



Farilane

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

WORKS BY MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

THE RISE AND THE FALL

Nolyn • Farilane

Esrahaddon (Summer 2023)

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*This book is dedicated to my amazing readers
who have made all things possible.
I'll keep writing and hopefully you'll keep reading!*



Farilane

BOOK TWO OF
The Rise and Fall

MICHAEL J. SULLIVAN

CHAPTER ONE

The Twelfth Night

Another series of bright-white explosions erupted where sea met shore as Farilane stood on the rocky coast and scanned the darkening sky for the star that would guide them to the treasure. That was the hope. Being that this was the twelfth night she'd stood at the same spot, Fairlane had her doubts.

On the first three evenings, it had rained. The next two, while dry, were frustratingly overcast. The sixth day dawned blue, but by late afternoon, clouds had returned as if they'd forgotten something. Poor weather continued throughout the seventh and eighth days. The three after that were literal washouts, forcing her to retreat to the field camp or be rinsed into the sea. Trapped in her leaky tent, Farilane had reread her notebooks, verifying the calculations for the hundredth time. She'd missed nothing. That shelf of stone partway down a rocky cliff was the correct place. Everything but the weather was perfect, but time was running out. She couldn't bear to wait another year. Then on the twelfth night, she caught a break.

A star appeared.

"Is that it?" Kolby asked, pointing at the singular pinprick of light on the darkening horizon. There was hope in his voice.

"Tell you in a minute." Farilane took out her astrolabe and positioned it directly over the staff she'd placed days before. She struggled to align the rule with one hand while dangling the delicate instrument with the other. "Be a dear and hold this for me, will you?" She offered the ring at the top of the disk to him.

Kolby took the brass apparatus of moveable plates with his left hand. Farilane knew he'd use his left before she had offered the instrument. His choice wasn't arbitrary; nothing about Kolby ever was. He always reserved his right hand for his sword.

“What is this thing?” he asked, his eyes studying the device, his nose turned up as if the metal reeked.

“You’re holding the entire universe in your hands.” She smiled. “So don’t drop it.”

Kolby narrowed his eyes, first at her and then at the device, concern turned to skepticism. He held the large ring at the full extent of his arm so that the bottom barely touched the top of the measurement staff, leaving the disk to hang like a lantern.

A lantern. Farilane smiled at the idea. Yes, that’s exactly what it is, a tool to illuminate the world.

“Now hold still,” she commanded.

“How still?” he asked.

Typical Kolby: precise, exacting, and literal: a by-product of the training, no doubt. All Teshlors were that way to a degree—more than a bit inhuman, until you saw them drunk or angry. That didn’t happen often. She suspected controlling one’s rage was also part of the training—if it wasn’t, it ought to be. An enraged Kolby topped Farilane’s list of scariest things she’d ever seen.

“Like you’re about to loose an arrow for a very important shot, one you can’t afford to miss.”

Kolby nodded, took a deep breath, then held it. The astrolabe hung from his fist as if nailed to a tree.

Farilane resumed lining up the rule with the star. As she did, Virgil stirred. The philosopher woke with an unhappy moan. Snow-white hair, long beard, and a dark cloak flew about him like living things. He got to his feet and wiped his eyes. After stretching his arms and neck, a grimace relented to the demands of a wide yawn. He had been napping on the cold rock for the last two hours.

How can he sleep on the eve of such an auspicious discovery, not to mention such a narrow ledge?

The old philosopher was such a sound sleeper that he could doze on the back of a cow caught in a stampeded during a thunderstorm. He’d always been that way and got better at it with age. “Well?” he asked.

“Give me a second,” Farilane said. She rotated the rete to the proper position, realigned the rule with the star, then read the face of the disk. “That’s the Eye of the Bear, the brightest star in the constellation Grin the Brown—first evening star in spring.”

“Are you done? Can I move now?” Kolby asked.

“No. Keep holding that bow steady, soldier.” Farilane offered him a grin, then moved around to the other side and peered through the same sight holes on the rule. “There!” she yelled, pointing down near the foaming water at a dark gap in the honeycombed cliff.

“What’s she pointing at?” Kolby asked Cedric, a note of concern in his voice. The younger soldier instantly advanced, and after taking a look, he shrugged.

Farilane had nearly forgotten Cedric was with them. Although physically larger than Kolby, he seemed smaller. She attributed this conflicting phenomenon to personality. Kolby had a presence, but Farilane couldn’t remember having heard Cedric speak. She supposed he might be mute but felt it would be impolite to ask. “Relax,” she told the pair. “We aren’t in any danger of being attacked.”

