

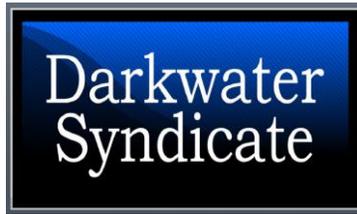
The Gullwing Odyssey

Book one of the
Gullwing Series

Antonio Simon, Jr.

THE GULLWING ODYSSEY

ANTONIO SIMON, JR.



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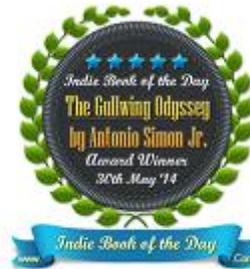
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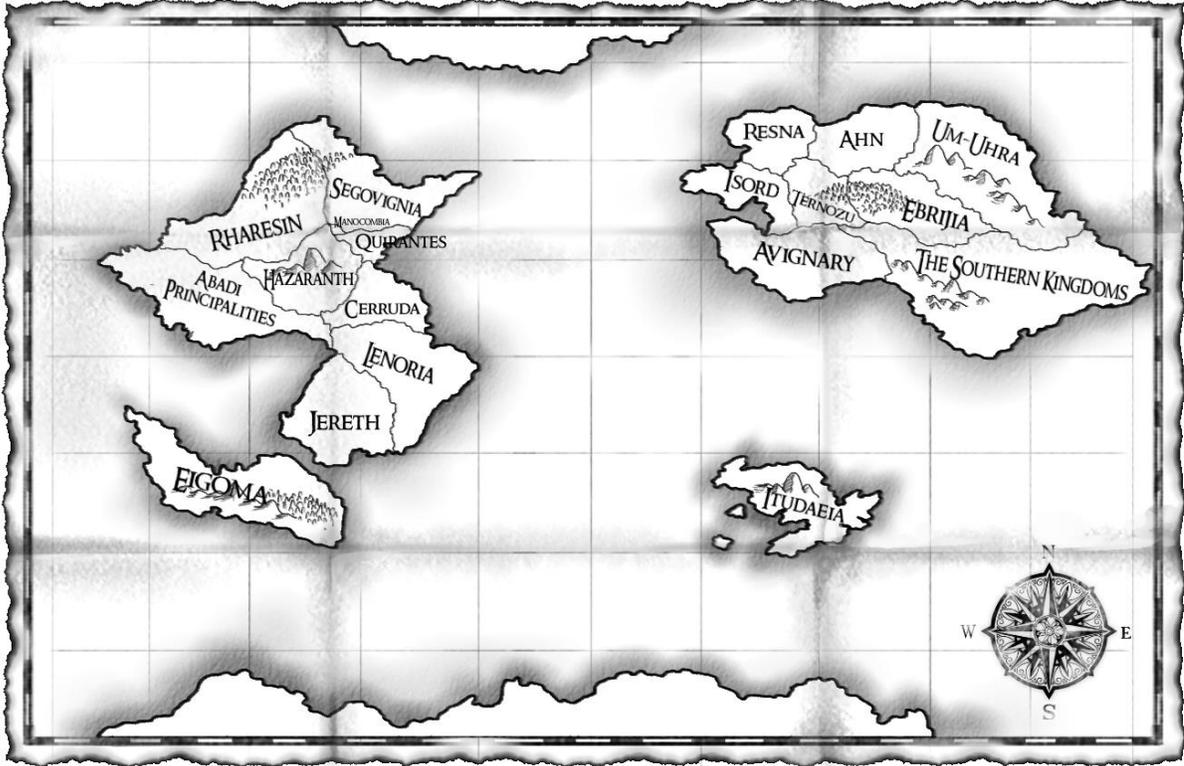
AWARDS & ACCOLADES

“The Gullwing Odyssey rests solidly on the shaking shoulders of a good laugh – and that’s what sets it apart from ninety percent of fantasies on the market.”

