

# Archmage of the Universe

Magelore Book III



by Christine Morgan

JLGe

**Archmage  
of the  
Universe**  
*Mage Lore Book III*

*By Christine Morgan*

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## Foreword

A single page of a Christine Morgan novel is enough to remind me why I hate reading fantasy fiction.

Just one witty exchange between comrades in arms has me clutching my head in torment.

Just one twist-riddled fight scene is enough to transform my ordinarily expressionless face into a mix of horror and startled amazement.

For I realize that no more work will be done, no more email will be checked, no more television will be watched, and no telephone solicitor will be granted my undivided attention until I have carefully devoured the entire book from cover to glorious cover.

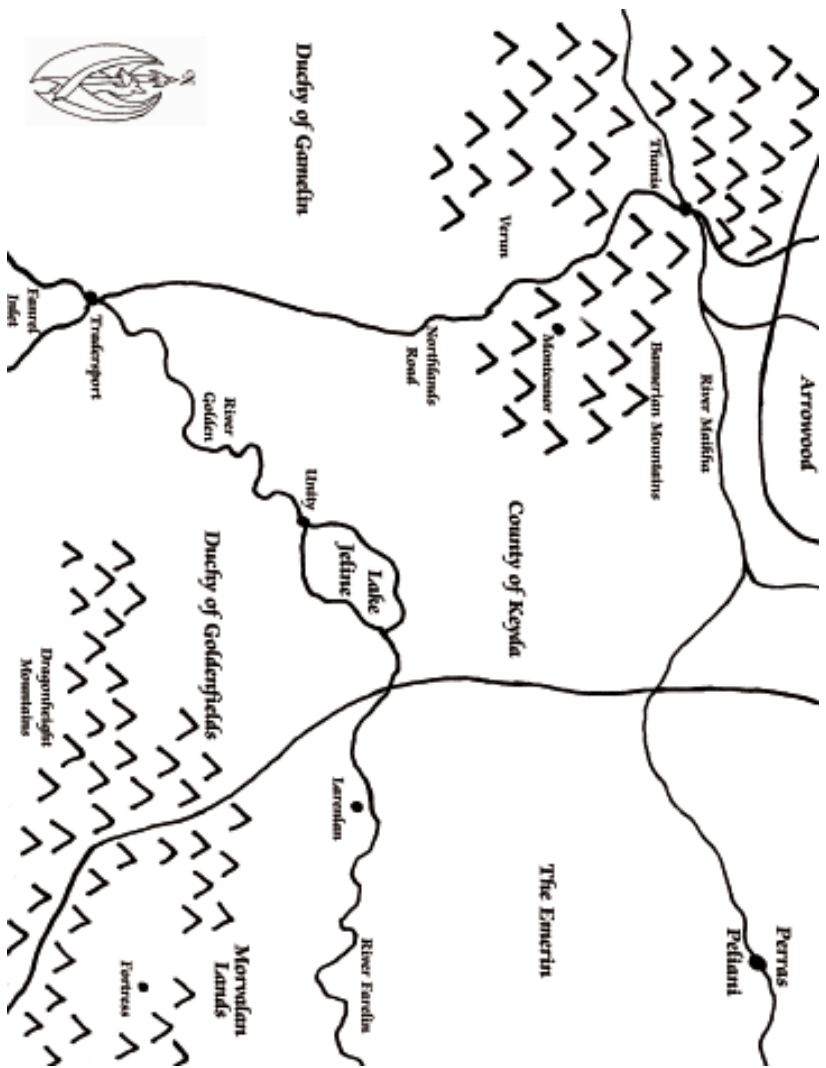
Imagine the anguish I have suffered at her hands. I have gone three days without bathing. I have come home from the bus station to find uncut grass as high as my knees and a family of rabbits living in my television. I have suffered the unique embarrassment of actually being asked to leave a dentist's office at closing time. All because I could not tear myself away from the work of Christine Morgan.

