

The Darkest Hour

Volume 2 of The Swordmage Trilogy

Martin F. Hengst

A Magic of Solendrea Novel

Copyright 2013 Martin F. Hengst. All Rights Reserved.

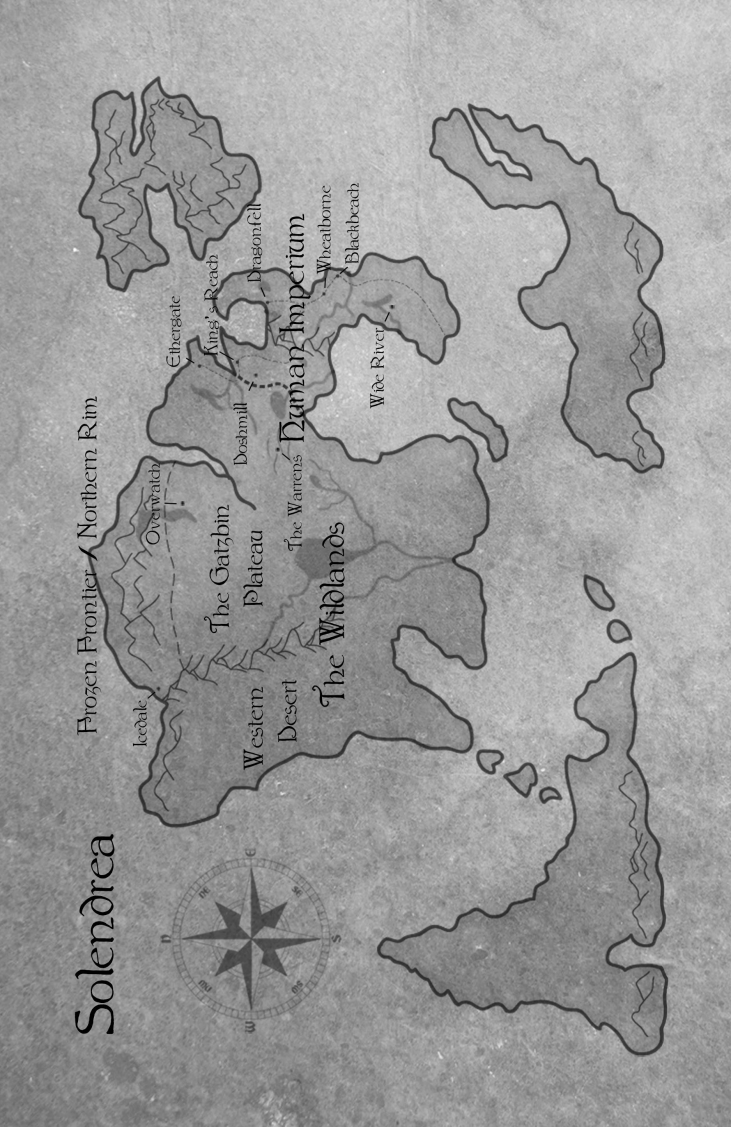
DEDICATION

To my loving wife who is my muse, my inspiration, and my best friend. The Tiadaria to my Wynn. To Jack and Lily, for keeping my imagination young and full of life. I love you.

OTHER TITLES IN
THE SOLENDREA SERIES

[VOLINETTE'S SONG](#)

[THE LAST SWORDMAGE](#)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to L. Natcher for designing and painting the cover for *The Darkest Hour*. Her skill and talent brought life to characters only seen in our imaginations.

Thanks also to my beta readers who helped me find the error of my ways.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	13
Chapter Two .	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Three	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Four.	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Five..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Six ...	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Seven	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Eight	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Nine.	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Ten ..	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Eleven	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Twelve	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter Thirteen	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Epilogue	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Chapter One

A thin green tendril snaked upward out of the earth. It slithered toward its prey, silent and unnoticed. The constriction started as a gentle squeeze, increasing rapidly as it took hold, threatening to choke the life out of its chosen victim.

