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# THE PRINCESS OF AENYA

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NICK ALIMONOS



**Books in the Aenya Series**  
(in chronological order)

The Feral Girl

Ages of Aenya

— City by the Sea

— The Serpent's Eye

— Flesh & Steel

The Princess of Aenya

The Magiq of Aenya (forthcoming)

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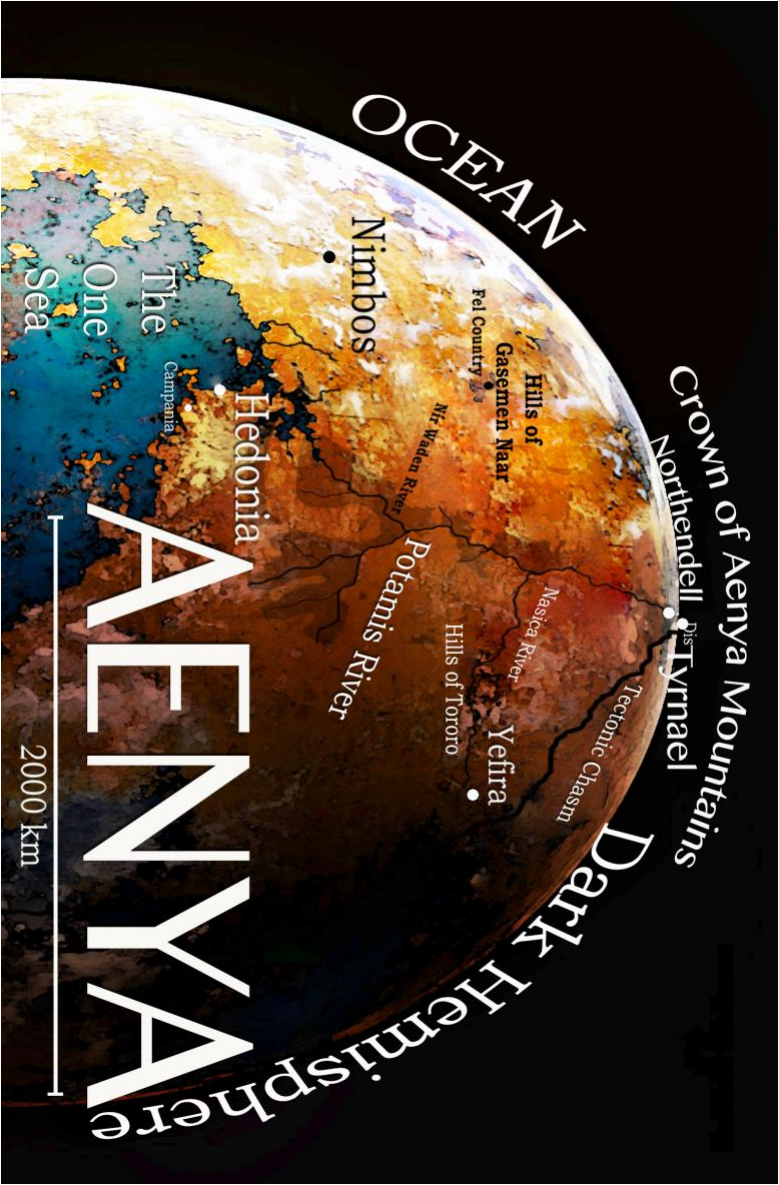
## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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For Hynda,

My Radia



*I sing the Goddess that is in all,  
who gilds the wheat and sun born rye,  
who, in dreaming plains we seek her call*

*In the greenwood, in the elms that fall  
from sundered root to shaken ply  
Her eternal verse brings breath to all*

*In the hornèd moons that nightly rule  
her silver sisters dance the sky  
and from dreaming plains attend her hall*

*Even in the sore and weeping gall  
there is the ballad which brings release  
there is the Goddess of great and small*

*In streams deep and mountains tall  
from lover's rage to felled knight's wreath  
Zoë sings her song, who is in all*

