

An excerpt to delight and entice you...

AUTHOR OF A NOT-SO-SACRIFICIAL MAIDEN

MANGALA MCNAMARA

*The
Pale
Sorceress*

*Book Four of
the Chronicles
of Ilseador*



*The
Prydeen
Prophecy*



“You’ll do.”

A smile that Damien was all too familiar with curled Azella’s lips. “You’ll more than do, in fact. My sources hadn’t told me how handsome you are. I shall quite enjoy this, I think.”

Damien tried not to roll his eyes.

“This beard...” She stroked his chin. “I assume you usually keep it a bit more trim. I usually prefer my bedmates to be cleanshaven. But then, they are usually too young to grow a proper beard. Perhaps I shall make an exception.”

“Perhaps you are making an assumption, lady sorceress,” Damien said dryly.

“No,” she said calmly. “You are no innocent child, Damien. You know full well the Power that is raised through sex. You will be my Apprentice. You will share my bed. And you will do whatever else I require of you.”

He looked back at Azella just as calmly. “I have sworn to my wife that I would touch no other woman in that way. And since I also know that the Power raised is proportional to the joy found in the doing, it won’t do you much good to compel me.”

Those blue-grey eyes sparkled. It wasn’t – quite – anger. Nor amusement. It was... challenge. Damien suspected that the sorceress rarely found something she wanted that she could not immediately bend to her will.

He suspected that was why she had wanted him in the first place.

***“Oh, I won’t have to force you to make love to me,
Damien. You’ll soon be begging to do so.”***



*THE
PALE SORCERESS*

*Book Four of the
Chronicles of Ilseador
(the Prydeen Prophecy Cycle)*



MANGALA MCNAMARA

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For everyone who is forced
to place the means before the ends – and then deal with
the consequences

A note to sensitive souls:

Damien has given himself up as a captive to an Evil Wizard - Azella the Unpitying - to save Ilseador and the people he loves.

He spent his youth hiding from his grandfather and Lord Prydeen's (and Prince Oskar's) Evil Wizardery - and he was sheltered from it as much as possible by his friends.

He's feared that by using any of his own magick he's getting too close to following in his grandfather's footsteps. Despit ethe reassurances of Adam, Genevieve, and the rest, he hasn't felt he could trust himself. That lack of confidence kept him from developing the skills he needed to fend off Azella.

Now, Damien is going to come face to face with what it means to be tempted by a true master of the craft of Evil Wizardery...

Proceed with caution...



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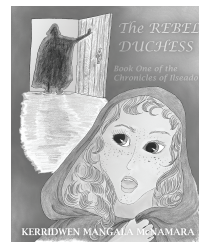
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Chapter ONE

Captured!

DAMIEN WAS LIMPING WITHIN MOMENTS of exiting the market square, his barely-healed, frostbitten feet aching and burning with each step.

But he dared not stop. Dared not let the sorceress who led him with barely a touch of her hand think that he showed the slightest hesitation, lest she loose her deadly salamanders upon his vulnerable, ice-bound city.

Salamanders... Fire-elementals. Creatures of legend as unlike the gentle amphibians of his own Realm as dragons resembled lizards. They could set fire to *stone*, for all he knew – despite a purported distaste for water, he'd already seen that they had shown no hesitation at melting either the ice that clogged his harbor or a path up from that self-same harbor for the mob of pirates she had brought here. Or perhaps that *was* a demonstration of their dislike of water. It was one of so many – *too* many – things Damien's self-education in magick had not covered.

And then there was that self-same mob of pirates led by his long-vanished cousin – who claimed Damien's throne as his own.

The sorceress cared nothing it seemed, for such mortal disputes. She had come to take the Sorcerer-King of Ilseador for her own – he knew not why – and had abandoned her pirate-allies when Damien agreed to yield himself if she would withdraw rather than loose her salamanders.

If she would withdraw rather than loose *herself* on his poor, ice-bound city.

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The silence behind him was almost deafening. He longed to know what was happening – were the pirates standing down in the face of a city they could no longer burn and ravage without their pet sorceress?

Was the Pirate-King, Evan Alsterling, Damien's long-lost and deeply embittered cousin content with stealing away Megan Solway, the woman he had loved since he was fifteen – thirty-five years ago? Was he trying to make peace with his son, Damien's oldest friend and mentor and now also his Heir to the Realm? Jason... just moments before revealed as Megan's secret son, and *not* her much-younger, much-reviled brother...

