

SHIFTING STARS



- The Salvation of Tempestria Book 1 -

GARY STRINGER

The Salvation of Tempestria

Shifting Stars

MY NAME IS ARSHES MEGANE AND I AM IMMORTAL.

My Time Intervention is illegal and dangerous, but I believe it's the only way to save our world.

To begin my justification, I must tell you about my mother, Catriona, a half-Faery magic student on the best and worst day of her life.

The day her home is destroyed by a terrible Monster. The day her Angel restores it and gives her a gift. Understanding that gift becomes her obsession.

With the aid of pioneering magic and ridiculous radical plans, Catriona allows nothing to stand in her way, until the day her quest forces her to make a terrible choice between preserving knowledge for the future and saving lives in the present.

At what price comes knowledge and what price is too high?

Shifting Stars marks the beginning of the epic series, The Salvation of Tempestria. A fantasy world within a wider sci-fi universe, populated by bold characters with ridiculous radical ideas, as told by an immortal girl from the future with a plan to save the world...or possibly end it.

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The Salvation of Tempestria
Book 1

Gary Stringer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter 1

My name is Arshes Megane and I present this in defence of my actions. As I write this, at my behest, Aunt Mandalee has already gone to fetch my father from a critical moment, a thousand years ago. I understand that this Time Intervention is illegal and dangerous. Potentially catastrophic. Yet, I maintain I am right to do this. To me, the choice is simple: sit here, meekly playing by the rules while the world burns, or throw the rulebook on the fire and save...everything. Or try to.

But I'm getting ahead of myself, or possibly behind myself. That's the trouble with Time manipulation: it can be hard to tell. Either way, let me take a step back, or forward, take a breath and begin to compose myself.

The moon is but a silver sliver in a starry sky, as I gaze out of my window. Hence, my desk is littered with lighted candles aplenty and an oil lamp for extra illumination on this page. Of course, I could simply speak a word of magic and light up this room as brightly as if it were Midsummer's Day. Indeed, in this age of magical wonders, there are commonplace spells with which I could transfer my thoughts directly onto magical recording devices. But tonight is not a night for magic.

These days, there is a small but vocal group of individuals who believe we have become lazy in this modern age and desensitised to the non-magical wonders that have surrounded us for who knows how long. Aunt Dreya would call that 'sentimental nonsense.' For her, magic is all; even more so since Ascending to the higher planes. Oh, how I miss her!

Me? I take a more balanced view of magic. While I appreciate its place in the world and all we can do, tonight, as I say, is not a night for magic. So, I sit at my desk, armed with nothing more than a pen and inscribe the words onto paper, as it was done in ages past – simpler times, when the dew of Creation was still fresh upon the world.

Please, gentle reader, forgive my ramblings. I sometimes get so caught up in the simple pleasures of this form of non-magical creativity that I forget what it is I am supposed to be writing about. For the record, allow me to introduce myself: I am the only daughter of Daelen

StormTiger and Catriona Redfletching. These are names that are remembered with honour in times past, present and, I trust, in the future as well, if you will forgive such crude temporal terms. In case there is ever such a time that the old legends fade and are forgotten, however, let me write further.

My name is Arshes Megane and I am immortal.

Perhaps I should have led with that, but there's a fine line between dramatic and pretentious.

When I say immortal, I do not mean merely long-lived, but nor should you imagine that immortality is the same as omniscience or invulnerability, though I do possess unique powers and natural defences that I use to protect myself and those I care about. Immortality means that my ageing process stopped more than nine centuries ago and will never restart, leaving me with the appearance of a young woman of around nineteen or twenty. Barring some grand cosmic accident, or unless I fulfil my final destiny, whatever that might be, I shall exist until the end of eternity. Does eternity have an end, or does it go on forever? I do not know. Moreover, it occurs to me that true immortality is something that cannot be proven. Who but another immortal could be around to verify it? Philosophy aside, however, proof or not, I know that it is true.

How this came to be, I cannot say. A consequence of being born within the Guardianship? The Guardians exist out of Time, and I am so far the only child to be born in its embrace. A legacy of my father? He did originate from one of the higher planes of existence, where Time flows differently. Heritage from my mother's Faery blood? To the Faery of Quarthonia, I am Emryse Amrosia – Ever-Living – the latest of several immortals that feature in song and story, if one is to believe such things. (As a corollary to my earlier musings, I can't help but wonder, if there have been other immortals before, why have I not met them? By definition, they must be alive somewhere!) Maybe it is a combination of all these factors. Perhaps it is none of them. Once again, whatever the reason, all I know is that it is true: My name is Arshes Megane, and I am immortal.

