



“I failed you. We all failed you... Failed the Realm...”
Adam’s words were choked out.
“Failed Genevieve.”

Damien’s heart, still exhilarated from his run across the country and his reclamation of Farivera, stilled from its wild beat. He had known. In some part of himself he had *always* known what he was coming home to find.

“Tomas Elsevier has her hostage, does he?”

Adam nodded without raising his head. “Her and...”

“Jason.”

Adam nodded again, eyes tightly shut, and with tears still leaking out. The Royal Guards he had brought with him down to the docks looked uncomfortably at this collapse of the stoically sarcastic man who had trained most of them. They were knights all and were not so far away from their days as squires under Adam’s sharp eye.

“And the city is under siege?” Damien asked. He hadn’t noticed any such thing as he ran down the surface of the rivers. But... he wasn’t sure he *would* have, immersed in his magick as he had been.

“What need?” Adam whispered bitterly. “Without any Alsterling to hold it, what were we to do but follow Tomas’ orders? With him holding...”

Damien’s arms went around Adam.
“We’ll fix it, Adam. Somehow.. we’ll fix it.””



THE
UNCAPTIVE KING

Book Five of the
Chronicles of Ilseador
(the Prydeen Prophecy Cycle)



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.

Made by humans for humans.

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For my mother, who made all the worlds of religion, philosophy, fairytale, legend, magick, miracle, and wonder seem like a series of open doors just waiting to be explored and incorporated. She never stopped seeking for deeper truths and more real realities.

A note to sensitive souls:

Damien has come face to face with what it means to be tempted by a true mistress of the craft of Evil Wizardry... and now he has to figure out how to heal and move forwards.

Proceed with caution...



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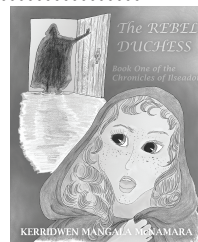
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PROLOGUE

a reminder of what has gone before

DAMIEN ALSTERLING HAD COME TO the throne of Ilseador unprepared to rule.

And worse, *he* had known it, although no one *else* seemed to.

His friends and advisors, who had made the throne secure for him, seemed to think he was doing fine. His wife, Genevieve – the former Rebel Duchess – had taught him some of the finer points of governing that his grandfather and predecessor, the Evil Wizard tyrant Reginald the Ruthless, had kept from him, but she swore he had a talent and gift for the skills.

She reminded Damien constantly that the Monarch's Sword – the ancient blade that Chose the Realm's Heirs – had 'spoken' for him. And it was true, when he unsheathed it for the purpose of proving his right to the throne of Ilseador, the Sword would blaze up with a light like a coruscating rainbow in a dazzling display that half-blinded anyone watching.

*(Thank all the Gods at once that it didn't do that when he practiced with it. The thing was too important and precious to leave lying around and Damien could hardly carry **two** swords around everywhere. Nor would he be effective at being his own last measure of defense if he tried.)*

But Genevieve had ruled the sparsely populated mountain province of Elaarwen, where blood-feuds and avalanches were a bigger problem than the logistics of trade and finance. Ilseador's capitol city of Emeralsee was one of the larger cities in the known world. Elaarwen had been an ideal place to protect the nucleus of the Rebellion that had defied his grandfather's tyrannical rule, and his beautiful, soul-bonded bride was a capable strategist and general.

She was not, however, deeply versed in the complexities of multi-layered courts and sewage systems.

And even if she did know all those fine distinctions and details, Genevieve's skill at war had immediately been needed. Ilseador had five Lost Provinces to reclaim, after all – pieces of the Realm that had seceded to the allegiance of the neighboring lands, claiming asylum from Reginald. Damien would as soon have waited on that – were it not the will of both the people and the Land Itself, to which he was magically Bound – that those places be won back.

Had he his choice, he would have kept Genevieve and her greater – although still incomplete – knowledge of governance by his side, both because he loved her and because he also needed an Heir.

He was the last – they had then thought – of the Alsterling line, after all. And now that they once again possessed the long-lost Monarch's Blade, it seemed unlikely that anyone but an Alsterling could actually claim the throne.

