

Prologue

The law was explicit: the Sapphirian throne could not be held by a king or queen younger than eighteen unless his or her birthday was more than three months into the year, in which case ascension was allowed with the dawn of the new year just prior their eighteenth birthday. That was how it had been before the civil war three generations ago, and that was one of the many traditions of the old royal family that had carried over to the newer one.

To that end, as he withered under the terrible force of an incurable illness, Sapphiria's beloved king Michael Sebastian Ransenholgen appointed two regents to watch over his kingdom while his only daughter Helen matured. Until the year she turned the required age, she could not ascend to the throne. Therefore, guardianship of the land was transferred to Michael's sister Cecilia and her husband Horatio as regents for the seven years it would take.

In addition, Michael privately assigned his court mage and Captain of the Royal Guard to watch over and protect Helen with their lives if necessary. He trusted these two men, some of his deepest friends, having no political interest and being outside the royal family, to not abuse their newfound roles.

Helen knew very little of her future kingdom's situation during that time. She was focused on everything a young princess would be: her royal and non-royal friends allowed to visit her in Castle Sapphirina, ambassadors from the neighboring kingdoms bringing news of their exotic foreign lands, and, of course, schoolwork. If most people in Sapphiria were required to learn their numbers and know how to read and write, she was doubly so, and she spent most of her waking hours learning all the things necessary for her to be a kind and knowledgeable leader as well as a skilled and respectful diplomat.

There was but one exception to her learning, and that was how to command an army and navy. It wasn't that she didn't want to learn, but rather that she had never found the opportunity nor time to do so. It would be alright, she figured. She could learn when she ascended, and then the knowledge would be fresh when it was useful. Not that it could be helped anyway, since Sapphiria's military and espionage network could only report to her after she ascended to the throne thanks to the Regency Code.

She was initially expected to be crowned with the dawn of the new year, but her regents used an obscure written but usually disregarded rule in the Regency Code that, under the assumption that she still remained too immature, impulsive, and emotional to properly hold the throne at the new year, moved her coronation to her birthday which was at the cusp of summer. And so she waited impatiently for six more months.

Finally, three weeks before her ascension, the castle sprang into action, putting into motion plans that had been made years ago and languished, unable to be used, for months beyond their expected date. The city became decorated and festive, the

anticipation growing infectious and spreading through Sapphiria and its Corundum Islands and to its neighboring kingdoms: Diamondia, Zirconia, Peridan, Amazon, the Citrine Isles, and the Emerald Empire and its various satellites.

The Navy returned to anchor, ready to sail a naval parade under the guidance of its flagship's signals. And the Army, at least a large portion of it, paused in its leave rotation to prepare the traditional extravagant army parade going from the Temple of the Divine where the ceremony would take place to the docks at the naval yard where the newly crowned queen would board a boat to take her to her flagship for the Navy's part of the parade. The Army also prepared for the evening ceremony where she would light the fires of the Lighthouse Tower with her magic, turning its orange flames to a brilliant sapphire blue in celebration and recognition of her authority and rule.

Security around the castle increased substantially, and the kingdom's counterespionage network worked nonstop to look for threats in the city. If someone wanted to come close to their coming queen, there would be more than enough layers of protection to keep her safe. There were cracks in the watch, of course, but these were minimized to the best of her guards' and spies' abilities. Newcomers by sea were subject to inspection by harbor galleys before being allowed to dock. Visitors by land had to go through similar checkpoints at the city gates. By the eve of the ceremony, the city was secure of threats as best as its people could make it.

After seven years of waiting, on the fourth day of summer in the year 1563 of the Mages' Era, the daughter of Sapphiria's beloved king was finally allowed to take her place and fill the seat of her kingdom's long-empty throne.

Chapter 1

The young woman adjusted the blue shoulder straps of her dress for the hundredth time and took a deep breath to forcibly calm herself. She fiddled with her sapphire earrings again, then threw her hand back down as she caught herself. This wasn't the big moment, not yet. That was tomorrow. Today was just the rehearsal.

She let her eyes wander for a moment more. This was the Sapphirina Temple of the Divine, the greatest and largest temple in the world to the Four Divines: Natalia the Wild, Maria the Peaceful, Nickholous the Warrior, and Sam-Hwell the Righteous. Midmorning sunlight streamed through stained glass windows and the open-air pillars that held up the highest dome, and a thin haze of smoke rose from the night's candles and incense to waft up and out of the building. The white marble of the walls and pillars felt solid and imposing, putting her in her place as it should. She was but an insignificant speck compared to the Divines.