Civilizations may rise and fall. Hurricanes may destroy my continent. Friends and acquaintances may visit my home and devour my reserves of croutons and mineral water. And yet I have no knowledge of these events, ensnared as I am by the same insidious work you now hold in your hands.

If I could give the reader just once piece of advice, it would be this: save yourself! Walk away from this book while you still can, and take up something less stimulating. Stay available to the distractions of everyday life without the burden of your inevitable unswerving commitment to the characters and events you may find herein. Examine the latest "Reality Television" show, study arthroscopy, or mull over the endless list of ingredients in your sugary breakfast cereals. Arrange the rocks in your garden or surf the Internet for signs of intelligent life. Resist while you still have the power.

I have done everything I can.

—James Ernest  
New York City  
February 12, 2001



Part One:  
Power Behind the  
Throne



### 3

**Violence is not senseless if it's effective.**

— *The Book of Solarrin*

Geoffrey of Verun woke from nightmare to a pounding, and his confused initial thought was that he was hearing his heart slamming against his ribs. Only when he was fully awake did he realize that the pounding was on the door, not in his chest. He sat up in the narrow bed, spilling his blankets to the floor.

He had been several days in Verun now, hiding out in his sister's house, keeping away from the windows lest the neighbors realize she was harboring a fugitive. Rest and Anne's herbal remedies had helped his leg to heal, although he would have a knot of scar there for the rest of his life.

Slower to mend was the ache in his heart, and the shame. He had come to his sister because he had nowhere else to go, but even then he hadn't been sure if Anne would take him in or turn him in. Women of Verun were as capable and brave and dutiful as their menfolk, of all those the one of most import being *dutiful*. Of all crimes most heinous to a Verunian, desertion was high among them.

Yet their tie of blood had led her to listen, as he stammered out his tale in a haze of misery and pain. How he had left Thanis, wounded and under cover of darkness, and made his slow way to Verun. Slow because he dared not take the roads, dared not be seen, and had a festering wound left by a crossbow bolt in his thigh. She had cleansed it for him as he told her of Solarrin, and the circumstances that had led to his abandoning all that he'd ever been most proud of attaining.

Anne had barely been able to acknowledge this broken, weeping shell of a man as her brother. He had seen it in her eyes, how pity warred with duty inside her. But in the end, pity won. She had tended him, fed him, sheltered him, and as the days passed and he regained his strength, the bitter bite of what he'd done began to fester as much as the wound had done. But this was nothing

that could be treated with poultices and rest. He had an infection of the soul that nothing could remedy.

A dim glow grew in the hall and resolved itself into a candle, with Anne's hand cupped around the flame and her body a shadow in a nightdress. The flickering light cast hollows beneath her eyes and made her look older, frightened.

No . . . the age might be illusion, but the fright was real. Geoff felt it too. Someone hammering at the door in the dark of night; such could only bode ill. He had been spotted, had been found out, and now the fort commander or the officers of the Royal Guard had come to claim him.

Or someone even worse . . .

Geoff shivered, and clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from rattling. He got silently from the bed and drew on a pair of woolen trousers as he heard Anne make her careful way by candlelight to the front of the house. As in many Verunian homes, weaponry were displayed on the walls of each room, and Geoff debated with himself as to what to do.

He chose a sword, but told himself that if it was an officer or a soldier, he would do the right thing and surrender rather than raise arms against his fellows. That might be the first step toward allaying his shame. By finally standing up and facing the penalty for his actions.

The sword was in case it was someone-even-worse.

"Who's there?" His brave sister's voice didn't quaver as she called.

"Rilmar," came the reply, and Geoff knew his friend's voice at once although Rilmar sounded hoarse and thick and ill. "Rilmar Bearsarm . . . once of the Royal Guard."

"Once?" Anne hissed at Geoff as he crept quickly to join her.

"He must have deserted, as I did."

"Where is Geoff?" Rilmar asked through the door. "I know he would have come here. I need to find him. Help me."

"He sounds . . ." Anne whispered.

