

Kingdom in the Balance

Volume 5 in The Myrridian Cycle

Debra Killeen

Kingdom In The Balance

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the wonderful convention folks I've met over the past few years – the volunteers, the fans, the other writers/guests. I owe you all, and for those of you who've been patiently waiting, here is the final installment.

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Special mentions to Scott, as the Rhennsbury stable cat who continues to make the most of his cameos (rest in peace) and Finn, as the fierce gray kitten, Tiger

Kingdom in the Balance – Dramatis Personae

21st century time travelers

Chris McCabe – former medical resident and co-regent of the Duchy of Saelym, current Earl of Kilhenry

Elijah Holmes – former medical resident and current Earl of Tippensdown

Nicole Carpenter – Chris’s former fiancée and resident of Tippensdown, *deceased*

Kingdom of Myrriidia

Robert Claybourne – King of Myrriidia

Juliana DiStephane Claybourne – Robert’s wife, Queen of Myrriidia

Adele – Juliana’s personal maid

Mary – Juliana’s personal maid and former prostitute

Allyson Claybourne – Robert’s sister, currently residing in Tippensdown

Tamara Parrescu – formerly known as Brother Thomas, Allyson’s lover

Reginald Claybourne – former King of Myrriidia, *deceased*

Margaret Claybourne – Queen-Mother of Myrriidia, residing in a convent

Edward Fitzroy – Archbishop of Rhensbury, Robert and Allyson’s uncle

Father Ambrose Spenser – Edward’s assistant

Helen Lattimore McCabe – Chris’s wife and co-regent of Duchy of Saelym

Christian Lattimore – former Duke of Saelym, *deceased*

Reginald Lattimore – 12-year-old Duke of Saelym

Eleanor Lattimore – Reginald’s 10-year-old sister

Jude – Chris’s personal servant

Hugh Thurstyn – Bishop of Castrella
Terence Markham – Bishop of Saelym
Michael Pembroke – Bishop of Tippensdown
Anselm DeLacey – Duke of Latham
Lucas DeLacey – Anselm’s son
Beatrice DeLacey – Lucas’ wife
Colin DeLacey – Lucas & Beatrice’s 12-year-old son, fosterling in Saelym
Fergus MacTavish – Earl of Tavendish
Hamish MacTavish – Fergus’s 12-year-old grandson, fosterling in Saelym
Agnes MacTavish – Fergus’s 9-year-old granddaughter, fosterling in Saelym
Paul Bowdoin – Robert’s former squire, now Baron of Morwaith
Rhys Griffyth – chaplain at Morwaith Castle
Theodore Berengarius – Bishop of Morwaith
Father Jasper – assistant to Theodore
Ian – guard sergeant at Rhennsbury Castle
Guy – castle steward in Tippensdown Castle, former acolyte of Aldric Smithson
Kieran – resident in Tippensdown Castle, former acolyte of Aldric Smithson
Malachi – Jewish resident in Tippensdown Castle

Kingdom of Esterlyn

Wilhelm DiStephane, elder – King of Esterlyn
Wilhelm DiStephane, younger – former heir, *deceased*
Frederich DiStephane – Wilhelm senior’s 12-year-old son, heir apparent
Rudolphe DiStephane – Wilhelm the elder’s half-brother
Desmond de Rhone – Archbishop of Lynxhall, Primate of Esterlyn
Johann – Lynxhall royal guard captain
Tristan Arrondell – Earl of Levasham, Helen McCabe’s brother
Elisabet Arrondell – Tristan’s wife
Justin Arrondell – Tristan & Elisabet’s elder son, 14 years old

Michaela Arrondell – Tristan & Elisabet’s daughter, 12 years old
Edgar Arrondell – Tristan & Elisabet’s younger son, 5 years old
David Arrondell – Tristan and Helen’s younger brother
Baldwin LeFavre – Duke of Swansea
Gascon Fontana – Baron of Senpike
Gregory Fitzallyn – Earl of Montellea
Abby – Lynxhall Castle scullery maid, Baldwin’s lover
Sallie – Lynxhall Castle maid