Accepting this fact, you will appreciate that I have a unique perspective on the world. That is why I am sitting here, preparing to write this story: no other could.

I am choosing to call these ramblings, 'The Salvation of Tempestria' in desperate hopes that events yet to come will match the

title. If anything goes wrong – perhaps the smallest mistake – then as far as this world, this reality is concerned, the events I relate to you will never happen. Yet I swear to you on all I hold sacred – by the memory of my father, through the love of my mother, on the very essence of magic itself – that every word I write is true.

But I am in danger of starting my story at the end instead of the middle. I understand it is customary to start a story at the beginning, but when one lives outside Time as I do, the beginning can sometimes be...elusive. Besides, sometimes, unless the middle happens as it's supposed to, the beginning may never happen. So, gentle reader, allow me to present the Salvation of Tempestria, in the middle.

As I gaze through Time to that moment, gentle reader, I can see that Daelen has agreed that it would be best to camp for one more night and begin the final push to Kullos' fortress at first light. Since there are no more plans to make, while the others head for their tents for the night, the shadow warrior has chosen to go for a walk alone to relax. He knows it will probably be his last chance to enjoy something so simple.

Even with all his power, the great shadow warrior always took pleasure in the smallest things.

That is a side to my father that people often do not appreciate. Perhaps it is his influence, as much as my mother's, that compels me to write this story in such an archaic manner as ink inscribed onto paper with a pen.

The shadow warrior has been walking for close to an hour, when he comes across a female figure standing in the moonlight, dressed in white body armour much like his own, with white boots and a purple mask that conceals the upper part of her face.

“Greetings, Daelen,” she offers. “Ah, but it is good to see you like this again; it's been a while.”

I can see he recognises her. Almost. Something about her causes Daelen's memory to flashback to when his current mission all started. She looks very different, but somehow, her aura is the same.

“You're her, aren't you?” he says, at last. “You're the one who woke me from my rest and made me aware of the threat and the power of Kullos in the first place. Who are you?”

Considering how to answer without revealing too much too soon, her mouth twitches as a very old memory flashes through her mind. A thousand years ago from her perspective. Just a few days from his.

“You once referred to me as an Assassin Peacemaker,” she replies at last.

“Mand—?”

“—Don’t say my name!” his visitor cuts him off. “You don’t know what terrible trouble you could cause. That’s why I didn’t use it myself. You asked who I am, and now you know, but I’m not who you think I am...or maybe I am, in a way, but never mind, there will be time for explanations later. Assuming there still is a later. Right now, I need your help.”

Ever stubborn, Daelen wants some answers right then and there.

“But how can you be here?” he demands. “When I left, you were asleep back there!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I still am,” is her reply, “and I’m not here...that is, rather, I am here, but you are not. Yes, well, it’s a bit difficult to explain, really.”

Ah, gentle reader, that is so typical of my dear Aunt Mandalee, the White Assassin. She often said she dearly wished these things weren’t so hard to explain. Even now, I know she sometimes wonders if she makes any sense at all. She’s too hard on herself. She never chose to be a diplomat, a teacher or a politician. She became a demon hunter, an assassin and a Cleric of Nature. How strange it is that she is the only one of the original Three Guardians still in the position, at least she was until she agreed to this desperate act. I’m sure any rational person would have placed wagers on her being the first to resign. Of course, one wonders what exactly counts as reason in this irrational world, but that, gentle reader, is a subject better suited to my philosophy texts. For now, I have a story to tell.

“Look, if you’ll just come with me a little way further into the woods, we’ll be able to speak more freely.”

“Alright,” Daelen agrees and extends his arm for Aunt Mandalee to take as they stroll along.

She smiles at the gesture. It’s a rather old-fashioned tradition, from her perspective, but she can see no harm in indulging him.

After walking for no more than five minutes, the woodland opens out into a clearing and Mandalee declares that they have arrived.

Releasing her hold on Daelen's arm, she at last removes her mask so he can see her face. A face that appears about ten years older than when he last saw her an hour ago.