In his queen's absence, Damien learned to govern mostly by using his prodigious memory and rapid ability to assimilate new information. He read everything – every report, every message, every update casually sent in to the Royal Archives – and fit it all together in his own mind, finding patterns where others saw only chaos.

It was a method of desperation – he could only hope to outflank the pieces of information that were always, always, *always* missing from the whole.

And it was utterly exhausting, even without his other fearful obsessions:

First, that the magick which the Realm of Ilseador lent to him so profusely would fail him when he needed it most – in the attack of some other Evil Wizard, say. Damien had no one to teach him, after all. No way to learn how best to use what he had other than the secretive journals left behind by his grandfather.

And second... that he would *become* like his grandfather should he do more than lightly peruse those journals. Or perhaps even if he didn't.

Reading the journals – even as he feared them – became another obsession as Damien struggled to understand what had caused his grandfather – once a loving father and husband – to become evil... And how he might avoid that fate himself.

By five years in – and after ten traumatic, tragic miscarriages in the same length of time – Genevieve was near to dying and Damien with her, dragged down by their soul-bond.

Exhausted as he was, he would almost have been glad to give it all up – save for Genevieve and his sense of responsibility to the Realm.

In desperation, they turned to the prophecy which his grandfather's apprentice – Lord Prydeen – had made with his dying breath: that Genevieve could bear living children for Damien if only her first was sired by his Champion, Sir Jason Solway.

Eventually, Jason – and his long-time lover, Sir Adam Loveress, Captain of the Royal Guards – agreed to do that. They were the royal pair's closest friends and Damien's closest advisors and loved the king and queen both dearly.

The two knights had actually half-raised Damien, having discovered the orphaned prince hiding out in the Royal Library some four years after his parents had been executed in King Reginald's Throneroom at His Majesty's whim and word. Their loyalty was unimpeachable – secretly giving the king and queen a child was just one more sacrifice in a long line of such that they had suffered in their quest to see Damien to the throne.

Jason also, reluctantly, agreed to be temporarily Named Heir to the throne and a coronation was planned. In gratitude, Damien altered long-held Ilseadoran tradition to allow Jason and Adam to be wed.

In the ensuing months – as they all awaited Genevieve's recovery from her latest miscarriage such that she might risk another pregnancy – further complications arose. In order to protect the sickly queen from a too-early pregnancy, forced upon them by the unthinking demands of the soul-bond, Jason took Damien as a lover.

And then... just as Genevieve reached a point of health where they were all willing to take the risk... and in the immediate wake of the coronation-and-wedding...

... a terrible ice-storm smashed its way across the Realm, trapping most of the country's nobility in Emeralsee.

To handle the emergency, Damien taught his sworn vassals – the entire nobility of the Realm – to cast a barebones *compulsion* spell to send the people of the lands they were each Bound to under cover before the storm hit. And whilst they did that, he himself battled the storm directly.

Directly and – ultimately – futilely, though he managed to mute some of its fury on the farther western provinces. It hit Emeralsee hard, coating everything with several inches of ice and sealing everyone in the vast city indoors.

And worse... Damien had been able to determine that the terrible storm had been both *sent* and *called*.

Sent, presumably by mages from Deltheran, their neighbor to the west, where Genevieve had been ‘negotiating’ with Queen Estelle for the return of the Lost Province of Elendria. ‘Negotiating’ with the Ilseadoran army at her back and her reputation as a warrior and a strategist at the fore. It was the third such ‘negotiation’ – and the other two Lost Provinces had each come home without swords being unsheathed.

Deltheran was weeks’ ride away, but the storm had been *called* to Emeralsee by a mage on what appeared to be an entire *fleet* of pirate-ships hiding behind the Cape that sheltered Emeralsee Bay.

A mage... or rather a sorceress.

Azella the Unpitying, she named herself when she caught Damien using his magick to aid his ice-trapped people.

And she said he would come away with her when she bade him and nevermind his duties to wife and land and the unborn child who was just bare days from conception.

It all came true, despite Damien's efforts to prevent it.

The pirates came in, nearly a thousand of them, ready to ravage. And with the aid of the sorceress and the *salamanders* she controlled, it seemed likely that Damien and the small force of nobles and knights he had with him in his castle wouldn't be able to stop them. An attack by Fire Elementals like salamanders and a Powerful, trained, and unscrupulous Evil Wizard were most of his darkest fears coming true.