Kingdom of Wyckendom

Nicholas Severinson II – King of Wyckendom, *deceased*
Alexander Severinson – Nicholas’s youngest brother, co-regent in Wyckendom
Isabella DiStephane Severinson – Queen Mother of Wyckendom, co-regent
Nicholas Severinson III – 2-year-old King of Wyckendom
Cecelia Falkes – former member of Tippensdown’s ruling family, accomplished sorceress, *deceased*
Katharine Severinson – 12-year-old daughter of Nicholas II and Cecelia Falkes
Ermintrude Parrescu – widowed Baroness of Carris, Tamara’s mother
Anastasia – former novice and friend to Katharine, younger daughter of the Duke of Oberlyn
Guillaume Pascaux – Archbishop of Laurconsburg, Primate of Wyckendom
Mother Hildegard – Abbess at St. Judith’s convent
Mother Jehanne – Abbess at St. Therese’s convent
Aldric Smithson – Dark Sorcerer, *deceased*
Elayne – former acolyte of Aldric Smithson
Gervaise – former acolyte of Aldric Smithson

Prologue

In Lynxhall Castle, the seat of Esterlyn's kings for nearly a century, the servants went about their usual duties, despite the air of hushed expectancy. It was early June, in the year 1026, and the king, Wilhelm DiStephane, was dying. He had lived nearly threescore years, a number of them beyond the expectations of his physicians. Now, he knew his life's end approached. From his crimson-canopied bed in the royal apartment, he dictated a message to his son Frederich, a fosterling in the Duchy of Saelym, in the Kingdom of Myrridia to Esterlyn's west. Wilhelm wanted his son to come before he died, so he could say a final "good-bye." Sadly, he feared he was already too late. He drew in a ragged breath.

"I can return later, Majesty," the cleric attending him said.

"Mayhap 'tis best," Wilhelm agreed, in a voice little more than a whisper. Before the cleric could take his leave, the king's personal manservant entered from the adjacent sitting room with Rudolphe DiStephane, Wilhelm's younger half-brother, on his heels.

Rudolphe went straight to the bed and adjusted Wilhelm's pillows before kneeling and grasping his brother's hand. "Is there aught I can do to help?" he asked.

"Aye, help me live another four years," Wilhelm retorted, more spirit than strength in his voice. "Failing that, I need you to take care of Esterlyn, for Fred." Just shy of his twelfth year, Frederich was too young to rule Esterlyn in his own right. Rudolphe nodded, masking the sudden gleam in his blue eyes by keeping them lowered.

After several moments of quiet, Wilhelm fell into a troubled sleep. Rudolphe released his brother's hand and stood, glancing at the cleric. "I will send for you when he awakens," Rudolphe said in dismissal. The cleric bowed, gathered his ink, quill and parchment, and hurried out of the chamber.

Wilhelm's servant remained, his expression expectant. "Is there aught I can do for you, Your Highness?" the man asked.

Rudolphe shook his head, schooling his features to look mournful. "I should like to remain with my brother a while," he said, crossing himself in feigned piety. "I fear he has little time left."

"As you wish, my lord." The man bowed and exited the room, closing the door to leave Wilhelm and Rudolphe in privacy.

Rudolphe walked to the chamber's narrow window and looked out at the surrounding countryside, his hands clasped behind his back. Well-tended orchards, sheep-studded grazing pastures and orderly grain fields flourished as far as the eye could see. Rudolphe pondered the advantages and disadvantages of his nephew's return to Esterlyn before Wilhelm's death. Frederick's arrival could provide ample opportunity to arrange for a fatal accident, but the timing would be suspicious. After the death of Wilhelm's elder son, his namesake, Rudolphe had decided he would settle for nothing less than ruling Esterlyn in his own right, not as his nephew's regent. Rudolphe smiled as he thought of his niece, Isabella. She had always been his favorite of Wilhelm's children; her ambition matched his own.

He turned and stared at his brother's sleeping form, his expression thoughtful. Wilhelm murmured in his sleep, then his body stiffened with pain. He was dying of a growth in his abdomen. His physicians had tried every known remedy, but the tumor continued to grow. Rudolphe knew it was merely a matter of time before his brother died.

Wilhelm woke suddenly, his brow slick with sweat, his thin white hair plastered to his head. "Who is here?" he asked, raising his head and shoulders and staring straight ahead.

Rudolphe glanced in the same direction — no one was there.

"Maria?" Wilhelm whispered, reaching out his right hand in supplication. Rudolphe straightened to full attention. Maria was Wilhelm's queen, who had been buried eight years before. As Wilhelm sank back against the cushions, he exhaled once and was still.

Kingdom in the Balance

Rudolphe waited several heartbeats for another breath, holding his own then went to the room's dressing table and picked up the looking-glass. He held it under his brother's nose, but the reflective surface remained clear. "Excellent," he murmured. He returned the mirror to the table and withdrew to the sitting room, calling to Wilhelm's servant to summon the chaplain. He had other, more important, things to do than tend to his brother's posthumous needs.