*Do not dread and shrink from winter's pall  
or of Luna's chill bite be dismayed  
For Zoë, dying, sleeps in snowy shawl*

*And Springs born to sing the gilded corn  
so broken hearts are once more allayed  
when mourning moons break to Sun of Morn*



*Once, not long ago, there lived a king in the land of Tyrnael, who had but one daughter. This daughter he loved with his whole heart, but upon her eleventh year, she fell ill, her cheeks paling like the petals of a dying ilm. Never leaving her bedside, the king called for every physician in his kingdom, but all were at a loss, for her ailment was unlike any they had seen. With enduring hope, the king sent emissaries to lands near and abroad, and learned men did arrive from as far south as the One Sea and from as far east as Shemselinihar, yet all were utterly mystified by her sickness. Beset by grief and desperation, the king offered all that he had, his very kingdom in recompense, to save his little girl from doom.*

*And it so happened, that upon this decree, a wizened sage appeared at the gates of the Compass Tower. Examining the girl with care, he declared with confidence that he could make the girl whole again, brewing an elixir so that she might drink of it and become well. And shortly thereafter, the rosy hue returned to the little girl's cheeks. Overjoyed, the king asked what the stranger wished from him in return, reminding him of his vow.*

*"So long as you know," the sage said to him, "I can stay the hand of the Taker, but only for a time. At the close of three days, before the moon eclipses on the third night, if she does not drink of my elixir, Death shall surely claim her."*

*Hearing this dreadful prophecy, the king turned ashen, but the sage comforted him, saying, "Be not dismayed, for it is not beyond my power to procure this remedy, enough to keep your daughter in bloom for her remaining days. Yet it is not without its price."*

*The king readily agreed, preparing to surrender his great wealth, his kingdom if need be, but the sage asked for one small thing, and one thing only, in return for his ministrations, that the king take as his own a young boy to be adopted. The sage's own son.*

# 1

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## Radia

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**R**adia loved to watch the morning creep in from beneath the moon, the sunlight washing the dark gray shadows from the mountains to reveal their emerald glow. Foothills glittered with the various places she longed to visit, and as the light of day continued to spread, the familiar sights of her city emerged, one by one, from the gloom of night. Atop the Compass Tower, a thousand feet above her slumbering subjects, she watched the world unfurl like few ever could. Tyrnael radiated like spokes of gold, its spires rising like lotus flowers, its terraced hills green with moss and hanging vines and tall grasses. Arches moved between each structure and beyond the city, reaching impossibly outward. Once, the bridges served to unite the surrounding kingdoms, with the Compass Tower at its hub, but those days were long forgotten and the framework of steel and marble fallen into disrepair. Tyrnael was a city of unearthly beauty and wonder, if only one did not look at the cracks.

*And all of it is mine*, she reminded herself again. But the enormity of that truth failed her imagination. How could she truly rule anything when, throughout all her life, every last thing was done *for* her? She did not know to prepare meals or

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sew and, without Larissa's aid, she was helpless to lace her own bodice. Not that she wanted to. Her queenly raiment was heavy and stiff and stymied the flow of blood to her limbs. Most mornings, she could scarcely touch her toes, but dressing maintained the hierarchy, helped her subjects to know their place. Or so her advisers impressed upon her time and again. *A lady of royal birth cannot be seen half-naked like some commoner!*

Everything was different now. She stood upon the balustrade dressed in a gown of translucent white samite, the color of foam left behind by a crashing wave, and inlaid with gold thread and beads of pearl and lapis lazuli. Larissa had the good sense to match the gown with the late queen's tiara, which shone from Radia's forehead in pure platinum. *What would I do without her?* Today of all days, Radia needed to look the part, fifty-fourth descendant of the Zo, ruler of Tyrnael, princess of Aenya. Her youth, spent frolicking in the gardens and diving into fountains and being chased by tutors, was over. She was fifteen and a woman, and her father was dead.