"You're from the future!" Daelen realises. "You're a future M-." He catches himself. "A future version of the woman I know."

Mandalee pulls a face.

"That is a very crude description, Daelen. The reality has to do with the true nature of Time and its relative spatial dimensions, but I can't tell you about that."

"Why not?"

"You're not ready for it. Your entire home plane of existence isn't ready for it yet."

"Are you really so advanced in your time?" Daelen breathes in awe, trying to imagine a future where the knowledge of mere mortals might surpass that of his people. It's hard for him to imagine how such a thing is possible.

"Yes," Mandalee agrees, "as a matter of fact, we are. In some ways, at least."

"If you are so advanced, how come you need help from someone as primitive and backward as me?"

"Now, now, Daelen. Be nice," Mandalee chides him gently.

"Sorry," Daelen apologises. "That was uncalled for, wasn't it?"

"Yes, actually, it was. To answer the essence of your question, though...well, for now, let's just say the danger we face is unique to your own experience. Will you help us?"

Daelen gazes around the clearing in which he is standing. It surely reminds him of Catriona's Meadow, except he knows it's entirely the wrong world for that. He feels there's something else about it, something strange – it's been nagging him since he first entered, but he can't put his finger on what it is. That's making him irritable and stubborn.

"In case you've forgotten your history, I'm in the middle of something important right now."

"Not from my perspective, you're not," Mandalee counters. "Look, if you help us and we succeed, I shall return you but a moment after we left, and you can get back to fighting Kullos. It won't affect you in any way."

“And if we fail?” Daelen asks, fearing the answer he knows is coming.

“If we fail, my friend, nothing you do here will matter.”

“It doesn't seem like I have much choice,” the shadow warrior grumbles.

“Of course you have a choice,” Mandalee counters. “But within the parameters of who you are, I agree – there's no other you could make.”

“You've changed,” Daelen observes.

The assassin shrugs. “Happens to the best of us, dear.”

He couldn't have failed to notice how evasive she is, and there's a casual flippancy in her voice that the Mandalee he knows would never have used. The Mandalee he knows is a throw-caution-to-the-wind young woman who often uses ‘get very drunk, armed to the teeth and go for it’ as the way to catch her mark. What Daelen doesn't know is that for so long, she has been the White Guardian, not the White Assassin and that has led her to adapt.

Living outside Time, she has aged no more than ten years in the traditional sense, due to accumulated days within the Timestream. Even so, one day, a few years ago, when I asked her how she was truly feeling, she admitted to me, “I feel old.”

As an immortal, gentle reader, I am beginning to understand what she meant.

After she has assisted me with this Illegal Time Intervention, she has vowed to resign from the Guardianship, both in protest at the others' refusal to act and, as she put it, “Because it's time,” which is a strange concept for one who lives outside Time, but I could see the sense of it.

Take it from one who knows: Timelessness is wearying.

If all goes well, Mandalee will return to the timestream to live out the rest of her natural human life. It is my hope and my prayer that she will recapture her youth and rejoin the hunt. When I project that possible future, the early signs are promising. Her feline friend Shyleen's coat seems to already have a new glossy golden sheen to it, as well.

Yes, no doubt her resignation is the best thing for her, even though I know it means I will lose her as I have lost everyone else.

As I have said, I am not merely Timeless; I am immortal. I just wonder, gentle reader: how exactly does one resign from immortality?

Accepting her plea for help, Daelen says, “Alright, are you going to open the portal, or shall I?”

“Portal?” Mandalee looks amused.

“Yes, you know, to travel to your time.”

“Portal?” she repeats, laughing despite the seriousness of the situation. “My goodness, how quaint! I’m almost tempted to let you do it, just for the experience, but now is not the time for such crude techniques. We don’t use portals anymore, my friend.”

“Then how do we get to your time?”

With a smile, she replies, “We’re already here.”

“That’s why this place feels strange! I’ve walked through this forest so many times, and I don’t remember ever noticing this place before.”

“That’s because it doesn’t exist,” Mandalee explains.

“You mean, it doesn’t exist in my time?”

“It doesn’t exist in any time.”

“Then, where are we?” Daelen looks confused. “I mean, this ground we’re standing on, where is it?”

Mandalee sighs; exasperated. “It’s nowhere! I told you – it doesn’t exist!”