Was Evan Alsterling still hell-bent on taking the Crown as well, despite that it would put him inevitably into conflict with that selfsame son?

And Damien's beloved, and newly pregnant, wife and Queen... her raging, weeping voice still rang in his ears, in his heart, though the sound had long since died away.

“Damien! I will find you! And I will free you!”

That had been the voice of the Rebel Duchess he had married, the one who had torn the Realm apart to try save it from the evil wizard and tyrant – his grandfather. The one who had come to the city alone and in secret to see if the newly-crowned Damien would follow in those dire footsteps or be the king they hoped for – and become soul-bonded to him, to her own dismay... then finally fallen in love with him when he'd all but followed her through fire – and had *literally* followed her through stone – in order to reclaim *their* throne from the usurpation of her not-nearly-so-deceased-as-advertised former husband.

It had *also* been the voice of the Queen she had *become* – with the blood-right to rule in her own name, as a descendant of the evil wizard-king's own grandmother... The Queen that Damien hoped she could now be, since he could not be by her side.

Damien wondered if the Monarch's Blade now blazed in her hand, free from its scabbard and declaring his Genevieve the rightful Queen of the Realm, no matter what *Evan Alsterling* might claim. Or was the Sword still muffled and still held in trust by Jason, his Heir, and his beloved Genevieve still restrained by Duke Tomas Elsevier for her own protection. His beautiful love was a doughty warrior and an unparalleled strategist, but tended to hotheadedness at times...

He daren't look back to see if the coruscating rainbow light from the Sword was visible.

Nonetheless, he was distracted, and a loose cobblestone stubbed his damaged toes.

Damien stumbled, and bit off a curse.

The sorceress stopped and turned to look at him, a small smile playing on her too-young face. She looked barely more than a child, younger still with that long, pale hair, huge blue-grey eyes, and crystal-white gown. A mere waif.

Azella the Unpitying, she had named herself.

“We’re well past those fools, and you have demonstrated yourself to be a man of your word. I don’t need you to walk your feet off just to prove a point.”

Instantly, they were gone from the darkened, ice-shrouded street and ensconced in a warm, well-lit room paneled entirely in wood. By the slight bob and sway, Damien ascertained that they were aboard a ship. She released his hand and indicated he was to sit in a well-padded chair. Perhaps she was not so Unpitying as all that.

If he might have begun to think so, her next words dispelled any such foolishness.

“You are a man of *honor*, Sorcerer-King,” the waif said sardonically, “And you have given me your word to come away with me on pain of your city being burnt by my salamanders. This ship shall bear you to my Keep. I shall place no constraints upon your Powers for now, save for your own *conscience*.” The sardonic twist to her tone suggested she found such a restraint humorous.

Damien closed his eyes, the throbbing of his feet now that they had no pressure on them beating a counterpoint to the ache of his heart. For just an instant, he’d hoped... But no. Clearly she knew that, even though she’d withdrawn the threat, he would feel obligated to hold to his side of the agreement unless she released him.

“Until then, I leave you this toy. Do with her as you please.”

He opened his eyes in confusion to see the glamour of Power fade from around the waif.

You seem to favor redheads, the voice said only in his head now.

The hair grew darker, redder, the eyes went from huge and blue-grey to upturned and blue-green, a spray of fine freckles across the nose... a younger – much, *much* younger – version of Genevieve stood before him. She reached up to pull a lock of hair in front of her to examine, and her expression was aggrieved. Damien recoiled in horror.

Not to your taste, sorcerer-king? Trust me, it’s not an illusion. The transformation is real. No still? Very well. The girl will do in her native form for now then.

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The red hair darkened to a rich, mahogany, the features changed again, the eyes became a light hazel-green. A stranger stood before him, neither wife nor sorceress. Thank all the Gods at once.

Enjoy. A sense of rippling amusement, and then the sense that she was gone. For now.

The glittering white gown had also lost its luster, and was now a simple unbleached linen gown. The girl in it stared at him.

“You’re... not Azella the Unpitying,” was all Damien could think to say.

The girl snorted. “My mistress go out from the Keep into danger and – worse – discomfort? Don’t be ridiculous. She has better uses for her time when there are slaves to do this instead.” And the worst part of it was that the girl said it entirely without irony. As if it was what she truly believed.

“Are you... her apprentice?” he asked.

