

SAMPLE CHAPTER

THE
ETERNAL
STRUGGLE

THE
BLACK PHANTOM
CHRONICLES
BOOK TWO



BY
ESTHER WALLACE



EMERALD LAKE
BOOKS

The Eternal Struggle
The Black Phantom Chronicles (Book 2)

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*To those who have waited for this book
and those who know the scars
of the eternal struggle*



IN THE FIRST BOOK OF *The Black Phantom Chronicles*, *The Savage War*, a young shepherd boy, Arnacin of Enchantress Island, leaves his home to find fulfillment and honor. Instead, he finds himself assisting Mira, a kingdom torn by war.

There, he befriends Valoretta, princess of Mira, chosen by her father to be heir to the throne. She confides to Arnacin that, not only has the war with the natives existed for as long as she can remember, but she is also uncertain of their victory.

When Arnacin and Valoretta join forces to secure the future of Mira, hope rises. Yet, when the always independent, if extremely loyal, Arnacin clashes with the king of Mira, the islander is condemned to be sealed into a tower to die.

Escaping that fate with the help of Princess Valoretta, Arnacin is caught again but, this time, the king has him exiled. Mira has little hope of their survival in the coming days...



Chapter 1

THE PRICE OF LEADERSHIP

SILENCE... **THE SILENCE OF IMPENDING** death filled the air. No light broke the thick blackness. Not even a chisel of starlight on a moonless night seeped into his tiny, entombed—could it even be thought—coffin. Air gradually exhausted itself in the abysmal space, and Arnacin's uncontrolled shivering, his gasping breaths, the very heat of his body, betrayed him. He sat crumpled against what used to be the entrance, sealed shut out of spite. Already, as he forced sleep away, the pain of airlessness allowed no more movement than the last futile twitch of his fingers in the place a doorway had once been.

Crack! A flash of light brought the windowless cabin back. Something in the back of his mind told Arnacin the storm bashing against all four walls was reality. His trembling body, however, insisted that the sound was wishful thinking, a last hope granted before he died in darkness.

For hours on end, it was impossible to discern either tomb or storm as reality. Yet, as the world in which the cabin existed stopped rolling on storm waves, Arnacin bolted for the door and yanked it open. He ran until he stood on the far side at the dipping prow in the settling waves. There, as the vision of his tomb dissolved back into memory, Arnacin shivered for another reason—weak relief.

So his life had been since his exile from Mira. Yet, until the storm, he had dreamed of finally going home. At least, he had been

traveling in a homeward direction due to the navigations of his heart, not his head. Home was not in actual dreams, for he rarely slept anymore; even when complete exhaustion washed over his thin frame, he could only doze beneath the stars, where the cold permitted solely fitful rest.

Now, in the renewed sun after the passing of the storm, Arnacin looked up at his sail—the sail that would remain limp since the storm stole its brace. Without the wind, his ship could only drift with the current, and neither food nor water would last that agonizingly slow voyage.

There were no alternatives. He was doomed to die at sea, for no one would come across his ship out in the middle of the vast expanses of water and sky. Even if they did, whom would he trust? Even Valoretta had betrayed him. Yes, he had wanted her to keep her part in his escape secret, but she had chosen not to stand up for him at all. Considering her disloyalty, he knew, as he had come to realize these last few months, there was not a soul on whom he could rely.



“My lady,” Sara called from down the corridor. “A rider will be here in another moment.”

Quickly hiding the rough wooden key in her sleeve, Valoretta met her nurse before the older woman could reach the little alcove where the princess had been sitting.

“I told the gatekeepers to send him to the great hall when he arrives,” Sara continued.

The princess shook her head. “I’ll meet him in the outer ward.” Lifting her skirts, the princess raced toward the outside, wishing to catch the messenger as soon as he rode in. She heard the weary footfalls of her nurse, simply plodding behind with no word of dissent.

Valoretta caught up with the messenger just as he was turning up the keep’s stairs. “What word?” she gasped, even as the flushed messenger began talking.

