with him. But that would be later. And hopefully it was a *later* that would involve recriminations for giving away still more power, not for losing large numbers of his subjects and their livelihoods.

"You should all be able to feel your lands through the Bond that formed when you swore your Vassal's Oath. There's no way to get word to your people in time," he met their grim nods with his own. "Not the normal way anyhow," the king continued. "The Realm – your lands – won't let you do

this for long, but if you work together, liege-lords and -ladies with your vassals, you *may* be able to give your people a sense that they need to get themselves and their livestock under cover.”

“How?” Zachary demanded, his face white beneath that healthy tan he always sported. Rumor went that he worked the harvest and the planting as hard and as long as any of his people. And therefore likely knew a fair number of them personally.

“Join hands,” Damien was making this up as he went along. He could feel Queen Marian hovering behind him, but she’d been no sorceress; this was far beyond her purview. The answers were coming from *somewhere*, though, and it didn’t seem to entirely be the Realm. Where it *did* come from – he’d have to figure that out... later.

“Form circles around your liege-lady. She won’t need to contact anyone herself, since you are each closer to your own people, but she can stabilize your connection.” The king refrained from adding that the rulers of his duchies all had at least a trace of magick in their blood – and that there was likely more than a spark in scions of all the lesser families as well, given how they tended to intermarry. Damien had begun to suspect that there was a connection between the magick and why those particular families had risen... and it explained why the Alsterling line inevitably bred the strongest magick-wielders.

“Keep it simple,” the king went on. “Don’t try to talk to each individual. Don’t think in *words* at all. You want to spread your awareness thinly over the area that is bound to you with the single thought ‘*get under cover and stay put.*’ That way, even runaways and recluses should hear you.” He also refrained from mentioning that what they would be doing was placing a powerful compulsion spell on every human – and perhaps even the animals – in their demesnes. They wouldn’t – most of them – be able to sustain the connection – or the spell – for more than a few moments, but there were some of them...

Damien would be spending the next year – or lifetime – making sure that what he taught them in this moment of peril wasn’t abused.

But surely the lives saved would be worth it?

“Go to your Duke or Duchess’ rooms. Do this sitting down. On the floor, if need be, but somewhere that you won’t be hurt if you fall down.” He gave them a dry look. “Madame Elista’s people are used to dealing with *me*. They’ll have food and drink ready for after.” He hesitated, then sighed. “Ladies, forgive my boldness, but loosen your corsets. If you faint before your people are warned, you will truly have a killer fashion.” A variety of

reactions from relief to embarrassment, but no outrage at least. A few of the men looked surprised, perhaps that he had even thought of it.

People began rising quickly.

There were no objections, surprisingly enough, and the speed with which they moved... Damien had a frightening suspicion that he was *glowing* as they said he had done in the battle with Lord Prydeen, five years ago. Which might be more than appropriate... this would surely tax his magical strength and cleverness far more than that skirmish. With the Realm alive and awake and angry behind him, dealing with Prydeen had ended up taking little more effort than swatting a fly. This time it was Nature itself to face, and the Realm was more than half asleep with the onset of Winter.

“Your Majesty,” Rosa’s eyes were filled with determination. “Can’t you turn this storm? Or blunt it?”

Dalzialest... Zialest itself – the county which she had inherited – lay straight in the storm’s path. Damien had permitted her to merge it with her husband, Zachary’s, county of Dalizell to create the duchy of Dalzialest when he had come to his throne.

He didn’t have time to tell her that with *both* her and Zachary Bound, they might be able to do *more*. On the other hand, their lands *had* been counties until this generation and although both of them had magick, it was just a trickle. He suspected their tiny daughters had much greater potential, but they were too little now...

He gave her another grim nod. “I’ll be doing what I can, but Elendria is being hit right *now*, and that’s my first concern.” He gave Duchess Laura Marseill of Alpinsward and Baron Densal Krakenroost of Minglemere a nod. “The Realm doesn’t accept our human boundaries. I’m as Bound to Elendria as you are to your lands. They are just as much my responsibility.”

Tomas Elsevier rose to face him with folded arms. “No. They’re not.”

The room fell silent of rustling skirts and papers as everyone froze.

“What do you mean, Your Grace?” Damien positively *itched* with the need to be away from the Council table and warning the people – the *animals* – of Elendria. He could *feel* the shock of the storm devastating the far western edge of the province; feel animals dying, tree branches beginning to bend past the point of recovery, and humans suffering the first symptoms of frostbite and hypothermia.

There wasn’t *time* for discussion.

But he owed the Duke of Siovale his throne.

Despite being manipulated magically for two years, Tomas could have looked to the main chance and thrown in with his brother Harald. Brother

of the King surely sounded a lot better than the whispers of ‘the Traitor Duke’ that had followed him ever since, despite his sacrifices. Whispers that followed his family as well. Damien had never asked for Tomas’ children to serve as pages in the Castle – it would have looked too much like he was taking hostages.