Poor Mandalee. It’s like trying to explain the Origin of the Universe to a baby. Daelen is simply not sufficiently developed to cope with it. So many of what are considered the most basic root concepts are beyond anything the shadow warrior has had to deal with, and Mandalee has neither the time nor the patience to take him through nursery education.

Trying to rationalise it, Daelen asks, “Are you saying this glade is an illusion?”

“Oh no, it’s real; it just doesn’t exist. Look, it all comes down to the manipulation of spatial dynamics and dimensional harmonics to annex a section of spacetime. This place is special because it’s Timeless, but similar annexes are routinely created. It’s simple enough – delicate and intricate, but not hard. Any other questions?”

“Just one, about Time travel: you act as if it’s commonplace.”

“It is,” she replies.

“Since when?”

“For the Guardians, from their creation – it’s a natural consequence of existing out of Time. For the members of the Higher Council, over a century. For your average wizards, druids and clerics, about half that time. Then in recent years, basic observation-only Time travel has been available to all for recreation, vacations and study.”

“That’s impossible!” Daelen insists. He’s obviously finding it very hard to adjust to a world that has left him behind. “I would have noticed! Where are all these travellers from the future? Why aren’t they all over the place? Why haven’t I met any, apart from you?”

“Oh, the arrogance!” Mandalee rolls her eyes. “I had almost forgotten that about you. I often used to wonder if the real reason you left your plane of existence was that your ego grew too large and it just sort of spilt out like an overfilled bathtub. The reason you haven’t met any other Time travellers is that, except for the Guardians, nobody has ever gone back this far.”

“Why not?”

“Because, my dear shadow warrior, you’re just not interesting enough yet. Now, if you’re quite finished, it’s time for us to join a friend of mine so she can explain the current situation. She is looking forward to seeing you.”

With that, the White Guardian flies into the air, leaving Daelen little choice but to follow meekly behind.

Lying is generally frowned upon by White Clerics, but I’m sure all the gods of goodness will forgive Aunt Mandalee for her taking sweet revenge for how the shadow warrior had acted so superior and condescending when they first met. Surely, in that context, no-one could blame her for this harmless bit of fun.

I’m sure, gentle reader, you will have noticed, that she used the phrase ‘observation-only.’ That’s because the real answer to Daelen’s question is that the magic used for mass-market Time travel necessarily makes the visitors completely invisible and incorporeal to the natives of that time. Only the Guardians and I have Interactive Time travel, which is why only Mandalee could visit Daelen in this way and enlist his much-needed help.

Now that he's agreed, I can get on with my story, secure in the knowledge that my plans are in motion, metaphorically speaking. Literally speaking, *nothing* is in motion, because I'm keeping my house frozen in what I suppose one might call a bubble of Time.

In another quirk of my unique magio-physiology, I can create a Time travel dead zone around me, which I can extend to those nearby. That's how I'm holding the Black and Red Guardians captive in my room, so they can't interfere with what Mandalee is doing. Effectively, I have changed the Time settings to 'observation only' so that I can see and relate a first-hand account of what happened in what one might crudely call the past. The two Guardians can't stop me, because – and I say this without conceit – they're not powerful enough without the 'Power of Three.' And, before you say anything, yes, I know that's a cliché, and no, they don't really call it that. I just say it to wind them up and prick their egos a bit.

Nevertheless, the point still stands: The Guardians are greater than the sum of their parts, which is why it's so sad to see them divided like this. It is my hope that the story I write will convince them, the Council, and you, gentle reader, that I am doing the right thing.

'Who keeps me in check?' you may ask.

Why, Aunt Mandalee, of course! If ever I am on the receiving end of one of her Looks of Disappointment, I am completely powerless. No magic required. And failing her, there's always Shyleen. You might not know it to see the leopard as she is now, curled up by my fire and beginning to purr, but trust me: that is one cat you don't want to cross!

In case you haven't guessed, the 'friend' Mandalee is bringing Daelen to see, is me. I suppose it was easier for her to go with the word 'friend' rather than 'immortal daughter from your future, a product of a relationship you never even got to have and who, if things go wrong between you and Catriona before they're supposed to go wrong, might never exist, but no pressure.'

It will be strange to meet him, when for nearly a thousand years I've believed I would never have a chance to know him.