Tiadaria grasped the weed just above the root and yanked it out of the ground. She shook the dirt from the bundle before tossing it over her shoulder into a growing pile on the cobblestone pathway. Spring had come to the Imperium and already birds were singing in the trees at the edge of the fence that circled the cottage.

Winter had been cold and dark, with the loss of the Captain being harder to bear during the bleakness of the frozen months.

Still, with time, the sharp pain of loss had been reduced to a dull ache. Two years had passed since that fateful night on the battlefield outside of Dragonfell. The events of that night had forever changed her, but as that first winter had changed into spring, she found the loss easier to bear than she would have imagined. The time she spent in Dragonfell after his death had helped immensely. This past winter had been easier still. She supposed it was true; time heals all wounds.

She still felt the Captain's presence in a very real way around the cottage. Although she was frequently called to Blackbeach or Dragonfell on Imperium

business, she had no desire to live anywhere but King's Reach or the little home she had inherited from her former mentor. A new constable and magistrate kept things quiet in the tiny hamlet and it was a welcome respite from the constant flurry of activity in the capital.

There was a creak from the end of the path and Tiadaria was instantly alert. The gate hinge was left unoiled for precisely that reason. It was an innocuous warning, a first line of defense against anyone who might seek to sneak up on her. True, they could just jump the fence, but even King's Reach, so far from the heart of the Imperium, was mostly civilized.

The man who stood at the end of the path was tall and lanky. His curly brown hair peeked out from under the wide-brimmed hat he wore pulled down over his eyes, casting a shadow over his face. He wore a dirt-stained coverall and was stooped over, a common posture ailment for those who walked behind the plow. His dirty hands also lent credence to the image, but the little hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Something told her this was no simple farmer. She shifted into sphere-sight. It was second nature now. She cast out toward the man standing at the end of her path and inspected him in minute detail.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Lady Tiadaria," he said in a soft voice, very much at odds with his appearance. "I assure you that I am no threat to you. However, I suspect you've already allayed yourself of that worry."

Tiadaria shifted her sight back to the physical realm. Her cool blue eyes ranged over him as she pushed herself to her knees, then to her feet. She brushed her palms against the thighs of her breeches, loosening the worst of the dirt that was caked on her hands. Her visitor didn't seem concerned by her dirty attire and unkempt hair. The latter she twisted into a crude blond knot at the base of her neck.

"I don't believe we've met..." She trailed off, silently prompting him for a name, since none had been offered.

"Cabot, Lady Tiadaria, with the Imperium Intelligence Service." He glanced around and nodded to himself as if satisfied. "Do you think we could speak? Inside?"

Tiadaria led him into the little cottage, stopping only to fit a tiny brass key into the complicated lock set in the door. Cabot's eyes widened slightly as the lock made its customary series of pops, snaps, and twangs before the key, turning on its own accord, unlocked the door. She pushed it open and gestured for Cabot to precede her into the common room.

"To what do I owe the honor of a visit by Imperium Intelligence, Cabot?" she asked, ushering him onto a stool by the long trestle table. There were neat stacks of parchment at the end of the table and the far wall had a myriad of maps pinned to it. Weapons and armor of all types hung from pegs around the room. Cabot's awestruck expression was almost comical, but Tiadaria could forgive him that. It *was* an impressive

room. It had been so when it was the Captain's and it remained so under her care.

"My Lady—"

"Tia is fine, Cabot." She felt a little silly correcting someone several years her elder, but as he had made no attempt to drop the title, she did it for him.

"Tia then," he said, inclining his head in thanks. "Master Faxon Indra at the Academy of Arcane Arts and Sciences sent me to you. He says it is of vital importance for you to have my full report. Since I'm on my way back out on assignment, Master Faxon asked me to visit you."