Radia gathered her hem in her fists and moved away from the bailey, the silhouette of her bare feet showing through the fabric. She followed the arrow etched into the granite floor like a child on a balance beam. Every arm ended in the same rune, indicating *south*. As sovereign of the world, Radia stood atop the planet, at its pole. She was *True North*.

There was no roof above her, only the sun and turquoise moon and fading galaxies. A curved wall with its crescent of steps protected her from the chilling altitude. Her throne rose like a spire, the highest point for more than a hundred miles, but she could never imagine herself, or any other person, upon that chair. It was her father's place. With each breath, she could feel his absence, a gnawing emptiness in the heart of her being she could not shake. Now, more than ever, she needed his courage and counsel—he had always been around to provide her with just the right words. Though she found herself shielded from the ways of the world, Radia was certain of right action from wrong, good from evil. She knew it from the many

stories her father told and the books he bequeathed her. Heroes of old, *batahs of legend*, lived in her imagination, offering her their guidance. No hero would allow the kingdom to continue down its current path and neither would she.

Radia climbed to the top of her dais, the accouterments of her station heavier than ever, the train of her gown, thrice the length of her body, spilling down the steps and across the floor like a carpet. To sit where her distant forefathers' buttocks had rested for untold aeons felt wrong somehow, forbidden. *Royal butts*. She grinned at the thought of it. Beneath all that fancy clothing, they were all the same. Human. Her throne of amethyst crystal was quarried from the core of the planet, and pressed hard against her shoulders. She resisted the urge to tuck her legs in and sit sideways, but the arms were too far apart and she felt herself sliding forward. *Whoever sat here comfortably? Were the Zo made up of giants?* Everything was built to exude authority, she knew, but could she project power from the throne, as her father did? After fidgeting some more, she managed a stately position, with elbows tucked in and backbone arched and chin up.

"Father, help me." She said it for his ghost to hear, and with her heart throbbing in her throat, reached for the topaz switch in the armrest.

Archers gathered like silver birds along the periphery wall, up and around the spiraling stairwell. Their composite longbows reminded her of goose wings. Facing the throne, rising from a wide berth of steps, a contingent of knights flanked her in two columns, their sarissas swaying high above the ib feather plumes in their helms, the unicorn sigil of Tyrnael gleaming from their cuirasses. It was her *praetorian guard*. The sixteen knights swore fealty at her coronation only cycles before, the last and only time she sat the throne, up until now. It made her ill at ease that men she hardly knew should offer their lives in such a way. At the very least, she could learn something about them, if they had wives or children, but she was never good at matching names to faces. The praetorians were an elite few, carefully selected from among the tallest and

strongest, and indistinctly handsome. Only one was difficult to look upon, perhaps the most hideous man Radia had ever seen. His face was creased, like a sheet of papyrus crumpled and straightened again, and when he carried his helmet under his arm, there was not a single follicle to be seen on his scalp. When she first met him at her coronation, all she could do was stare at the scar dividing his eye and lip. She could not fathom why he had yet to fix his face, but he seemed oblivious to it. *Why ever would he choose to become my protector, looking like that, and whoever was so negligent to appoint him?*

Her brother was last to enter. His presence made her grip the edges of the throne. When they were children, they played at pretend, and she may even have loved him then. But even as a boy, he loved to pull the wings from the butterflies, slowly and methodically, watching and delighting in the agony he was causing. She used to cry and threaten him with father, but the king only listened sympathetically, taking no action. When his cruelty evolved from torturing insects to hammering frogs, she had had enough of him, and what love she might have felt waned to nothing. When I am queen, I will see you pay, she remembered herself thinking. Now father was dead and she had the power. So why did she not feel powerful?