* * *

That same night, several hundred miles to Lynxhall's southwest, Laurconsburg Castle in the Kingdom of Wyckendom was quiet. It was well past midnight and everyone in the castle was abed, with one exception. The latch to the door of the royal nursery lifted with a hushed click, and then the door opened slowly on silent hinges. A cloaked figure slipped into the room and glanced around, eyes already adjusted to the dark. The nursemaid's soft snores could be heard from her corner pallet. The cradle containing two-year-old King Nicholas Severinson III was still, as was the child inside, his thumb in his mouth.

The intruder crossed over to the cradle and knelt, picking up a cushion propped against the nearby wall, then reached in and brushed back a few fine strands of golden hair from the sleeping infant's forehead. The child didn't stir. "Farewell forever, little king," the individual whispered before placing the cushion against the boy's face and pressing down. The infant's struggles were brief. The interloper returned the cushion to its place then glanced toward the still-sleeping nurse and silently left the chamber.

Chapter One

A fortnight earlier

“You will not take that tone with me, young woman,” Abbess Hildegard snapped. “I care not who your parents are!” The abbess stood behind her small desk, her hands flat on its surface, and leaned forward menacingly.

A dark-haired, angry-faced novice stared back at her in defiance, her nostrils flared, hands on hips. “You will care one day,” Katharine Severinson said in an icy tone. “I am not the bastard daughter of the late king, Nicholas II, but the legitimate one. To all reports, my two-year-old half-brother will never live to reach his majority. I will be Queen of Wyckendom one day.”

The abbess laughed, and Katharine’s expression darkened. “That day is not today,” Hildegard said. “And you can stop flaring your aura. Your Magic is no threat to me.”

“Would you be willing to wager your life on that?” Katharine asked, as her blue aura continued to glow around her

head. "I have been studying with Father Xavier when he visits, and my power is growing."

The abbess paled. "You would not dare harm anyone with Magic. That will have you arrested by the Church and executed. Besides, you have known of your Magical talents for barely half a year. You cannot possibly have learned that much. And Father Xavier would never teach you any Magic that would harm others."

"Would he not?" Katharine smirked. "Have you forgotten that your family displaced his a quarter century ago? Those estates should be his, but instead he was forced into the priesthood, vocation or no." She crossed her arms. "I have no qualms about acting to avenge his family – on you." She waited for the abbess's reply.

Hildegard studied the girl for several moments, her heart thudding in her chest. The girl physically resembled her dead mother, Cecelia Falkes, with her heavy blue-black hair. Cecelia had gone mad after her family was massacred when the neighboring King of Myrriidia, the late Reginald Claybourne, had annexed her home, the Earldom of Tippensdown. Hildegard had assumed since Cecelia had given birth to Katharine a dozen years before that the main reason for the girl remaining at the convent was to determine if the madness had bred true. She now started to fear that it had. But, was Katharine capable of inflicting harm on another, or even of taking a life, with Magic? The abbess licked her suddenly dry lips. She wanted nothing more to do with Katharine; others would need to control the girl's Magic if she parted with the Church as her mother had done.

"Fine. You can leave this convent, against your parents' wishes. We are well rid of your ilk."

"My parents are dead, as you well know." Katharine took a deep breath, fighting to control her emotions. "How could they grant such permission?"

"That is not my problem, and neither are you as of now. You may take one set of clothes, a pair of shoes, a walking stick and food and wine for three days."

Kingdom in the Balance

Katharine's eyes narrowed. This was unfair, and the abbess had to know it. "I will need a horse. You expect me to walk to Laurconsburg? A member of the royal family? You dare?"

Hildegard shrugged. "None of the convent's animals can be spared. Unless your ladyship would like to make a donation as payment for the use of an animal?" The abbess now sat at her desk, her posture one of dismissal. She knew that as a fosterling at the convent, Katharine had no coin of her own.

Katharine began to sputter as her temper flared. She barely controlled her anger. "You will regret this," she said before turning her back on the older woman and stalking out of the chamber.

The abbess crossed herself and let out a breath. She would not miss Katharine Severinson.

* * *

After leaving the abbess, Katharine made her way to the novice's dormitory to pack the meager things she'd been allotted to take with her. She stopped walking, annoyed, when she heard her name called. She whirled around. "What!"