Her silky jet-black hair flowed freely over her dress a foot or so past her bronze shoulders, just the way she liked it, and her blue-green eyes darted back and forth as she scanned the temple for the others participating in the rehearsal. When she saw Sir Robert Soulgenheimer, her court mage, she relaxed, knowing he would keep her out of trouble. He wasn't her blood relative, but she still called him "Uncle Robert" out of habit.

From her position at the edge of the foyer, she could see two portraits hanging at the far wall of the temple by the altar: one of her mother, and one of her father. Her mother wore a flowery teal dress that coaxed the bronze of her Peridani skin into the light, while her father was dressed in his general's uniform, a dark blue coat and pants with gold highlights and cuffs and a trimmed brown beard across his chin. Although neither could be here in person, these portraits would carry their presence in spirit.

She glanced at Robert and saw him beckoning her forward. She took a few tentative steps and stopped at the rearmost pew in the main hall. That much she knew by rote. She wouldn't advance down the aisle until the music played. She took the opportunity to straighten her posture again and clasped her hands together in front of her.

"Song of the Sapphire" rang off the temple walls, startling her with the intense opening notes of Sapphiria's anthem. No matter how many times she heard them, they always made her jump. Maybe she could change that once she was Queen, but for now she had to deal with it.

She slowly stepped forward on the fifth major beat of the drums, remembering the task at hand. Each step hit the floor on the minor beats with every fifth step being punctuated by a major beat. She felt her insides turn to jelly with each beat but didn't lose her balance, and eventually she reached the altar where Sir Robert waited with High Priestess Sarah Willowford, Captain James Frederick of the Royal Guard, and two soldiers. When she stopped, a flick of Sarah's eyes sent the musicians here for the rehearsal into a side room as the song ended.

"Princess Helen Ariel Ransenholgen," Sarah began with a voice as smooth as silk that carried through the temple with ease, "for what purpose have you entered this holy site, the Temple of the Divine?"

Helen gulped as her gut butterflies took control. "Uh..." she stammered. "I... I..."

"I wish," Sir Robert prompted.

"I-I wish to... to serve... my people... and my land... to the fullest extent... of my ability," Helen stumbled through the rest of the line. "A-and I request... the blessings... of the Divine... to aid me... and to guide me... in my rule."

"Do not fret, Princess," Sarah said. Her sapphire-blue eyes beamed with kindness. "This is why we practice." Her eyes darted to the men beside her. "Captain, Sir Robert, we must act quickly if what you say is true. Will you bear witness before the Divine to what I am about to do?"

"Yes, Priestess," Robert replied.

"It is my duty," James said as he bowed respectfully low.

Helen glanced around and frowned. That wasn't in the script.

Sarah produced a small crown from the altar behind her, and Helen instinctively curtsied with her eyes low and her head still. Helen felt the ends of the crown work their way into her hair and then Sarah's hand as the priestess made adjusted its fit as necessary.

"Through the way of my hand, may the blessings of the Divine shine upon you," Sarah said. Her voice became echoey and powerful. "May Natalia's Wild bring you prosperity. May Maria's Peace find the hearts of your children. May Nickholous defend you and lead your protectors into battle. May Sam-Hwell bestow justice upon your land. And may you find the strength and the humility to call upon the Divine when you find yourself unequipped and unknowing. Rise, Helen Ariel Ransenholgen, as Queen of Sapphiria."

Helen slowly stood straight and tall, straightening her knees as she looked ahead and up. High Priestess Sarah smiled down at her like a proud mother, and the portraits of Helen's parents seemed to do the same. With a long, heavy breath, Helen turned around to face Robert and Captain Frederick. Both of them knelt on one knee at her gaze.

"Is this the actual coronation?" she asked. "I thought this was a rehearsal. Is the one with all the people just for show?"

"Not at all, my lady," Captain Frederick answered, standing. "The designated coronation day has always been that which the true coronation is held. With the past few months of observation and preparation, however, I had reason to believe that the full coronation would be interrupted or sabotaged. However unlikely that may be, this is simply a precaution to ensure the security of the royal throne, but it is not the usual procedure."