However...

Azella offered Damien a bargain.

She would withdraw, taking with her the salamanders and her magick – though the pirates would remain.

If only he went away with her, back to her evil lair.

Damien didn't hesitate.

He gave the Monarch's Blade to his wife – it had 'spoken' for both Genevieve and Jason by then, Jason having been proven his command of the castle to their most experienced general – Duke Tomas Elsevier of Siovale, his trusted friend and his second sworn vassal after Genevieve herself.

And he gave over himself to the evil sorceress.

Who lived up to her word and withdrew, abandoning her pirate-allies.

The soul-bond allowed Damien and Genevieve to stay in contact, so he was aware that the pirates had withdrawn and Emeralsee and his Realm overall were slowly beginning to recover... until Azella pinched off the soul-bond and Damien's Binding to Ilseador both. *(Temporarily, at least with respect to his Binding to the Realm, it turned out, though it was months before he had been sure.)*

Azella took Damien back to her keep – on a stone promontory that had been artificially raised by magick on the very cusp of the border between Ilseador and its southern neighbor, Sindalla. And there she kept him, held high above and away from the living stone that would have let him re-connect to his Realm, tempting him with her body and offering him her love...

...and finally trading him knowledge for the opportunity to persuade him to stay.

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Because the Evil Sorceress was, apparently, *lonely*.

Her goal was to convince Damien to fulfill his other remaining deep-seated fear and become an Evil Wizard himself, thence to extend his lifetime through foul means to be her eternal mate and partner. She wished, therefore, not to *break* him, but to *suborn* him, and she was willing to teach him all those things he had never learned in his solitary quest to learn about magick.

Damien was not such a fool as to believe that the insecure and ambitious sorceress would not turn upon him if she suspected him of even approaching her own Power. But he desperately needed the knowledge she had access to and embarked on his own plan to keep her... *entertained* until he had what he needed to defend the Realm, despite how the thought of dishonoring his marriage vows disgusted him.

But quite honestly, with his Binding to Ilseador pinched off, Damien really didn't have the Power to fight Azella.

The sorceress spent the Winter months teasing and teaching Damien. When he proved resistant to her own wiles, she sent one of her lackeys – an all-too-beautiful slave-boy named Mikhail – to him.

The boy had been bred for the use of Evil Wizards, Damien discovered to his horror. Mikhail's beauty and intelligence and well-designed sex appeal were difficult enough, but his curiosity and hopefulness were Damien's downfall. Even given direct and horrible evidence that the boy's seeming openness almost masked his... nearly-innocent evil and ambition to emulate his mistress, even then, Damien found himself falling for Mikhail.

He had no one else really close to being a friend in that dire place, after all, and his warm heart was desperately craving human contact. Nor had the line between *friends* and *lovers* ever been all that distinct for the king, dating back to when his advisors – Jason and Adam and a noblewoman named Ciriis Celavell – had decided to make sure their young prince would never be vulnerable to the wiles of the corrupt nobles of his grandfather's Court.

By the end of Winter, Damien – with his prodigious reading and memory – had managed to make his way through all of Azella’s storehouse of wisdom in the ways of Elemental mages. It was largely wisdom which she had herself disdained, given that her own Power was that of a Siphon – she absorbed Power from all the things around her. This was usually a harmless thing to do, given that all living things emanated magick, but her natural abilities merely aided and abetted her in removing an overabundance of Power through death and torture.

Damien was an Elemental mage himself, with a strong affinity for Earth – but no particular barrier to being able to use all five of the magickal ‘Elements.’ (*Though at first, Azella refused to believe he could do that, having never heard of an Elemental mage with such breadth.*)

His bargain with the sorceress having expired – and his connection to the Realm, if not Genevieve, restored – Damien was ready to depart when Azella taunted him with the reminder that *she* could summon *demons*. All his vaunted Elemental magick – even supplemented with that of Ilseador, now that he again had that access – would do him no good if the sorceress could send demons against him.

And so, he had stayed to learn what he could of demons.