Another novice, dressed in the same drab unbleached linen habit as Katharine, stepped away from the building. "Sorry, Kat. I wanted to know how your talk went with the abbess." The novice, Anastasia, took in Katharine's tense posture, flashing blue-gray eyes, and set lips. "She denied your request? How dare she! You have not taken vows."

"Oh, she granted my request," Katharine said. "In fact, she cannot wait to be rid of me. But she was impertinent about it and has forbidden me even the use of a mule. She expects me to *walk* to Laurconsburg!"

"She cannot *do* that," Anastasia said. "You are a princess and she knows it." She tugged on Katharine's arm. "Let us go see Sister Ermintrude. She will know what to do."

Katharine pondered the idea, seeing only friendship and a willingness to help from her companion. Anastasia was two years her senior, but the pair had bonded shortly after Anastasia's arrival at the convent when she was about eight. Anastasia was

Katharine's physical opposite, with blond tresses and warm brown eyes, and fuller of figure than Katharine's body with its lean, awkward angles. Anastasia kept assuring Katharine that she would develop womanly curves in time.

They hurried to the convent's herbarium, where they knew they could usually find the nun. Ermintrude invited them in and clucked in sympathy as Katharine shared her conversation with the abbess. The older woman's habit barely fit her stout figure, and her wimple was slightly askew. "Not to worry, dears," the nun said. "We shall all go to Laurconsburg in the style befitting noblewomen. *You* will need ladies-in-waiting, Katharine, and I was never meant to be a nun." She glanced at Anastasia.

"Aye, Sister. I mean, my lady. I would gladly come along."

"Good. Then if Mother Hildegard gives me any trouble, I will threaten to take my family's endowment with me." She winked at Katharine conspiratorially. "And you can let her know that the convent has lost all royal patronage. Hit her in the money – it works every time. You will not have to walk to your new home."

* * *

Ermintrude's prediction proved correct. As noon approached two days later, she, Katharine and Anastasia prepared to leave St. Judith's convent, on horseback, with a trunk bearing essentials for the three of them being carted in a wagon pulled by a pair of oxen. Their garb was subdued, but well made and was offered by the convent's retired noblewomen. Ermintrude had thanked them profusely for the dresses.

Hildegard was there to see them off, her features pinched in anger. "You have proven quite the hypocrite," she said to Ermintrude. "You have feigned piety since the day you arrived here. Now you leave, with this upstart bastard princess – regardless of what she thinks, her claim will never stand! – To curry royal favor. You never had a nun's calling, did you?"

Kingdom in the Balance

“Of course not!” Ermintrude laughed with a harsh braying sound. “What you need, Hilda, is a roll in the hay with a virile young man.”

The abbess took a step back, as though she’d been slapped, her face flushing dark red. “You might then begin to understand why others here might feel repressed. Many of these women, especially those of noble blood, were forced by their families to take vows. They would far rather be outside the convent’s confines, actually participating in life.”

Hildegard chose to ignore the gibes and went to Katharine, who had mounted her horse, a skittish mare. “This convent will be a far happier place with you gone. I pity the folk of Laurconsburg. Rest assured, your uncle, Prince Alexander, and Wyckendom’s archbishop, will never allow the likes of you to become queen. Not with your mother’s history. Besides, even if the late king *is* your father, he married well beneath his station, which does naught to help your claim either. An earl’s younger daughter?” She shook her head.

Katharine’s eyes had narrowed. The horse began to dance under her, sensing her rider’s anger and tension. “You will speak no more,” Katharine said, pointing her right arm toward the abbess as she flared her blue aura. “*Ever.*” As she reinforced the command in Latin, she felt the power surge through her as blue fire leapt from her fingertips and struck Hildegard in the throat. The older woman staggered back, her eyes widened in horror. She clutched her throat and drew breath to gasp at the pain, but when she opened her mouth to speak, no noise came out. A couple of other nuns present in the yard joined their stricken superior, staring at Katharine fearfully. Katharine looked down at them all, her expression disdainful.

“I only wish you had thought of that sooner,” Ermintrude spoke into the silence. “Come, let us go.” She urged her mare forward, and Katharine and Anastasia followed suit. None of them looked backward.

* * *

That night, after an afternoon's uneventful travel, the three women stopped at an inn. Ermintrude commandeered the best room, having the coin to pay for it. "Ladies need their privacy," Ermintrude explained to the innkeeper's wife.

The woman was unsure how to react since the women had no guards traveling with them as escort. She finally nodded. "Aye, my lady. This way, if you please."