“My lady does not take females for apprentices,” the girl said. “It was my privilege to bear my mistress’s shape and Power for some time. And now it is my privilege to serve you. I have been well-trained,” she added. “And I am a virgin.”

She came forwards and seated herself on his lap, twining her arms about his neck. “How should you like me, my lord?”

Damien blanched and not merely because the weight of her put renewed pressure on the soles of his abused feet.

He’d been propositioned many times. It was surprising to him, the number of nobles – both maidens and men, not to mention their ambitious relatives – who thought that the way into their king’s favor was through his bedsheets.

But there were no slaves in Ilseador. Even under his grandfather’s tyrannical rule that had not changed, though the way King Reginald had treated his subjects and sworn vassals, and even his scions, had left little distinction to be made.

This, however... *This* turned his stomach as even the baroness who had offered him a choice of her twin son and daughter had not. Well, not so badly. The expressions of avarice on said young people’s faces had turned his stomach in a different way.

“I’d... just like to get some sleep, please,” the king said, trying to roust the girl off his lap without forcibly dumping her on the floor.

The girl rose, and helped him over to the bed that was also in the room when it was clear that his feet hurt too much for him to stand long. She helped him remove the soft, indoor half-boots that were all he’d been able to tolerate, and that only this morning... glorified slippers, he’d joked to

Genevieve and she'd rolled her eyes at him. The thin soles were soaked through and irretrievably filthy after their unexpected exposure to city streets, the lamb's-wool interior damp and rough.

But there was only the one bed.

And he was *not* going to make the poor child sleep on the floor, or whatever she would be forced to resort to.

He removed his tunic, and she set it aside on the chair for him, neatly, then appeared to be awaiting other garments.

Damien eyed her dubiously and elected to merely loosen his shirt. He laid down, and as he had suspected she would, the girl slipped off her gown to reveal absolutely nothing underneath, and laid down next to him. At least she also pulled a heavy wool blanket over the both of them... but he felt obscurely guilty that he had the extra layer of his clothing for warmth. She also clearly had some Power of her own, for the lamps all dimmed down till the barest embers glowed from their wicks.

He trapped against his side the small hand that sought to slide under the hem of his shirt – he'd loosened, but not freed the shirt, so the attempt was bound to be unsuccessful.

"*Just* sleep," Damien told her. "It's been a very long day. And surely, after bearing the weight of all your... mistress's Power, you must be tired as well."

"That doesn't matter," the girl said. "It is my task to serve you. My mistress expects that I shall return to her well-used, and that you will have been well-entertained."

The king frowned, and raked back the errant lock of hair from his face. "I'm a soul-bonded and happily-married man."

"My mistress will solve those things for you."

She didn't seem to see any irony in referring to the best parts of his life as things to be 'solved.' It was, apparently, simply another 'fact.'

He sighed. "How old are you anyways? And do you have a name?"

"Fourteen. My mistress calls me Denisa."

Damien frowned. He was almost old enough to be her father. Definitely old enough – Evan Alsterling had been fifteen when he fathered Jason, after all. "She *re-named* you?"

"My mistress says that names are Power, and that she will keep my true-name safe for me."

Well, the first part was certainly true. Damien had seen what havoc could be wreaked when his grandfather's erstwhile apprentice had stolen the old king's name – and thereby his Power. It seemed to have been the

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culmination of a decades-long struggle for power – and Power – between the two evil old men.

Lord Prydeen’s accomplishment had erased King Reginald’s name from living memory and made it impossible to discern on documents. It had also led to the old wizard-king’s death, stealing his ability to keep the damaged, angry magickal fabric of the Realm from removing what Power – and *Life* – he had left.

“She will doubtless do the same for you, now that you are hers,” the girl added.

“I am not *hers*,” Damien objected. “I am merely a hostage. Not a... a slave.”

Nor an apprentice, he thought. Though a part of him wondered what this sorceress could teach him. He was entirely self-taught, learning from instinct, experiment, those few books he could find... and, cringingly, from his grandfather’s and Lord Prydeen’s notes.

The girl’s eyes gleamed in the faint light, though he couldn’t make out the rest of her face. “You are here. And soon you will be at the Keep. You have chosen to come, but it was because she left you with no viable alternative.”

A pretty vocabulary for a slave. Interesting.