To anyone looking upon him, Radia's brother was a monster. From horn to heel, he was iron the color of rust and blood, and he bristled with spikes like some demonic urchin, with pike-like horns that protruded from the sides of his helm. His mask gave the impression of a face, with absences for eyes through which to look out. Radia understood the need for a soldier to coat himself in armor, but war had never been known in Tyrael, not for a thousand-thousand years. His readiness for battle was unnerving, and yet it would not have surprised her if she caught him sleeping in his suit. The cacophony it made, as each metal plate grated against another, was an assault to the ears, and a further insult to her rule as he marched before the throne. Zaibos exuded the power she failed to gather, even as he fell to one knee before her.

*I must not be intimidated.* “You may remove your helmet,” she managed, without a tremor in her voice.

He tugged at his horns, but what emerged from underneath the mask was no less fierce. A perpetual scowl was etched across his jaw, as if his face were made of stone, and his eyebrows were dark and bristly, like dead caterpillars above deep-set, iron-hard pupils. The hair that spilled over his shoulders was black as pitch and, about his chin and cheeks, a beard grew like a thorn bush.

Radia immediately became conscious of her small, girlish features. Her mismatched eyes, one turquoise, the other violet, stared back at her sixteen-fold from the praetorians’ rounded helms. Her cheekbones were framed by golden braids—not blonde, but gold. Brother and sister looked nothing alike, but they were not of the same blood.

“Why did you call me here, sister? I am very busy.”

“You will address me properly, Zaibos. *Your Grace* will do, but not *sister*. Not here, when I am on my throne.” Her voice felt small, swallowed by the space. She sounded more like a songbird than a monarch.

“Very well,” he groaned, adding, with a measure of contempt, “Your Grace.”

“Seeing as you are busy, I . . .” she started, *No, stupid, use more forceful language!* “Tell me all what you have been doing with your time.”

“*Doing, Your Grace?*” His eyes were steel—two archers taking aim.

“I know you have been doing things . . . taking distant forays into the dark hemisphere. I hear rumors of battle, that you return with blood on your armor.”

“I act upon my duties, Your Grace, those bestowed to me by your father.”

“And what duties might those be?”

“Protecting the kingdom. *Your* kingdom, of course.”

“From whom? We have no enemies. Tyrnael has not known war since before the Cataclysm!”

“That is precisely the matter. We have become a stagnant civilization. Tyrnael was once known throughout the entire world. Now we exist as myth, in songs. The greatness our people once knew has been denied too long. Empires grow out of conquest. If we go on as we have, hiding behind our mountains, without the conquered to fill our bloodlines, we will continue to decay and in time be forgotten. And so, as I told you before, I am doing my duty, and protecting the realm.”

“Do not speak to me as if I am a child, brother. I’ve read the histories, but we need not go to war to be great again. There are other ways. We can send emissaries to the Outside, make ourselves known. Build friendships and alliances.”

His armor rattled with laughter. “Friendship? I fear you are much too young, sweet sister. If we open our gates to the world, the world will come in like a flood, rob us of our secrets. They have always sought what we possess. Why else have our people hidden for so long? If we had only the numbers to fill our ranks, to build true armies, I’d welcome the chance to defend our borders. But alas, Your Grace, a child is born only once in a cycle if we are fortunate, and the rate is decelerating.”

At fifteen, Radia could count on her hands the number of girls she knew her age. Larissa used to tell awful stories of mothers losing their newborns to theft, and it always upset her, as if her handmaiden was telling lies. Childbirth was a miracle in Tyrnael. But its perpetuation could not justify the cruelties of war.

“How do you do this, then? Make conquests without armies?”

Zaibos was standing, his helmet clanking under his arm. “Alliances have been made. In the dark hemisphere,” he explained, “there are denizens of the sunless lands, bogren and horg of countless number, who seek to sate their bloodlust.”

Horg and bogren? Those were the names of inhuman things, a product of nightmares, fitting company for someone like her brother. “You can’t—it is forbidden!”

“It was your father, the king—”

“My father would never!” she cried. “He loved peace, something you’ve never understood! These actions have nothing to do with the good of the kingdom. You satisfy *yourself*, and your hunger for cruelty!”

