

**THE
SPANISH GATEKEEPER**

BOOK I

Empire of the Ulfair

a science fiction fantasy

by

Bernard Dukas



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THIS BOOK BORROWS IN SMALL PART ON ACTUAL PERSONAGES AND EVENTS
FROM THE CLOSING YEARS OF THE 19TH CENTURY. IN EVERY OTHER RESPECT
IT IS A WORK OF FICTION AND A PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION.

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Chapter 4

Henrik

“Stop! Stop! Let me down!” screamed Bonifacia as they zig-zagged through the wood at a mad gallop. Brown sweat and foam from the straining beast clung to Bonifacia’s pretty blue pinafore. A buckle on the soldier’s cross belt jabbed her shoulder while the pommel worked against her lower back imparting a mean black bruise. But the akritar forged on, holding her tight in the saddle before him.

Grasping limbs from the surrounding forest streaked perilously close to Bonifacia’s face and she winced and wiggled to prevent fragments of brake and branch from striking her. “Oh stop!” she cried.

The horse grunted with each long stride, snorting loudly as the akritar reined first left and then right, narrowly avoiding trees and outcroppings, once or twice even jumping a fallen timber. They rode on at this interminably breakneck pace, Bonifacia bumping against the akritar like a raggedy doll.

“Oh *Dios!* Stop!” she pleaded in agony and fear, but on he pressed into the forest until the horse could give no more. At last they slowed to a trot, then a walk and then a halt somewhere deep within the wood. She could feel the akritar loose his grip, letting her slip slowly to the ground.

Brushing herself off and wiping away the tears, Bonifacia forced herself to her feet, almost toppling in the process. “I’ve lost my hairpin,” she sniveled. The akritar remained slumped in the saddle. For a moment she wondered if he’d been injured and started to worry, but he stirred finally and slowly lowered himself from the horse.

With his eyes fixed upon her, he bent at the waist to catch his breath. Pulling himself back up to his full height, he returned to his horse where it rested amid the trees, its long neck

stretched low to the ground. The animal's powerful chest and shoulders still heaved from the monumental exertion of its run. It raised its head at his approach and the akritar scratched the animal affectionately between the ears. Then moving around the horse as if in slow motion he reached under, undid the girth, and slipped off the saddle. For a long drawn out moment the akritar stared at Bonifacia, tears welling in his bloodshot eyes. He pulled a long knife from the top of his boot and studied it carefully.

Bonifacia stood stock-still, not fully comprehending. She watched him reach for the reins, tap the horse behind one knee and then gently coax it to the ground. The reason was now apparent—a thick quarrel protruded from the animal's flank. She gasped at the sight of it.

The akritar got down on one knee, cradling the horse's head in the crux of his arm. The animal gazed calmly up at him, regarding its master with unreserved love. With one quick motion of his knife the akritar slit the creature's throat, cossetting its head until the lifeblood drained away. Bonifacia shuddered and turned her head.

"Girl," said the akritar, regaining his feet.

She faced him, unable to look upon the lifeless creature.

"There is a house some ways from here where we may find safety for a time. With luck we can make it there in a few days. Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think so," said Bonifacia, though her body still ached from their harrowing ride.

He pulled a water bag and satchel from the saddle and tossed them to her. "I can't carry everything."

Bonifacia tugged the straps over her head.

"Ready?" he asked. She nodded, following after him in silence.

They walked deeper and deeper into the forest. There were no roads, no trails or footpaths that she could discern. Even the sound of birdsong evaporated. In a way, she found the undisturbed forest comforting. It seemed unlikely the enemy would pursue them into a place so far removed.

"What's your name?" she asked the akritar, shattering the dense stillness.

"Henrik," he replied, never breaking his stride.

“My name is Bonifacia,” she said.

“I know.”

“Where is it we’re going?”

“Someplace,” he said.

“That’s not very helpful.”

“Helpful?” He stopped short and turned on her. “Girl, do me a favor. Stop your garrulous prating and just keep up.”

Bonifacia glared at him. “As you wish.”

They carried on, slowly but steadily, picking their way through the forest until darkness fell and they could go no more. In the shelter of a tapering dingle, Henrik called a halt for the night. “We’ll camp here,” he said, searching about for a level place to make their beds. “You can use my cloak for cover.”