"Terrible, yes," Geoff said. "What he must have been through, on the run this long!"

"It could be a trick," she said. "He could have led the officers here to find you."

"Not Rilmar. We were close as brothers. Royal Guard or no, he wouldn't betray me. He'd die first."

Geoff opened the door, and saw how prescient his words had been.

The thing sprang in as soon as the opening was wide enough. It still wore the remains of a blue and gold uniform, the shreds of it flapping around him. It had been skinned, a flayed horrific thing of red-black straps of muscle and staring, lidless eyes.

They were supposed to be slow, this was Geoff's insane thought in the moment he tried too late to slam the door and shut this terror out. Supposed to be slow, and how could they be fast when they were *dead*, walking dead with

flesh sloughing from their bones? Yet fast, it was fast, the door slamming on nothing but a trailing scrap of cloth.

It was in the house. In the front room, and the leaping shadows from the candle in Anne's shaking hand did not conceal the monstrousness of what it was. It had been Rilmar Bearsarm once – in its movements Geoff could see the fighting skill of his former comrade. But no one could have survived, nor would have wanted to, the tortures that had been done to him.

Someone was screaming, and in the extremity of his fear and shock Geoff wasn't sure if it was Anne or himself. He stumbled back from the undead Guardsman, barely avoiding a swing of its fist and not avoiding the spatter of maggots that flew from the limb. They struck his face and bare chest, warm and moistly squirming. He slapped at himself, gagging, catching the rotting reek of the thing, gagging again.

Something hard and sharp brushed his calf, the sword he still held but had forgotten. He brought it up in a clumsy slice that would have earned him a stern lecture from every weapons master he'd ever had, justifiably so as it missed by a clear foot.

Anne was the one screaming, he could hear now. From his own throat emerged only a series of rough barking cries.

Rilmar seized Geoff by the neck, and the bones within the spongy fetid mass of his hands were like iron. Geoff's lungs turned to fire. He brought up the sword in a disemboweling thrust, loosing a cold, jellied gush of entrails, and Rilmar did not react.

Geoff drove the sword deeper, felt the point lodge against a knob of spine. Dizziness was spinning black threads across his vision. With the last of his fading strength, he threw his weight on the weapon. It severed Rilmar's backbone. The upper half of his body divorced from the lower with a slow gruesome tearing.

Rilmar's corpse still held onto Geoff's neck. The weight of the torso, without legs to support it, pulled both of them to the ground. Geoff levered the sword between Rilmar's arms and jerked it in a sharp twist, shearing through one forearm and partly freeing himself. He rolled away, losing hold of his weapon but prying at the dead fingers that sought to maintain their death grip.

At last, after snapping fingerbones like twigs, Geoff was free. He stood as Rilmar's body hitched and dragged itself around, as if seeking to reassemble itself. Geoff found the sword again and began chopping, madly and wildly, nothing but a pure wonder he didn't cut off his own feet, shouting incoherencies and obscenities.

When nothing of Rilmar was moving except for a few twitches and surges in the hewn mass of tissue, Geoff whirled away and tried to vomit, tried to bring up the sickness that had permeated not only his gorge but his mind and soul as well. But nothing would come up. He was covered in gore, but nothing would come up. He . . .

Slow, lazy applause. “Well done,” said Solarrin.

It was as if a wad of dry, scratchy cloth plugged his throat. Now not only would nothing come up, nothing would go down, not even air. Geoff was locked in place, rooted to the spot, by the mere sound of that unmistakable voice.

“Did you truly think to escape me?” Solarrin said. “Did you dare to presume that I would not learn of your feeble attempt to defy and discredit me?”

Geoff raised his head, his abused neck creaking like the bough of a gallows tree.

Solarrin filled the room. The tips of his horns, fitted with bronze, nearly scraped the ceiling. Held captive in his grasp, even tall stately Anne looked like a child’s doll, some waxwork figure with the white skin and glassy eyes brought on by transcendent horror.

“Archmage —” Geoff choked the word off, knowing that there would be no pleading for mercy.