“Please, my lord,” Denisa pleaded, reverting abruptly to her previous demeanor. “Don’t return me a virgin to the Keep. My lady has only one use for virgin maidens save for these rare occasions when she needs a vessel for her Power.”

“And what is that?” Damien asked, dreading the answer.

“To summon demons.”



He was able to soothe the child to sleep after that... though it took a good long while of convincing her just to close her eyes and rest. Finally, he had to turn over and fake sleep himself, ignoring her until her breathing slowed and steadied.

Demons! His grandfather’s notes included an extensive discussion of his researches into demonology, but he felt fairly sure that the old man’s experiments had never been successful. One good thing about evil wizards was that they were not much inclined to share their discoveries, and most decent people burnt their grimoires when they were finally defeated by decadence, heroism, or personal accident.

Damien had fully intended to do just that when he had gleaned what he could – not merely regarding magick, but to fill in the lost history of the Realm, missing persons and the like. It niggled at him that he might now not be able to do so. He had, at least, bespelled the books and papers such that no one else than himself should be able to open and read them.

Once Denisa was asleep, Damien was able to reach down the soul-bond for Genevieve's reassuring presence.

Damien! she exclaimed, and he was surprised that her words came across so clearly.

She must be in bed and able to concentrate, perhaps even have been trying to reach him herself. Genevieve's talent for magick had far exceeded her desire to develop her abilities; while they had used the soul-bond to communicate for years, detailed discussions still required that she be touching him or meditating. Otherwise, they received only sense-impressions from each other – emotions and, occasionally, physical sensations.

He flung himself to her... wishing he dared do it physically as well. But a sorceress who wielded Elementals and *demons* as well as her own Power was not to be trifled with. They might not survive her next attack so well.

Because they *had* weathered this one well, Genevieve informed him.

Without the ability to burn and pillage, without the sorceress's backing, and faced with besieging a well-stocked force with the advantage of strong walls, not to mention the anticipated arrival of the vastly superior Army division... the pirates had begun abandoning their king like rats deserting a sinking ship. Every time Evan had turned away, another group had slipped back down the ice-free pathway to their ships.

Finally, the Pirate-King had snarled at his own crew and departed. Though he had taken Megan Solway with him.

Lord David Solway, Megan's husband, had reacted with less drama than Genevieve had expected. He was grim, but he was already making plans to rescue her. Somehow. Damien's Queen had asked that he run things by her first, but he hadn't answered and the glint in his eye suggested that she had better be sure they had spies watching his movements.

For now, however, the bereft foreign lordling seemed to be spending his time with his children, helping them to cope with the loss of their mother.

Jason... was performing his roles as Heir to the Throne and Duke of Emeralsee. He was as shutdown emotionally, Genevieve said, as she had ever seen him, and she had known him since he was thirteen.

It had been less than a week ago that Jason had learned that his father had not been the monster that his mother, the Countess Alexa Solway, had

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always claimed and that his conception had been ordered as part of some obscure plot by King Reginald. And that the tyrant had been his great-grandfather.

Last night Jason had learned that his mysterious father was still alive, indeed that he was the King of the Pirates... and that Countess Alexa was not his mother but his *grandmother*. That Megan – the woman he had always thought was his much-elder sister – had actually given birth to him.

Jason had never handled change particularly well. It had taken him days just to be able to say ‘yes’ to Adam’s proposal of marriage – though they had been loves and lovers and completely committed to each other for over fifteen years.

Genevieve had tried to dislodge Jason’s new husband, Sir Adam Loveress, from his role as her bodyguard to take care of Jason. But having so spectacularly failed to protect the king, the Champion was refusing to leave Genevieve. Although he’d at least been willing to return to Jason’s side when Genevieve had herself retired for the night.

Duke Tomas Elsevier of Siovale and Sir Timothy Ancellius, Knight-Commander of the Royal Guard – and *de facto* commander of the Castle’s defense in this case – had remained on the walls to monitor the pirates’ retreat. It had taken the two of them, and Genevieve pretending to more exhaustion than she felt, to convince Jason to try to rest, and Adam to go with him.

The denizens of the Castle, however, had been released from the warded or secured rooms to seek more comfortable quarters now that the crisis had passed. She had hopes that they could somehow begin freeing the ice-bound residents of the city once the Army arrived.

You should see the Army by evening tomorrow, at the latest, Damien told his wife. And then went on to tell her where he had left certain documents and how to lift some of the spells he had used to prevent tampering – one of the warded rooms having been his personal office. She stopped his flow of information with the psychic equivalent of a kiss.