“No thank you,” said Bonifacia stubbornly.

“Just take it, will you.”

“If you insist.” She kicked some fallen leaves into a tolerable mattress and laid out Henrik’s cloak, which was large enough to cover four or five Bonifacias.

“You haven’t answered me,” said Bonifacia before going to sleep. “Where are we?”

“Kaladar,” replied Henrik.

“I suppose that’s an answer,” she said. “And who were those men that attacked us?”

“Ornish rebels. Borganin’s men. Now go to sleep. We still have a long walk ahead of us.”

Bonifacia pouted. “Do you not say your prayers before you go to bed?” she asked.

“That’s none of your business. You’re welcome to do as you please.”

Stars twinkled between the overhanging branches, the moons hidden temporarily behind the forest canopy. Bonifacia said her prayers and crawled up under Henrik’s immense cloak. She fell asleep to the sound of insect song, the peaceful rustling of leaves in the treetops and Henrik’s ocarina carrying a cheerless tune into the night. *Where is Peter?*, she wondered.

“Get up,” commanded the akritar, after what seemed only moments, but the sun was out. “We can eat as we walk.”

Bonifacia rubbed the sleep from her eyes and crawled out from beneath her soldier's cloak. It was far too long and heavy for her to carry on her own. Henrik rolled it up and strung it across his shoulder together with his haversack. "Take this." He handed her a mound of sticky paste and a handful of dried currants on top a broad green leaf.

"What is it?" she asked, giving the paste a tentative sniff.

"Breakfast. Don't eat the leaf." He strolled off, Bonifacia tripping after him.

"Breakfast?" She was famished and her stomach grumbled at the mere mention of food. "It looks like soggy bread." She poked at the viscous glop with her little finger.

"Not bread, strictly speaking," said Henrik. "It's called *melat*. Made from the pulp of a fruit. Much better than shorka eggs. Now eat up. It will give you strength."

"I don't think I'm familiar with shorka eggs."

"Sure you are. The household guards were eating them."

"You mean those funny eggs? The blue ones?"

"Yeah, that's the ones."

"And what exactly is a *shorka*? Some kind of chicken?"

"I can't say I know *cheek-ben*," replied Henrik. He stumbled on the pronunciation. "Have you not seen a shorka? Yellow padde-like creatures with big buggy eyes."

Bonifacia started to laugh. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Bonifacia. "Just that I know someone who really enjoys eggs. He's in for a big surprise when he finds out." She dipped her fingers into the melat and gave it a taste. "Hey! Not bad," she exclaimed, smiling widely. "A little like lemon custard. You must show me how to make this." She paused, becoming suddenly very serious. "I'm sorry about your horse."

"Me too," said Henrik.

They walked together through wooded glens and steep river valleys for more days and nights than Bonifacia cared to count. Her feet were sore and hurt with every step. "Does this forest have an end?" she bleated.

"We're almost out of it. Can't you hear the birds?"

"The birds?"

"Just listen."

She was so intent on putting one foot in front of the other that she hadn't noticed the birdsong. Except for the occasional woodpecker, heavy silence pervaded the deepest parts of the wood, every sound absorbed by the damp moss and lichen-covered trees. But here, at the eaves of the forest, where the trees were thinning, the sun reached through the canopy and the birds were once again all a twitter.

"The walking will be easier once we're clear of the trees and back on level ground. With luck, we should be able to make our destination before nightfall."

"You still haven't told me where our destination is," retorted Bonifacia, trying her hardest not to sound querulous.

"My uncle's cottage," said Henrik. "He lives alone and doesn't receive many visitors."

The conversation died there. Bonifacia needed all the strength she could muster to soldier on, but the sun on her face, the pleasant singing of the birds and patches of fresh wildflowers put her in a much better spirit. Near noon they shared a meal of melat and wild berries while seated atop the rocks beside a crystal rill.

"I'm so sleepy," sighed Bonifacia. "And my shoes are in absolute tatters."

"Not much farther now," replied Henrik. "Do you want me to carry you?"

She couldn't tell if he were serious or not. "No thank you," she replied. With the collection of things Henrik was already carrying, she would have been a dreadful burden. "I will manage, but I don't think I can go another day like this. It's three steps for me to every one of yours."