“You always say that,” Kolby grumbled.

“What are you worried about?” She looked up at the rapidly fading, orange-cast sky where a handful of seabirds soared. “Man-eating seagulls?”

“Goblins,” Virgil said. “They didn’t name this the Goblin Sea because it’s shaped like one.”

“The Ba Ran are seafarers,” Farilane pointed out. “We’d see their ships if any were near.”

“Not necessarily,” Virgil added. “This area is littered with coves and caves. They could hide their vessels in any of them. That happens all the time. Haven’t you heard about that poor little village of Tur? It’s been ravaged over and over.”

“That’s all the way down on the southern tip of Belgreig, and it isn’t goblins raiding that coast. It’s pirates.”

“Perhaps, but let’s not forget that a thousand years ago, *goblins* came from out here and used a network of underground waterways to attack Percepliquis and kill Emperor Nyphron.”

“That’s only one theory,” Farilane qualified. “We both know there are several contradictory accounts of the first emperor’s death. And for the record, he died one thousand twenty-nine years, eleven months, and two weeks ago.”

They all stared at her as if she’d belched.

“How many hours?” Virgil asked and then chuckled.

Confused as to why Virgil was laughing, she replied, “Sixteen and a half.” She glanced at the astrolabe. “Give or take a minute or two.”

Virgil stopped laughing and all of them stared at her, dumbfounded.

“What?” she asked. “How precise do you need me to be?”

His expression changed from amusement to shock. “Ah no. That’s . . . that’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Or would you prefer to discuss the ramifications of the Belgic War for a few hours before getting back to why I practically screamed *there!* twenty minutes ago?”

No one said anything.

“Good. Because I was pointing out the cave entrance we’re looking for. I found it. It’s that one down below us.” She took the astrolabe back from Kolby and carefully stowed it in her pack. “Shall we, gentlemen?”

“You can’t be serious,” Virgil said. “It’s nearly night. Now that we know which hole to explore, can’t this wait until morning?”

Farilane pointed at a hazy gray curtain of rain sweeping across the Goblin Sea. “Wind is blowing our way. The last storm trapped us for days, and we’re running low on food. Besides, all these crevasses look the same, and if we come back in the morning, I doubt I’ll be able to identify the right one.”

The old man frowned as he looked down the slick jagged face of the cliff. “Allow me to rephrase. You don’t expect *me* to climb down over slippery stone in the *dark*, do you?”

“Why not?”

The old man replied with a dangling jaw. “I’m not a limber young woman. I’m sixty-eight years old, and even in my prime no one would have described me as athletic.” He took a step forward for a better look, then grimaced. “One slip and your man-eating seagulls will be pecking flesh off my shattered bones.”

“Virgil,” she began, placing her hands on his shoulders, “life is a gamble, my friend. The trick is to wager wisely, balancing risk against reward. At your age, nothing is too perilous. Working for a wedge of cheese at a leper colony wouldn’t be out of the question. And the reward waiting in that cave is so much better than a bit a cheese.”

“You can’t know that. The book you’re searching for has been intentionally hidden for centuries. I have to think there’s a reason. Perhaps you should reconsider the implications of unleashing such a thing upon the world.”

“I seek the truth, and the truth is always a good and noble goal.”

“Is it?”

“Yes.” She nodded sharply. “For example, earlier you said you were not a limber *young woman*. This was meant to suggest the contrast between the two of us. But Cedric might interpret the comment to verify the all too vocal and false rumor that the imperial family is human. It’s

possible Cedric could repeat the comment, erroneously describing me to his friends as *a young woman*, and thus further the misconception. If repeated enough times, that inaccuracy could be believed by millions. So what began as an innocent joke between friends might become a distorted reality for future generations." She hoisted her pack onto her shoulder and turned to the younger knight. "For the record, I'm old enough to be Virgil's great-great-great grandmother, and I'm not a *woman*."

Cedric eyed the princess suspiciously.

Farilane frowned as she considered the myriad of things the young knight could be thinking. "What I meant is that I'm only *part* human. My father is descended from Nyphron who was elven—or Fhrey as they used to call themselves." She paused to calculate. "Since all the emperors except Nolyn took human wives—and because both Nolyn and his wife, Sephryn, were half-elven, which resulted in no bloodline dilution—that makes me only one thirty-second elven. Arguably, I am more human than elf, but it's still not technically accurate to call me as *a woman*."