“I might have permitted you to flee,” Solarrin continued, striding forward and carrying Anne’s rigid, terror-struck body with him as if she weighed nothing. “I might have forgotten your failure at the so-very-simple task I gave you. It isn’t as if I have time to personally discipline every wayward servant.”

Geoff bobbed his head, and would have thrown himself down to grovel if he had been able to move.

“But you . . . oh, what you did was inexcusable. Did you think I would not learn of your little message to the Highlord? You made that puling brat think, and worry, and backslide in his trust of me. So did this friend of yours, and as you can see, I had to kill him before he would finally tell me what I wanted to know.”

“You would have killed him anyway,” Geoff said, surprised at how strong his voice sounded once he found it. “Just as you’ll kill me. So go on and get it over with.”

Solarrin lowered his head between hunched shoulders, showing his teeth. “To kill you so quickly would hardly teach you the penalty for crossing me. When I allow you to pass into Haarkon’s cold embrace, you will have gone far beyond begging for death. You shall experience the sensation of pain in every conceivable form, so that not one fraction of your being is spared unutterable horror and agony. Were I to tell you in detail what my plans for you include, your pathetic mind would freeze into senselessness, and it is very important to me that you be alive and aware so as to fully appreciate your fate.”

“My sister . . . let her go,” Geoff said. “She’s no part of this.”

“Your . . . oh, yes, your sister.” Solarrin looked down at Anne, who remained paralyzed by her fear. “I have no use for her.”

“No!” Geoff cried, knowing what was coming.

Bright lances of terror, not for himself but for Anne, gave him the strength to move. He sprang at Solarrin, but not before Solarrin broke Anne’s neck with

one slight and unimportant flick of a wrist. The noise it made was equally slight, equally unimportant, a muted *crack* like that of an iced-over pond beneath a man's heavy tread, but all the tension fled from her and turned her to a woman-sized pillow stuffed with feathers.

Solarrin met him with one huge hand, batting aside the sword and taking a gash to the forearm as if pain was of no concern to him. He grasped Geoff's head, wrapping his fingers around it like a child with a ball.

Braced for the sound of his skull splitting, Geoffrey gave in almost happily to the deep black daze that engulfed him.

\* \* \*

As well-furnished as the Tower of the Archmage was, it lacked one vital amenity, at least in Solarrin's view. How could any self-respecting master wizard function without a dungeon? They said that even the Emerin's noted Kysander Feyna had secret chambers beneath Feyna Rel where he could 'question' those who'd displeased him.

Yet evidently, Talus Yor had somehow seen no need for anything of the sort. In fact, the closest Solarrin could find were a set of leather manacles and a few other items that looked to have been borrowed from a coinwench-house catering to the habitually depraved. This discovery did little to elevate Solarrin's opinion of the late Archmage, although it didn't particularly surprise him either.

The lack of a dungeon prompted some alternate arrangements for the care and keeping of Solarrin's prisoner. He had Geoffrey installed in a guest room with stout locks upon the door and window, instilling in Zura the importance of locking up after her nightly visits to take care of the cleaning and the privy-pot. Geoffrey's meals would be provided by way of a dumbwaiter far too small to admit a man, and the evening meal was laced with an alchemical sleep elixir to assure that he never had a chance of overpowering Zura and escaping. Not that he would be in much condition for that.

It was even more relaxing than coming home to a nice glass of brandy before supper, Solarrin found. Nothing took the edge off a day like inflicting a bit of merciless torture on a deserving victim. He took great enjoyment in varying the ways he tormented Geoffrey. With that beforementioned lack of a dungeon and devices, he was called upon to rely creatively on his magic.

Sometimes it would be the Vision of Death, other times the Touch of Death, never enough to kill Geoffrey, though often enough to make him wish it would. Sometimes it was unspecific, sourceless pain that wracked the man's body relentlessly. Other times it was just a matter of making his every sense so heightened that any light brighter than starlight was searing agony, every whisper a grating scream to his ears, every whiff of scent or taste overpoweringly strong, and the touch of even something as soft as a milkweed puff like being abraded with shaved steel. Solarrin amused himself for a time by causing one after

another of Geoffrey's limbs to go limp and useless, or even turn them against him so that his own body was his mortal enemy.

