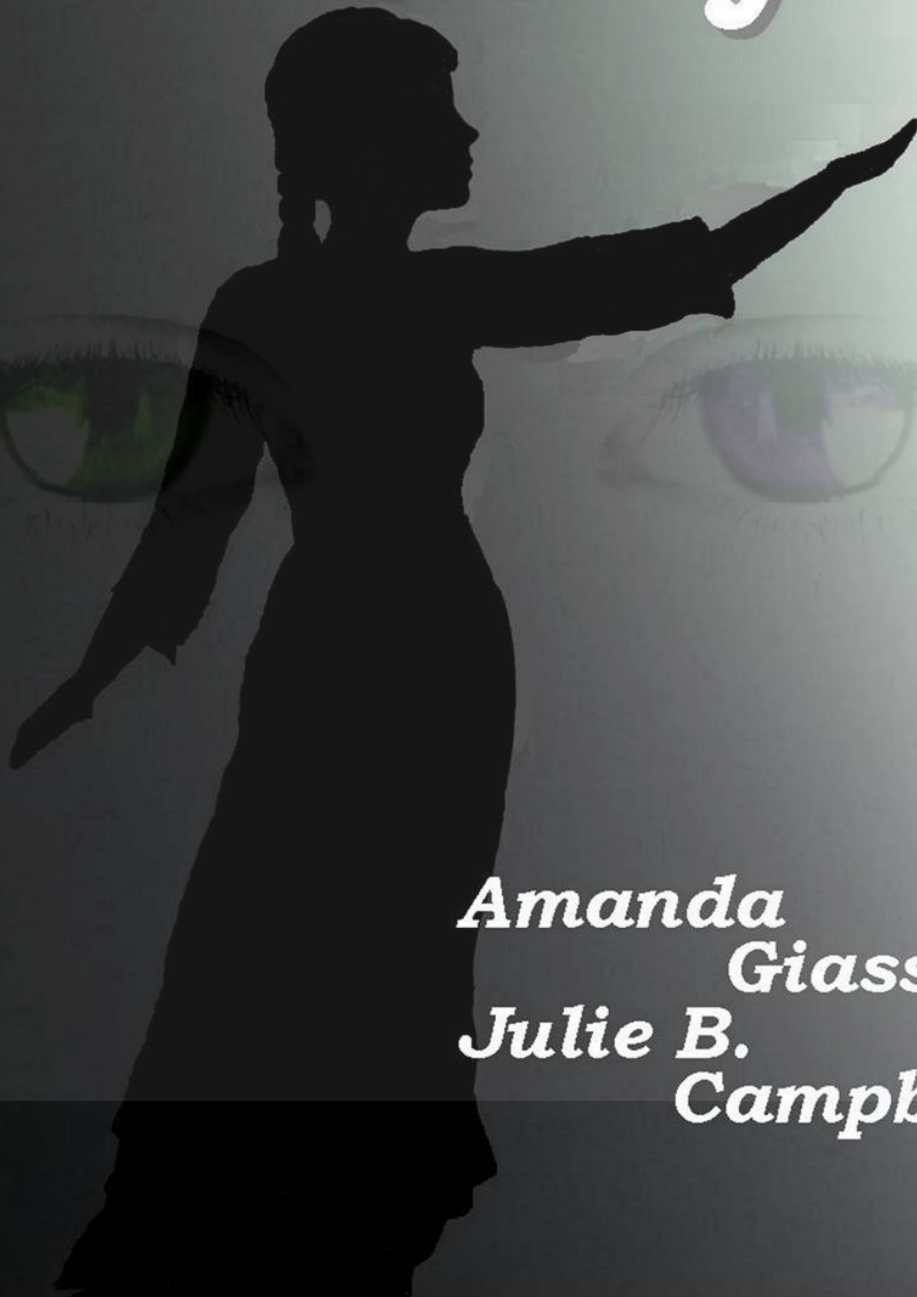


# **It's Early Days**



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Julie B.  
Campbell*

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***A Short-Story Prequel  
to the Perspective Series***




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&  
Julie B. Campbell

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## Gveyldna

Gveyldna Uusulf walked along the narrow path of trampled grass that cut its way from her property to her closest neighbour's. She could remember a time, before the war and the invasions that came with it, when these paths radiated from her house like the spokes of a wheel. Each line represented regular trips to visit family and neighbours in every direction. Soft leather boots lovingly maintained the paths with each step they tread.