"It's truly a wonder that you aren't married yet." Virgil shook his head. "You knew what I meant."

"I did. He didn't. Facts are important. They are the notches we cut in trees as we explore reality—lose them and we might never find our way."

The old man shook his head. "The point I was making is that I can't climb as easily as the three of you can."

"What do you want from me, Virgil?" Farilane slapped her sides. "The knights aren't allowed to abandon me even to assist my tutor, and you can't climb back up the rope by yourself. I can't leave you here on the side of this cliff. You'd fall asleep, roll off, and die. Either we climb down now, or give up, and I'm not willing to quit—not after so many decades of searching—not when we're this close." She took a breath then added, "Look, it will be okay. I promise, and when we get back to camp, I'll give you some pie."

"Oh really? Pie? Well, that's a completely different argument, now isn't it?" Virgil peered below at the violent war being waged between sea and coast. "And you're right," he sighed. "I'm not risking much, am I?"



Kolby found the nearest thing to a path and led them down in single file over algae-and-lichen-covered rocks to the mouth of the cave. The sea continued to battle the cliff. Waves churned and exploded in geysers, each accompanied by an impressive *Boom!* Blasted by the constant ocean wind and drenched by the salty spray, the four shivered with the cold. Farilane pulled tight the front of her cloak and drew up the saturated hood. She attempted to wipe her face with a sleeve, only to discover it, too, was soaked.

Kolby and Cedric entered the sea-slicked cave first. The younger man paused just inside and dropped his pack next to a small tidal pool. He drew forth one of three lanterns and set to lighting it as evening faded into night.

“All the caves on this coast are reputed to be haunted, did you know that?” Virgil asked while struggling to keep up. “People in the village said so.”

“Every town has ghost stories.” Farilane adjusted her pack, which had been cutting into her neck. Satisfied that the strap was in a better place, at least for the time being, she gave a glance back at Virgil. “And since when do you believe in ghosts?”

“Always have.”

Farilane smirked to no effect. The man was going blind and likely couldn’t see her face beneath the hood. “Next you’ll be telling me you believe in the gods.”

“I *do*.”

“Really?” she scoffed.

“We’ve discussed this on many occasions!”

Farilane frowned. “I’d hoped you were just going through a phase. I mean, how can you still believe in deities? You’re the most educated man I know.”

Virgil shook salt water off his cloak. “The more we know, my dear, the more we understand how little we understand.”

“Sounds like you’re stuttering in whole words.” She smirked again only to remember he still couldn’t see her expression.

“No one knows everything, and you could benefit from listening to me once in a while.”

“Ah-huh. Okay, old wise one, tell me this, do gods grant wishes to their faithful?”

Virgil considered this a moment, then shook his head. “Not usually, no.”

“Then what’s the point of having them?”

“Wishes or gods?”

She smiled. “Cute. Gods, of course.”

“That’s like asking what’s the point of air, trees, or rain. You can’t—”

Farilane used her fingers to tick off each of the three in order. “To breathe, for lumber and fuel, to drink.”

“Okay, bad examples.”

“Not at all. They illustrate my assertion perfectly. Everything has a purpose, except the gods. So why have them?”

“But we don’t *have them* they exist by their own right.”

“Oh really? Can you name a single person who has seen a god?”

“There are several stories where—”

“Those are myths. The question is, have *you*, or anyone you’ve personally met, encountered a god?”

“No, but—”

“Neither have I, and I’m nearly two hundred years old and have a social circle that includes people who have lived to be more than a thousand. Tell me, Virgil, have you ever seen a tree being blown around in a rainstorm? Of course you have, everyone has. Air, trees, rain, all accounted for, but the gods—well, they never seem to show up, do they? Strange, don’t you think? Given how vain they’re reported to be, you’d expect them to pop up all the time to demand praise, propagate fear, or inspire awe. Instead . . . nothing. If you got rid of all the people, the trees, rain, and air will still be here. But the gods? Could it be because we invented the whole lot, and they only exist in stories?”

“Such an insane notion could only be conceived by you.”