If Faxon had sent Cabot to her, there must be something foul afoot. There was a standing joke between Tia and the quintessentialist that the only time Faxon summoned her to Blackbeach was when something horrible was about to happen. Or already in progress. She sighed.

"Alright then," she said, slipping onto a stool and leaning forward over the table. "You'd better tell me all of it."

"I'm afraid all of it isn't very much." Cabot spread his hands in a gesture of apology. "All we have to go on are rumors and hearsay. The Xarundi have apparently been licking their wounds and they are striking out again, attacking some of the smaller human settlements nearest to the Warrens. We know that they were badly fragmented after the battle at Dragonfell. We have a mole within the Shadow Assembly—"

"Really?"

“Yes, Lady...I mean, Tia. We have several moles that have infiltrated the lower ranks of the Assembly. Most of them report to lower functionaries, which is part of the problem. There is talk that one of their seers has had a vision of a great and powerful artifact. Others dismiss this as rumor and misdirection. Either way, we don’t know what the artifact is, or where it might be.”

“But if the Xarundi are seeking it out, there’s a good chance that it doesn’t bode well for the Imperium. Or me.”

“Exactly. So Faxon—“

“Wants me to get near enough the Warrens to see what’s going on and what we can do to stop it,” she finished for him. Cabot slowly shook his head.

“No, not exactly. He wants you to meet with him in Blackbeach so the two of you can go through the Great Library and see if there are any clues as to what the artifact might be and where the Xarundi could be looking for it.”

“Ugh,” Tiadaria groaned. “Research. What is it with quints and their research? I’ll take a blade in my hand over a book any day.”

Cabot smiled tolerantly. “I’m not inclined to disagree with you, Lady Tia.”

“If that’s all then?” Tiadaria pushed off the table and got to her feet, extending her hand to Cabot as he did the same. He grasped it tightly and smiled.

“I have nothing more,” he said. “It was nice to meet the heroine of Dragonfell in person, though. Not

very often that a man gets to say that he was in the presence of greatness.”

“Oh stop it,” Tiadaria snapped, her cheeks burning red. “There were many on that battlefield that night.”

“True.” Cabot nodded. “But not many who laid out two score of Xarundi before the rest of us could find our daggers.”

“You were there?” She asked, touching his shoulder lightly.

“Aye, Lady.” He sighed. “A shame about the Captain, but he wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. May we all be so lucky when our time comes.”

“Indeed.” Tiadaria’s throat was tight, her chest aching.

Cabot seemed to shrug off his melancholy.

“Anyway, it was nice to meet you, My Lady. I’ll see myself out.”

Tiadaria stared after him long after he had slipped out through the exquisite door. She went to the window and watched him take the path away from the cottage with long strides, his farmer affectation a memory.

Cabot’s innocent remark had stung her in a tender place. How long, she wondered, would old ghosts continue to haunt her?

* * *

“Cabot found you then, I presume?” Faxon spoke to her without raising his eyes from the paper laid out in front of him. His chambers in the Great Tower were crammed, floor to ceiling, with books, sheaves of parchment, and all manner of contraption, both magical and mundane. Tiadaria had never been particularly claustrophobic, but walking into this man-made cave gave her vivid visions of the entire mass crashing down on them at any moment. She was already fairly disagreeable after a week on the road and his nonchalance wasn’t helping her disposition in the slightest.

Faxon gestured absently to a buried object in front of his desk that might have been a chair. Tiadaria lifted stacks of paper and looked for someplace to put them. She was completely at a loss. There was literally nowhere in the cramped room for her to put the pile down in any meaningful way.

“Faxon?”

“Hmmm?”

“Where should I put these?”

The quintessentialist finally looked up from the papers and seemed to really see Tiadaria for the first time. He looked from the chair to her hands and back again.

“Oh, right,” he pointed to the gently smoldering hearth in the corner of the room. “You can put them there. Yes, that will do fine.”

“Really?” Tiadaria looked from the papers to the fireplace, uncertain.