Ermintrude graciously thanked the woman and slipped her an extra copper coin. She ignored the bustle in the inn's main room, where a score of local farmers dined on the evening's fare, and requested a hot supper for three be sent up. The smell of roast pigeon and rabbit stew wafted on the air, causing the three of them to realize how hungry they were. She then turned and winked at her companions after the woman had gone. "Good breeding always shows, and the peasants respect it, knowing they can be punished severely for the slightest insult. Truly, I cannot abide them. Filthy people. Well, with the occasional exception..." Her voice wandered off as she was distracted by a memory.

Anastasia had inspected the room and let out a squeal of pleasure when she sat on the bed. It was more than big enough to accommodate the three of them, and the hay-filled mattress felt luxurious compared to the thin pallets at the convent. The wool blankets were soft to the touch, instead of rough. "I cannot remember the last time I slept on a real bed." She sighed.

"I never have," Katharine said. "I was born in that horrible convent and expected to die there. At least that was all I expected until my Magical talents began to manifest." She went to the room's narrow window, pulled the plain linen curtain aside and stared outside, not seeing the nearby apple orchard as she contemplated her options. "I thought I should never be able to leave, in spite of the death of my parents, slain by Allyson and Robert Claybourne. Father and Mother's deaths *will* be avenged one day, after I am queen. And I *shall* be queen. No archbishop or weak-minded uncle is going to keep me from the throne!" She turned and looked at her companions. "Should I try acting meek and dutiful with my uncle?"

Kingdom in the Balance

Ermintrude was thoughtful. She'd met Alexander Severinson before, at Court functions when she was still the Baroness of Carris, and Nicholas I had been king. "As I recall, your uncle had leanings toward the priesthood. As he was a younger son, I admit I am surprised he never was ordained." She paused. "Hmm. He may be happier at the idea of you being queen than him being king. We should be able to learn how he feels fairly quickly. And we shall make the best time we can to Laurconsburg."

* * *

Katharine reined in her mount when they topped a hill that allowed a first glimpse of the kingdom's capital early one morning about a fortnight after leaving St. Judith's. She'd set foot out of the convent before this journey, and she'd had a chance to enjoy the relative freedom of traveling with her identity unknown to the people they'd met. She came to agree with Ermintrude's assessment of the commoners – she wanted as little to do with them as possible.

She studied the castle, whose ramparts could be seen towering over most of the town from its position on the capital's eastern side. She shaded her eyes from the sun and tried to catch a glimpse of the kingdom's standard, flying from the top of one of the towers. She was surprised at the height of the building; the convent's structures had all been single-storied with the exception of the two-story nun's dormitory. All of the buildings in the capital looked to be no taller than that, while the castle seemed to have at least four floors. The only other tall edifice in sight was the cathedral, whose spire easily towered above the town as it reached toward the heavens.

Katharine turned her attention to her imminent arrival at the castle. One of the first things she'd do once she got settled would be to find a Magical tutor, preferably not a priest. She wondered who had taught her mother and asked Ermintrude.

"I am unsure, my lady," Ermintrude said. "Magic was never a consideration for me, as my family and my late husband's had none, so I admit I did not pay attention. I did meet your

mother a handful of times – you favor her in looks by the way – and I always admired her ambitions. She wanted to regain Tippettsdown as I recall.”

“Of course she did!” Katharine took a deep breath. “I understand the earldom has now become open to any kind of Magical practitioners. While I care little for Church teachings, is that not against the law?”

“Well, ’tis certainly against ecclesiastical law,” Ermintrude said. “But mayhap King Robert Claybourne has approved it. His sister is a pagan heretic, according to the rumors surrounding your mother’s death.” She murmured an apology as Katharine frowned in anger at the mention of the Claybournes. Timidly, she continued, “Although I cannot imagine that the situation sits well with Myrriidia’s archbishop, Edward Fitzroy. I always understood him to be a zealot for enforcing Magical law.

“The situation with the Claybournes is not your fault, Lady Ermintrude,” Katharine said. “I am just so frustrated by the injustice of it all. The two of them slay the King of Wyckendome and our kingdom’s strongest Magical practitioner, and pay no penalty for their crimes.”

“Aye. I have no idea if your uncle requested reparations from Myrriidia after he brought your father’s body home and buried it in the royal crypt.”

Katharine tore herself away from the painful memories. “So, the archbishop allows this to happen, this Magic outside the Church?”