“Yeah, well, we both know I’m odd. So tell me, Virgil—oh believer in all things divine—which member of the grand pantheon managed to provide the crucial bit of evidence that kept you faithful? Are you a follower of Eton the god of the sky? Eraphus the god of the sea? He’d be really handy right now, don’t you think? Or is it Arkum that bright fellow who supposedly rides a chariot overhead each day then takes a nap before doing the same thing the next morning and oddly never tires of the routine? Or are you devoted to that stodgy old elven relic, Ferrol, who is still somehow the official imperial god. Oh wait—no—don’t tell me you’re a convert to the new cult, the one that insists Nyphron was a god, or is it a demigod? I always forget.”

“You’re being purposely obtuse just to annoy me.”

“Of course I am.”

“Why?”

“It’s fun. Where is your sense of humor?” She threw back her hood this time to reveal a grin. “You know how easily I get bored. You just have the misfortune of being around when it happens.”

Virgil shook his head. “Kolby is always with you, too. You never speak to him like this.”

Farilane glanced at the two men who worked single-mindedly to light the lantern. “Oh he’d just smile and nod. There’s no fun in that.” She inched closer to the philosopher and whispered, “Besides, if he actually comprehended my supposition, Kolby would kill me.”

Virgil raised both eyebrows. “The man is sworn to protect you with his life.”

“His oath to a distant emperor and an ancient creed is hardly a shield against momentary rage coupled with a razor-sharp sword. The man is a walking death trap. A vicious lion held by a string leash.”

“You don’t honestly believe Kolby would ever hurt you?”

Farilane shook her head. “Of course not.”

“But then why did you—”

“Oh please!” Farilane threw up her hands. “You *really* don’t understand the meaning of the word *fun*, do you?” Once more she grinned, and Virgil sighed as if a noisy expulsion of air was a remarkably convincing argument.

Virgil folded his arms, locking them in a show of frustration. “We’re on the outskirts of the empire, beyond the civilized world, and literally at land’s end venturing into a complicated labyrinth of sea-soaked tunnels as night falls. I’m cold, wet, and quite frankly, more than a little frightened. We have no idea what lies ahead. Could be anything. This is incredibly dangerous—no joke. Anyone who went to such great lengths to hide a book down here didn’t want it found. They likely took precautions to protect their treasure. Every step we take is a risk.”

“Oh . . .” Farilane softened her posture. “I apologize and stand corrected. You *do* know the meaning of fun.”

The lantern caught fire, and the glow illuminated a natural tunnel that twisted and turned.

“I’ll take that.” Farilane stepped forward and reached for the light.

Kolby snatched it away. “I’m going first.” Then he dutifully added, “Your Highness.”

Farilane frowned. “I could order you to stay here, you know?”

“Think that would do it, do you?”

Farilane looked to Virgil.

“Kolby Fiske!” the philosopher snapped in a reprimanding tone that was designed to quash the self-confidence of pride-filled students. “You’re honor-bound to obey her.”

“Sort of,” Kolby replied.

“Come again? What do you mean by *sort of*?”

Kolby shrugged. “We serve to protect the emperor and his family—even *from* the emperor and his family. It’s part of our code.”

Virgil eyed the knight with the precision of a cat prior to a pounce. The philosopher knew the Knight’s Creed as well as anyone, and he was a skilled orator who had used rhetoric to win debates in the Imperial Council. “Where exactly is that written?”

Kolby grinned. “In the section that says: ‘Don’t be an idiot.’”

Farilane snickered. And when she saw Virgil’s appalled expression, she laughed harder.

“The two of you . . .” Virgil huffed and shook his head. “It’s like being trapped with children, and I’m tired of being the only adult.”

“I’m sorry,” Farilane said, and she took the philosopher’s hands in hers. “But you’re just so good at it. You have that whole frowny-face thing going for you, and that marvelous sigh, which really lets me know how disappointed you are with my behavior.”

“Yet it does no good, now does it? We were almost crushed to death by that giant near Fairington and nearly drowned in the headwaters of the Urum River. Then there was the . . . *Dwarf Incident* in Haston five years ago. Don’t think I’ve forgotten. Believe me, I’ve tried. I still have nightmares. And I don’t know how we escaped without starting a war.”

“Would have been a really short war,” Cedric muttered.

They all paused and looked at the man. Then the joke landed. Not the cleverest of jests but given how little he’d said up to that point, it made even Virgil laugh. “We have *two* comedians now, I see.”

Farilane and Kolby looked at each other, puzzled and a little disappointed.

“All right—three,” Virgil relented. “You’re all clowns. Does that make you feel better?”

Farilane nodded. “Much. Now shall we proceed?”

“I’m still getting pie, aren’t?”

