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Loyalty costs money. Betrayal, on the other hand, is free. When the emperor is taken hostage, the Red Knight and his men find their services in high demand - and themselves surrounded by enemies.

The country is in revolt, the capital city is besieged and any victory will be hard won. But the Red Knight has a plan. The question is can be negotiate the political, magical, real and romantic battlefields at the same time - especially when intends to be victorious on them all?

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An author has fun (again)

By JPS

Just like in the Red Knight, the first volume, reading this one gives the impression that the author essentially has fun writing a piece that takes place in a fantasy world that borrows from European 14th century. It also makes "the Albin" into some kind of cross between Britain and North America, with the North West part of the continent full of monsters (Trolls and Giants, in particular, but no dragons in this episode, except "in disguise") but also elf-like creatures and various types of Indians (with some suggestive tribe names and place names such as the Abenakis or Ticondanga for Fort Ticonderoga).

The eastern part of the continent is called "Morea" and is the seat of a fictional and much reduced Empire modelled on the Fourteenth Century Byzantine Empire, with the capital city called Livianopolis (instead of Contantinopolis) and the second largest city called "Lonica" (instead of Thessalonika). Also very much present are the "Etruscan" merchants, with their respective city-states and colonies inspired from Venice, Genoa and Pisa. The southern part are the lands of Jarsay (would this be inspired from Jersey by any chance?) and Occitan (Languedoc?) while south of the North Cross Ocean lie the lands of Galle, Iberia and, to the south west, Ifrikiya.

At least some of the main characters seem to be loosely inspired from historical figures, although several of the historical figures are often blended together to make up one of the book's characters. For instance, the Imperial Princess Irene seems to be a cross between the Byzantine empress of the same name and the Princess Anna Komnene, although she appears both younger and much less ruthless that the two historical characters. The King of Galle (France) somewhat reminded me of a petulant and younger version of the French King Louis XI. The Red Knight himself reminded me of a rather youthful and sympathetic cross

between John Hawkwood, the English mercenary to made a career for himself in Italy and Roger de Flor (whose real name was Rutger von Blum), a rather infamous ex-Templar sergeant and leader of the Catalan Company of mercenaries. He and his men did serve the Byzantine Emperor Andronikos II for a few years at the beginning of the 14th century before being murdered by his employer.

Then there is the story itself, which I will not discuss and let you discover. As in the previous volume, you can expect plenty of physical and magical fights, including a few battles. There are however a number of differences with this book.

First, there are many more stories being told in bits and pieces and in parallel, sometimes more than half a dozen, with events taking place in Morea, Galle, at sea, in the Albin Kingdom (whether at Court, in the South or in the North) and in "the Wild". Depending on preferences, some will like this and find that the device is useful in showing the events taking place simultaneously and in creating some additional suspense, a bit like R.R. Martin has tended to go in his Game of Thrones, while others might find that it complicates the story and spoils the flow.

While I tend to incline towards the former, and very much liked the book, I must also admit that the plot itself was not exactly a surprise, although the story remained rather exciting and I leafed through the whole 600 pages in a couple of days. Note, however, that despite the device of having multiple stories unfolding within each chapter, the real action takes place in Morea with the Red Knight and his Company. Despite some desultory warfare in the North, and the increasing trouble raised by the Galle knights and their insufferable leader at the Albin Court, I could not help feeling that these were all sideshows and "holding actions".

Second, there are the military elements: the respective armies, their equipment and the battles. The Morean forces, irrespective of which side they are fighting on, are a collection of units mixing up regiments and forces that really existed between the 11th (for instance the Scholae) and the 12th and 13th century (for instance the Vardariots and the Latinikon), even if some names have sometimes been modified (the Varangians been perhaps the most obvious example). The Company is a rather typical English force of the mid and second half of the 14th century, with a mix of men-at-arms and squires, on the one hand, and long bowmen on the other hand.

The outcomes of the confrontations between the two types of forces tend to be somewhat predictable and one-sided, however much the author conveys the impression of hard fighting and hotly contested battles, as the long bowmen are shown shooting their opponents to pieces time and again. One exception to this is the merciless contest opposing the simili-Varangians to the mercenary knights serving with the rebels. This is inspired from the battle of Dyrrakhion in 1081 when the Varangians (largely made up of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Dane exiles at the time) faced Normano-Lombard heavy cavalry and were largely wiped out after inflicting heavy casualties on their opponents.

Anyway, I started this review by suggesting that the author may have had fun in writing this book, which does not preclude some hard work also. I do not know whether this is true or not, although I hope it is. What I do know for sure, however, is that I had a lot of fun reading it and very much enjoyed it...

Four stars and highly recommended. One thing to note however: it is also recommended to find the first volume before this one.

14 of 16 people found the following review helpful. The fear is palpable and real! By James Butters I've read a lot of fantasy and in my mind this series stands apart through its unique mix of gritty realism and smooth refined tactical drama whether it be on the battlefield, within the political spectrum, or the subtle dance of romance it all lends itself to an exciting and enjoyable read. The battle scenes are a personal favourite, it actually feels as if I'm right there in the thick of it, fighting for my comrades, my brothers, my sisters, my honor and my life! The fear mixed with adrenaline is palpable and real. The characters are deep and genuine and I care what happens to each and every one of them. The Captain is a brilliant and troubled soul, an inspirational leader and fearless warrior - "a real loon" as Bad Tom would say! I can't wait for the next installment!!

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Your Princess is in this Castle

By H. P.

The Fell Sword is the second book in Miles Cameron's Traitor Son series. The Fell Sword shows that Cameron's considerable flair for combat and the minutia of medieval war are paired with a grasp on fantasy at a grand scale. The Fell Sword opens with the Red Knight's mercenary company, fresh off its costly victory in the first book, traveling to "the Empire" for a contract for the Emperor. (The Empire resembles the Holy Roman Empire at first blush but is probably a better analog to the Byzantine Empire.) Things go sideways before they start, however, when the Emperor is kidnapped shortly before the company arrives. Meanwhile Thorn weaves new plots, the Wild roils, the Galles scheme, and the north of Albin recovers.

Of course, more battles, although they don't live up to those of the first book. Neither the fell sword nor the princess play a prominent role, but that's ok. Once again, POVs are shared by host of characters, both new and old. Almost twenty different characters grace the chapter headings alone. Locations include familiar ones like Harndon, Albinkirk, and the Wild, as well as new ones such as Liviapolis (capital of the Empire), the capital of Galle, and Ticondaga (the seat of the Red Knight's father). Book 2 is a story of men, but that doesn't stop of from exploring the Wild far to the west and to the north. We see the dams of giant beavers, the source of the famous Wild honey, an irk king, giants, and much more of the Native American-esque Sossag (as well as the Huron tribes).

We also learn more about the mysterious force behind the events of the first book. From that I can think we can draw a broad sketch of where the story is pointed for the final three books. Along those lines, we learn that some characters who seemed relevant only for color in The Red Knight a now shown, or hinted, to hold more important roles in the story (Peter the slave-turned-Sossag most obviously, I think). Unfortunately, there are several plots which are neither brought to any sort of climax nor given reasonable signals as to where they might go. I'm sure they're important, but it detracts from the book nonetheless and is the main factor in a lower rating than for The Red Knight.

Disclosure: I received a complimentary e-copy of The Fell Sword through NetGalley.

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