We’ll sort it all out, Genevieve assured him. *When we get you home.*

About that, the king said reluctantly, and told her about the demons.



Chapter TWO

Opening

THE SHIP MUST HAVE SLIPPED its moorings while he slept, dreaming uneasily of small, pale sorceresses and murky, bloodthirsty creatures... and his beloved wife, somehow kept safe from it all. By the time he woke, the movements of the ship were so much more dramatic that Damien felt sure they must be at sea.

Denisa served him breakfast with some disgruntlement, and didn't object when he made to leave the cabin. It wasn't until the king was out into the companionway that he realized his still-bare feet barely twinged at all. After days of magickally-enhanced healing from the magickally-induced frostbite, he was *almost* back to normal. A great relief, because he felt sure that he would need all of his capabilities in top form to cope with whatever would come next.

They were, indeed, out to sea. So far out, in fact, that Damien could not guess in which direction the closest land might lie.

At least not by sight.

Damien was magickally Bound to his Realm, and so he was all too aware of where he was in relation to it. They were sailing south, into colder waters, and the coast to their right was merely just beyond visual range, perhaps due to winds and currents... perhaps out of an attempt to disorient him.

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The king had never been outside of Ilseador before, never been farther from his capitol city of Emeralsee than brief visits to his vassals' lands. Given his Binding to the land, he had never thought to be *able* to travel... nor really had much desire to do so when all he loved and needed was right there. And when he – once a discarded and disregarded princeling who had hidden from his grandfather's ire in the Royal Library for nearly ten years – when he was so dearly loved and needed right where he was.

This, however...

Damien found himself unexpectedly energized by the feel of the ship cresting from wavetop to wavetop under the power of the belling sails. There was something incredibly freeing about standing at the bow of the ship filled with its silent sailors, the salt spray flying up into his face. He found himself – despite the fact that he was effectively a prisoner aboard this ship – grinning in exultation.

He was, after all, a prisoner by choice. A hostage of his conscience. He could exert his Power at any time to return himself home – if he were willing to break his word... and risk the sorceress's retaliation. Though without the pirates as her escort he suspected she would not pose quite so much of a threat.

And he had spoken to Genevieve last night and knew that all was well at home. He had even been able to sneak his Healer's sense across the bond, so he knew her pregnancy hadn't been affected by all the craziness of the previous days.

You seem very pleased with yourself, sorcerer-king, Azella the Unpitying's eternally amused voice inserted itself into his head as he stood in the bow, soaked to the skin and enjoying it.

I have a name, you know, Damien answered. Why not just call me by it?

Oh, you are pleased with yourself. Enough to reply, at last! She insinuated herself deeper into his thoughts. I would have imagined such self-satisfaction in a male would correlate with having availed yourself of certain... opportunities, but Denisa tells me you did nothing but sleep. How odd, when you seemed so much more... active back in your lovely Castle.

Damien refused to feel embarrassed. *She's just a child. I don't bed babies.*

Hmmmmn. Based on dear Evan's stories, I had the impression your people were not such sticklers.

He ended up exiled for that. Damien retorted. Effectively at least.

So why are you so pleased? If it's merely the cessation of paperwork – my dear, you really need to get out more! What is the use of having all the Power you do and doing nothing but shuffling papers?

Damien realized that *was* actually a significant portion of his ebullience. There was no way to get to his desk and the reports piling up on it, therefore no guilt that he wasn't doing so. He couldn't actually remember the last time he had escaped from the paperwork for more than a day, except for his stolen week this Autumn. There had been his visit to Embervest following the reacquisition of Minglemere – two years ago. And his nearly biannual visits to Elaarwen. And even then, the paper had followed him.

He remembered that Genevieve had said early on that she went hunting to get away from it all. But Damien didn't hunt and had no desire to learn – not when he could feel the death of every animal in the Realm as it was. He had hated the idea of killing things even before he was Bound to the Realm.

But how wonderful it had felt to ride out with Jason earlier this Autumn, simply to be away...

He needed to think about something else. He didn't *really* want to be gone from Ilseador – his *wife*, the baby to come... His goal should be to negotiate a way to return as soon as possible...