Radia was standing without realizing it, shaking with rage. Father would never have done that. A princess should be composed, speak firmly but never rashly or in anger. She was still only a child. Everyone could see it, her brother most of all. If only there was a kind face amid the masses, someone who loved her, she might find a measure of courage in it. Larissa had pleaded to stand beside her, but Radia was too stubborn to listen, fearing that keeping her handmaiden close would make her appear weak. She had rejected her father’s most trusted adviser as well. Anabis was kindly and wise, but he stressed patience and moderation, when what was needed here was boldness. Now, Radia wanted nothing but to end this ordeal, return to her dolls and books. She could not even find the strength to match eyes with her brother, focusing on her feet instead, dismissing him with a tremble.

She waited, battening down the heart in her chest like a sail in a windstorm, but to her dismay, there was no sound of retreat, no reaction to her command. The court was frozen in place. Zaibos did not move and his archers stood like stony sentinels. Had they not seen her gesture? Would she lose face in repeating it?

“No. I am not one of your handmaidens, sister, to be sent away so easily.” His tone was like the hiss of a snake when it threatens to bite.

“I am in charge here, Zaibos, not you. Am I not the blood of the Zo? Am I not True North?” She was pleading now, not with him, but with the others in the room.

“Titles do not confer loyalty, Your Grace. There is a high price to pay for that. My men die for me on the battlefield. But what do you know of such things? The power of Tyrnael lies with me. I command the army. What do you command? Cooks and seamstresses?”

Radia had prepared endlessly for this day, rehearsed every word, and yet she stood paralyzed, robbed of speech. Her pretty gown and seat of amethyst meant nothing. She could see the doubt in the eyes of her protectors, and dread crawled into her mind. "This is high treason, Zaibos! Be dismissed or I'll—"

"You'll what? Have me hanged? Beheaded? Drawn and quartered? Does your compassionate heart have the strength to enforce your dictates? I think not. And yet you cannot accuse a man of treason without carrying out the sentencing. You are weak, my sister, and innocent."

Spurred by the insult, Radia found her courage. "Guards! Take him to the dungeons!" But even as the words escaped her lips, she knew she had made a mistake. Zaibos donned his helmet, becoming the monster again, and none dared move against him.

With his back to the throne, he addressed his archers, the voice from his faceplate sounding eerily. "I had hoped for a peaceful transition of power—no angry mobs to contend with, no rebellions to quell—but now you've forced my hand."

*By the Ancients! He is going to kill me.*

She had always known him to be cruel, and this frightened her, but she never imagined dying by his hand. Did their childhood memories mean nothing? *No, he is a monster, nothing like my father, or me.* Sensing the threat at last, her praetorians moved into action, joining together with their sarissas thrust outward like an immense morningstar.

Zaibos was undeterred, walking against them, armed only with the poison of his tongue. "Who among you is prepared to die for this girl? She slumbers here in this tower on silken sheets and sups from silver goblets every night. And what have her people become? We are like lichen under a rock, living in the shadows of past glories, and she would see to it that it ever be so, that we continue to bend the knee and serve, until her children come of age and the cycle continues! I say no more! The progeny of the Zo ends here. Do your duty and spill your blood here and now for this undeserving brat, or follow me into a new age of Aenya."

Radia's guards did not flinch, not until Zaibos raised his gauntlet, and the chamber echoed with the sound of drawn bows. Knights broke rank in turn, until the phalanx fell apart, and a mere six stood before the dais, torn between duty and self-preservation.

Only one spoke out. "I am."

"You are what?" the monster barked, towering a head above him and every other knight, but the guard with the scarred face did not step away.

"I answered your question. I am prepared to die for this girl. There is more to life than death."

"Then you are a fool!" Zaibos's blood-red gauntlet came down and hundreds of arrows reached into the sky, perched in mid-air, and dropped with sudden terrible force.