– Diane Donovan, Midwest Book Review



THE GULLWING ODYSSEY



Odyssey: A long journey, typically by sea, during which things tend not to go as expected. Usually full of adventures from which one derives knowledge or wisdom, oftentimes about oneself.

ONE

Unbeknownst to him, Marco's life teetered on the cusp of change.

Muttering curses under his breath, Marco trudged up the boardwalk with his backpack in tow. He was short on time and completely lost in the labyrinth that was Denrico's seaport.

The merciless heat didn't help either. His messenger's uniform was crisply ironed this morning. If he wrung the sweat out of his shirt now he could irrigate a small farm for a day.

He cupped his eyes and scanned the pier ahead. Enormous trade galleons packed the crowded harbor. Never had Marco seen, much less set foot on, an oceangoing vessel. Today he had seen enough ships for a lifetime.

He slung his backpack across his opposite shoulder. The parcel inside was heavy. To make matters worse, it would be weeks before he could rid himself of its bulk. The parcel was addressed to Queen Catherine Saint-Saenz Lucinda of Avignary, and that was on the other side of the world.

A shout from nearby snagged his attention.

"Hey there, lad!"

Marco turned his head to look. An old crewman sauntered down the gangplank of a nearby ship. He was particularly ugly. Here was a man who looked like he threw rocks at beehives when he was a boy, except that the rocks were attached to a short stick, and the stick was still in his hand when the rocks hit the hives. His cleft chin extended beyond the arch of his nose, giving him a horrific underbite. He balanced a reed on his lips. When his jaws met to chew its stem, he looked as though he could sniff his chin.

The sailor planted himself in the center of the boardwalk, arms over his head as though signaling someone distant. "Hey!"

Marco held his breath as he approached. The sailor reeked of sweat. He hadn't gone a step past when his backpack snagged, knocking him off balance.

"Whoa!" Marco yelled, whirling to face the old man.

The sailor's eyebrows arched, resembling a pair of caterpillars on a twig. "Whoa yourself."

Marco took a step forward. The old man put out his hand to stop him.

"Out of my way," Marco said.

"That presumes you know where your way is."

Marco stiffened at this affront. "You'd better have a good reason for obstructing Lord Amadis Eric's mail."

"Yup." The sailor gnawed his reed.

"Well?"

"You don't know where you're headed."

"You don't either."

"Don't I?" The old man grinned a checkerboard pattern of missing teeth. Those teeth that remained were stained from years of neglect.

Marco tucked the backpack into his armpit. "What do you want?"

The sailor turned up his hands, palms out. "Meant no offense, lad. Old Turbo here only wants to help you. You look lost."

"I am," Marco admitted despite himself. He would never make his delivery if he did not first find his ship.

"Right, right." The sailor touched his forehead and shut his eyes, pantomiming a diviner receiving a vision. "The sea spirits are calling. They tell me... They tell me you're headed to Avignary."

Marco crossed his arms. "Lucky guess."

"Turbo doesn't guess, lad."

"So answer me this: where are the ships headed for Avignary?"

Turbo gnawed his reed. "That answer's hidden in an old tale of the sea." He cleared his throat. "The ship you seek flies a pennant blue as the sky on a summer day, red like the blood in your countrymen's veins, and gold like, a... eh... Sorry, lad. I never was too good at rhyming sea tales. Rhythmic pentameter'll be the death me, if I knew what that was."

"What does this have anything to do with my getting to Avignary?" asked Marco.

"Rules of the sea, my boy. An old salt like me has to answer every nautical question by spinning a tale of the sea on the fly. And they don't have to be true." Turbo held up an index finger to make his point. "But they have to rhyme. That's the important part."

"You're senile," Marco said.

"Aye, there's a touch of madness in this here skull, methinks. Old injury. Musket ball to the noggin. But I tell you no lies. Avignarian ships fly blue, red, and gold pennants." He pointed across the pier. "Head back the way you came to the branch and go two over."

"Thank you," Marco said before trudging away in a hurry.