Do you really look like that? He found himself asking her as a distraction. *All pale hair and big blue eyes? And looking like a child?*

You'll see soon enough, came the reply. Phantom fingers ran down his skin in very... intimate ways, and he couldn't suppress a shiver that had nothing to do with his sea-spray-soaked clothing. *I don't think you'll be... disappointed, shall we say. For now, however, it seems you have some contact still with Ilseador. And with your Queen. We can't be having that, now can we? That clever, hotheaded wife of yours might be tempted to come after you if she could sense where you were... and that wouldn't end well. For her.*

You could let me go back, Damien suggested.

After all the trouble I went to just to acquire you? Don't be silly. You should be honored, sorcerer-king. I haven't seen a reason to deal with those howling sea-rats for any lesser purpose. Now... about these troublesome Bindings...

Damien gasped, and fell to his knees clutching the ship's rail as his sense of his Realm... vanished. The Binding that had begun when he wore the great, grey pearl of the Heir's Ring, continued with his Crowning and Anointing, taken a deeper aspect when he'd accepted the Sword from the stone statue of his ancestress – and nearly eaten him alive when he'd subsequently sat upon his Throne...

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...he could no longer *feel* it.

And even with the Realm in Winter-slumber, he was now cut off from the greater source of his Power.

A moment later, the sharp, white *feeling* of blankness where he'd had the constant reassuring sense of Genevieve for over five years nearly made his heart stop. He hadn't even noticed that he *felt* her breath, her pulse, tasted the low level of her mental state – last he knew, mild exasperation and irritation – until it was suddenly cut-off.

A soul-bond was supposed to be a gift of the Gods...

"*Why...?*" he gasped it aloud, fighting for breath. "What use can I possibly *be* to you with the bulk of my magick taken away?"

You underestimate yourself, Damien. Though I do not. You are a much safer acquisition now, and it behooves me to blunt your teeth and claws before allowing you access to my person, does it not?

"Now you're willing to use my name?"

Now you're not so much a king, are you? With your Realm left away?

Oh, that horrible ripple of amusement...

*And as to whether you are actually worth the title of 'sorcerer'... You are half-trained at best, a glorified Apprentice at worst, **boy**. With all the Power of your Realm, **you** should have had no trouble repelling me, salamanders and all. But you don't know **how** – neither how to use your Power nor how to pace and ration yourself to avoid exhausting your own resources. Nor do you know where and how to seek the Greater Powers.*

*You are a **child** who has lived a life of plenty, and you squander yourself thoughtlessly and cry and give up when your wastefulness has left you with no more toys to play with.*

Damien's grey eyes blazed with offended pride. "I'd like to see you do better, with what I've had to learn from."

He still gripped the ship's railing with one hand; his other was now wrapped around his middle to try to contain the incipient nausea that had come upon him when she pinched off his soul-bond to Genevieve.

You need a Master, boy, she told him, relentlessly... unpityingly. Or, in this case, a Mistress. I shall teach you, and you shall give me your Power in exchange. Perhaps you will even survive the process.

"Apprentice to an evil sorceress?" He laughed, bitterly. "I've had the notes of both my grandfather and Lord Prydeen to learn from."

Amateurs. Azella dismissed his grandfather's eighty-three-year reign of tyranny. And you fear to use what they learned anyways. I shall teach you not to fear your Power, Damien. I shall teach you what you need to be Great.

“No thank you,” he gritted out.

You sound as though you have a choice, boy. You do not. While there are few – or none – as Powerful as myself, you would choose to go back to your paltry kingdom and await the next sorcerer who would take it from you? You’re not such a fool.

Damien managed to get a full breath. “You’ll teach me to protect my land?”

It didn’t seem like her to offer her something that would actually help him.

What you learn from me will make you invincible should you defend your land, she said somewhat evasively. He didn’t miss that earlier she had said he might not survive her teaching.

“And if I agree to be your Apprentice?”

*You mean if you do so willingly? You are **already** my Apprentice, Damien. And this is but your first lesson. The first, but the most important: Do not think you can challenge me. Do not imagine that you can escape me. You are my **belonging** as much as that ship or my slaves that sail it – or the slave-girl I gifted you for your amusement. Do you fight me I shall enjoy breaking you to my will. And do you choose to comply without fighting, you will not lull me into any false sense of belief in your loyalty.*

You are not a king anymore, Damien. You are my Apprentice and my chattel and what freedoms I allow you are for my amusement alone.

The sense of her was gone, and Damien stayed crouched on the deck of the ship, recovering his breath. She had certainly made her position clear.