“We didn’t bring any, Virgil. The pie is a lie. You know that, right?”

The philosopher sighed but nodded. “Then by all means lead us to our deaths.”

Farilane turned to Kolby and made a welcoming gesture toward the tunnel as if the cave were her home. "After you, light-bearer."

The knight held the lantern as if it were an astrolabe and began the descent. Cedric followed at the rear. The route was uncomfortably tight at first, and the knights struggled to squeeze armor-plated shoulders through the narrow space. Certain noises were painful to Farilane's ears, and metal scraping stone was near the top of her list. The tunnel widened but never allowed for more than a single file march. They hadn't gone far when Kolby stopped. "That's not good."

"What's wrong?" Farilane asked. She couldn't see past him. His silhouette outlined in the glow of the lantern filled the tunnel, but she heard a constant rushing sound, a roar of water that echoed loud enough to suggest the corridor had opened considerably.

"See for yourself." He stepped aside, granting her access while holding the lantern higher. The tunnel stopped at the edge of a cliff—a massive vertical shaft with no visible ceiling or floor. A waterfall spilled from high above, its spray illuminated by the lantern. "Passage ends here."

"No it doesn't." Farilane pointed across the chasm. "The tunnel continues on the far side."

"You can see a far side?"

"Yes. About thirty feet, maybe less. What I can't make out is any way to cross."

"Might not be any," Virgil said. "There may have once been a bridge, which time and that waterfall destroyed. Or perhaps the means of access was intentionally removed."

Farilane shook her head. "I don't think so. There's no sign of erosion and while the book has been buried to keep it safe for future generations, they would have had a means to retrieve it." Farilane looked up at the waterfall that issued from darkness and plummeted to more of the same. There was a bottom. She couldn't see it but heard the splash from far below. "Why do you suppose that waterfall is here?" she asked.

"Because water has to go somewhere? And usually that direction is down."

"But why here?"

"You know, Your Highness, sometimes there isn't a reason." Virgil leaned on the stone wall of the tunnel and took off one of his sandals. "You need to accept that some things just are. The gods are. That waterfall is. The world doesn't manifest itself merely for your entertainment."

"And yet that hasn't been my experience."

Virgil rubbed the heel of his bare foot. "Growing up in a palace could have something to do with that."

"Don't confuse me with my brother. He's the one who wears silk pajamas and has a gold crown waiting. I'm . . . well . . ." She gestured at her skirt and leather tunic. Except for the dragon pendant in the center of her chest, she looked like a youthful legion scout on his first deployment. "Let's just say the sun doesn't shine on my ass because I want it to."

She caught Kolby and Cedric smiling and wondered why. They might see her as the quintessential spoiled brat who got whatever she wished, but the pair of grins could have been an expression of solidarity. She hoped for the later but cautioned herself against seeing only what she wanted. Farilane spent more time in their company than her brother's, and while a princess, she felt more at home with the knights than the imperial family.

No one spoke after that, which returned her attention to the sound of falling water. "Why *is* that waterfall here?" Farilane looked at each of them. She didn't expect an answer. It wasn't a real question, at least not for them. This was merely her process, the way she solved puzzles. She addressed the riddle and waited for it to answer. In this case, the waterfall was being pig-headed, refusing to give any clues. "No, I'm certain that waterfall doesn't just *happen* to be here."

Kolby reached out his free hand, wetted his fingers, and tasted. "Fresh."

"Wonderful," Virgil said. "Good to know we won't die of thirst. One less item on the lengthy list of potential causes of our demise."

"Hmm," Cedric uttered. Unlike the others, he wasn't looking into the shaft but rather at the floor beneath their feet. This caused each of them to do likewise.

"Hmm indeed," Farilane agreed. "Kolby, if I promise not to jump into the abyss, can I borrow the lantern?"

He held it out to her. The princess backed away from the edge, bent over, and examined the floor.

"Writing?" Virgil asked.

"Looks like it." Farilane set the lantern down and brushed aside dust and dirt until the engraved markings were clearly visible.

"Can you read it?"

Farilane exhaled a disapproving puff of air. "So you found your sense of humor after all. Was it lost at the bottom of your pack or something?" Farilane held up the lantern to get a better view. "But by the name of God will you enter here."

“How wonderful,” Virgil said, delighted. “It is so rare for irony to be on my side.”

The princess set the lantern on the floor once more. “This doesn’t mean gods exist, merely that another person has been equally duped.”