And... Tomas was a friend. And perhaps the only person in this room who was willing to call the king out on a poor decision. Perhaps the only person here who was thinking straight at *all*, with all but the northern edges of Siovale likely to be spared by this storm.

Damien owed the man a fair hearing for putting his personal and political capital on the line.

“Elendria is *not* a part of your Realm, Damien.”

Tomas Elsevier did nothing that was not deliberate. Using the king’s given name, for instance.

He unfolded his arms and leaned forward on the table, supporting himself with only his spread fingertips. “Countess Miraly – and her mother before her – *left* the protections of this Realm and has not chosen to accept them back. Let her – or Queen Estelle – protect their own. Your energies are vast, my king, but even you have limits. How vast or how limited, perhaps even you don’t know, but your *duty* is to the people who are sworn to you through these, your Sworn and Bound Vassals.” His nod encompassed the room. “Not to unrepentant rebels.”

Damien stared at him. “Tomas... six years ago, that could have been *Siovale*.”

“Yes,” the older man agreed. “And *I* would have been responsible for what happened. Not King Reginald.” His eyes flickered to Rosa and Zachary. “Or not King Reginald alone. Of course,” he added with a small smile, “six years ago, our king wouldn’t have even *tried* to protect the country from a natural disaster. Even if he *could*.”

“How about an *unnatural* one?” someone muttered from near the door. “Isn’t this happening because of what the king did to the weather yesterday?”

Damien looked for the speaker, but apparently the sentiment was sufficiently shared that no one gave her up. “No, it’s not actually. There hasn’t been time.” He closed his eyes for a moment so as to *see* the weather patterns without the distraction of it all being superimposed over the people in his field of view. “*That* storm is brewing out in the ocean. It should bring us an out-of-season near-hurricane in three days to a week. The warm air I created is pushing against the colder currents normal to this time of year...”

MANGALA MCNAMARA

He frowned without opening his eyes. “We shouldn’t *have* winds *out of* Deltheren at this time of year.”

“I should say not!” exclaimed the Baron of Flowerdell, who’d been speaking earlier, one of Rosa’s vassals near the Elendrian border. His face was pale beneath his florid complexion.

“You *cannot* protect Elendria,” Tomas recaptured the king’s attention – and the rest of the room. He had straightened up again, and his posture was still hard and unrelenting, but his eyes were sympathetic.

“Tom,” Zachary Miramar tried to intercede. “It’s His Majesty’s decision.”

Tomas Elsevier looked at his brother-in-law. “No. It’s not.” His eyes went back to Damien. “How many of our people will die if you waste yourself defending Elendria, Damien?”

The king couldn’t meet his duke’s eyes. He could *feel* the glow around himself dimming.

He swallowed hard.

Tomas was right. There was only one way to make this come out right in any way at all.

“Duke Elsevier, since thy province is largely out of danger, I entrust the Realm to thy most capable hands as Regent until such time as I or the Queen or Prince Jason is capable of resuming rule.” Damien pulled off his signet ring and held it out to the startled duke. “Take it, Tomas.” he said, too quietly for almost anyone else to hear. “Shortly you – and Tariana – may be the only people of any authority with the ability to see straight.” Embervest wasn’t in the storm’s path at all... but its cheerful young duchess had never fought a battle. That wouldn’t be lost on Tomas Elsevier any more than the fact that his king had just demonstrated his utter trust in him.

Hopefully it wouldn’t be lost on anyone else either. *Enough* with this ‘Traitor Duke’ nonsense.

“Captain Ancellius,” Damien began turning away as Tomas took the ring – and the power to issue royal proclamations up to and including executions and war. “Summon the Queen to – ah.”

He stopped because Genevieve was entering on Jason’s arm, Adam a half-step behind. It didn’t matter that it was a crisis of unspeakable proportions, Damien’s heart lifted at sight of her, and everything began to seem more manageable. And he didn’t have to wonder if she was glowing for anyone else *now*.

Based on the way people were staring, she most definitely was.

Suddenly Damien realized his vassals of Emeralsee had gathered around him as he had instructed. Except... this wasn't his place anymore, no more did he have time to spare just for Emeralsee just now.

He gave them a small smile. "Your Duke is here, good people. Jason," he said with relief, "Did Gen- did the Queen explain what you need to do, Your Highness?"

Jason looked harried as he made his way over. "I think so. Yes." He ran a hand through his golden hair as he looked around at the men and women who were Bound to the fiefs in the Duchy which he had accepted only yesterday. Counts and barons and... Adam's mother and the man Jason now knew as a cousin, Baron Eldridge, Sir Angelos' father. The former Champion and newly made Duke and Prince had met them all briefly yesterday after the wedding. Properly done, it *should* have been immediately after his investiture as Duke, but they had seemed to accept Damien's explanation that the Vassal's Oath had taken Jason hard. They had seen enough other oaths sworn to have some idea of what he'd meant by that.