“Yes, yes.” He waved his hand, lost again in the paper spread out on his desk.

Tiadaria went to the hearth and shifted the papers into the crook of one arm. She prodded the glowing coals to life and then tossed the entire sheaf into the fireplace. It took a moment, but the edges of the paper began to blacken. Before long, orange tongues of flame licked up around the edges and the fire started burning in earnest.

“What are you doing?” Faxon cried, leaping to his feet, toppling his chair backwards. He rushed to the hearth, his face contorted into a mask of alarm.

“What you told me to do!” Tiadaria shouted, dropping to one knee. She was about to reach into the flames when she heard Faxon’s rumble of laughter.

“Relax, Tiadaria,” he said, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “I was just teasing you.”

She brandished the poker at him, backing him against the wall. “You gremlin-eared, goblin-toed, stinking, filthy ice pig!”

Faxon threw his hands up in surrender, still laughing so hard that tears were streaming down his cheeks.

“Alright! Alright,” he said, getting himself under control. “Oh, but if you could have seen the look on your face.”

Tiadaria shook the poker at him again, and then dropped it into the rack by the hearth. “Not funny, Faxon.”

“On that, young Tiadaria, we will have to agree to disagree. However, scarring you for life wasn’t my intent in calling you here. I trust that Cabot filled you in on what we know?”

“What he knew of it. It seems to me that we don’t know as much as we need to.”

The quint nodded, leaning against the edge of his desk. “From what Cabot tells me, there are a number of Xarundi packs harrying the settlements around the Warrens, the few of them there are. It seems like they’ve recovered from the thrashing we gave them at Dragonfell and now they’re looking to expand as far and as fast as their furry little feet can carry them.”

“That’s not funny either, Faxon.”

“No,” he said, sobering abruptly. “It’s not. It is, however, the way things are. Add to that the rumor that they’re looking for something, but we don’t know what. I’ve been going over every record we have in the library and there are vague mentions of ancient Xarundi seeking out an object of great power in the icy wastes of the Frozen Frontier, but no concrete statement of what it is, or where it might be.”

“Surely the records here can’t be all we have to go on,” Tiadaria said uncertainly. “If there isn’t any information here, maybe there is in Dragonfell. I can go to the capital and—“

“No need,” Faxon interrupted. “King Greymalkin had all the documents pertaining to magical history, theory, and such moved to here from Dragonfell.

He felt that they were...safer...in the hands of those who were trained in the arts and sciences.”

Tiadaria wrinkled her nose. “In other words, he was afraid that a rogue mage would get hold of something nasty and do something horrid.”

“Something like that,” Faxon agreed.

“Regardless, all the documents that refer to any magical relics are either here in Blackbeach or in Ethergate.”

“Ethergate?”

“Blackbeach isn’t the only quintessentialist city. It just happens to be the largest one in the Imperium. Ethergate is farther north, outside the Imperium’s borders. Here in Blackbeach, we deal with education and research. Ethergate deals more with practical application.”

Tiadaria ran her finger along the thin gray witchmetal collar around her neck. It was a habit she had developed as a former slave under the Captain’s care. Now it was a source of comfort when she was nervous or agitated. It helped temper the unknown with the familiar.

“So,” she finally said. “Ethergate is where you test the things that you don’t want the King to know about, or that you want to be able to disavow.”

The papers in the hearth had died back down to embers. Faxon took the poker and prodded them experimentally, watching them crumble to ash before he replied.

“Not officially,” he said at length. “But there are those quintessentialists who...shall we say bend the rules from time to time.”

Tiadaria laughed. “I’m surprised you don’t spend more of your time in Ethergate.”

“I used to, in my youth. Now my talents are better put to use here, shaping impressionable young minds. Like yours.”

Tia snorted. “Ha!”

There was a knock at the doorway and they turned to see a girl no older than eight or nine standing in the doorway. Her miniature robes swirled around her ankles. The girl’s long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail and framed a delicate face so pale and flawless that it reminded Tiadaria of smooth porcelain.