Taking the old sailor's advice, Marco backtracked up the pier and followed the boardwalk to a distant wing of the seaport. The ships anchored at this end of the harbor dwarfed even the freighters he had seen earlier. These giant barges floated so high on the surface of the ocean that the boardwalk between them seemed like a path through a valley. Each of them flew Avignarian colors.

He slowed his pace to look at the ships more closely. These had square windows carved into their sides, some ships having one, others two rows running along their middles. He stopped in place, stunned, when he noticed that the ship before him cut away. The rear quarter of the ship's side had been shorn off.

Sunlight glinted off of a dull metal tube sticking out of a stack of splintered wood. Marco cupped his eyes to peer inside, and realized that the metal was the lip of a cannon cast in black iron.

Marco was so engrossed with the warship that he wasn't looking where he was going. He walked into the outstretched hands of a man standing in his path.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Marco said out of reflex.

"No harm," said the man. He brushed the ruffles out of his red suede coat and adjusted his hat. After a beat, he added, "Admonisher caught your eye. It was to be expected. She is a remarkable ship, after all."

He doffed his hat with a bow. "I am Alexis Mordail, corsair extraordinaire."

Alexis's overcoat drew back as he straightened from the bow, giving Marco a glimpse of the ivory-gripped derringer holstered at his waistband.

"Look," Marco said, "I'm sorry to cut you off, but I'm lost and pressed for time. I'm looking for an Avignarian ship."

"You're in the right place," said Alexis. "All of these are Avignarian."

"Yes, I know, but I'm looking for one in particular. I'm on business, you see, and I can't be held up any longer."

"Ah." Alexis gave a thoughtful nod. "Forgive me for not recognizing you earlier, sir. We've been expecting you."

"It's of utmost importance that I... wait, what?" Marco asked. He'd kept speaking over Alexis without listening to what the man said. "You've been waiting for me?"

"Of course."

Marco's shoulders bowed in a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank Kandensa."

"Here, let me take that for you," Alexis said, snatching up Marco's backpack like a dutiful valet. "Follow me, please."

Alexis led him past the warships, where a much smaller vessel awaited at the end of the pier. "This is Stormwind," said Alexis as he led Marco up the boarding ramp. "She's on loan to me for this special assignment."

"What special assignment?"

Alexis stopped in place halfway up the ramp. "Why, you, sir." He resumed walking. "She's by far one of the finest caravels on the open sea," Alexis went on, absently running the pads of his fingers along the ship's rail as he stepped aboard. "I've a mind to own a vessel just like this - as a pleasure boat, of course - before I get old and relegated to telling rhyming nautical tales to random passersby."

Marco's brow knit. Sailors were strange people indeed.

Alexis put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Men poured out from the stairs leading below deck and assembled before him. Each of them stood shoulder to shoulder, rigidly at attention, eyes trained at the horizon, arms at their sides, exemplifying the chiseled discipline that comes only through effective leadership.

"Mister Monkeygrip," Alexis called out.

"Coming, sir!"

None of the men standing at attention had spoken. Then, suddenly, a tall youth with spindly limbs shimmied down from the mainmast, leaping between the rigging ropes like an ape. He dropped to the deck and tumbled with the fall, coming to his feet in mid-roll.

"Present and accounted for," Monkeygrip gibbered. He snapped erect long enough to give a firm salute, then dropped to all fours with a crooked grin.

Alexis shoved the travel bag into Monkeygrip's arms. "Take the gentleman's personal effects to his quarters."

Monkeygrip pressed the backpack to his chest with one arm and scampered through a door at the ship's rear, jabbering all the way.

Alexis turned to face his crew. "Mister Kerrigan, if you please."

A bald crewman with a face like creased leather hobbled forward. His tiny eyes were sunken deep behind his craggy brow, looking like two black raisins floating on the surface of a bowl of burnt oatmeal. Grease and sweat stains pocked his shirt, which frayed away at the sleeves, revealing giant bronze forearms. He slumped against a gnarled wooden crutch tucked under his armpit.

"Prepare for departure, Mister Kerrigan," said Alexis with arms akimbo.