He dropped to one knee. "My lady... I'm sorry. Miro was struck down. His remaining troops sent me back to warn you while they still drew breath, but they didn't expect to live. Those that stood, remained to hold the savages back for as long as they could. This morning, I noticed a false sunrise toward Fort Corugwan while I rode."

"Our last fortress," Valoretta breathed, her skin icy, the perspiration from her mad dash suspended in little droplets along her spine. With a flash of pain, she thought of all those senseless deaths. There was no turning back now though. Looking up at the walls, the princess, now ruler of Mira, calmly ordered, "Go into the city and make it known that it's time to evacuate Mira. Tell the ship captains they must allow our evacuees."

Wearily, the messenger bowed and left to do as bidden. "Sara," the princess sighed without turning around, her gaze returning to the retreating messenger. "Make sure the people know they are to take only what they most need. I will start with the nobility. I doubt we have much time."

"Is that your decision? Have you not thought of another solution?" Sara's tone was beaten, but unsurprised.

Turning to her nurse, Valoretta admitted, "My waking hours have been consumed with little else. This end has been likely for a long time."

"But there is nowhere to go, my lady. No kingdom will aid us. Most are too jealous over our position in the trade routes to wish anything but our ruin, and there is no unclaimed land we can sail to."

"I know... Yet we must go as individuals and integrate into other kingdoms. I see no other way to hope for life."

Sara's gaze flicked to the ground, but she stubbornly asked, "Do you intend to win Mira back someday, once her people are safe?"

"Never, Sara. It should have been evacuated long ago. Mira has proven greedy, unjust and immoral. If and when we find safety, we must start anew."

“My queen,” Sara intoned with a gracious curtsy far deeper than Valoretta had ever seen from the older lady. Then Sara hurried off, and Valoretta shook aside her feeling of complete dread and immense loss. Only resolution could pull them through.



“Rosa, take your most important things only. You’re leaving on the first ship.”

“You’re leaving?” Rosa—queen through marriage only—repeated. “Won’t you be on one of the first ships yourself?”

“So Sara will insist,” Valoretta muttered, stepping toward the clothespress and pulling out the young queen’s cloak.

Despite her tentative character, Rosa was, unfortunately, shrewd. “You don’t intend to comply! Valoretta, as Mira’s princess, you have an obligation, far more of an obligation than do I, to leave while you can!”

With a sad smile, the princess threw the cloak over Rosa’s shoulders, clasping it for the queen. Then, straightening the folds as the queen looked down in astonishment at the gesture of servitude, the princess softly admitted, “I am needed here, Rosa, until the last man has departed or fallen. It will turn into chaos as soon as I leave and, in that chaos, anyone remaining will be slaughtered.”

Dropping her gaze, Rosa whispered, “I’m not leaving without you, Valoretta.”

“This war isn’t yours. You arrived solely as a tool for Mira. You’ll not die as one.”

“But you’re not queen, Valoretta. I am.”

Smiling, the princess quoted Rosa’s statement from a year ago, only changing the pronouns, “Mira has only one queen, that title will not be taken from her, and I am she.”

“This has nothing to do with their hearts—”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” Valoretta gently interrupted. “It has everything to do with their hearts. How can you help them in these last days when only love and deep respect will hold them from terror? With that in mind, may I be so bold as

to remind you I don't need your assent? I can order you hauled aboard a ship, and I will be obeyed. Understand?"

Both relief and terrible sadness spread across Rosa's face as she curtsied deeply in submission. In honor of Rosa's attempt to live up to her title, Valoretta returned the curtsy before turning away. "Now pack, my lady. Your ship sails in an hour."

As Rosa lifted her chin, tears sparkled in her lashes.



Rosa would not be the only one to raise concerns and, if the princess addressed each one individually, the savages would cut them down while Mira was still in discussion. Deciding to answer all further questions at once, Valoretta called upon the nobility to gather in the great hall, among the blue lapis, opal and gold walls that spoke of Mira's vast wealth. As she entered, someone called, "Hail, Mira!"

"Mira! Mira!" echoed throughout the hall, and Valoretta knew a coronation was pointless. She was Mira, sole ruler of the kingdom bearing that name. As she faced that crowd—most of whom were female, the rest only the very old men, the limbless and the boys younger than twelve—she lifted her chin for their sake.