Best of all, these tortures left no mark, so there was no need for the tiresome tending of wounds or waiting for him to regain his strength. But it wore him down, oh, yes. Constant and unendurable pain, even when inflicted by magic rather than physical hurt, took a heavy toll on Geoffrey. And every so often, simply because he wanted to, Solarrin resorted to knives or handy household implements, or even his own teeth and horns.

Geoffrey's spirit, crushed by the shame of his initial desertion and the grief of both bringing about and witnessing the death of his sister, withered further in his captivity. Although his sanity lasted longer than had that of fragile Alinora, he soon lapsed into an apathy from which he would rouse only with the bleating terror of an animal at Solarrin's approach. The *man*, the honor-bound and proud *man* who had defied Solarrin, was no longer recognizable as himself.

That tended to take some of the fun out of it . . .

The night before the royal ball, Solarrin only threw a few token spells of pain at Geoffrey before retiring. The following day would be a busy one, and he had already seen how helpful Jarrell was when last-moment crises arose. About as helpful as Jarrell was in all other things.

The ungrateful pup.

Here Solarrin had all but shouldered the entire running of the city, leaving Jarrell free to squander his time in the Lord's Retreat and the ale-houses, and what thanks did he get? Besides a gold shaving brush and razor that he'd never use, that is? None at all.

Solarrin was of half a mind, when the need arose as it inevitably would to kill Jarrell, to use that very same razor and open his throat from the hinge of one jaw to the other. There would be a certain rightfulness in that.

He'd come close to doing that, or something similar, only a few nights ago. How tempting it had been! Especially once he'd found proof that it wasn't his imagination, that the Highlord *had* been acting distrustful of Solarrin lately.

He relived it in his mind, still wondering what impulse had made him go into Jarrell's room that night. The palace had been dark and quiet, nearly everyone abed but for diligent Solarrin hard at work on the final arrangements for this ridiculous ball – how he would have loved to blame it on Grugan, but it had been his own suggestion. He hadn't been thinking of Jarrell's happiness, of course. None of this was about Jarrell's happiness. What it *was* about was finding him some docile biddable bedmate that would keep him entertained and less inclined to concern himself with matters such as, oh, say, the running of a kingdom. That was something best left to Jarrell's betters.

So the idea of the ball, supposedly for the Highlord to review the eligible ladies of the Northlands, had come to Solarrin as an idea that *he* might review them and their parents, and scatter more seeds of mischief. Or perhaps mischief

was too innocuous a term . . . perhaps destruction would be a better one. He hadn't realized at the time how much work would be involved, how much work for him, because Grugan was an ill and useless old man and the palace servants needed *someone* to give the orders.

Thus, Solarrin had spent many a late night at the palace, attending to things he would have never expected to have to be concerned with. Seating arrangements. Menus. Other such fripperies and nonsense. On one of these nights, weary and irked and spurred to suspicion because Jarrell had been simpering nervously around him all day, he'd changed his course and come to the room that was the Highlord's.

A spell of dazing had taken care of the door-guards, already only half-awake due to the lateness of the hour. They'd stood their ground, staring foggily down the hall, as Solarrin strode past.

Within, Jarrell had been a snoring lump in the blankets, visible only as tufts of tousled yellow hair and one white, soft arm dangling over the side of the bed. He slept on without a change in his breathing, unaware of the dark presence standing over him. Unaware, although Solarrin felt his disgust and dislike beaming from him like rays of fire.

It would have been so easy to simply turn Jarrell's face into the pillows and hold it there. Solarrin could already imagine his muffled cries, his feeble struggles. Long live the Highlord.