Men were dying at her feet, clutching at the seams of their armor, their eyes wild with terror. Feathered shafts grew from their knees and throats and the open grills of their helms. Her guards were young and naïve to battle. The *praetorian* was an honored position, but their training was ceremonial, more dance than combat. The unicorn sigils were lined in red and blood was pooling across the floor, staining the hem of her gown. A second volley of arrows arched into the sky, silhouetted against the sun, and not a man remained to shield her from them. After only fifteen years, less than a tenth of her father's age, her life was to be cut short. She closed her eyes to welcome the end.

*I hope it doesn't hurt much. Don't scream. Don't weep. Give him nothing.*

Arrowheads were chiming like rain on a plated roof, and she waited, with no place to run or hide. *My dress will be all bloody, and Larissa worked so hard to ready it.*

But death did not come. Nor pain. When she dared to look again, the view was saturated with the scarred visage of her last remaining guardian, the only man she had ever seen stand up to her brother, and he was groping at her thighs—no, that wasn't right—he was shielding her with his armored body.

"I should be dead," she murmured, checking herself for holes to make certain she wasn't.

"You're not out of this yet, Your Highness." He played with the switches on the armrest until finding the one he needed. The throne started to turn into the floor with the both of them on it. Everything was spinning. Stone masonry was passing over her eyes. They were in a long vertical shaft and dropping quickly. When the throne settled into place, dim orbs of light played with their shadows. They were in a blue room large enough for two to stand abreast.

"Are you hurt?"

Radia could hardly think or hear. What she witnessed only moments before dominated her vision. "No, but what of you? You should be—"

"The throne was built by the Zo," he remarked, "for just such an occasion, no doubt. There must be a field within range of it, or we're both just terribly lucky."

Tears ran hot across her cheeks. "Those men . . . they're dead because of me."

"They did what was expected of them, Your Highness," he replied. "Now you must do the same. Run."

But Radia did not leave her chair. "I can't—"

"They won't be long," he said, pulling the longsword from his belt and moving forward, as if to gut her. "We'll have to be quick about it." He worked the blade through the fine muslin fabric. "You'll forgive me, Your Majesty."

Radia could not watch. It was her great-grandmother's dress, but when he had sliced through it, she could feel the air on her knees, the freedom of motion. "That's good."

He nabbed her by the wrist, harder than she would have liked, and dragged her through an open archway. A flight of steps led up and another set spiraled downward. She could hear the stomping of boots above, the clank of armor, the rattle of arrows in quivers.

Walls pushed on them from both sides as they took to the stairs. The descent was steep and narrow, with just enough space to set her foot.

"I think they hear us!" she murmured.

"Be quiet, will you?"

Radia stole back her arm, which was already sore. This guard of hers acted nothing like the heroes in her fairytales. "Are you rescuing or kidnapping me?"

Again, he brandished his longsword, as if to attack her. She followed the length of steel to the line of marching boots crossing the stairwell like some monstrous centipede. In that same moment, an archer poked his head under to spot them, and a volley of arrows ricocheted overhead, clacking and clattering like hailstones.

He grabbed her again, moving faster than she thought he could in mailed knees and greaves, traversing the steps in twos and threes. Even in her bare feet, she had difficulty keeping pace. "We need to reach the bottom before they do. If we give them a clear shot, we're done for."

"Who are you," her voice echoed, "and why are you helping me?"

His silence was infuriating, and if not for the threat of death, she would have refused to move unless he answered.

They continued on, her right hand following the inner wall to maintain balance, moving down and down until the whole of the tower opened into a vast hollow. The stairwell curved for hundreds of feet to the bottom and went up just as far. Seized by vertigo, she reached for a support that was not there, finding only a sudden empty drop. Even her praetorian slowed pace, moving with deliberation.

They circled the tower as they descended, watching the archers chase precariously from across the other side, looking miniscule where Radia had been only seconds before. A few took aim, but their footing was too narrow and the updraft carried their arrows every which way.