“And yet what is existence, but that which we believe it to be.”

Farilane scrubbed her palms together to clean off the dirt. “I’m astounded that *you* were appointed to be *my* teacher.”

“It may appear that I’ve been a poor tutor. After forty years, I wonder if you’ve learned anything from me, but is that the fault of the instructor or the student?”

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by Kolby shouting, “Ferrol!”

Turning, they saw him with hands cupped on either side of his mouth, yelling into the darkness. He looked surprised when nothing happened.

“He’s so cute,” the princess said to Virgil.

“What?” the knight asked. “God’s name is Ferrol.”

“You’re right,” Virgil told the princess. “He wouldn’t have comprehended the supposition.”

“I don’t understand,” Kolby said.

“Exactly,” the philosopher replied, and having rubbed life back into his heel, he put his sandal on.

Kolby frowned and hooked a thumb in his sword belt the way he usually did when annoyed. “Would you care to explain whatever it is I’m apparently missing?”

“Certainly,” Virgil said. “My role is to educate, after all, and since the princess refuses to allow me to improve her mind, I might as well help you. First, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of gods. Everybody has their favorite. Second, Ferrol is the elven god, and the people who built this vault were definitely not elven. They were, or are, what’s known as *monks*, a word derived from the elvish, *monakus*, meaning solitary. This is a bit of a misnomer as these men always dwell in groups. You saw one of their little habitats outside the village of Roche—that ruined stone building next to the domed temple. They call them *monasteries*, which also absurdly means *to live alone*.”

“Or *apart*,” the princess inserted. “The monks were outlawed by the empire during the reign of Nyphron for spreading subversive lies. They were driven into hiding in remote places like this. They were hunted, practically for sport.”

“Why?” Kolby asked.

“Nyphron didn’t like the monk’s habit of writing things down,” Virgil explained. “He sought to erase their slanderous lies by destroying their records,

hoping that memories would, in time, grow fuzzy and fade into non-existence. The monks countered by hiding their most important texts in secret vaults like this.”

“So we’re here to destroy this book you keep speaking about?” Kolby asked. Farilane shook her head. “No. We’re here to learn the truth.”

Virgil coughed most insincerely.

“My pedagogue disagrees,” Farilane said. “He is willing to accept the official imperial dogma just the way it is, all white-washed and tidy with no inconvenient questions like: If Persephone insisted on having the capitol built on the site of her childhood home, and Nyphron obliged her out of his intense love, why was Percepliquis built on the wrong side of the Urum and Bern rivers when every known record describes Dahl Rhen as being just south of the ruins of Alon Rhist, placing it in western Rhulynia?”

“A mapping error,” Virgil said.

“Not likely. Percepliquis is located in the imperial province of Rhenydd, which in clearly elvish for: *New Rhen*. Can’t have a *new* Rhen without an *old* Rhen, right? And do you honestly think Nyphron betrayed his own people—led a war against them—for the love of a woman who he’d just met?”

“As you already mentioned, there are many who believe Nyphron wasn’t an elf at all, and his real name was Novron. To some, he was purely human, or even a god, depending on who you talk to.”

Farilane’s brows rose. “Oh my! So the cultist *have* gotten to you, too?”

Virgil smiled, and a glint of mischief was in his eyes. “I thought you knew the meaning of *fun*.”

“Ha ha.” The princess pretended to laugh and added three slow claps of make-believe applause. “Isn’t it about time you stowed that sense of humor back in your pack?”

“So I still don’t understand,” Kolby said. “What did the monks call their god?”

“That’s easy.” Farilane bent down, and placing her face close to the floor, she blew what remained of the dirt and dust away from the markings.

BUT BY THE NAME OF GOD WILL YOU ENTER HERE

A quick check proved all the necessary letters were present. Placing her thumb on the M in the word *name*, she pressed. The stone on which the letter was engraved dropped slightly into the floor. Then she moved to the A and did the same.

“They’re levers of some sort,” Kolby said, then looked around for the effects of her actions, but nothing changed.

“Fifteen hundred years ago, or so,” Virgil spoke in his lecture-voice, “the early monks enjoyed a friendly relationship with the Belgic Kingdom. Those dwarfs likely showed them all manner of insidious mechanisms.”

Farilane depressed the R, then the I, then the B.

“I can’t read,” Cedric admitted as he studied Farilane’s movements. “What name is she using?”