"Aye," he shouted back. He faced his mates. "You heard the man. Get this barge moving."

All at once, the crewmen scattered to their respective duties.

Monkeygrip skittered out from the rear of the ship and let out the sails. Three enormous men wrestled with a hoist to draw up the anchor. Kerrigan took his post on the bridge, overseeing the activity on deck with the tiniest motions of his even tinier eyes. In the midst of the uproar, Marco turned in place to watch as the men around him worked with mechanical precision. It was extraordinary.

Alexis squeezed Marco's arm gently, catching his attention.

"Please sir, follow me," he said, sweeping his other hand out before him. They cut through the commotion on the deck, headed for the stateroom at the ship's rear. Alexis was first to reach the door and he held it open for Marco.

"I trust you will be comfortable," Alexis said.

The quarters were sumptuously furnished. A fine writing desk stained glossy black sat at the end of the room, accompanied by a plush chair tucked under it. A globe of the world cast in bronze stood within arm's reach of the desk. In the opposite corner, a wardrobe sat on brass lion's paws. A massive four-post bed occupied half of the room. Just by the look of it, Marco presumed that he could lie down at the bed's center and stretch out, and yet still not reach its corners.

"This is magnificent," said Marco as he stepped inside.

"I'm pleased you think so. These are my quarters. I'm rather particular about my furnishings, you see."

Marco blinked. "So where will you be staying?"

"I must oversee the repairs to Admonisher. Kerrigan will serve as acting captain in my absence." He pinched the brim of his hat between his thumb and forefinger and tipped it down briefly. "Safe journey, sir."

"Goodbye," said Marco as Alexis left.

Marco rounded the desk and sat in the chair. The globe beckoned for his attention, just asking to be spun dizzily.

Monkeygrip had left his backpack on the desktop. Marco undid the buckles and peered inside it to make sure nothing had been removed. Tasked with such important business as he was, he could not be too careful. The parcel was still inside and padlocked. The letter strapped to it bore an unbroken wax seal. Neither showed signs of tampering.

He looked up with a start as Kerrigan appeared at the doorframe.

"We'll be leaving shortly, sir," Kerrigan said. "Captain Mordail asked me to tell you." He glanced over his shoulder and back again, his eyes merely a dull glimmer beneath the shelf that was his forehead. "Also, there's someone here to see you, sir. I'll be leaving you to your business."

Marco rocked forward in his chair as his visitor came in.

A dragon. Never before had he seen one in person. If it was scaled, walked on two legs, and talked, then it was a dragon by Marco's reckoning. That, or an exceptionally well-trained iguana.

Smallish in height, the dragon seemed smaller still with a giant like Kerrigan beside him. He had the look of a human bureaucrat, dressed in a black straight tie and crisp white shirt tucked neatly into his pinstripe slacks. Navy blue scales covered his body, from the tips of the frilly crest atop his head to his clawed feet. His tail ended in a broad spade that hovered above the floor but never touched it.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance," the dragon said with a bow.

A pair of enormous folded wings jutted out from where his shirt had been tailored to accommodate them. "I am Kuril Krenarin," the dragon went on, "of Emperor Rao Ordan's Bureau of Foreign Affairs. On behalf of our country, we are most pleased to have you as our guest."

There was no mirth in Kuril's words. He smiled out of cordiality alone. Marco fought hard not to wince as there were many pointy teeth in that mouth.

"I trust you have your letter, sir?" said Kuril.

"Oh," Marco sputtered, prying his eyes from the dragon's fangs. "Yes, of course."

He reached into his bag and handed Kuril the envelope.

Kuril glanced down at it but did not take it. Instead, he wagged his talons in a *render unto me* flourish.

"Your letter of introduction, please?" Kuril insisted.

"I didn't think I'd need one," Marco said.

"Well, perhaps a person such as yourself needs no introduction. But a letter of introduction would be helpful to identify you, sir."

Marco's brow furrowed. "Why is everyone calling me 'sir' all of a sudden?"

"Shall I call you something else, sir? Lordship, perhaps? Ambassador?"