"I have no doubt you all know where Mira now stands as a nation. It is my desire that everyone departs immediately, carrying only what matters most." At the dull mutter, she dipped her chin in acknowledgment. "Yet I must warn you of the two possible futures facing you. It is folly to think all of us will escape."

"My queen." Young Nayhuel, Duke Cestmir's oldest, stepped up beside Mira's swordmaster, Voninath. Despite his tender age of eleven, he had become Duke upon his father's death. Wars had no mercy. In Valoretta's silence, the boy stated, "We are Mirans. Once we leave her shores, we are no more, whether we still breathe or no. It is against our national pride to flee in her last hours, to lose even our identity. Could we not try to protect that at least, if it must come to a last stand?" He was, as ever, precocious.

Compressing her lips in sick sorrow just briefly, Valoretta announced, "That is something we have all but lost already. Mira's lack of selflessness has caused her to crumble, and those who cannot escape will not face simple death. For our nation's pride, we will resist the enemy until the last minute, and it may be a death far worse than any we have yet known. There will be slow starvation, dehydration, minds will freeze except for thoughts of food and water, humanity will crumble, and only in the very end will the enemy come with their poison.

"Those who are able to escape, however, will find new lives. They will be lives you are not accustomed to, true. You will find lives as farmers or weavers. Some of you might dig in mines or, yes, even attend others as their servants. Perhaps this is why all of you were taught first to serve before leading. I know even with that, you will find it humiliating being forced under other people's authority one way or the other, for even half the farmer's workings will likely be for some landlord. Yet, there will be laughter. There will be festivals and holidays. You will find friends and make new families. In short, there will be life, whereas the last days on Mira will be living death, even for those who remain strong."

"Why is Mira's pride worth that sort of death?" someone in the crowd asked. "Why resist the savages' attack once escape is no longer possible?"

In a soft voice that nevertheless carried to even the farthest corner of the hall, Valoretta proclaimed, "If we are forced to face death, we will stand in the fashion I have described so that Mira will be forevermore the greatest kingdom ever to exist."

Her slowly strengthening voice spellbound the assembly as she continued. "No one will forget it. Memory of it will even haunt the strongest kingdoms in existence. Mira will be the kingdom that stood fast, that never faltered under impossible odds. In Mira's lack of fear and humanity through all that blackness and misery, it will give her an honor she has never had, and it will come through your strength and mine.

“No one person can achieve such a victory alone, to make the memory of Mira light the imagination and call even the lowest wretch to a higher level of life. Therefore, always remember, whether you manage to escape or not, you are Mirans.”

After a moment, many bowed out of the room, but a few remained behind. “I will stay until the day you board a ship, Mira,” Duke Nayhuel whispered. “For our homeland.” As his mother gripped his shoulder in protest, he insisted, “Take the rest of the family now, Mother. I am a duke of Mira and, for my father, I will serve her until death.”

“Your Grace,” Valoretta interrupted. “With all respect to your commitment and title, I would that the young and old should leave first, or I fear they will be the first to die here.”

“I cannot, my queen,” the young duke stated with a deep bow. “I am staying with you.”

As Valoretta nodded her assent, the swordmaster huffed, “I might as well stay with you until the last. I won’t have any life among farmers, and I won’t train any man for anyone except Mira.”

Despite the muttered retort from somewhere about peg-legs making the best pirate captains, the swordmaster did not budge. As other pledges to remain followed, Valoretta thanked the group and dismissed them.



Miro’s councilors had not spoken their minds, however. They entered the great hall with low bows while the queen was planning the best defenses for the evacuees. Seeing them, Valoretta excused the swordmaster, with whom she had been talking.

As befit their training, the councilors waited for her to address them. Facing them, the queen felt her chin rise. “I have no need of your expertise.”

“We are here to help, Mira. With the evacuation, it would be unrealistic to swap us for new councilors.”

“Indeed.” For a just a second, Valoretta paused, aware that there was very little for them to gain by offering their services. They had

to mean it in these times. Briefly, she looked at them for the first time as men, capable of feeling fear, duty, Miran pride and love.