“The monks believe the god of mankind is named *Maribor*,” Farilane said, as she finished by depressing O and the second R. “Maribor, Ferrol, and Drome—the three sons of Erebus, father of the gods.”

An instant later, they felt the ground shake. Not really a tremor, more of a short-lived jarring as if a massive hammer hit the floor. Nothing else happened.

For a long moment no one said a word. Heads turned side to side, all of them looking into the shadows beyond the lantern light.

Farilane stood up and bushed off her knees. “Something is different.”

“What?” Kolby asked.

“The waterfall. Don’t you hear it? The sound has changed. The tone of the splash is hollow.” The princess moved past Kolby to the edge and peered down. “The shaft is filling up.”

“Filling up?” both knights moved to the edge and looked down.

“Is that a good thing?” Virgil asked.

“If the water rises high enough, we can swim across,” Kolby said.

Virgil looked back up the narrow corridor. “And if it goes too high, we might drown.”

“Won’t need to swim,” Farilane announced. “There’s a bridge floating on the surface of the water.”

“There is?” Kolby held the lantern out over the drop. “I don’t see—oh, there it is.”

It took surprisingly little time for the shaft to fill and the bridge to appear, bobbing like a long dock.

“This corridor will fill up,” Virgil warned. He looked back.

Kolby looked concerned, first at the rising water and then at Farilane. He was calculating when he would need to grab her and run for it. The princess’s life was his responsibility, his sole concern. Kolby wouldn’t waste an instant on the survival of either Cedric or Virgil. When events crossed a certain line, no force on Elan would stay his actions.

The moment the bridge became level with the passage, Kolby took a step toward Farilane, then stopped after hearing a rapid series of snaps.

Virgil pointed at the writing on the floor. "The markings have popped up."

"The bridge is going back down!" Farilane shouted. Without hesitation, she ran out onto it.

"Damn it!" Kolby cursed. He handed over the lantern to Cedric. "Stay here in case we need you to punch that name in again."

Cedric shook his head. "Not a monk. Can't read. Can't spell."

"I can do it," Virgil said. "I'll stay with Cedric. Go with her!"

Farilane had leapt out as far as she could onto the bridge, guessing correctly that it was an unstable raft, and her weight—dumped too close to one side—might capsize the whole thing. Seeing the rate of decent, and the far passage rapidly rising beyond her reach, she scrambled through the cold shower of falling water until her weight began to tip the scale. The moment Kolby jumped onto the bridge his impact nearly catapulted the princess off. Only a fast drop to her knees and a quick grab of the planks saved her from a swim.

"Stop!" she shouted, holding a palm out toward Kolby as the knight worked his way toward her. "You'll tip us."

With his weight as a counterbalance, Farilane reached the opposite end. Whatever had corked the shaft and lifted the bridge had come unplugged and the drain far outmatched the inflow. Already the passage on the far side was more than five feet above the bridge. By the time she got there, the opening to the tunnel was too high to reach.

"Go back!" she shouted and waved at Kolby. "Use your weight to raise this end!"

"I need to come with you!"

"You can't! I need you to lift me! Do it! Do it now!"

With a frustrated growl, the knight shuffled backward. His weight, far more than hers, lifted Farilane's end until she could almost grab the ledge. "Jump!" she shouted over the rush of the falls crashing on the center of the bridge.

She didn't look to see if he heard her. Farilane turned her back on him, positioned herself on the edge of the bridge-raft, her toes hanging off the end like a diver on a board, knees bent, arms out. The bridge went down briefly, then lurched up.

Farilane jumped.

Fingers caught the ledge of the far passage. The wooden platform fell away, leaving the princess to dangle, legs swinging. Her body slammed against the rock wall as the bridge, Kolby, and the water, plummeted beneath her.

This probably wasn't a good idea.

She heard Kolby gasp and grunt as he dealt with what she imagined to be an unruly raft reacting poorly to her exit. He sounded disturbingly far away.

Fingers can't last! She mentally yelled at herself. Up! Climb! Up!

She got her chin on the ledge. Gritting her teeth, she used her jaw as a third hook, just enough to find an improved grip with her left hand.

"Farilane!" Kolby shouted, his voice a gasp from far away. "Are you all right?"

Can't talk right now—I'm hanging on by my chin!

Once she had her elbows up, life improved immensely. Pressing both down, she bent at the waist, lifting her hips and swinging a leg up. After that, she rolled on to her side and lay panting for air. Her heart raced and muscles burned.

"Princess!" This time it was Virgil.