"Ambassador?"

"Do you prefer that one?"

Marco swallowed hard. "Why would I?"

Kuril's eyes narrowed. "Well, sir, that is who you are, isn't it?"

TWO

Emperor Rao Ordan sat in his office, hard at work yet accomplishing nothing. One at a time, he leafed through dossiers and moved them from one side of the desk to the other. War loomed, and with it came the responsibility of having to make decisions. He bristled at the notion. Was it not enough that he held supreme executive authority over the Itudaeian empire? However could he be expected also to make difficult choices?

Each week brought a new stock of fat dossiers, documenting every aspect of the empire that could be reduced to a number and percentage change from the prior week. His duty as emperor demanded his timely perusal of each report, although lately this had become a futile chore. No matter how hard he worked, never could he read them faster than they were brought in.

He thumbed through the reports, but his mind was not on them. Work and worry occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of everything else. He stretched in his desk chair, gave a mighty yawn. Most nights he would lie awake in his hammock, and when he grew tired of lying down he would crawl out and stare at it. War was difficult business, and life was difficult enough having to sleep alone in a hammock made for two.

The doorknob clattered and he nearly sprang out of his chair.

"Father?"

Hearing that voice brought a tired smile to his face. "Come in, dear."

Dria entered. There was a heavy note of concern in her face.

"What troubles you?" Rao asked.

"You, father. You've been in here all morning. A break would do you good."

He sighed. Much as he wanted to take a break, he could not allow himself to be sidetracked now, especially since he was making such headway.

"I can't, dear. I'm far too busy." He corralled a stack of dossiers, gathering them into a pile at the center of the desk. One at a time he drew them out of the stack as though looking for one in particular, murmuring and nodding occasionally for effect. Before long, two smaller piles of paperwork had begun to stack up on either side of the desk.

Dria pulled a dossier out of one of the corner piles and glanced it over.

"You're always too busy," she said, handing it back.

"These troubled times demand my full attention," he said, dropping it into a pile without looking at it.

"Father?"

Rao stiffened.

"You need rest."

He raised his eyes just slightly, not enough to meet her gaze, but enough to notice that her arms were crossed.

"It shows that much?" he asked.

"That one I handed you came from the other stack."

Rao shrank into his chair. He owed it to his people to serve as their protector, and he owed it to Dria to be her father. Both duties were equally weighty, but if the scales tipped in one direction just this once, no one would be the wiser.

"You're right," he said, pushing away from the desk. "Would you like to join me for lunch?"

She grinned and took his arm.

"You came at a fine time too," said Rao. "I'd almost forgotten that I have a lunchtime appointment with the chancellor."

She groaned. "Must he join us?"

"Oh come now, Chancellor Maldronigan is a fine man as far as humans go."

"Chancellor Maldronigan..."

The door to the office swung wide, but no one stood nearby to hold it open.

"Is right on time," Rao finished his daughter's sentence.

Maldronigan strode toward them, the ends of his flowing red robe whipping at his ankles. He stopped to greet them at the doorframe.

"My liege," he said with a bow of his head. "And, my lady."

"Hello chancellor," said Rao. "I hope you don't mind if my daughter joins us for lunch."

"Not at all, lordship," said Maldronigan. "As a point of fact, I think it to be an excellent idea. The young princess can do with learning all she can on statecraft."

He offered his arm to Dria. Dria's arm tightened around Rao's.

Maldronigan's eyes shifted. "Lordship, might you indulge me?"

"By all means," said Rao, stepping back.

Rao felt Dria shudder as the chancellor took her arm. "Are you cold, my dear?"

"Indeed, it is a bit drafty," Maldronigan answered for her.

With a sweep of his hand, the shutters hanging in the hall windows drew closed in sequence.

"You never cease to amaze," Rao said.

Maldronigan repaid this comment with a meager smile and nod. "I remain your ever complaisant servant, my liege."

The three exited to the palace courtyard, where a winding trail of pebbles led them to the crescent garden. Here, a shady copse of palm trees grew in a semicircle around a white marble table.