“Aye, which is a great mystery.” Ermintrude paused. “Do you remember hearing anything about another Magical practitioner, a Dark adept called Aldric Smithson?” At Katharine’s shake of the head, Ermintrude continued. “Aldric and Edward fought a Duel about three years ago, and Fitzroy won, barely. But he has not been the same since, again through the rumor mill, and I have wondered what exactly happened during that Duel, since a lot of these happenings in Tippettsdown began afterwards.”

“It should be interesting to find out,” Katharine said. “But now, methinks ’tis time for us to move on.” She directed her

Kingdom in the Balance

mount toward a dirt path that would lead them down the hill and closer to her ambitions.

* * *

That same morning, Prince Alexander Severinson of Wyckendom woke suddenly from a troubled sleep. He waited until his heart stopped pounding before he rose and padded to the room's narrow window. He moved the tapestry aside and stared at the thatched roofs of the city of Laurconsburg. His gaze moved to the newlycompleted cathedral, whose roof towered over all other city buildings. He shivered despite the already-warm air and reached for his dressing gown, unsure what troubled him.

Alexander ran a hand through his thin blonde hair, staring at his hollow-eyed reflection in the burnished looking-glass. He spun around as his bedchamber door was flung open without warning. He stared at his sister-by-marriage, Isabella, who appeared surprised and angry.

"What means –?" he began.

"You devil-worshipping murderer!" Isabella screamed at him, thrusting forward a bundle she carried in her arms. Her coldly beautiful features were contorted into an expression of loathing.

Alexander's face drained of color as he held out his arms to accept the bundle. It was the cold, stiff body of his two-year-old deformed nephew, Nicholas, the king. He remained on his feet with an effort. "Isabella, I did not –"

"Liar!" she interrupted him and then spat at his feet. "You are the one who gains from his death! Now you are the king!" She slapped him, causing him to almost drop the child. "How could you? He was an innocent!"

Alexander gently laid the bundle on his bed. "Aye, Isabella. He was an innocent, unlike yourself. If I were to murder anyone, 'twould be you."

Isabella's expression turned fearful and she backed away a step, as though he had made a move to carry out the threat.

Alexander's brows lowered in irritation. "I have no intention of killing you," he said in an exasperated tone. "God's

blood, I would have done it long ere now. I did not kill Nicholas, or order his death.”

Isabella crossed her arms and stared at him in disbelief.

Alexander stared back evenly. “If I wanted my nephew dead, why wait until now? Why put up with your presence all this time?”

Isabella had remained in Wyckendom after the death of her husband, King Nicholas Severinson II, acting as regent along with Alexander. Theirs was an uneasy relationship on a good day, which was a rare occurrence. Isabella paled with anger at the insult and slapped him again. “Mother of God, but you are impossible. If not you, then who?”

Alexander waved his arm vaguely. “How should I know? Let us go to his chamber and I will see if I can learn aught about his death.” *For all I know, you murdered him yourself,* he thought. He stepped away from the bed so Isabella could lift her son again. He slipped on his dressing gown, donned slippers and a cloak and followed her to the castle nursery. She laid the small body in its cradle then glanced warily around the whitewashed chamber. The boy’s nurse had fled the room when she’d discovered the body at first light, fearful of Isabella’s well-known short temper.

Alexander and Isabella were administering the kingdom in Nicholas’s name until the child reached his majority at age sixteen. Neither had realistically expected the boy to live that long — he had a cleft lip and palate, an extra finger on his left hand, and he was deaf. He’d shown no aptitude for learning of any kind during his short life.

Alexander had been on poor terms with his elder brother Nicholas, who’d been slain during his failed invasion of Myrridia, the kingdom separating Wyckendom from Esterlyn, two summers prior. His other brother, Victor, had also lost his life during that invasion. Alexander had never wanted to rule, and his heart now skipped a beat as he realized he was next in line to inherit.

He looked around the room; none of the furniture seemed out of place. The cradle was close to one wall, a small table and

Kingdom in the Balance

stool nearby. A narrow pallet sat along another wall near the chamber's narrow window. Alexander knelt before the cradle, one hand resting lightly on it, and slowed his breathing with an effort so he could ease into trance.

Isabella watched him carefully, studying his face to see if she could determine what, if anything, he learned. She rested one hand on the hilt of her dagger.

Alexander came out of trance with a soft sigh several minutes later. "Someone smothered him with a cushion," he began.

Isabella strode past him and deposited Nicholas in the cradle. She wrapped the purple and gold coverlet around him as tears fell along each cheek. "Then his nurse shall be hanged as the traitress she is," she declared. She turned to move toward the door but Alexander placed a restraining hand on her arm. She whirled around and hissed at him.