"Like I said, it's not much farther. We'll cross this brook," said Henrik, gesturing with one hand, "then pass through a stretch of lowland fen, but it soon turns to mire and will pull you under if you step badly. You must be extra careful then and mind you stick to the track."

Bonifacia did not at all like the sound of that. "Your uncle lives in the morass?"

"Uncle Bartle likes his privacy. He sells peat from the tur-bary...amongst other things."

After their meal, she removed her shoes and followed Henrik across the brook, picking up the narrow track again on top of

the slippery brae. As Henrik foretold, the terrain altered rapidly, trees abandoning the land in favor of sedge, tussock and spindly willows interspersed amongst pools of still dark water thick with blooms of green-blue algae.

They wended their way carefully through the growing miasma, the smell of swamp gas turning their noses. As the sun began its descent the sound of peeping insects grew louder, pressing in about them. The air grew dense with beleaguering midges that flitted annoyingly about their eyes and lashes.

A deep throated croak rumbled somewhere off to their right, the creature hidden by the rushes and tall marsh grass, answered by another somewhere in the distance. "I know that sound," said Bonifacia, anxiously scanning the swamp. "What did you call it? A shorka? Are there many of those horrid beasts out here?"

"Some. They sound a lot closer than they really are. Come, keep moving."

They hurried along the winding trail as best they could, keeping a wary eye on the setting sun. "Over there," said Henrik.

The trail ended abruptly at the edge of a swift moving stream, edged all round in tall grass and reeds and shrouded in a dense mist. A bollard rose amid the tussocks. Fastened to the top of it were block and tackle, and three thick ropes projecting out across the stream, their end points lost in the heavy fog. From one of these ropes lay suspended a bosun's chair with a wood slat for a seat.

"Get on. I'll pull you across the water."

"*Caray!* Are you mad?" exclaimed Bonifacia.

"It's perfectly safe. I've ridden it a million times."

Bonifacia remained steadfastly unconvinced. "I don't care if you've ridden it ten million times."

"I can go first if you prefer."

"That suits me fine," she said.

"You'll have to wait here on your own till I'm across," warned Henrik.

"If I must, I must. Just get on with it," replied Bonifacia, irritably.

Henrik let drop his haversack. "Give me the satchel and water bag." Bonifacia unhooked the items from her shoulder and passed them to Henrik, watching as he hid them behind some

reeds. "My uncle has a boat on the far side of the river. 'Safer that way. I can come back for these things later.'"

Henrik swung himself up between the folds of the ropes, settling himself on the narrow seat. The aerial device drooped along the catenary with his added weight. "See, nothing to it. If I pull on this second line it will take me across, then I'll send the chair back for you. When you're ready, just give the line a solid tug. Mind you hold on to the ropes with both hands and I'll pull you across from the other side. All right?"

"Fine," said Bonifacia.

He reached up and drew on the line. The bosun's chair lurched forward over the water, swinging from side to side as it went. Hand over hand he hauled on the overhead line and slowly Henrik and the odd contraption disappeared into the mist.

Bonifacia stood by the edge of the river listening to the roar of the water. Between the dusk, a cloudy sky, and the thick gray mist, she felt alone and vulnerable, as if standing in a dimly lit room. The wait was interminable, and she remembered the feeling she had when Peter slipped over the wall in the hollow leaving her on her own, frightened in the darkness with only a taper lamp. She trembled at the memory.

At last the empty aerial chair came bumping out of the mist, swinging wildly. It stopped abruptly when it reached her side of the brae, knocking up against the block and tackle.

Bonifacia took a deep breath, crossed herself, and slowly climbed out onto the wooden slat that barely sufficed for a seat. The chair hardly dipped at all from her added weight. Tugging hard on the line and hurriedly entwining her arms around the two ropes on either side, the aerial device lurched forward. She closed her eyes tightly, feeling the seat pull out over the water with each steady jerk of the rope. Part way across she gained the courage to open one eye and glimpsed the swift flowing stream only a few feet below her dangling legs. Ahead of her, she could see only fog and the churning water.

Bonifacia's imagination immediately got the best of her. She had no certain knowledge that Henrik had arrived safely on the opposite bank. It might not even be Henrik hauling now on the rope. Who might she find when she alighted on the other

side? Panic welled up inside her. She called out, "Henrik! Henrik!" but there was no answer to be heard above the burble of the stream.