But my special relationship with Time is relevant for another reason. Even though from an external frame of reference, the pair will be here any moment, I still have as much time as I need to write this story. I know it's weird, but as Mandalee so eloquently put it: The explanation has to do with the true nature of Time and its relative spatial

dimensions, but I can't tell you about that because you're not ready for it.

No offence.

Actually, I am doing you a favour by not telling you how it works; I know exactly how it works, and the whole thing makes my head hurt. I wouldn't want to inflict that on all my innocent readers, so in short, it's best to stick with the image of a bubble in Time.

Now, I think it's high time I gave you some much-needed perspective on my mother, Catriona, and my two Aunts, Mandalee and Dreya. The people who made me who I am and the world what it is. To do that, I must take us back to the beginning...

...Or, at least, an earlier part of the middle.

Chapter 2

The world of Tempestria was well-named, for the sky, both day and night, was dominated by a perpetual vortex of swirling energy. The shape and pattern were continually shifting, and its intensity seemed to wax and wane according to some vast cosmic cycle, but even at its lowest ebb, it was far from what anyone could describe as ‘calm.’ Of course, in those days, no-one in this world considered this unusual or strange. After all, they knew of no other worlds with which to compare theirs. To the people of Tempestria, this was simply the nature of reality.

Now and then a group would spring up, claiming that the world had not always been so and that it had once had another name entirely. Depending on prevailing social attitudes, the response to these individuals ranged from polite sympathy for their delusional state through to, I’m sorry to say, gentle reader, persecution and violence.

Catriona was born to parents who many considered mismatched. Her father, Gabrian, was one of the long-lived Faery who was as rooted to his sun-drenched Quarthonian forest as any oak tree. Like many Faery, he grew uncomfortable if he strayed too far from his forest home. The one time he visited a human city, he became seriously ill. While not as ancient as many of the Quarthonian trees, at almost two hundred years old, he was considered middle-aged. Gabrian was a druid mage, a healer in the community, while Catriona’s mother, Velena Redfletching, was a fierce warrior. Equally adept at hunting both animals and people, she was well-known for the battle frenzy that would come upon her when she felt threatened. This greatly enhanced her speed, strength and focus, to the point where nothing could sway, divert or reason with her. Aged just nineteen when she first met Gabrian, she was more at home in the crowded city streets at night and rarely stayed in one place for long. She was indeed the unstoppable force to Gabrian’s immovable object. The name Redfletching came from Velena’s trademark ruby-coloured feathers, which adorned the tails of all her arrows. Catriona adopted the practice and earned the name on the day she outshot her mother.

Despite their differences – or perhaps because of them – Gabrian and Velena were hopelessly attracted to each other. Catriona was the fruit of their love, their only child. Trained in the formidable archery

and hunting skills of her mother and the gentle magic of her father as she grew up, she proved to be highly gifted in both sides. From a young age, she appreciated the strength that is found in diversity and committed herself to the pursuit of Balance in herself, in magic and in the world.

Outwardly, modern-day Faery were slightly smaller than the average human and considerably lighter, possessing hollow bones as a legacy of evolution from creatures that could fly. Faery did not have wings, however, and depictions of winged Faery were generally deemed offensive. Their most distinctive feature was a stripe of small brown spots that ran down each side of their body, legs and arms. Catriona's markings extended to her face, although as a half-Faery, they were faded, so they could easily be mistaken for freckles. Cat was always quick to make it clear that they were not.

The mortals of Tempestria shared their world with higher planar beings, powerful even beyond the gods to whom they prayed. Every now and then, Daelen StormTiger would drop out of the sky and fight some unfathomable cosmic threat known as Kullos, and often their great and terrible battles took their toll on innocent Tempestrians. According to legend, one particularly devastating battle, in ages past, caused Daelen to somehow split in two. He and his twin, generally known as the dark clone, did not get on, and so Daelen had two nemeses to fight. Relative to my mother's time, that was a thousand years ago and even now, almost a thousand beyond that, we know almost nothing about the world before that time. There are no records, no history books. Nothing. To all intents and purposes, that was Year Zero, but that's clearly impossible.

All mortals knew of Daelen was that he was something called a shadow warrior – as was Kullos – a being of incredible power and their world's self-styled protector. It was a matter of some debate as to whether the world would, in fact, need a protector if he would simply go away, which, to the relief of many, he did for long periods. Still, nobody, not even the wizards and the clerics, had the power to do much about it when Daelen StormTiger chose to return and 'protect' them once more.

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