But if Jarrell died now, without a bride, without an heir, Solarrin couldn't be fully confident of what might happen next. So he'd gone from the bedside to the dresser, finding his way with ease because like the little boy he resembled, Jarrell insisted on having a light burning as he slept.

Nothing amid the untidy clutter atop the dresser caught Solarrin's interest, so he began sliding open the drawers as silently as he could. There, in the top one, thrust far back under other things, he found what he was looking for.

He smelled it before he saw it, the unmistakable odor of dried blood. And there it had been. Proof that the Highlord had reason not to give Solarrin his full trust. That he had hidden this crest, when he had shown Solarrin the more incriminating letter from Lord Marl, suggested that Jarrell harbored doubts. Suspicions. Secrets. Having thoughts of his own.

That was not the way it was supposed to be.

He had almost killed Jarrell again right then, almost let his anger carry him away. It would have been the end of everything, for he wouldn't have been able to do it quietly. Nor would he have wanted to. He would have wanted to hear the screams, the pleading, the sobbing. He wanted to haul Jarrell from his bed, defenseless and confused. Throw him to the floor, kick and trample him. Gore him.

Instead, bringing his temper under control although such might have seemed a feat comparable to taming the wild wind, Solarrin had replaced the crest and closed the drawer, and left the Highlord to whatever childish and insignificant

dreams capered in that head.

\* \* \*



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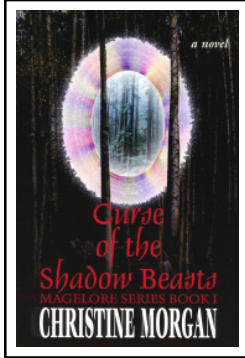
# Books & Games



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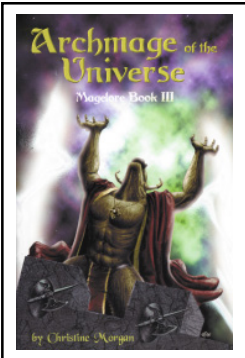
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He is Solarrin. Once his body was as twisted as his mind. Now inhabiting the form of a minotaur, his physical and magical prowess are without equal.

The young Highlord is his pawn. The city of Thanis is under his control. His next move will plunge the Northlands into war.

The only ones who will stand a chance against him fled on a foolish quest – to bring his predecessor back from the dead.

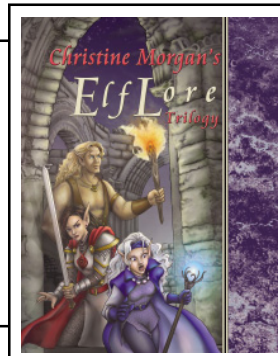
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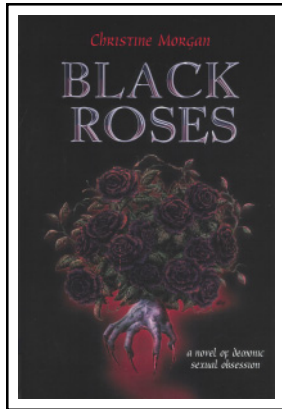
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*The Trinity Bay series  
by Christine Morgan*



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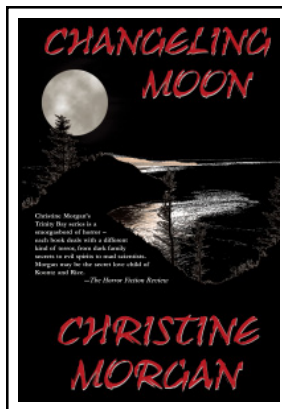
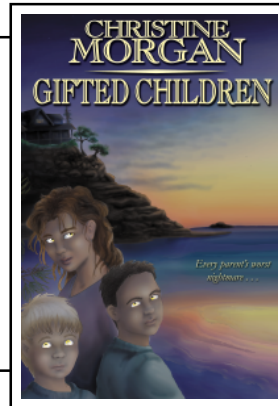
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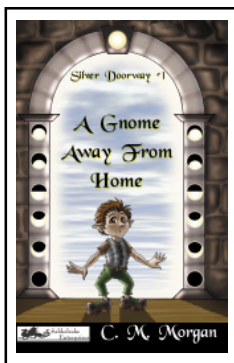
*The Silver Doorway series  
by C. M. Morgan*

Life is complicated for the Broderick kids. They've just moved to a new neighborhood. Their parents are having problems. Mom is always busy with work, Dad is always busy on his computer. Half the time, it seems like they forget they even have children.