At length the chair emerged from the mist and she found herself hanging above dry land, Henrik standing at ease beside the reciprocating bollard.

"Not so difficult, eh?"

Bonifacia scrambled from the flying chair, happy to have two feet planted back on *terra firma* (or the nearest equivalent).

"The cottage is down this way. You can just make out the light from here."

It was very dark by this point, clouds having moved in to obscure the night sky. Henrik set off at a brisk pace for his uncle's cottage. They stopped just outside a low rail fence. "Best wait here a moment," cautioned Henrik. He hopped over the fence and headed toward a small wood frame house raised on stilts. There were voices in the dark, a little laughter, and a few moments later, Henrik was back at the rail.

"No worries," he said. Reaching over to grasp her under the arms, Henrik lifted Bonifacia up and over the fence. "This way."

The door was open and they went directly in. Henrik's uncle stood stooped over the fender tinkering with an iron kettle. For a moment, Bonifacia worried that his long white brows might catch the flame, but something about the old man gave the impression of long practice and quiet competence.

"Tea will be ready in just a tick," he said. "Take a seat at the table." That's when Bonifacia noticed the pedestal behind the old man. Instinctively, she whirled about to face the doorway. Despite what she knew she'd find there, she still gave a start at the sight of the enormous blinking eyes of a shorka watching her from a mat beside the door, just as they had at the gatekeeper's cottage.

"I should have warned you," apologized Henrik.

"Ah," said Henrik's uncle, seeing her recoil. "That's just Strella. Take no notice of her."

"I don't care much for shorka either," admitted Henrik. "Uncle Bartle captures and tames them for market."

Bartle joined them at the table. He walked with a perceptible limp.

"You mean to say the creatures aren't domesticated?" exclaimed Bonifacia.

"No. 'Course not," replied Bartle. He smiled, displaying a mouthful of crooked yellow teeth. "They only breeds in the wild and very particular about it."

"We heard them calling to each other in the quagmire beyond the river," remarked Bonifacia.

"Just so," said Bartle. "No place for young'ins like yourself to go wanderin'."

"Why's that?" asked Bonifacia, not sure she wanted to hear the answer. "The gatekeeper in the forest used his shorka to subdue Peter, but in general they seem pretty docile."

"Docile?" exclaimed Uncle Bartle. "Pah." He massaged his leg thoughtfully.

"They're not?"

"Natural cannibals, given the opportunity. A little thing like you. A pair would have you by the shanks and splayed in two in no time at all."

"Uncle!" protested Henrik. "I'm sorry Bonifacia, he's not used to decent company and likes to frighten people." It was the first time Henrik had called her by her proper name.

Bartle sniffed the air. "The truth ain't always pretty," he said. "Ah, the kettle's up."

Bonifacia watched the shorka in the corner watching her as Bartle poured the tea.

"Don't worry about Strella," said Henrik. "She's very old and set in her ways. Once tamed, shorka get very lazy and quite docile, despite what Uncle says."

Bartle chortled. "So, Henrik, what's the story here, eh? Too busy being soldier. You haven't come to see your old uncle in ages, and show up now with this little thing in tow. Not from here, is she? Someone's took her eyebrows, poor darlin'." He examined Bonifacia in the firelight. "She could stand a bath."

Bonifacia reddened.

"She's been through a lot, Uncle." Henrik recalled their story from the point where he'd encountered Bonifacia and Peter at the gatekeeper's cottage.

"So it's come to that," quipped Bartle, learning of the Ornish attack. He gazed down at Bonifacia. "You came through a portal?" he asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Please, call me Uncle Bartle. Why would you want to do a thing like that?”

Bonifacia sighed. “Enter the tunnel? I don’t know really. It was a mistake. We didn’t fully comprehend.” Her eyes welled with tears.

“Damned fool wizards, always muckin’ about,” cursed Bartle.

Henrik interrupted the conversation. “We’d like to rest here with you for a while, if you don’t mind, Uncle. Think on things for a bit. Decide on our next move.”

“Of course, Henrik. You’re always welcome.” He turned to Bonifacia, his leathery features flushing warm and sincere. “And you too little darlin’. Stay as long as you like.”