Now, there were only two paths left. Paladin Ligve Erleck lived on his own to the west of Gveyldna's farmhouse and Paladin Jarek Reinvag lived to the east with his cousin Naoma Mjolla. Paladin Rral Radone had once lived to the North, but he had gone to Lorammel, Syliza's capital, after the loss of his family, seeking a new way to maintain his honour. Paladin Bjanno Oltrozen, from the south, had done the same, only he had gone to the west. No one knew where.

Technically, they weren't Paladins anymore. The honour guard of Gbat Rher, composed of uniquely large men who were raised for their positions from birth, had been disbanded by the Imperial Couple of Syliza. When Syliza attacked the adjacent country of Gbat Rher and claimed it as a province, only devastation was left behind. Without their title, these massive men were now often referred to as "the Giants of the North" by outsiders; a nickname they didn't like, but that they preferred to "former Paladin."

Much of the lands that were once a part of a mighty country and rich culture now lay in waste. Farms were burned. Families were butchered. Not one person escaped unscathed.

Gveyldna was now living with her uncle, Paladin Keld Bjergund. They were the last of their family. Bjergund was her mother's brother. They'd been very close. He still wore Dryfa's medallion around his neck. He wore all the family's medallions. All but Gveyldna's.

She sighed to herself as the heavy metal disk thumped against her chest as she walked. To her, the feeling meant that she could still feel her family's heartbeat. Syliza, despite her best efforts, had not silenced it. Every step she took kept the memory of each family member alive. It made her proud to think of them, particularly at times like these.

She was in no real hurry as she returned from calling on Naoma. They always visited together on the days when the Paladins held their secret meetings. These men had always been their government and, as Syliza had not bothered to put any of its own political representatives into place in Gbat Rher, the Pala-

dins took it upon themselves to keep up the honour of their previous duty...though, without letting Syliza know of course.

That said, it was Gveyldna's belief that the Paladins would have continued their secret meetings even if Syliza had moved its Imperial Palace from Lorammel to the very centre of Gbat's farm fields. Paladin honour demanded it of them. They lived for their honour. Without it, there was no reason to breathe.

While the men continued their meetings, the women kept up their traditions as well. Gveyldna felt strong and alive while she prepared for Bjergund's return. It was her job to make sure he had a good meal and a mug of mijols on the table. He'd be ready to eat and drink after the long talks and travels.

Everyone knew that Naoma's mijols was the best in Gbat and Gveyldna's lamb pies were unrivalled, so the women took the opportunity to drop in on each other on meeting days to trade these delicacies. She'd brought her pies to Naoma to serve to her cousin Reinvag, and now she carried a jug of mijols for Bjergund.

Gveyldna enjoyed the thought of Reinvag savouring her lamb pies. He had lost his wife and children to the invasions. While he'd fought the soldiers and saved dozens of people from the fires, his own farm had succumbed. Today, he was one of the most respected Paladins alive. People still talked of how he had carried injured men and women, two at a time, across the fields and away from the fires. He'd borne entire families of children in his arms and on his back. He hadn't stopped for two straight days, sleeping while he walked. But it had broken him.

Returning to find his family as they were had drained the spirit from his body. Not even his infant son had been spared.

*And Syliza wonders why we won't accept them,* thought Gveyldna with bitterness.

She shook her head as though to rid herself of the image and the feeling that went with it. Her long caramel-coloured hair, fastened in a loose braid down her back, swung with her gesture. To force the thoughts away, she let her mind drift to her favourite subject for moments like these: Kolfi Ingmardr.

She missed seeing him since he'd left on his journey to seek answers from Lorammel. Still, it didn't mean she felt any less happy when she thought about him. He would be a brave and celebrated Paladin one day, even if he were only ever to be called a Giant of the North. It wouldn't be long before he was recognized as one, regardless of his official title or lack thereof.

He already bore the tattoos on his cheeks, marks that would soon be covered over by a Paladin's beard. She wondered if it would already be filled in upon his return. The notion made her smile. Would he see a difference in her, too? She'd set aside the new dress she'd made for herself this season, so she would have something special to wear once he was home again. Sure, it was unlikely that he would ever notice that she was wearing a new dress – particu-

larly after having been gone for weeks, if not seasons – but she didn't mind leaving her little dream intact. It was harmless and it made her happy.