It had eventually become apparent that Azella would never really grant him access to her spells for demon-summoning. This, after all, was the base and center for her Power over the rest of the world, insofar as she chose to exert it.

Nevertheless, Damien kept studying, hoping to do as he had always done and find the missing parts of the pattern by noting the shape of the holes in what he *did* know.

And he explored her keep while he did so, meeting the slave-girl Denisa – bred for this, as had been Mikhail – whom Azella planned to use as a demon-sacrifice, and the numerous boys whom Azella also kept. Like Mikhail, the older boys – and even Denisa – thought only of becoming Evil Wizards themselves, should they have the opportunity to do so. The ambitions of the younger lads seemed less sharply formed.

Azella forbade him to see the younger boys after learning that the king had been speaking subversively to all of her slaves. She merely seemed amused at the idea that he could turn any of the older ones against her.

Damien was appalled to discover that even Denisa preferred her fate of living in comfort until ‘the Mistress’ required her death than to consider fleeing into the unsure world for freedom. Not that any of them were free to try – Azella controlled them all by the magick of their true-names.

Nonetheless, the king did his best to persuade them – or at least Denisa, and perhaps Mikhail – to change their minds. If he could only be sure that he would not be releasing a plague of young Evil Wizards upon his Realm and his neighbors, the king would have freed them from Azella himself.

For he had discovered what had been thought impossible – the way to defeat the Power of one’s true-name being held by another.

Between that and the lack of progress in his studies in regards to demon-summoning, it was enough to make a man despair.

But as the day approached when Azella was planning to sacrifice Denisa, Damien realized that the *pull* of Ilseador was suddenly growing stronger. And not merely *stronger*, but that *pull* was making him recognize the shape of the *missing piece* that his strategist-wife had recognized was hiding some relevant and critical part of the ice-storm-and-pirate invasion of the previous Autumn.

And that missing piece was...



Chapter ONE

It's All in the Name

“**S**^{IOVALE!}”

Damien surged up out of his comfortable spot on the bed, spilling Mikhail from his shoulder as he came to his feet in one smooth motion. The boy woke looking confused, then scrambled away as he saw the look of rage on the captive king's face. Unfortunately for him, there was only so far he could go, without coming up against the sorceress...

Azella woke with a great deal less drama at Damien's shout.

“You didn't just make *common cause* with Estelle in Deltheren. You plotted with *Tomas Elsevier*.” Damien's voice was now quiet with deadly fury.

The pale sorceress looked at him calmly, not bothering to so much as lift her head from the pillow.

“Duke Elsevier wanted Ilseador. *I* wanted *you*.” She smiled. “Queen Estelle wanted to rid herself of Elendria's special status and *your* irritating attempts to retrieve the province to your Realm. At least one of us got what she wanted.” She stretched comfortably. “Oh, and I suppose Evan got his Megan. Though not his son or his crown. But after all, the crown could only go to *one* of my allies. And while my Master had made the initial contacts with the pirates and

Elseviers both, Duke Tomas seems like he'll be more useful to me in the future."

"Damien," Mikhail said fearfully, shrinking away, "You are *glowing*."

The Sorcerer-King glared at the sorceress and her slave-boy both, then stormed away to the washroom to dress. His clothes – the single set that she had permitted him and that he had handwashed earlier this evening, as he did every night, then hung up to drip – were entirely dry and even neatly pressed in an instant. It wasn't even a spell – just the wisp of a thought – to set the clothing straight, now that his mind wasn't clouded and he had no reason to hide his Power.

On his return to the bedchamber, Damien picked up the pot-metal sword from where he had last left it, leaning scabbarded in a corner. He half-drew it, just so Azella would see the changes as they happened. Damien was an Earth mage first and foremost, and metal was Solid and therefore of Earth, even were it not extracted from rocks.

It would not match the Monarch's Blade, but he had a sword of sharpest, strongest steel now.

Azella tried to hide how impressed she was, but Damien was enough of an empath to know *that* as well. She narrowed her eyes as he stepped to the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

The Sorcerer-King of Ilseador didn't bother to answer her.

He was *done* with this subterfuge.

Done with this keep.

Done with Azella the Unpitying.

But... perhaps... not *done* with Mikhail.

Damien looked at the beautiful boy, cowering naked in the bed.