None of them probably realized that Jason had been literally *blind* for several hours after his sunrise investiture. At least the title of Crown Prince didn't require a Binding to the entire Realm as did a Crowning, or more than Jason's meeting his new vassals might have needed to be delayed. Though Adam had sworn he could have gotten his love through the wedding ceremony without sight, they had deserved to be able to look into each other's eyes as they spoke their vows.

"Your sitting room should be sufficient to seat everyone, with a little rearrangement," Adam's mother put in. She and the rest of the Loveress family had been breakfasting in Jason and Adam's suite, but his brothers and nephews had been sleeping in that space. "I'll just have the boys rearrange the furniture..."

She caught Adam's eye, and he started to turn away, but Damien called him back.

"I'll need you in the Throneroom as soon as you are able, my Champion."

He tried to apologize with his eyes, but wasn't sure if he'd succeeded when Adam gave him a curt nod and stepped out of the Council chamber. To summon his brothers, Damien presumed.

The king had always hated to keep them apart for any reason, and Jason surely could use his husband's support in his first attempt at a spell... not to mention that the population of the city of Emeralsee was double that of some of the duchies, and the surrounding counties nearly doubled that again. Thank the Gods that the city itself had its own count – a rather

terrified looking man running to elder years; Damien knew him well as a solid administrator though the king felt his no-corruption policy needed rather better enforcement than Count Antonin had been giving it, no doubt to a certain lining of the man's own pockets. But the king had no doubt that the Count of Emeralsee would hold steady today, and be an anchor for his new-made Duke; Antonin had more than a drop of magick in his own blood, after all, likely due to the occasional royal scion trickling down to his family's lineage.

In the brief span while the door closed after his Champion, Damien's eyes had gravitated to Genevieve – as they always did when nothing else claimed them.

She smiled faintly. “It's a good thing Elaarwen isn't in danger,” she said wryly, and he nodded.

Indeed. Doubly-Bound as Damien was to Elaarwen – both as King and as Duke, for being Genevieve's husband – it would have been incredibly distracting to have his focus pulled away to deal with the mountain province... though less so, admittedly, than Emeralsee would have been.

It also meant Genevieve could devote all of her energies to helping *him*. Her eyes went to the small number of her own vassals, awaiting instructions, and she directed them to put themselves at Duke Elsevier's disposal. There would doubtless be a number of administrative tasks that needed doing in the absence of the usual chains-of-command.

Damien wanted badly to reach out and touch her hand... but that would have to wait.

“Captain Ancellius. Would you kindly escort the Queen to the Throneroom and see that she has whatever she requests? I'll be there shortly, my love,” he added to Genevieve, not even noticing the endearment until it slipped out. Normally they were more careful in public.

“I'll await you there. Your Majesty.” Genevieve never curtsied to him. They had established that early on. She might be Queen-Consort, legally, rather than holding the Throne in her own name, but that was not the way they ruled, and not only because she very well *could* be ruling in her own name.

She held out a hand to Sir Tim, and he came over and offered his arm to her properly, but his eyes gave sharp orders to the Royal Guards scattered around the room, and they edged closer to their king. As long as Sir Tim had been by his side, he had been the king's personal guard. As he departed, Sir Leverett and Sir Marcus took his place. Damien almost cracked a smile, wondering if any of his vassals noticed that it took two men to replace his new Captain... just as it had his old one.

Too much else to do. “Baron Eldridge,” he caught the man’s attention as he followed Jason out of the Council chamber. “Our meeting will have to be delayed, my lord. I shall send word to re-schedule as soon as I am able.”

The baron inclined his head politely. “Of course, Your Majesty.” He paused and stepped closer. The room was almost emptied now. “Is this about our... mutual relatives, Your Majesty?”

Damien gave the man credit for being observant. “It is.”

The baron smiled. “It was good to see my younger brother’s reputation restored. Not that Alexa Solway made her slander so public as to tarnish the rest of the family, but that she used it to punish my nephew... and that she wouldn’t let any of us *see* him, any more than His Majesty allowed us to see *you*...” He shook his head. “We’ll have much to discuss, I’m sure. *After* this crisis is over. If I may borrow my son as a guide, Your Majesty?”

The king nodded and the baron turned to the young knight hovering nearby.

“Angelos, please show me to your cousin’s rooms.” He grinned at the king. “Your *other* cousin.”

Damien began to think that he’d made a mistake in not getting to know this side of his family again once he’d been free to do so. He remembered – vaguely – how his mother had always tempered his father’s tendency to seriousness with gentle humor... Genevieve would say ‘I told you so’.

But for now, there was a storm to thwart.