"You're missing all the *fun*, Virgil," she shouted back.

"Oh, I'm certain of that. Are you okay?"

Farilane sat up. Looking across the chasm, she spotted the glow of Kolby's lantern. "Nothing broken, and I'm on the far side. Kolby, how are you?"

"I'm fine, but I'm at the bottom."

"We'll need to raise the water level again," Virgil said.

"Not yet. Hold on. Let me light a lamp."

Farilane pulled off her pack and took out her old clay pot. Working by feel, as she had many times before, she filled it with oil from the little bottle. Then stuffing the wick in, she made certain to drench it well. Finally, she fished around for her char cloth, flint, and striker that was shaped like a little flat metal dragon with a long, curved tail. A few good sparks, some deep breaths and solid blows, and Farilane had the lamp lit.

Ahead of her was more tunnel. Rough-hewn poorly chiseled rock displayed an impoverished work ethic by its narrowness. These monks got by with the least amount of effort, leaving her a tight passage and an easy decision. "Okay, everyone stay where you are," she shouted. "I'll be right back."

Virgil asked, "Where are you going?"

"I'm certain it's just ahead, and it looks perfectly safe."

All of this was a lie, but she felt going unaccompanied was for the best. If the choice had been hers, she would have taken the entire trip alone. But the Princess of House Nyphron was an imperial treasure too valuable to leave to her own devices. She had been forced to accept not just one but *two* Teshlors and Virgil—whom she could only guess was there to talk some sense into her. Farilane's greatest fear was the possibility of getting someone in her party killed.

Virgil had been correct in his evaluation that this venture was perilous. The ancient monks were clever beyond normal men. Armed with literature, they had a collective repository of information that stretched back thousands of years. Each monk possessed the intelligence of all those that had come before. They documented centuries of problems and the solutions that worked as well as those that didn't. Even the ancient elves couldn't rival their knowledge. So long as the monks had their books, they forgot nothing.

"I'm sure it'll only take a few minutes."

"That's what you said in Farington right before the giant attacked." Virgil shouted. "Just let me raise the bridge so Kolby can join you."

"You can't do that."

"Of course, I can. I'll just repeat what you did."

"This crossing was designed to be used by a team. In order for Kolby to get to me, Cedric would need to join him on the bridge, putting Cedric at the bottom. And since we need you to operate the controls to reverse the process, I don't think it's a good idea to leave you alone. What if those goblins who you're so afraid of, turn up to investigate the light of your lantern shining out of this cave? If something happens to you, the rest of us would be trapped."

No one replied. The only sound was that of the waterfall.

Farilane continued to shout, "I'm fine. Kolby's fine, and you're protected by Cedric. I'm just going to grab the book and come back. It can't be far. The monks of Maribor are human, not dwarven, so they couldn't have dug too deep. Just sit tight."

Everything she said made perfect sense, her logic impeccable, but still, she was worried.

"I've got this." She spoke too quietly for them to hear over the splash of the waterfall. That didn't matter. She'd said it mostly to herself.

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We hope you have enjoyed this sneak peek of *Farilane* which will be [launched via Kickstarter](#) on February 15, 2022. The book's retail release is scheduled for June 7, 2022. Backers of the Kickstarter will be able to read the story two months before it's available to the public at large.

About the Author

Michael J. Sullivan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post* bestselling author who has been nominated for nine Goodreads Choice Awards. His first novel, *The Crown Conspiracy*, was released by Aspirations Media Inc. in October 2008. From 2009 through 2010, he self-published the next five of the six books of The Riyria Revelations, which were later sold and re-released by Hachette Book Group's Orbit imprint as three two-book omnibus editions: *Theft of Swords*, *Rise of Empire*, *Heir of Novron*.

Michael's Riyria Chronicles series (a prequel to Riyria Revelations) has been both traditionally and self-published. The first two books were released by Orbit, and the next two by his own imprint, Riyria Enterprises. A fifth Riyria Chronicle, titled *Drumindor*, will be self-published in the near future.

For Penguin Random House's Del Rey imprint, Michael has published the first three books of The Legends of the First Empire: *Age of Myth*, *Age of Swords*, and *Age of War*. Grim Oak Press distributes the last three books of the series: *Age of Legend*, *Age of Death*, and *Age of Empyre*. Michael is now editing the remaining two books of The Rise and Fall trilogy. These books are set in his fictional world of Elan and cover the historical period after the Legends of the First Empire and before the Riyria Chronicles.

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