"You may come with me if you so choose, Mikhail."

The boy's bright blue eyes flickered to his Mistress.

"Mikhail," Azella said. She had come up to a seated position, but still looked casual. "Use his name the way I taught you. Command him to kneel."

The boy looked fearfully from her to Damien, then pleadingly at the man. "Damien, I must obey her."

The King held out his hand. “Take my hand and I will protect you.”

Mikhail’s expression was skeptical. “You can’t even protect *yourself* if I use your name.”

Damien snorted. “That was a bluff. Try me.”

Azella was beginning to look impatient. “Mikhail. *Dandelion*. Order him to come back here and make love to you. So I can watch.” She gave Damien a long-lashed lascivious look. “*Again*.”

Mikhail had wilted entirely at her use of what must be his true-name.

Damien gave her a disgusted look.

“Damien,” the boy said pleadingly... but with fear and Power behind the name. “Do as she says. For both our sakes.”

The Power found no grip on the Sorcerer-King.

He held out his hand once more as both youth and seeming-maiden gaped at him.

“Mikhail,” he said again. “Take my hand.”

Unbelievably... *almost* unwillingly... the boy did so, crawling across the wide bed and off.

Damien smiled reassuringly at him. At least, he hoped it was reassuring, given that he was most certainly still *glowing* and had just terrified Mikhail by breaking what both the boy and his evil Mistress thought was one of the most fundamental rules of magick.

The dark-skinned lad looked... maybe not *reassured*, but perhaps... hopeful?

“How?” he asked as he put his hand in the older man’s. “How did you break the Power of a true-name given away willingly?”

And, with a fearful glance at the sorceress. “Can you do it for *me*?”

Damien pulled him close, and was briefly overwhelmed by the astonishing beauty and native sensuality of the bred-youth. He settled for giving the boy a brotherly kiss on the forehead – he’d taken enough liberties with his marriage vows, whether or not it had been in the good cause of learning what was needed to protect his wife and land.

The Sorcerer-King was aware that Azella the Unpitying was waiting to hear his answer as well. Doubtless it was only for the sake of hearing how Damien had done this that she had permitted Mikhail to seek his protection.

Not that it would do her any good.

“You must break it for yourself. By finding a name that is *more* true.”

Mikhail frowned, but Azella looked thoughtful.

“Has there ever been a name that *felt* more like it described you? Accept it as your own, and you are free of the one given you at your birth,” the King tried to explain.

Damien had struggled with this. His name described him very well, he felt. He *was* a ‘Damien’ all the way down to his toes... and it wasn’t any *less* him, for all that he’d finally accepted that he truly *was* ‘The Sorcerer-King of Ilseador, Defender of the Realm, Father of Giendra Marlerite Stellarine Alsterling.’

And if that was a ridiculously long name to encapsulate his inner self... it was no one else’s business.

The boy was hesitant. “My wet-nurse called me *Jemmy*. The trainers called me *Jerry*. Those were both *almost* right...”

He seemed to want to say something, but his weirdly brilliant blue eyes were focused on the sorceress.

“You can say it aloud,” Damien told him gently. “As you know, unless you *give* it to her – or anyone else – it gives them no Power over you just to know it.” He gave Azella a withering smile. “Else our ‘sweet lady’ would not have needed *you* to try to control me.”

“Jeremy,” the beautiful youth breathed, and... *something*... seemed to come into him as if he suddenly took a breath of air for the first time.

His first breath of *freedom*, Damien realized.

The King released Jeremy from his arms and stepped back.

“What you do is up to you now, Jeremy. You may come with me and I will protect you. But I will tolerate no breath of evil in my Realm. This keep...” He looked at the still-silent Azella. “This keep lies at the very pale of my demesne, neither clearly mine nor Sindalla’s. I am quite certain that both this lady and her Master before her have

been quite careful to perform their evil wizardries well above the living stone that is still part of Farivera and thereby avoid attracting my attention – and that of my predecessors.”

The sorceress looked at him languidly.

“The location was convenient,” she admitted. “Though the Siovalese Dukes have been importuning us for long years and even ceded Farivera to us for our own uses.”

That... was disturbing, but perhaps not unexpected. Now, anyways.