Still, she could not trust them. "There is no advice I need for which you have been trained. There are few new choices I must make, and every reason for you to line up with the evacuees. Were times different, I would not only swap councilors, I would try each of you for treason." Some of the councilors paled, others dropped their gazes to the floor. "Have you not tried in every way possible to continue this war? Should your counsel to my father have been less self-seeking, we might still possess a Mira. Now go, and take Memphis with you if he still lives."

Not one argued with her as they bowed deeply and left.



All through the rest of that day, a line of people poured from the city to the quay, where every merchant ship had been ordered to squeeze as many evacuees on board as possible if they wished to be let out of port. As the first night came, with that line still looking as long as ever, Valoretta commanded the destruction of the sea walls to prevent the enemy from conquering them first and thereby blocking escape.

Now watching the ships sailing through those fiery gates, Valoretta heard Sara stop beside her. "They're going to have a comfortable journey," the older lady snorted.

"It will be worth it," the queen sighed.

"You need rest, my lady. Someone can wake you when there is need."

"I need to be awake for the savages' attack."

"You're sure they will come before everyone has escaped?" Sara's tone held no hope.

"As queen, I can't voice my fears."

"I might as well not speak..." Sara paused only a moment as Valoretta glanced resignedly in her direction. "But I wish you would leave now," she pressed. "Politically, Mira's only chance is in your flight. Without that, we have lost already."

Sighing, Valoretta nodded to the streets below where people waited in line for an uncertain future. “That’s Mira, Sara. If I escaped and they perished, there would be no more Mira than if I fall to the savages. You must see that.”

When Sara spoke, it was a whisper. “Sadly, I do, and I know yours is the right choice, no matter what politics say. Mostly, I just know who is responsible for your disregard of royal procedures, and I don’t thank him. He has brought your destruction in his wake.”

With a slight smile, the queen dryly stated, “I know exactly who you are insulting, Sara. There’s no use in disguising it.” Her smile faded as her gaze drifted out to the open seas, and her fingers found the wooden key tucked into her sleeve. “No one could blame him for this, at least not fully. Whether he helped as he could have or not is outside the question. Mira was doomed to die before he came and, without his help, we only would have perished sooner.”

Silence was the only answer. Yet, feeling Sara’s eyes on her, Valoretta turned to meet that gaze. Awe, pity, respect and sorrow filled her nurse’s face, but seeming to conquer her thoughts, Sara curtsied low. “Mira,” she intoned before withdrawing to see to their packing, in case they should ever have the chance to escape themselves.

Watching her, Valoretta called her back. “Sara. Perhaps, as my father’s sister, you do have an obligation to escape.”

Snorting, her nurse reminded her, “I did raise you, Valoretta, and I am just as stubborn. You are my sole ruler and anything you ask of me I will obey without the slightest hesitation—except this. I will remain beside you until my last breath steals me from you. This I swear.”

Although warmth filled Valoretta’s heart, her stomach twisted. She simply nodded in acceptance, however, excusing her nurse.



As days passed on that still ship in the ocean, Arnacin found nothing to alleviate the despair of approaching death. His journey

to Prater to stock his almost-empty ship for the journey home had been in vain. His summer, spent toiling for an outdoor blacksmith to pay for the needed supplies, had been in vain—to say nothing of the fact that his shoulder had made it painfully clear that he was not actually capable of working for a blacksmith.

Trying to survive was pointless and, with the silence of the ship, the ghosts of Mira manifested aboard. Arnacin's only escape lay in the bottle, which he resorted to carefully, knowing the danger of compromised senses at sea. He only needed a little to take the edge off the memories.

It worked until his exhaustion conquered his slight calmness.

Miran houses pressed upon him, their upper floors curving inward as if to crush him. Somehow, he had returned without his consent, but if he failed to find any escape soon, he was dead one way or the other. Yet, he was searching for something, something he could not seem to remember.

Turning a corner, he ran into a slight, brown-haired girl. As she whirled toward him in surprise, he gasped. Valoretta's face met him under the dark hair. Hardly had he recognized her, however, before she dashed away, calling, "Help! The traitor's returned! The Black Phantom!"