Maldronigan took his seat on a backless stool. "My liege, you must appreciate how flattered I am, that Your Excellencies have permitted me, your lowly servant, to share this meal with you. Ah, and while it pains me to have to sour our enjoyment of this wonderful luncheon, it is my duty to report that the

mail has arrived. I took the liberty of opening, condensing, and then disposing of it all for you."

"What of it?" Rao asked.

"Tsk-tsk. All bad news from Hazaranth, I am afraid."

Rao clenched his jaw. "I see."

The courtyard door opened and three servants came forth.

The first brought a silver bowl piled high with steaming fish buns and set it down at the center of the table. Another placed a pair of eating sticks before Rao and Dria. The third unfolded a serving table beside the diners and laid a spread of twenty each of spoons, forks, knives, and plates. As the first two servants left to retrieve drinks, the third laid a napkin across Maldronigan's lap and remained at his side.

Maldronigan snapped up the fork closest to him and thrust it into a fish bun, then set the bun onto his plate. "I needn't adumbrate much, as I am certain Your Lordship is aware that the imminent conflict with the Hazaranthi nation is on the verge of becoming something of an imbroglio."

"Y-yes," Rao said. It was wishful thinking to believe that Rao understood even half of what Maldronigan said at times. Still, Maldronigan was a learned man. Rao felt it was better simply to agree with him than ask what he meant. It saved face, too.

Maldronigan plucked a knife off the tray and cut the bite-sized morsel in half. "Nonetheless, as per my most recent communiqué, we apprehend that this pestiferous situation may promptly be allayed somewhat with the arrival of the Hazaranthi emissary."

Dria pinched a fish bun between her eating sticks and popped it into her mouth. "It never fails to amaze me how well you Manocombians must perform on elementary school vocabulary exams."

"Chancellor, you say an emissary is coming here?" Rao asked.

Maldronigan ate half the fish bun and wiped his lips.

"Indeed. I took the liberty of chartering a vessel to transport him here. Now, this act by the Hazaranthis of sending their emissary is a pellucid sign of their intent to terminate belligerent activities."

He ate the other half of the fish bun and dabbed the napkin to his lips again.

The servant beside Maldronigan removed the chancellor's used napkin, plate, and silverware, then set a fresh plate and napkin on the table.

With a clean fork and knife, Maldronigan pinched another fish bun and cut it in half. "Now, while I abhor conflict as much as anyone else, I implore Your Lordship not to perfunctorily defenestrate the notion of employing reasoned caution."

"You should perfunctorily defenestrate yourself," Dria muttered.

"Um, yes," Rao said, with no idea of what was meant by either of them.

Dria smirked. "You heard him, chancellor. You know where the windows are."

"Windows, dear?" Rao asked.

"Such a charming sense of humor," Maldronigan said with a rare, tooth-baring smile. Sinews tensed, corded tight in Maldronigan's neck, running taut down his frame as his face turned pink.

Rao's eyes shifted between Maldronigan and his daughter. "I don't get it."

"Defenestrate," Maldronigan said, "is a verb for the act of throwing something or someone out of a window."

"Oh," Rao said with a nod. "Dreadful."

"Quite." Maldronigan snorted, performing his most indelicate act in a week, and composed himself. "My liege, we should not dismiss the notion that the Hazaranthis' act of sending an emissary under the guise of negotiating peace may very well be a supposititious offer at compromise. We must not let them catch us with our proverbial pants at our ankles."

Rao, with a fish bun pinched between his eating sticks, stopped halfway from the bowl to his mouth. He was certain that if Maldronigan had spoken that last line in any other language he understood, it still would have made no sense.

Dria chewed a fish bun and swallowed. "He means that the Hazaranthis will tell us they wish to end this war, when they really only want to catch us off guard when they invade."

"Is this true?" Rao asked.

"I would not put it past them," said Maldronigan. "And as an aside, I dare say that Your Majesty's daughter is both smart and beautiful."

"Thank you, chancellor," said Dria, "but I've had enough compliments for today."