Quite suddenly, she was drawn out of her reverie upon spotting two men in the distance. She raised her arm to wave at them, despite the fact that they were still too far away to recognize. Strangers were never a concern. Everyone left in Gbat Rher was considered a friend, these days. It wasn't uncommon to give shelter to strangers for a night or two if her house happened to be along their journey. Towns and farms continued to rebuild and inns were few and far between.

The men waved in return and slightly adjusted their course to walk toward her.

“Hello, friends,” she called to them in greeting. “Do we know each other?”

The unspoken answer was rapidly apparent as their approach allowed her to see them in better detail. She had never met these men before, and they were not from Gbat Rher. She'd never seen anyone like them. Despite the fact that they were dressed as locals – villagers, perhaps – they looked nothing like the people here.

One looked muscular. He appeared strong like a Paladin, though a head shorter than even the smallest Paladin she'd ever seen. His hair was a deep plum colour, tied at the nape of his neck. His eyes were friendly but unfamiliar.

The other had dark skin. Darker than any complexion she'd ever seen. Even when she was tan in the Hot Season, her skin didn't approach the richness of his. He had black hair entirely contained in short, tight braids. His knowing eyes were a surprising hazel.

“Hello,” said the plum-haired man in the Simple Tongue. It was the common language that most of Qarradune's peoples learned, though in Gbat, few had ever needed it outside their lessons.

“Hello,” replied Gveyldna, squaring her shoulders and looking at the men with a distrust she did not hide.

“Are you Gveyldna Uusulf?” asked the dark skinned man. It was clear he knew the answer, though he waited for her reply.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Who are you?”

The men didn't bother to reply. A gag was jammed into her mouth, and a bag of rough fabric was tossed over her head. Gveyldna blindly fought to free herself, dropping her basket and the jug of mijols it contained. She pulled and tore at the bag, trying desperately to yank it back over her head, but managed only to unfasten the ribbon that held her medallion around her neck. It fell to her feet with a dull thud; its heartbeat stilled.

Her efforts did nothing to free her against the firm hold of the two men. Her own hot breath turned the inside of the bag into an oven. Her struggles served only to exhaust and overheat her.

Soon, her wrists and legs were tied, and she was slung over the shoulder of one of the men – the muscular one, if the size of his shoulder was any indication. After a while, she gave up on struggling and listened instead. She hoped she would be able to tell where she was. Those hopes however, were dashed when she was thrown onto the back of a horse. She could feel the formation of every bruise as she bounced along, unable to tell where she was or where they were headed.

As painful as it was, she was grateful for those bruises. Focusing on them allowed her to distract herself from the terror that threatened to burst open from within her.

After a while, the smell of sea air penetrated the bag over her head, and she was pulled down from the horse, only to be tossed over a shoulder once again. She heard the distinct sound of boots on wooden planks before she thudded down onto her bottom on the seat of what had to be a small boat, based on the way it rocked in the water.

Swallowing a whimper, she did her best to brace herself against the movement of their small vessel. It wasn't easy to do with bound hands and feet, and she had never been on a boat before.

Escape was hopeless. She couldn't see. She couldn't move. She couldn't swim. Before she could think on it further, an odd fragrance seemed to fill the air between the fabric and her face. She lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \* \*

After that, her memory became a haze. Trying to think back over the details of what followed felt like navigating a thick fog in the morning of the Rainy Season.

Gveyldna's actual vision wasn't much clearer than her memory. What light made it into the dark metal cell seemed to have fused with the moisture that hung in the air. The cell had a door made of wood, but it was braced with metal, and its one tiny window was barred.

She'd spent hours trying to see something, anything, through that window. At first, she'd called out, but no one replied. She could hear movement on occasion, and crying, but nobody responded to her shouts and pleas.

She hadn't any idea how long she'd been there. Judging by her hunger, her thirst, and her overall weakness, it had to have been far longer than a day. More likely, it had been several.