Swiftly, Arnacin outraced her, catching her arm. "Valoretta! Do you want me to die?"

Yet, instead of warmth, her eyes were cruelty itself beneath her brown hair. Even as he tried to stop her, the sealed tower—which was a tomb—broke from the ground encircling him, cracking the dirt and swallowing sky and air alike.

Without warning, Arnacin found himself in Mira's great hall, but it was Valoretta who sat enthroned. Yet, like the Valoretta in the streets, she was different: darker-haired, taller, bedecked in gems, her iron crown coldly glinting with stones. In the ruthless power radiating from her, she was an enchantress of legends.

"Your death is written in our laws, Arnacin." She seemed to grow even taller as she stood. Approaching him, she whispered,

“But I can rewrite it. Since the savages trust you, they will submit with you beside me.”

As she placed her fingers under his lowered chin, Arnacin jerked away.

The back of his head hit the mast, waking him with a start.

Trembling, he glanced at the wine bottle beside him and then angrily chucked it over the side of the ship. Only overdrinking was supposed to give nightmares, or so he had heard some say. A little bit was only supposed to steady the nerves.

It was clear to him that nothing would control his hallucinations, but at least reality told him Valoretta would never do such a thing. She might have betrayed him, but not as completely as that. Such actions were beyond her capability. Or were they?

Had he really known the princess, who had invented her entire character for foreign ambassadors, who had remained silent when the king unjustly exiled him without even the promised supplies to return home?

Still, Valoretta had rescued him from his entombment...

Yes, but that would never mean anything. Nobles only played political games, when they were not torturing others in the open. Had not Valoretta herself tried to use a prophecy to her own gain, hoping to convince the king he needed to listen to their plans? She had been the one to teach Arnacin politics, to say that anger could be shown but never fear, that outward expressions of love were dangerous, that every action had to be calculated in order to create the best outcomes for oneself out of each opportunity.

No, she was completely self-centered, like all nobles, and a liar. He would never know why she rescued him, and it hardly mattered. He would never see her again anyway.

But his compass weighed against his chest, her gift to him, hidden beneath his shirt. By his own logic, he should destroy it, that close link to her. At the very least, it was a silent mockery every time he told himself he could never concern himself with such a liar again.

Even so, he would always care about Valoretta. Regardless of her actions, he had once regarded her as a sister. Although that made her betrayal all the worse, he would keep the compass in memory of brighter times.

As he spotted three masts rising out of the distance, Arnacin rose, shrinking against his own mast.



“Ship to starboard!” The call carried from the crow’s nest of the brigantine, *Pursuit of Justice*. Rushing to the rail, Captain Belon of Nomacir jerked out his spyglass, his heart pounding.

Around him, he heard the murmur, “Pirates? Is it pirates?” What he saw in the distance, though, was not like anything he had expected. There was a ship out there, seemingly dead in the water, flagless, its single sail down, not a whisper of movement stirring its ghost-like silence. Had it been of normal build, it would have screamed, “Eerie.” As it was...

The ship almost appeared to be two different things smashed together. The front was an elongated, sleek prow that possessed the deadly beauty of a blade and looked made to act as one, cutting the ocean’s waves.

The second part, toward the back, looked like an old, wooden fort cut off at the base. That back had no business being on the water, and yet, combined with that dangerous floating blade, it created a complete enigma of what was, beyond a doubt, some sort of ship.

“Should we approach, Captain?”

For a long moment, Belon gave no answer. Finally, he voiced his thoughts. “It’s too small to hold any force that could harm us. Yes, we’ll approach. Perhaps someone is still alive in that box.”

Upon drawing closer, the captain spotted a thin figure watching them silently. Indeed, the figure was so still, with his back against the mast, that Belon began to wonder if it was not some masterfully crafted statue, wrapped in a cloak and crowned with black hair that swept about in the wind.

“Ship! Prepare to be boarded!” he nevertheless called in the common trade language before ordering hooks thrown over the vessel’s rails. As the hooks clattered over wood, the figure twitched, as if briefly thinking of stopping them from pulling his ship closer. Despite his surprise, the captain called, “Stranger, why are your sails down, and where are your colors?”