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The rest of the family thinks Dad's sister, Aunt Ellie, is weird. But when the kids discover a secret room in Aunt Ellie's basement, and a glowing silver doorway that leads to another world, they realize how weird their aunt really is.

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A sneeze leads them down to the basement, where they follow a little gnome back through the door . . .

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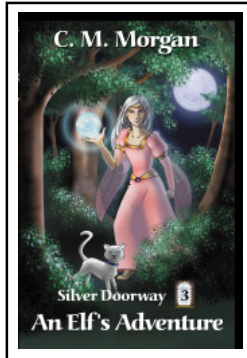
Stone Hammerfine and Sam Broderick might be from different worlds, one of them a dwarven boy and one of them a human boy, but they have something in common. Mean, bossy sisters!

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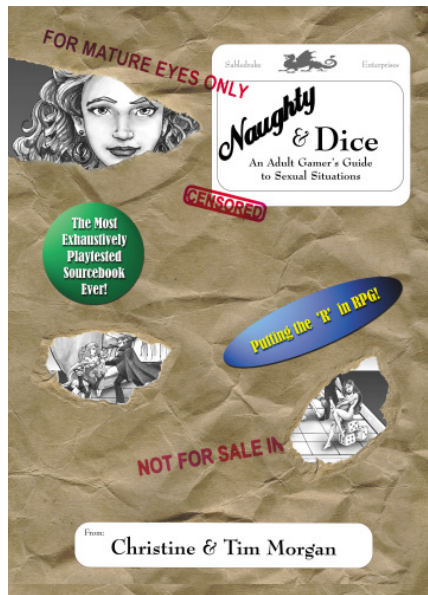
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And look for *Ellis: Kingdom in Turmoil* featuring the **Simulacrum Roleplaying System**, by Tim Morgan, coming in 2007 or 2008 from Sabledrake Enterprises. We're still working on the final size and price, but check out <http://sabledrake.com> or <http://SimulacrumRPG.com> for updates, demos and up-to-date information.

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in  
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*Christine Morgan*



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In addition to the works presented here, Christine Morgan's writing has appeared in many magazines and story anthologies.

"Coppers, the Alchemist" in *Pyramid Magazine* #17.

"The Reaching Wall" in *Cthulhu Sex Magazine* #14, Vol 2.

Several entries in *GURPS Villians*.

"The Dawn of the Living Impaired" in *The Book of All Flesh*.

"Seven Brains, Ten Minutes" in *The Book of Final Flesh*.

"I Am . . ." in *Leather, Lace & Lust*.

"Safe Sucks" in *Closet Desires IV*.

"Monsters" in *Path of the Bold*.

"Don't Look Back" in *Fear of the Unknown*.

"Death and the Scream Queen" in *Hell Hath No Fury*.

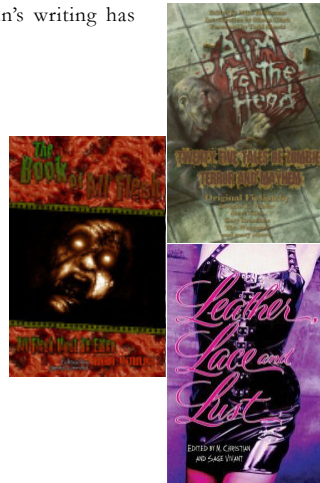
"Easting for Two" in *Dreaded Pall*

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"Family Life" in *Aim for the Head*.

Sabledrake Enterprises keeps a few copies of most of these in stock and we can fill orders on a first come, first served basis for anyone interested.

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