She had a strange feeling that she had left the cell, possibly many times, but she wasn't sure. There was no distinct memory to confirm it. It couldn't have been a recent outing, as she could no longer sit up under her own power, let alone walk. The rats were near. Waiting. Watching. Ready for her to take her final breath.

As she lay on the floor, trying to ignore her body's aches, the vision of a man appeared before her mind's eye. It wasn't her typical daydream of Kolfi. She barely remembered his image anymore. Instead, while she drifted into that place between awake and asleep, she found herself looking into the aquamarine eyes of a man unlike any she had ever seen or imagined. He was flawless and ageless despite the fact that his hair was perfectly – nearly glowingly – white. He was beautiful and comforting, and yet wholly terrifying.

Had she ever met this man? Or was he nothing more than the consequence of a wandering mind and starving body? She searched for the answer like a hunter tracking its prey through the fields and woodlands of Gbat Rher. Still, she found nothing. Her traps were empty. Her spear was clean.

Leaving her thoughts on the mysterious man and his liquid movements, she smiled to herself. It was a nice enough image with which to leave this world and enter into Paradise. If only she could think of home, instead. But she couldn't remember how it looked anymore. The fields, the farmhouse, Kolfi... they'd all faded away.

Suddenly, it was as though her senses had been stroked back to life, and she sighed. Soft, entrancing music filled her ears until it overflowed over her entire body, caressing it. Embracing it. She could no longer feel the unforgiving metal floor beneath her. The wall no longer dripped onto the fabric of her dress. The damp cloth no longer chilled and wore at her skin. Her hunger and her thirst disappeared.

The perfection of the notes washed it all away. Somewhere nearby, a woman was singing. Was she an angel? Regardless, the sound encircled her spirit and carried it, lifting it away from her body.

"Paradise," was Gveyldna's final thought before she released her last breath. The rats moved in.



## Excerpt from *Love at First Plight*

### *Megan*

...I made up my mind and tentatively stepped up to the door, resting my ear against it. At first I heard nothing, but then I heard what sounded like a humming; not like the ship's regular humming. This one sounded melodic.

I wanted to hear more to confirm what I was hearing and that my ears were not playing tricks on me. After making certain that I was still alone, I reached for the handle, held my breath out of anticipation, and turned it. I pushed the door ajar and was instantly greeted by the clear voice of an angel. It *was* singing that I had been hearing, and the voice belonged to a woman. The melody was powerful and hauntingly beautiful. I stood there entranced as a huge range of emotions washed over me. I felt overwhelmed by relief, happiness, fear, sorrow, desperation, and intense courage all at the same time.

I blinked, snapping myself out of my stupor and peered inside. It was pretty dark but I could see the start of what looked like a very narrow staircase. My intuition – or maybe it was the singing – was strongly urging me to go forward. I listened to it and opened the door farther; enough for me to enter. I slowly exhaled the breath I had been holding as I quietly eased my way through the door. Holding the heavy door with one hand, I reached out my other for the railing.

I grasped the sticky moist bar – *ew* – and took a step forward so that I could soundlessly close the door. I gasped, startled when my foot slipped off the short strip of landing. I instantly released the door and reached out frantically for the other rail to prevent myself from falling down the stairs. Any relief I felt, after successfully catching myself, was cut short by the sound of the door slamming behind me. *So much for being discreet.*

I held my breath and realized that the song had stopped abruptly. I listened desperately, unmoving on the stairs, straining my ears to hear anything over the pounding of my own heart. The courage I had been feeling was quickly overrun by sheer terror as reality took hold. I was alone in a forbidden place not knowing who or what I would find...or what would find me.

I didn't know how long I had remained frozen, but the sound of dripping water drew me out of my panicked and frightened state. I inhaled deeply through my nose in an effort to calm my racing heart – that was a mistake. I was immediately greeted by the foulest stench I had ever encountered; a stomach churning mixture of rot and sewage. I slammed my eyes shut and quickly

covered my nose and mouth with my dress sleeve. I fought back the urge to puke and desperately tried to recover my breath.

I began to gain control over my breathing and swirling stomach, and I noticed that my skin felt unusually clammy. A few loose strands of my hair were clinging uncomfortably to my forehead and the sides of my face. The air was thick with moisture. It felt like I had just walked into the open jaws of a huge beast and its putrid breath was coating me in its slime. *Yuck!* This place – wherever I was – was seriously nasty.