The bright, clear day with its blue sky and fluffy clouds seemed to have darkened, and his sea-soaked clothing suddenly chilled him to the bone.



Apparently, he was still to be permitted to decide whether he would bed the child, Denisa, however. For even when she found him dry clothing – in his size exactly, and a similar style – she made no effort to seduce him again. Or perhaps she was merely awaiting the approach of night.

The dark-haired man stretched out on the bed after eating the luncheon Denisa had served him – silently, and with no indication that she knew her mistress had put him in his place. That she knew he was as much a slave as she, at least in the sorceress’s mind.

Damien had never exactly felt *free* – at least not since he was eight years old and his parents had been summoned back to the city to live in his grandfather’s Castle. Before that they had lived with his mother’s parents and siblings and he had existed as part of a happy herd of cousins, running wild through the fields and farms and forests of Ravenscroft. There had been a herd of cousins at the Castle, too, but it was quiet, cutthroat, and as the youngest he was largely ignored.

That had turned out to be all to the good, as that herd of cousins – and the aunts and uncles that had produced them – was thinned, year by year. *Culled*, really. Accidents that weren’t accidents – such as the damaged tack that had ended with his sister, Kandra’s, death. Kandra, he’d discovered many years later, had been about to announce her betrothal to the son of Baron Anvliyar and then use the wedding as a way to help her parents and the then-ten-year-old Damien defect to the Rebellion.

Instead, Kandy’s grand plans had been betrayed to Lord Prydeen by her fiancé’s mother. She had ended up dead in a ‘riding accident.’ Their father, Crown Prince Eric, had confronted his own father, King Reginald, in open Court over his daughter’s death and been executed right there in the Throne-room along with his lady wife for that temerity.

With his ten-year-old son watching.

Damien had fled to the Royal Library and hidden there.

He had been ‘cared for’ by the same woman who had betrayed his sister, the now-Dowager Baroness Theresa Anvliyar. ‘Dowager’ because in betraying Princess Kandra, she’d had to reveal that her husband was also party to the plan. How she’d managed to shield Raphael, her son, Damien still didn’t know. For her ‘service’ she’d been kept as a hostage and given the title of Royal Librarian.

She’d discovered the terrified boy when she found a newly hired maid leaving baskets of food for him, reported him to the king, and ended up put in charge of Damien. Lady Theresa had made sure he was fed and relatively clean and that he showed up for the occasional ‘family dinners’ his grandfather would summon him to. Otherwise, she ignored both him and the Library she had also been charged with. Damien had tamed the mice with crumbs, slept hidden in corners or under couches, and read his way through much of the extensive Royal Library.

And that had been his life for four years. Alternating terror with losing himself in the stories and histories of the past. Damien had found that even reports on such plebian topics as grain production told stories that came to life in his head, and legal treatises were even better for finding stories of people who lived somewhere where there was grass and flowers and sunlight that wasn’t filtered through windows.

It had gone on until Ciriis Celavell came looking for any forgotten Heirs that might not yet be corrupted. She wasn't looking for Damien, but she caught sight of the scrawny boy scrambling away into dark corners when she came looking for genealogies of the Realm, and felt bad for him. When Damien wouldn't come out at her urging, she brought her friend, the squire Adam Loveress, to help.

It was mostly for Adam's benefit, in Ciriis' eyes. Adam's beloved Jason had just been knighted and assigned as bodyguard and Champion to Prince Oskar... whose idea of a bodyguard's duties was heavy on *body*. Adam was going half-crazy watching what was going on and needed a distraction, she thought.

Adam, however, had recognized the half-feral boy as Prince Eric's vanished son.

Recognized him, Damien had learned only recently, through his inherited abilities as an empath and telepath.

It took them a year before Damien would even come out where he could be seen when they were present. He had almost forgotten how to speak to people by then. His interactions with people had been limited to obeying Lady Theresa's few directives and saying "yessir, nossir" to his grandfather at those rare dinners.

What finally brought him out of the Library – and started turning him back into a human, he thought wryly – was Jason. Sir Jason Solway had emerged from his time with Prince Oskar broken inside somehow. He'd mended himself by spending his infinite patience on Damien, helping the young prince heal in his own way.

Jason had become his first real friend.

Finding out over the last week that Jason was doubly his cousin – Jason's father was cousin to Damien's mother and nephew to Damien's father – had been one of the most heartwarming things that had ever happened to the king.