He stepped back and held up his hands in a non-threatening posture. "Isabella, there is no proof 'twas the nurse. I could not tell who used the cushion to smother Nicholas. All I can say is it was a purple cushion with gold trim." He pointed to one nearby. "Probably that one. We may never find the guilty party."

Isabella looked him up and down and then smiled with satisfaction. "It matters not. *You* ordered the death; it is unimportant who carried out your request." She swept out of the chamber. "I am reporting this to the archbishop. You will not be crowned king until this is resolved. To my satisfaction," she said in parting.

At that moment, the castle herald's voice rang out. "The Princess Katharine Severinson!"

"Katharine?" Alexander repeated. "Who is -?" He knew the names of all of his immediate family members and there was no one named Katharine. He followed Isabella to the nearest stairwell, a step behind her as they entered the castle's Great Hall. Two women stood with a young maiden. The girl's hair was blue-black and plaited into two long braids. Her eyes were a steely

blue-gray. Her features bore no clear resemblance to the Severinson family.

“What kind of welcome is this for the sister and daughter of a king?” she demanded, hands on hips.

Taken aback, Alexander stopped in his tracks.

Isabella kept moving, however, not the least bit intimidated, until she was a foot away from the girl. “How *dare* you take that tone to the Queen Mother of Wyckendom!” she hissed.

Katharine took a step back and glanced from Isabella’s angry features to Alexander’s bewildered stare.

Realization dawned on him, and his smile was genuine as he approached the girl. “Welcome to Laurconsburg, Your Highness,” he said. “I am Alexander, your uncle. Cecelia Falkes was your mother and my brother Nicholas your father, yes?”

Isabella’s anger intensified and she turned it on Alexander. “Do you mean to say you *believe* that story about their marriage and daughter? Cecelia Falkes was a madwoman – only a fool would credit her tales.”

Alexander ignored her; he’d had no love for his brother Nicholas or Cecelia, but Nicholas had never disputed the marriage. And his brother had been nearly as mad as Cecelia in his single-minded pursuit of conquering Myrridia.

Katharine meanwhile had curtsied to him. “Thank you, Uncle,” she said, her tone now coolly polite. Alexander marveled at her poise; she couldn’t be older than twelve. “May I be shown to my chambers?”

Alexander offered his arm while the other two women followed the pair. Alexander reached a decision as they climbed the stairs and led Katharine to the former king’s apartment.

She pushed the door open, stared at the rich furnishings, and turned to face him, her confidence replaced with confusion. “Uncle, this apartment –” she began.

“Katharine, we need to talk,” Alexander interrupted quietly. “May we converse in your sitting room?” He gestured toward her companions. “I believe they are suitable chaperones.”

Kingdom in the Balance

Still feigning to be nonplussed, Katharine entered the chamber. The furniture was covered in dust, but it did little to disguise the quality. A gold and silver chess set sat on one table. The purple and gold of the chair's cushions had faded, but the excellence of the stitching remained evident. Alexander waved her to the chair and moved a footstool to sit at her feet.

"Katharine —" He broke off as a pounding sounded at the door.

A still-angry Isabella stepped in without waiting for an acknowledgment. She crossed the space to Alexander and again struck him across the face. "She cannot have this apartment!" she shrieked. "'Twas mine and Nicholas's!"

Katharine looked from Isabella to Alexander. He ignored Isabella's outburst and met Katherine's gaze. "Your brother was murdered last night, Highness. Once your claim is established, you will become Wyckendom's queen."

The girl's face lost color; her shock at this news was real. She recovered quickly and protested falsely, "No. I did not come here to — I am not —" Alexander clasped her hands in his. "I wanted to — to receive money, to further my education," she lied. "I have Magical talents and would like to develop them."

Dear God, no, Alexander prayed silently. *If she has Magic, please keep her free of her parents' madness.*

"A convent is a good idea," Isabella said maliciously. "Especially since I understand you have already spent some time there."

Katharine gazed at Isabella challengingly, as if to ask, *So?*

"Isabella, have a care," Alexander admonished. "For that matter, remember that you no longer have a place here. The girl has just learned she may not have the future she envisioned."

"Spare me. You have no spine, Alexander. But I see what game you play. Soften her with kindness, then slay her at the first opportunity, like you did my defenseless Nicholas." Her voice broke and she began sobbing. Alexander suspected the emotion was false.