Everything felt wrong. I should have left, but I had come this far and I felt that I would regret leaving more than I would regret staying. I kept one hand secured firmly on the railing and the other at my side. I debated using my free hand to cover my nose and mouth but I didn't want my face to come in contact with whatever icky substance coated my hand from the railing, so I chose the lesser of two evils and decided to take shallow breaths through my mouth, instead. I started to make my way slowly down the steep narrow stairs. I moved my feet carefully onto each grated step. The flat soles of my shoes offered me very little traction on the slippery metal surface. The last thing I wanted was to fall down the stairs.

I reached the bottom and looked around. Although the space was dimly lit, it was still very hard to see or to make out any real details. I could hear the distinct sound of dripping in the distance. I was starting to think I was in a sewer. *Do ships have sewers? Yeah, Megan, ships have sewers with girls in them that sing pretty songs. Honestly! Focus!*

From where I stood, I could see that all that lay before me was a long hall with doors that lined the walls on either side. My eyes could distinguish only six doors in total; three on each side. Beyond that was only darkness.

I heard a scurrying sound, and I tensed and sprang up onto the bottom step. My eyes searched my surroundings to find the source of the noise. I saw nothing. *Oh God, Oh God, Oh God!* There were creatures living down there and I didn't even want to guess what kind!

I fought the urge to scream like a banshee and bolt up the stairs. *It's alright, Megan, I told myself. It's probably just a friendly little mouse going about his business, finding some tiny morsel to bring home to his family and the missus, that's all. It's not some huge rat king with big spider minions planning to attack you.* Okay, my pep talk really wasn't helping me and the sound of the irritating tiny clinks of dripping water was really starting to get to me. It was time to be productive and to find out who was down here. Maybe I'd find a sewer fairy.

I walked toward the first door on my left and I noticed that high up on the door was a small box-window with bars on it, about the size of my head. I stopped in front of it and, at that moment, I felt a sting of terror as a sudden realization took me over. This wasn't some forgotten storage area or some

sewer. *Was this a prison?* Did that mean that the person I was looking for was a criminal?

*No!* I refused to believe that someone who had a voice that angelic could be bad. I knew it was illogical to think that way, but I had to believe in something good. Besides, there were all different types of criminals and I certainly had nothing against the girl I was searching for. I didn't know her and this wasn't even my home. Who was I to judge?

I stood on the tips of my toes and reached my hands out to the bars to steady myself. I grimaced as I wrapped my fingers around the clammy poles. Fighting the chills that were walking up and down my spine, I brought my head close to the bars and ignored the scent of rust that entered my nose; a smell that reminded me of blood. I peered intently into the darkness of the room, hoping that the smell was only in my head and nothing more.

At first I didn't see anything, but upon further inspection of the floor, I could see that there was a person lying there. It wasn't light enough to make out any colours or features, but based on the size and the dress, I guessed that it was a woman. *It had to be her!*

She wasn't moving, but she had stopped singing. *Maybe she had fallen asleep.* I watched her for a moment, not sure what to do, and then I heard the scurrying sound again. This time, I saw what was making the sound. Rats. They were in there with her and they were moving around her. One even crawled on top of her. In that instant, I knew I was wrong. *She wasn't sleeping.*

The horrible realization struck me with a force so powerful that my hands went numb. I released the bars and stepped back from the door feeling panicked and dizzy from shock.

I swallowed hard in an effort to calm my swirling stomach and I listened desperately for sounds beyond the dripping and the rats. I heard nothing.

When I felt that I could move, I walked farther down the hall and decided I'd try only one more time to see if anyone else was alive in this hellish place.

I took on my biggest nerve and called out, "Hello?" The sound of my broken voice startled me as it cut through the quiet and echoed off the walls.

No voice greeted me in return, but I heard a scuffing sound coming from somewhere farther down the hall. I walked toward it and stopped in front of the last door, placing my fingers around the window bars. I went up onto the tips of my toes and looked in.

There was a person sitting against the back wall of the room. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Whoever it was, this person was breathing and, right now, that was all that counted. Before my fear could claim my voice, I spoke.

"Hello? I...uh...I heard you singing. It was beautiful...your voice, I mean. Of course, I don't know if it was you singing, but well... was it?"