She held up both her hands. "Wait, wait, wait, slow down. What?"

"My lady," Frederick repeated carefully, "the royal throne was insecure. It has been seven years since Sapphiria has had a king or queen. For your safety and the security of the throne, I requested that the official ceremony with the minimum number of witnesses be conducted today under the pretense of a rehearsal. As your personal guard and chief of security for the ceremony, this is well within my power to authorize."

"I don't think this is right, Captain."

Sarah stepped forward to stand with the men. "I felt the same way when Captain Frederick first approached me about it, but I see that it's necessary. You must still make your vows in the public ceremony, and the Divines must still recognize your promises."

"What happened just now only covers the secular legality so that we can bring you up to speed. The signs we've seen point to the need for today. Outside the Temple,

all references to your rank as Queen will be to accustom you and everyone else to your title until the ceremony,” Frederick added.

“Okay. I suppose that will have to do.” Helen sighed, and her mind skipped back to Frederick’s initial statement. “And what do you mean, someone might sabotage my coronation? Who would want to do that? Uncle Robert? Who do you suspect?”

Robert stood and dusted his knee. “Helen, Emperor Matthew has been acting aggressive lately. Scouts report that various elements of the Emerald Army have been gathering near the pass north of Azura. Given your grandfather’s assassination near the start of the Great War, his movements are highly suspicious. We needed to act.”

“And you didn’t tell me?!”

“It’s on a need-to-know basis, Your Majesty,” Frederick quickly said, this time using her new title. “You didn’t need to know until now.”

“It’s my coronation! I need to know everything! Not just the motions and the lines.”

Robert held up his hand. “Helen, take a deep breath. It’s not the end of the world.”

“I have enough to deal with as it is!”

“And as Queen, you will have more on your plate,” Captain Frederick said. “If you’ll follow me, I have many messages for you to sign and send out to the islands and neighboring kingdoms.”

Helen nodded, putting aside her exasperation, and followed him to a side room with a desk and a short stack of papers. “Use our fastest ships, Captain, and send them by nightfall. If you still think tomorrow will be sabotaged, make those preparations. I’ll have to trust your judgment on this.”

Captain Frederick bowed, and Robert offered one of his magical pens. Helen sat and flipped through the papers. The top one was a plain document that formally acknowledged her ascension, signed by Sarah and witnessed by the two men as well as Lord Morenstall, the kingdom’s visible spymaster. Another was a form detailing her dominion over Sapphiria’s army, navy, and magi-corps. A commissioning authority form, a tax collection authority form, a commerce regulation authority form. All were the things she needed to sign to gain full dominion over Sapphiria as her title dictated.

“Right,” she mumbled. Accepting the pen, she signed the top form as precisely as she’d practiced down to the curls and swirls she loved to make. From now on, this would be her formal signature as it evolved over the years. Sighing, she set the form aside and signed the next, and the next, until she reached the bottom of the stack.

“What’s this?” she asked. She’d caught herself going through the motions without paying attention to the wording and just signing whatever and had shaken herself out of it before her pen had touched the last form. Her eye had caught the wording on it which looked deceptively formal.

“All rights and territories to be inherited by Princess Helen Ariel Ransenholgen are to be transferred to her regal guardians, effective immediately,” she read. “Upon signing, she revokes all rights of objection and is to be exiled from the Kingdom of Sapphiria and its allied States, also effective immediately.’ Who put this here?”

Robert leaned over the desk, his eyes narrowing. “WHAT?! Don’t sign that!”

“I figured that much, Uncle.”

He took the form and looked it over closer. His brows furrowed. The form burst into flames and disintegrated, but not before a near-translucent magical copy floated next to it. “Go through the others and make sure there aren’t any other hidden ones,” he ordered. “I’m going to look into this. This is treason. Captain, ensure that I am not missed this afternoon while I conduct my investigation. Helen, this unfortunately means I may miss the reception dinner tonight.”

Captain Frederick nodded, and Helen flipped through the stack. Fortunately, everything else was legitimate. With a relieved sigh, she set it aside.

“Okay, we’re safe,” she told her captain. “Now that that’s done, can we run through the rehearsal again? We still have the public one tomorrow, and I want to get this right.”