"As you wish." He finished the fish bun and wiped his lips.

The attendant refreshed his plate and napkin.

The courtyard doors swung open and the pair of servants reentered the garden. The two worked in diligent silence, pouring tea and setting down assorted dessert pastries.

Rao scooped up an apricot tart and ate it. "So if we are unsure as to the Hazaranthis' true intentions, what do you propose we do?"

Maldronigan pinched his cup between his thumb and forefinger, raised his pinky and took a dainty sip. As soon as he had set his glass down, his servant wiped the rim of his cup clean with the corner of a napkin, then readied a fresh napkin in case the chancellor cared to drink some more.

"In my humble opinion," Maldronigan said, "we should impress him with a feast of multiple courses and as much wine as he cares to imbibe. Food, drink, comfort, entertainment - quite simply the most vulgar and ostentatious display of sumptuousness as Your Majesty's people can muster."

"Surely such a reasoned suggestion has an equally weighty justification," said Dria.

"Why, of course. If our reservations about the Hazaranthis' presumed ulterior motives prove to be incorrect, then such a gesture as the one I propose

would only have salutary effects. The envoy will go home full, happy, and with nothing but wonderful things to report.”

He carved a tiny piece out of a marmalade tart with his dessert spoon.

“But,” he went on, “if the Hazaranthis do have a hidden agenda, then with enough wine and an extravagant meal, the emissary will certainly let something slip.”

“And in that case?” asked Rao.

Maldronigan patted his lips clean. “We kill him.”

THREE

"Altansayir preserve me," Kuril moped, wringing his claws as he paced the room. There was no purpose in his step as he plodded the same concentric track he had paced out for the past quarter hour. In that time, the dragon's claws had run the circuit from wringing to being stuffed in his pants pockets to pulling on his crest and back around again.

"All right, so I'm not this emissary person everyone thinks I am," said Marco, shrugging with his palms up. "I'm sure that Kerrigan will turn this boat around when we tell him there's been a mix-up."

Kuril stopped pacing. "He has no discretion to do that."

"He has to."

"He won't."

Marco scowled. "No one obstructs Lord Amadis Eric's mail. When His Highness finds out, he will dispatch his lancers. You'll see. Before long, he'll be bearing down on us with his army of fifty..."

Marco paused, saw no harm in inflating the numbers a bit.

"Five..." he went on.

Kuril crossed his arms.

"Hundred..." Marco ventured. "Thousand?"

"Really?" Kuril asked, cocking his head to one side. "Lord Eric's glorious army of fifty-five hundred-thousand cavalymen?"

Kuril lowered his tone to a growl. "Do you take me for a fool? I know you're from Quirantes. I also know that there aren't even fifty-five hundred gnats in all of Quirantes, let alone horses."

Marco's face flushed. "I'm under orders from Lord Eric. We have to turn around."

"And I'm under orders from Emperor Rao. And we can't turn around."

"Lord Eric will have you in the stockade for this."

"And you'll be drinking seawater at the bottom of Damicyan Bay."

Marco rocked back and swallowed hard.

Shaking his head, Kuril hissed frustration out through clenched teeth. "You've botched everything!" he shouted. "When the Hazaranthis learn of this foolishness, they'll withdraw all offers."

"Don't blame me for this," Marco said. "If anyone's to blame, it's that fool Alexis for mistaking me for someone else."

Kuril's upper lip twitched, baring his incisors. Faced with this, Marco knew better than to press the issue.

The tension in Kuril's face broke. He grimaced, crinkling the scale folds that age and worry had drawn under his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Kuril said. "We hit it off poorly. I don't even know your name."
"Marco."

"Marco," Kuril repeated. "Right, well, if both our species are to have any hopes of co-existing peacefully, then they'd better start somewhere. And if we both are to have any hopes of existing at all, we'll need to work together."

Marco crossed his arms. "What do you mean?"

"Someone's going to have to meet with the emperor, regardless of whether he's the real emissary or not."