The stranger said nothing, and Belon leaned over his rail to see the other better. Still, he could not frame any sort of opinion outside of an approximate age in the younger twenties. Between the wind and the length of that black hair playing over the face, the captain could only guess at the reasons for wariness exuding from the youth.

“Is there anything you need?” Belon tried again.

“Four blocks of wood,” finally came the response. The voice was husky with lack of use, low in tone as if with uncertainty, and yet marked by a certain authoritative warning.

“Unfortunately, we don’t carry any wood we can share, but if you would consent to allowing us to board your vessel, we’ll see what we can do.”

“Captain,” his first mate, Denis, whispered in their native language, “I can tell you now that the only way we can help is if we drag that thing home. None of us would know how to fix it.”

“What are you suggesting?” Belon responded in their tongue, equally soft.

“I’m saying we should probably leave him here. I sense a trap and, even if I’m just jumping at shadows, we’re wasting precious time.”

“I can’t sail off if he needs help.” At Denis’s compressed lips, the captain smiled. “I’m not forgetting the danger. We’ll search his ship. What better way than this?”

Without waiting for a reply, the captain called back down to the stranger, again in the common tongue, “Do you consent?”

A spasmodic shiver shook the stranger, and then he nodded slowly, almost begrudgingly.

Scanning his deck, Belon beckoned to four of his men. “I want a thorough search of that ship. Make sure he is the only one on board, and bring any documents you find to me.”



One of the sailors finally convinced the rather silent stranger to board the *Pursuit of Justice*. Nodding in greeting, Belon regarded the young man, who watched him as warily as a deer, yet with the alertness of a cat. Aiding the feline image was the lean subtle muscles, the hand lightly resting upon a gold-encased short sword—a nobleman’s blade, for certain.

Again meeting the stranger’s gaze, Belon held out his hand. “Your weapon, please.” He hoped his tone lacked sharpness or suspicion. It seemed the youth was not noble, unless the worn clothes and odd ship were an attempt to disguise. Denis would discard that possibility entirely due to the build and black hair, which closely resembled those of a notorious pirating family.

The stranger’s fingers only tightened around his blade, though the rest of him remained still.

Belon kept his palm extended. “I can’t assist you if you refuse.”

Dark lashes lowered as the stranger’s gaze turned to the captain’s waiting hand. Shifting, he unbuckled his blade and held it out.

Uncovered, Belon saw a crane stamped into that gold. After staring at it for a moment in his hand, he left the stranger at the rail. Any information from those surveying the smaller ship should shorten his bursting list of questions.

Only ten minutes passed before his first mate entered the captain’s cabin with a report. “That ship’s bone dry of information. There’s no map or even anything resembling a letter aboard. No ship could sail alone without charts or log to guide it. I think some larger ship must have dropped him here, and that makes me very nervous.”

“Besides its lack of charts or log, what did you find?” Belon asked.

“There’s a bow with arrows. The bow’s of superb craftsmanship with a pattern I don’t recognize. But except for that, there are only the usual things I would expect aboard a ship—blankets, dried and salted food, several kegs of water, a small portion of medicines, an extra pair of clothes...” He shrugged.

“The medicines aren’t marked?” the captain asked in surprise.

“Well... They are, actually, but—”

“What language?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was it Miran, by any chance?”

Denis paused in thought, then answered, “I don’t know what the Miran script looks like. Anyway, don’t they use the common trade language now?”

“Unfortunately, I’m not familiar enough with Mira to know,” the captain admitted.

“Why do you ask?”

“His shirt is Miran and his sword bore a depiction of a crane, but our stranger himself looks to be of Zedelious’s brood.”

“And that’s the point. His barren ship, his appearance; he’s clearly a Zedelious trying to act as something else.”

Pointedly, Belon raised one dark eyebrow. “Oh?”

“No one innocent would watch us in silence the way he does or lack all records.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him, but not all Zedelious’s offspring are pirates or murderers—remember that. He might be fleeing his family for all we know. That would explain his distrust at least.” He said nothing about the noble’s blade—not yet.