“Yes, Tionne?” Faxon’s voice was gentler than it had been just a moment before.

“Head Master Maera wishes to see you, Master Indra.” Tionne’s wide round eyes, like little pools of emerald fire, glittered in the dim light. Tiadaria found the effect unsettling.

“Thank you, Tionne,” Faxon said with a wave. “Please tell her that I’ll be along momentarily.”

Tionne nodded and padded off down the hall, her slippers making only the slightest whisper on the smooth obsidian floor.

“Tionne,” Tiadaria said thoughtfully, then shot Faxon a startled glance. “Not the girl from Doshmill?”

Faxon nodded gravely. “The same. She showed an affinity for the arts, so Torus brought her here after

the attack. She's a quick study. She'll outmatch even me one day."

"That's hard?" Tiadaria quipped.

"Quiet you," Faxon snapped. He was gathering stacks of paper and piling them on top of each other. He hefted the entire pile and gave her a measured look. "I need to meet with the Head Master. If you want to make yourself useful, you can start going through the library again to see if I missed anything. Once I'm done with Maera, we'll have dinner and tomorrow maybe we'll see about heading to Ethergate. I have an apprentice there who can probably help us dig up some details."

He squeezed past her and stopped in the hallway, turning to face her. "Stay put until I get back, Tiadaria. This is no time to be flaunting your independence."

"Have I ever?" She asked sweetly.

"Oh, only at every turn." He gave her a piercing look. "I mean it, Tia. This could get ugly. I'll be back."

With that, he disappeared from the doorway, leaving her alone in the office.

* * *

The library in Blackbeach was a large rectangular building that filled the better part of the entire northwest corner of the city. It was bounded on the north by the city walls, the east by the great eastern ocean, and the west by the Great Tower itself. Four stories were crammed floor to ceiling with books and scrolls,

diagrams and paintings, from all over Solendrea. One of Tiadaria's favorite things about the library was the way it smelled. The subtle combination of old paper, ink, and lamp oil was soothing no matter how frayed her nerves were when she arrived.

She slipped through the arched doorway and passed the prune-faced quintessentialist at the reference desk. Tiadaria had long ago learned not to let the disapproving glances at her collar bother her. There were many, both here and in Dragonfell, who didn't approve of her unorthodox jewelry. However, since she was vouched for by not only her reputation, but also one of the most powerful quintessentialists in the realm, and the One True King himself, there weren't many who would openly show her any blatant disrespect. No matter how they thought of her in private.

Tiadaria climbed the spiral staircase to the third floor and let herself into the map room. Large wide cabinets dominated the perimeter walls, while a series of tables were pushed together in the center of the room forming one large table that allowed even the largest maps to be spread out in all their glory. Small moveable steps were scattered around the table, allowing those viewing the maps to climb up and gain the proper perspective on the larger specimens.

Jotun, a quint so old that Tia suspected he had been present at the founding of the Imperium sat in one corner of the room. His head was pillowed on his arm and his snores were the only sound in the otherwise still and empty room. She let the old man sleep. Circling the

map table, she read the neatly printed letters on each cabinet. Though she had come to the Imperium with a very basic understanding of written language, Faxon had drilled her time and again on both fundamentals and advanced concepts of language and record-keeping.

He expected her to be able to match the fastidious Captain's records and notes, a task that Tiadaria loathed almost as much as research. Still, the records she kept for Faxon helped to document the tasks she performed in service to the quints and the realm as a whole, and so earned her a stipend from the king's treasury for her service. That part, she had to admit, was rather nice and could be easily adapted to.

Finally she found the cabinet with the map she sought. It was painted on thin muslin but was so large that it was still rather heavy and bulky for her to move on her own. However, even if she woke Jotun from his nap, he wouldn't be much help. The elderly mage was much more adept at reading maps and remembering forgotten details than he was at anything as pedestrian as physical labor. With some effort she got the map to the viewing tables and began to spread it out.