Katharine withdrew her hands, eyeing him with trepidation. Alexander held his right hand up between them, his palm forward. "Hold your hand to mine," he said quietly, "and judge my words as you will." The girl touched her palm to his. She slipped into trance with little effort. "I did not murder, or order the murder of your half-brother Nicholas," Alexander said.

Katharine nodded once as she returned to full consciousness. "I shall have to think about all of this. Can I refuse to be queen?"

"I do not know, Highness."

Isabella left in disgust and descended to the castle's chapel. Laurconsburg's chaplain, Father Darius, greeted her and asked if she needed to give confession or had come simply to pray. Isabella gave an unladylike snort. "No, priest. I need you to contact Lynxhall Castle." When he didn't immediately move to obey her, she crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "Now."

The priest frowned before lowering his gaze and heading into the Magical workroom. "Of course, my lady," he murmured belatedly. Once Darius contacted Lynxhall's chaplain, Isabella dismissed him curtly. She schooled her features into a serene expression and smoothed her skirts as she waited for her uncle to arrive. Rudolphe appeared quickly.

"Darling Isabella," he said, before smiling fondly. "You have news?" He had shared with her the news of Wilhelm's death the previous evening. Isabella hadn't bothered to share it with anyone else in Laurconsburg. Once an official messenger arrived, she would pretend to mourn, at least in public, although she hadn't been close to her father in years.

"Aye, my son is dead. Alexander cannot prove 'twas me, even with his accursed Magic. He tried to learn the identity of the killer, but he failed." Isabella's expression turned conspiratorial. "Methinks 'tis time I entered a convent, to grieve for my husband, now that my son is dead as well." She paused, a smile playing on her lips. "And when will my brother Fred be brought here to die?"

"Are all of your arrangements in place?"

Kingdom in the Balance

“Aye. My assistants are nearly finished readying a cave where my brother can meet his fate. I shall be there to witness it, then notify you as soon as ’tis possible. Then you will be King of Esterlyn, and by year’s end, I will be your Queen.” Isabella curtseyed deeply, then told Rudolphe of Katharine Severinson’s arrival. Both were amused at the potential for chaos the girl could cause.

They left their respective workrooms a short while later. Isabella directed Darius to break the contact. “And if you breathe a word to anyone that I have spoken with my uncle, I shall see to it that you are drawn and quartered. Understood?”

Darius bowed. “Of course, my lady.” He kept his eyes lowered, to hide his anger. He knew Isabella would follow through with her threat, but he hoped to pass on word of her surreptitious activities to Alexander at some point. He would not be sorry when she left Laurconsburg, and Wyckendom, for good.

* * *

Katharine closed the apartment’s door behind Alexander, who’d left not long after Isabella. She glanced at Ermintrude and Anastasia, both of whom now smiled at her.

“I thought he would never leave,” Katharine said, easing gracefully onto a footstool. She grinned. “But ’twould appear as though I shall be Queen of Wyckendom much sooner than expected!” She leapt to her feet and began dancing with Anastasia. “Do you think ’twas Isabella who murdered Nicholas? She is quite the royal shrew! Alexander is innocent, which is too bad.” She sobered. “I suppose he will be regent until I turn sixteen.”

Anastasia, herself the youngest daughter of the Duke of Oberlyn, said, “No matter. I am just glad to be free of that horrid convent! I would much rather be your lady-in-waiting, Kat.”

“Of course, Ana. And of course, you will be my lead lady, Ermintrude.”

Ermintrude was the widowed Baroness Parrescu of Carris. She had been forced into the convent when her eldest son discovered her having an affair with her dead husband’s squire, a youth more than thirty years her junior.

“Convents are for weak-minded women, or for women with no power in their families,” Ermintrude said. “This,” she gestured at their surroundings, “is much more to my satisfaction. We will get this apartment cleaned, and refurbished if needed, to say naught of getting you a wardrobe worthy of your new station. You will be a splendid, powerful queen, my lady, able to slay with your Magic those who disobey you. Wyckendom will come to fear your name. You need only put up with this lackey of an uncle for a few more years. You can use that time to further your Magical talents. It should prove simple enough to find you a qualified tutor.” She clapped her hands together. “And you can banish your uncle the same day you become queen!”

Katharine smiled slyly. “And in a few more years, I shall fight and destroy Allyson Claybourne, the pagan witch who murdered my mother.” Katharine had heard many different rumors regarding the two Magical Duels that had taken place between Allyson and Cecelia, but she focused on one thing: Allyson had slain her mother. Twice.