After calming his first mate, Belon sent for one of the medicine jars and for a member of their crew who loved to study written languages. Shortly, the sailor and jar arrived. In silence, the sailor scrutinized the writing. Then, he announced, “This is Miran script, but it appears not to be written by a Miran hand.”

“How so?” the captain pressed.

“The Mirans have a very specific way they write their letters. Each letter has its own starting point and there is a calculated

space between individual letters, words and even angles. Whoever wrote this was very familiar with the Miran letters, but was obviously not taught by a Miran. I can only guess that a foreign merchant sold these bottles on Mira and therefore wrote their labels for his clients' understanding."

Staring at the jar sitting on his desk, Belon remained silent, his face lined in concentration.



Valoretta had ordered that the moment anyone spotted the enemy, the line of people was to break in half—those closest to the docks would board the vessels and those closer to the castle should dash inside the closing gates. She had placed guards in the streets to make sure the orders were carried out. When the attack came, however, no forewarning of the enemy arrived until those in the castle towers noticed a horde of them on the plains. Within minutes, all reason fled from the evacuees.

Mira's queen could only watch helplessly while captains cut the lines holding their ships to the dock. As the vessels floated away from the mass of people now racing, trampling each other in their desperation, some individuals tried leaping for the ships, their fingers clawing for handholds.

Meanwhile, a horde of savages poured into the streets from the hills bordering the shore. From the little rise splitting the city from the valley, more of the enemy engaged Mira's guards, preventing them from trying to restore order. With nothing left to do against the slaughter, the guards inside the castle hauled the gates shut, barring them.

Sara placed her hand over her queen's eyes, and Valoretta did not fight against the pressure turning her face away. Yet no lack of sight could block out the screams, shouts and cries. Nor could blindness remove the crackle and smell of the savages' flames in the city's houses, the clang of metal on metal, and the terrible thud of the gates' latches.

"Mira's death has begun," Sara muttered.

Yes, and she was their ruler. Ripping her eyes away from Sara's covering hand, Valoretta faced the smoke-filled skies with the squared shoulders of a queen. Archers on the battlements sent off volley after volley as savages bodily tried to break through the gates or scale the walls. Even now, dead filled the streets, blood soaking their stones with crimson. Toward the sea wall, the last ship broke for the safety of the open ocean, its intentionally water-soaked sails smoking from flaming enemy arrows.

Slowly, the slaughter lessened as the savages murdered the last of those outside the castle and backed away from the walls, retreating to set up camps beyond the burning city. In their wake, the few ships that had been unseaworthy spewed flames to the heavens. The wood of the dock crumbled into the bay, hissing as waves met fire. Houses blew sparks into the streets, where the dead remained strewn from one end to the other—infant, child and adult alike.

Shakily, Mira's queen turned to her nurse. "Tell our remaining guards to help portion out space in the baileys to the people left, and have someone start calculating exactly how much food we have and how many of us still live. Until death comes, our grounds will be their home." Unable to hide her horror any longer, she left the room. Her nausea would need to fade before she could see anyone personally.



Leaving the royal wing, Valoretta's feet took her to a room that had been left untouched for months. Stopping at the door, she lightly placed her fingers against its wood. For a second, she stood there before she pushed the door open with a sigh, hearing the creak of the ungreased hinges.

A light layer of dust stirred around her skirts as she entered. Closing the door behind her, she rested her back against it as she looked around. The room was as bare as ever, with its single bed covered in the yellow, green and brown quilt where stags and ponies pranced around the edges. Unmissed from Mira's cavern

of research, three closed books still sat atop the bedside table. In the candleholder, only an inch of wax remained, a reminder that the room's former occupant had liked to stay up reading late into the night.

The queen shuddered slightly with the eerie feeling that the room's tenant had only just left. She turned her attention to the window, which was still open, and the wall next to it, where maps covered the stonework. As a brief, smoky wind blew in from the ocean causing the dust to swirl in circles over the floor and the parchments to crackle softly as if in conversation, Valoretta pushed herself away from the door.