When fully unfurled, the map took up nearly the entire viewing table. It was easily twenty feet wide and three-quarters of that high. Tiadaria had to climb to the top of one of the step-stools to get the proper vantage point from which to gather her bearings. Dragonfell was easiest to locate, as the inset detail of the cavern palace and the large alabaster stonework was unmistakable. From there, it was a relatively simple matter to trace the

trade road south, past Wheatborne and eventually to Blackbeach.

Tiadaria gnawed thoughtfully at her lower lip. Faxon had said that Ethergate was outside the Imperium's border, so she followed the trade route north from Blackbeach, across the Dragonback Mountains through which she passed so often and out past King's Reach. There was a large city far to the northwest of King's Reach. It was unlabeled on the map, but marked with the hand-eye-and-triangle symbol that was the common mark of the quintessentialists. Certainly that had to be Ethergate.

"Have you found what you seek, young lady?" Jotun's gravelly voice startled her so badly that Tiadaria jumped and had to clutch the handrail on the steps lest she fall down. He had gotten silently to his feet and shuffled around to where she stood on the stool, two heads higher than he.

"Is that Ethergate?" she asked, pointing at the dot on the map. Jotun nodded, scratching his stubbly white whiskers and looking at her thoughtfully.

"Aye, young lady, it is."

"How long would you say it would take to travel there on horseback?"

Jotun shook his head. "The trade road ends outside the Imperium, Lady Tiadaria. That slows things up something awful. Once you get onto the lesser used roads in the outlands, it's slow going indeed."

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "I understand. But how long to ride from Blackbeach to Ethergate?"

He peered at her with his watery brown eyes for a long moment before he replied. "I'd reckon about two weeks, My Lady."

"Are there smaller versions of this map? One I could borrow perhaps?"

Jotun went to a cabinet and produced a roll of parchment. Tia slipped the ribbon band off the end and unrolled it. It was a perfect copy of the map she had laid out, right down to the bends of each river. The only thing it lacked was the rich colors of the original. She suspected that the copy was meant to be functional, where the original was obviously a display piece. She re-rolled the parchment and slipped the ribbon down over it.

"Thank you, Master Jotun," she smiled at him and his eyes crinkled with happiness. "You've been most helpful."

"My pleasure, Lady Tia. My pleasure."

She lingered long enough to replace the map that she had spread on the table and then departed the library, going directly to the stables. Nightwind nickered as she approached and she clucked her tongue to appease the animal.

"Easy now, lovey," she said quietly as she took down her saddle and bags from the pegs near the stall. "We're off on an adventure."

Tiadaria quickly fitted the accoutrements to Nightwind's well-muscled body and eased him out of the stall, leading him by the reins until they were outside the stables. With the ease of much practice, she hefted

herself from one stirrup, swinging her leg over and settling herself into the saddle.

It was nearing dinner time and the sun was sinking low behind the mountains in the west. Traveling in the dark didn't bother Tiadaria, as sphere-sight was just about as good as being able to see in the dark, but Nightwind didn't care for it at all. He hesitated at her spur, and then reluctantly trotted onto the cobble road that would lead them out of Blackbeach.

Tia smiled. Faxon would catch up with her at Ethergate, she was sure. That was if he didn't catch up to them on the road. It served him right to be left behind, she thought, still smoldering over the incident with the fire. She leaned in close to Nightwind's neck and spurred him into a run, delighting in the spring air that swept her hair back as they plunged headlong into the twilight.

Want to know what happens next? The Darkest Hour is available on Amazon.com. Amazon Prime members can borrow The Darkest Hour as part of the Prime program.

[The Darkest Hour](#)

Also available on Amazon:

[The Last Swordmage – Swordmage Volume 1](#)

[Volinette's Song – A Magic of Solendrea Story](#)