But it had still taken Jason *another* year to get the young prince to come out of the Library.

And another year after *that* before he'd convinced Damien that he wasn't risking his life to his grandfather's ire just to pick up a sword or ride a horse as most other young noblemen had been doing for years by that age. Princess Kandra had been noted for her skills as a warrior... and at that point Damien thought it was for possessing that skill-set that his sister had been killed.

MANGALA MCNAMARA

The young prince had taken to both riding and swordsmanship naturally, but it was far too late at seventeen years of age to consider training him as a knight, even if his grandfather would have permitted it. The three conspirators – Adam, Ciriis, and Jason – had instead begun priming and preparing him to become a *king*.

By that time, the only other candidate was the on-again-off-again Crown Prince Oskar, Damien's youngest uncle – his grandfather had wed seven times and produced thirty legitimate children, but they and their own offspring had all met with 'accidents' or executions, as had all other known branches of the Alsterling family. Oskar was so perverted and self-centered that even the evil wizard-king could only tolerate him for short spans of time. Had the Ring of the Heir not been enchanted to make a nuisance of itself if it were not worn for over a year – meaning that there was no designated Heir to the Throne – Oskar would also have been disposable.

Careful planning – planning that had not included the anxious and naïve Damien – had ensured that Prince Oskar was not available when next the Ring made itself a nuisance to the king; it would fall onto his plate at dinner creating a single bell-like tone that would take longer and longer to die away each day. He'd been awarded the coronet of the Crown Prince simply to ease the king's headache.

No one had expected the 'careful plan' to fall apart in such a way that it left Prince Oskar, as well as most of the noble family of County Zialest, dead.

Oskar's demise had taken some of the pressure off of Damien, since there was no other known legitimate offspring with which to replace him. *King Reginald* had known that Jason Solway – who should properly have been named Jason *Alsterling* for his descent from the king's eldest son – was his great-grandson, but no one else had, due to the Solways having obscured Jason's father's name and origin.

There were, however, uncounted *illegitimate* offspring of the king, many of them acknowledged bastards who stood outside any chance of the line of succession as long as there were legitimate descendants. The potential for assassination by rivals or rebels had remained enough of a concern that Adam, Ciriis, and Jason had created a cadre of bodyguards for the prince.

Eleven young knights who were chosen for their loyalty and honor and cleverness... and a matching set of twelve young ladies chosen more secretly to guard the prince in more intimate settings. *Eleven* knights only, because Adam Loveress served as the twelfth and Captain, and Jason Solway as the Prince's Champion... the same role he had served for Prince Oskar.

Unbeknownst to them all, the king's dissatisfied and aging 'apprentice,' Lord Prydeen, had discovered how to steal what remained of King Reginald's Power. He siphoned off the last bits, leaving the king to be drained by the Realm and die, assuming, perhaps, that Damien would be a malleable puppet. Lord Prydeen had fallen to a back-up plan – and a back-up puppet-king – when Damien proved less malleable than the evil sorcerer had hoped... a plan which also failed and led to Prydeen's demise as well.

Fourteen years after his parents' execution, Damien had been secure on the throne... with only a Realm to Heal both magically and politically. And a Rebellion to negotiate out of civil war. And five 'Lost Provinces' which had defected to other countries to reclaim. And a soul-bond to the most beautiful, brave, brilliant woman in the world.

He had been *safe*, but hardly *free*.

And now... he closed his eyes, reaching automatically for his links to Genevieve and to the Realm like an amputee would feel for his lost limb...

Now, he was more *free* in some ways than he had ever been, regardless of what the sorceress claimed. And more *safe* than he'd been for most of his life – perhaps for *all* of his life, though until Kandy had died, his parents had done the worrying and he'd been blissfully unaware.

It would be hard for this Azella to match the constant, real terror he'd lived with for so long, no matter how Unpitying.

He ignored the warm dampness making its way down the sides of his face. Genevieve was fine. Jason and Adam were fine. Ciriis, pregnant up in her mountain exile, was almost certainly fine. His other friends were fine. His Realm was... not fine, but it was in good hands to recuperate from the ice-storm Azella had called down upon it. Genevieve's among others.

He was as free and as safe as he had ever been.

The more fool he that he didn't want anything of it.

***To find out what happens to Damien when he reaches
the sorceress' lair...***

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