Closing the window and somberly latching it, the queen paused before those maps, each one painstakingly drawn by the room's previous occupant. There hung the main map of Mira's lands before its smallness disappeared into the vast unknown of the continent. A second, more-detailed map of Melmoor was marked with the individual troops' names, scratched out and rewritten at another location; circles for discovered savage villages and little X's over those circles to state that they were no more.

Next to those two maps hung the one given to Carpason so long ago—the one of the savages' mountain lands—both researched on foot and drawn by the room's inhabitant.

The last parchment on the wall Valoretta could not really call a map, for it was the agreement between the first Mirans and the land's savages, showing the original border of the kingdom. Reading the sworn agreement hanging next to that plan, the queen pushed her forehead against that wall, the wall that shouted: *Where is Mira's honor? Its life?*

No more, followed the whisper at the back of her mind. Controlling herself, she pulled the wooden key from her sleeve. Shaking out its string, she reverently hung it beside the agreement, watching the light dance over it as it swayed to and fro.

"I have unlocked my life, Arnacin," she whispered. "I've made my choice... and all is soon to be over. All the same, I cannot think of much I would do differently."

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Praise for
The Black Phantom Chronicles

Esther Wallace has created an interesting world with deep characters who drew me into their story. She weaves a tale of hope, even in the midst of severe conflict, and shows how one person can truly make a difference.

– **Suzanne Hartmann, co-founder of Castle Gate Press and author of the *Fast Track Thriller* series**

Hold on to your seat! *The Eternal Struggle* immediately draws the reader into the action. The dire situations of the two main characters—Valoretta, Queen of Mira, and Arnacin of Enchantress Island—are clearly portrayed as the action alternates between their evolving parallel perils.

Wallace is a solid storyteller. Her ability to maintain the period dialogue adds charm to the reading that frames the action in an unusual fantasy world of old. The characters peopling this world are clearly drawn and compelling.

– **Andrea O'Connor**

Esther Wallace is a tenacious writer who will break your heart with her characters and their journeys. Her debut is a high-stakes world filled with fierce and philosophical hearts.

– **Stephanie H. Warner, writer and author**

The Savage War is an ingeniously plotted novel that is fast-paced and filled with action and focused scenes. There is a kind of ritual that opens the narrative, establishing a custom that is passed from father to son, allowing readers an idea of a tradition that reflects the setting in which the story takes place. Arnacin is a young protagonist who grows in wisdom, but he is a character that has internal battles of his own. I loved the way the author allows his humanity to come out in the narrative, a personality that is characterized by “humility, compassion, and intense feeling of responsibility” and these are the values at the center of the internal conflict when he has to make difficult choices. *The Savage War* is well written with a vivid setting; deft and balanced, and featuring characters that are interesting and real.

– Readers’ Favorite, 5-star review

The characters in *The Savage War* were well thought out with unique personalities. The protagonist was wise with sharp instincts and values honor above all else. The reader can feel how torn he is when he has to make those hard decisions.

– Eileen K. Copeland

The Savage War is definitely packed. (But do buckle in for the long ride, because it is definitely worth it.) There is a lot going on by way of story, themes and thought-provoking moments. I especially love Anarcin’s willingness to see the conflict from all sides, to ask the hard questions, and do what he feels is right despite opposition.

– M

The Savage War is ideal for fans of G.A. Henty and R.A. Ballantyne. It’s intentionally written in an older style, evoking classic adventure/fantasy authors. The characters are charming and the imagery evocative.

– CT Reader

Many books of epic medieval fantasy clamor for attention in the market today. But few of them manage to retain a balance of majestic tragedy with the themes of honor and nobility, a balance which characterized similar novels of a bygone era. [In *The Savage War*.] Author Esther Wallace tells a story about a young man who feels called to an adventure away from his idyllic homeland, where he eventually discovers a nation torn by war. Arnacin's sense of honor compels him to take part in the conflict that, over time, threatens to crush his spirit... Snippets where Arnacin and Princess Valoretta are teasing each other are genuinely touching while heroics on the battlefield stir the soul with excitement.

In short, this is a great novel for anyone craving realistic fantasy with a dose of spirituality. It is awash with battles, drama, political intrigue, and raw human emotion. Just make sure to save some room on your bookshelf for Esther's next entry!

– Amazon Customer