Damien would not allow his heart to break over this. He had trusted Tomas... Dear Gods, Duchess Sildra was Zachary Miramar’s elder *sister*. And how *many* of the Elsevier children had ended up staying on in the capitol after the wedding as pages and squires and even ladies-in-waiting to Genevieve?

“Come, Jeremy,” he said. “It’s time I was going.”

Jeremy looked at her fearfully still. “Mistr– Lady, you will let me go with no outcry?”

Azella smiled, and it was *not* a gentle expression.

“Neither of you will be leaving, my *Dandelion*.”

The boy cringed, and trembled, though the name clearly had less Power over him than before. Accepting a new name was not instantaneous, as Damien well-knew... and in his own case he had not needed to entirely give up his old one, merely make it Powerless over him.

“You may *try*, of course,” she added. “Doubtless breaking you to my will shall be entertaining. I have a demon-Summoning to prepare for after all. And in the end, *Jeremy*, you will *give* this name to me as well.”

The boy began to tremble and looked pleadingly at Damien again.

The Sorcerer-King of Ilseador (etc.) held out his hand again. “My offer is still open.”

“A normal length life,” Jeremy asked, quaveringly. “And to grow old?”

Damien nodded. “But free. To make your own choices. To bring joy to others. To find love.”

“It’s all lies,” Azella told the boy. “As you’ll see for yourself when I break *him* as well. His great love? His soul-bonded *wife*? He has taken other lovers *of his own free choice*. And he was willing to throw her over entirely for *me*.”

Jeremy’s eyes went to Damien in confusion.

The Sorcerer-King nodded. He couldn’t deny the truth of her words, after all. Though he might argue that *free choice* had never been a part of his life in that or any other matter.

“Though all of it – *all*–” and he let his gaze rest, coolly, on the naked sorceress to make it clear that whatever *personal* charms she had had never interested him, “–has been to protect her and my Realm. Had Azella been willing to give up Evil Wizardry to marry me, I would have given up all I hold dear to know that I had ended the threat she poses. And I would have given her all the love that was mine to bestow and never looked at another again.”

He let his smile grow. “Fortunately, she delayed and denied me until it was no longer necessary for me to make such a sacrifice.”

The first flicker of uncertainty crossed the sorceress’ blue-grey eyes.

“You won’t make it out of the keep,” she said again. “And even if you do, there is nowhere I cannot find you – both.” She cast a dark glance at Jeremy, who cowered before her.

But she’d expressed just the slightest hint of uncertainty in whether she could hold onto him... *them*.

Damien snorted. “Lady, if I do not roust *you* out of this fell place and claim this *margin* for Ilseador, be grateful.”

He turned towards the door, and felt a desperate hand grasp at his own.

The path out of the keep would have been shorter if Damien had not diverted to try to find Denisa and the younger boys – but they were not where he expected them, and he had not the time to waste. Now that the pieces of the puzzle had fallen together, now that he *knew* that Tomas of Siovale was Genevieve’s missing piece, the Realm was urgently calling him home.

The massive black doors at the entrance to the seldom-used entrance hall opened at his touch, and he stepped out onto the windswept rock of the high promontory. Jeremy still trailed hesitantly behind, still clinging to Damien's hand. They had paused to get the clothes the boy had used during arms-practice, so he was no longer naked. But it was far warmer inside the keep and Jeremy shivered in the gusts of a wind that spoke to Damien only of freedom.

A howl of sylphs sang over his head, nearly lifting Damien up to celebrate that freedom as the Sorcerer-King raised an arm to them.

Almost there... this promontory was nominally part of Farivera, but it was still an unnatural outcropping. It had been birthed of the ancient sorcerer's need for a hidden space between the edges of Realms that traditionally had Bound and Crowned sovereigns that should otherwise have been able to *feel* what might have gone wrong. Ilseador had lost touch with Sindalla some time ago – decades, if not centuries. Last Damien had heard, the country had reverted to being inhabited only by warring tribes; perhaps the Sindallese no longer had the kind of protection that such a Monarch could provide.