"You're not serious?" Marco half said, half asked. "I'll do no such thing. I'm needed in Avignary."

Kuril shook his head.

"This can't be." Marco's voice was shrill with disbelief. "When Eric finds out I failed to deliver his mail, he'll fire me for sure."

"I'm trying to avert a war here," Kuril spoke over him. "Are you saying your job is more important than the lives of thousands?"

Marco took a pause before answering. "I get retirement pay if I serve until I'm fifty."

"Then if you want to live to fifty, I suggest you reconsider."

A twinge of fear spurred Marco's heart to gallop. His eyes flew to the knife on Kuril's belt, then back up to meet the dragon's gaze.

"There's no way around it," Kuril said. "The emperor, fair as he is, is stern. Either you do it, or he'll have us killed."

Palms up, Marco shrugged. "I don't know the first thing about diplomacy."

"You'll have to learn. Sit tight a moment."

Kuril left the room and returned with a thick tome hugged to his chest.

"And that is?" Marco asked.

"This," he said, dropping the book on the desk, "is your first lesson."

Disgust churned in the pit of Marco's stomach as he eyed the monolithic book. It was an old tome, and looked as though it had not been opened in a long while. Turning it to its title page released a puff of trapped air that reeked of vellum and conceit.

On the title page was printed:

A Treatise In Which It Is Discussed In Effusive Detail The Proper Dining Etiquette For Ingenious Learned And High-Stationed Lords And Ladies Seeking To Outdo The Dining Etiquette Of Other Learned And High-Stationed Lords And Ladies.

Below the title, in larger letters than the book's title itself, was printed the name of the author of this scholarly treatise.

His Munificent, Enlightened, Gods-favored and Most Exalted Excellency Dark Bishop Monsignor Maldronigan Ebizpo, direct lineal descendant of the pure and noble blood of the House of Ebizpo, a most excellent and ancient freehold in the Parish of Lielianixu, in the Luminous and Free Republic of Manocombia.

By *Kandensa*, Marco thought. A *Manocombian* wrote this. The whiff of arrogance from opening the book should have been forewarning enough. He committed the name to memory and vowed to spit on it when he reached dry land.

"You expect me to read all this?" he asked.

"Yes, and quickly, because when you're done I'll have to show you the finer points."

"There's no way this will work," said Marco, shoving the book away. "Do you really think your emperor is that gullible?"

"Well, no, certainly not," Kuril said, wringing his claws. "But I think this is as good a plan as any, especially considering we've no alternatives. Besides, the emperor has never met anyone from Hazaranth, and so he wouldn't know enough to think you weren't the emissary."

Marco breathed hard out his nostrils. "We're dead."

Wincing, Kuril nodded he was in agreement.

END OF SAMPLE

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R.A.G.E.: Roleplay Adventure Gaming Engine

By: Antonio Simon, Jr.

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Forgotten Spaces: Poetry For A Pensive Mood

By: Steven M. Fonts, R. Perez de Pereda, & Antonio Simon, Jr.

These twenty-five poems explore the dark paths on our walks through life: addiction, bereavement, solitude. These are the forgotten spaces, blighted areas we pretend don't exist. Everybody's got one. Tread lightly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Antonio Simon, Jr. is an award-winning author of several books. His debut fantasy/comedy adventure novel, "The Gullwing Odyssey" was an instant hit in 2013. He has won the prestigious Royal Palm Literary Award; the Pacific Book Award; Indie Book of the Day; and the Reader's Favorite Five-Star seal.

Antonio's interests are as varied as his literary repertoire. He is a local historian and has written "Miami Is Missing," which delves into the hidden history of the Magic City, with all its glitz and scandal. His public appearances on Miami's history never fail to enlighten and entertain. He is also an avid tabletop gamer and the author of "R.A.G.E.: Roleplay Adventure Gaming Engine," a fun, innovative, and original roleplaying game system.

Mr. Simon holds a law degree from Saint Thomas University School of Law and two undergraduate degrees (Political Science and History) from the University of Miami.

He lives in Miami, Florida.

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