Nor would his own Ilseador, if he abdicated in favor of an elected Council, Damien realized at last, despite his own wishes and prior attempts to yield up his secular power. A King or Queen who was Bound to the Realm but had no temporal power over its population would quickly become less able to serve the needs of the Realm... And given how very *much* magickal Talent lay hidden – and perhaps recently revealed – in the noble families of Ilseador, it only begged for another King Reginald the Ruthless to emerge. Another tyrant Evil Wizard, either home-grown or invading.

There must be some middle ground. Some happy place of perfect balance where the Will of the People kept the monarch from excesses and tyranny... but where the Strength of the Monarch served as sword and shield for the people.

And for the land – the plants and animals, the rocks and the life that was too small to be seen.

This was not the time to sort it out.

“Jeremy,” he turned to the boy, still clinging so tightly to his hand. “We part ways here.”

The boy's bright blue eyes – so incongruous in comparison to that mahogany skin and below those tight, golden-yellow braids – looked at him in fear and confusion. “What have I done wrong?”

Damien smiled at him, but his attention was with his Realm, and it was pulling him far, far away. “Nothing at all, lad. And you are most welcome to follow me. But I need to go faster than you can.”

“I can go fast,” Jeremy quavered. “I’m strong.”

“The Realm will sustain me,” Damien explained. “It can’t do the same for you. Not... as fast as I need to go, anyways. If you stay in my footsteps, you’ll be safe from Azella. The Realm knows I want you protected.”

“What is this *Realm* you keep talking about?” Jeremy demanded, not releasing his hand.

Damien knew it was a delaying tactic.

He needed to go... to *move*... That internal Fire that gave him his insatiable curiosity, that made him pace... that was going to feed him on this harrowing journey.

But he had promised Jeremy freedom and protection both and he could take a little time to soothe the boy's fears. Or to try to, anyways.

“The Realm is the Soul of my Land. The Aether of Life that evolves from all that Which Is and has consciousness, from the soil and rocks to the birds, the trees, the humans... the other-than-humans. It Chose me to be its Guide and Guardian. Its Healer. As It Chose my ancestor so long ago, when humans became such a Powerful force in the world. And the Realm has husbanded my Line through all these centuries and millennia. Right now... it knows that the Line is threatened, and I *must go*.”

Damien's eyes were being dragged to the north... he wrenched them back to look at the confused youth.

“Stay in my footsteps,” he said again. “You will have everything you need. But I must reclaim Farivera – and Siovale – and I cannot do that the whiles I take you with me. I cannot run as fast while bringing you.”

Now Jeremy looked entirely alarmed.

“So, you really will *leave* me? To the Mistress’ not-so-tender mercies? You promised to *protect* me! And... and... how can you run so *far*? Damien,” he looked askance at the King’s feet. “You did not even put on your boots! You are barefoot!”

The Sorcerer-King of Ilseador simply didn’t have time for this. His bare feet itched with the need to run, to Heal the breach between Farivera and the rest of the Realm that still oozed magick and misery... and to *go home* to Emeralsee. There was... *something* there that threatened his unborn daughter’s life and well-being.

His daughter’s... and possibly also Genevieve and Jason’s? Were they not the other possible Heirs to the Realm? Not that the baby and Genevieve were exactly separable at this point in time...

“In my footsteps you will be perfectly safe. The Realm knows I have claimed you for Ilseador.” Damien wriggled his fingers out of the boy’s tight grasp and handed him the newmade sword. “You know how to use this well enough to protect yourself from non-magickal dangers. I’d stay to guide you myself, but I *must go*. I must go *now*.”

And The Sorcerer-King of Ilseador, Defender of the Realm, Father of Giendra Marlerite Stellarine Alsterling, began to run. Barefoot along that unnatural outcropping of rock as it bent to the west, dipping down to meet the Fariveran plain from which it had been drawn up so long ago.

Jeremy stood watching, arms wrapped around himself. He was not a runner, having spent all his life in enclosed spaces, so perhaps he did not understand the more-than-human speed with which the King ran.

But if he had wondered how he would identify Damien’s footsteps to follow him in promised safety he could do so no longer: every place where the King’s foot had stepped, be it the smoothest of solid rock, burgeoned with grass and wildflowers, spreading to merge into one long trail even as the boy watched... a ribbon of green disappearing into the distance and the gathering twilight...

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