The base of the tower led to an inner courtyard. Sunlight from a domed ceiling streamed across the walls, gilding the granite frieze-work, the sculpted planets and the replicas of cities, the great orators and scientists and heroes

immortalized in stone. It was a marvel of antiquity from the Age of the Zo, but there was no time to wonder at it.

Beyond the courtyard, they passed through the pleasure gardens, through citrus groves and stone ponds, under the cover of grapes growing from a trellised ceiling. Faerie butterflies with luminous azure wings, some the size of her palms, fluttered about their ears, as pods with purple and pink buds threatened to knock them over. Radia could spend days in the gardens reading, or chasing the phosphorescent fauna, without stuffy tutors or stuffy clothes, but such frolic would never come again, she realized, nor would she sleep again in her soft bed, or know the company of . . .

"Wait! Larissa."

"Your Highness, we must hurry—"

"I go nowhere without my handmaiden!"

"I did not swear an oath to protect Your Highness's handmaiden!" he growled. "Follow me!"

"I won't and you cannot make me." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Am I not *True North*, am I not—"

"Alright, then. Where is this girl of yours?"

"In my chambers, of course, where else—?"

"Are you insane? A hundred men are coming for us both, and you want to go to the one place they'll most expect us?"

"If you wish to protect me, you'll simply have to do it there."

"Where?" he barked.

Holding the threads of her gown, she skipped to the edge of the enclosed garden, through an arcade of jasper, tourmaline and chalcedony, and out to a postern door. Another rumble echoed through the walls, succeeded by the pitter-patter of water droplets. "That isn't the army—it's a storm," he remarked, pushing through to the outside.

The sky was somber gray and the stones below were slick and glistening. The rain was falling hard and harder and sideways with the wind. "The sun was ablaze only moments ago," he said with a bit of confusion. "The gods must be smiling

on us. This will give us cover, skew their arrows at least, should they find us."

Radia followed him and secured the door. It would be some time, she figured, before her brother's men could determine where she'd gone.

The ledge led directly to a one-man bridge. It seemed to be suspended in air, with nothing but sky on either side, crossing high above hills and waterfalls and tiled rooftops. A lone minaret stood a great distance off, like a lance passing through the turquoise moon.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

He stared over the brink, as if measuring the distance to the bottom, which shifted with the motion of the clouds. "There has to be another way."

"To my bedchamber? It's right there," she said, pointing, "in *that* tower."

He took a wary step onto the bridge, clutching the railing firmly. Radia paced behind him, lifting her cheeks to the rain to take the brunt of it, letting it rush down her neck and clothes and drip from her braids. It was invigorating, empowering. "Go!" she cried, shoving him.

"Are you sure this is safe?"

"Wait. You're not afraid of . . . Are you afraid of heights?"

"I do not prefer them."

"You faced off against my brother and his army and now you shrink before a bridge?"

"Men I can handle. The ground far below us is another matter."

"I walk this way every morning, noon and evening, as does Larissa. Now make haste before they find us!"

The royal bedchamber was in order. Frilly, her swan, drifted lazily in its fountain pool, and behind the silk partitions of the room, her bed was straightened with linens newly washed and pressed, and her collection of dolls and perfumes was neatly arrayed, and her books were all on their proper shelves, except for the one she was reading, the fairytale collection with the unicorn seal on the cover. Yet her

handmaiden was nowhere to be found. *Larissa, you have been so good to me. How can I leave you behind?*

Radia twirled about the room, anxious to know what had become of her companion, the larger predicament dissolving from her mind as her protector paced to and fro.

"So, where is she?"

"I don't know," she said, running a finger over a jeweled comb. "Maybe the stables."

"*Maybe the stables!*" he roared. "You said she would be here!"

Radia recoiled, frightened by his sudden temper. "I said no such thing. I sometimes find her here, is all. But she does love the stable ponies. We might find her there."

"Princess, for the sake of your life and mine, we must depart this castle immediately. Do you understand what that means? *Immediately!* No more detours!"

"If I'm never coming back, let me at least pack a few things, change out of this outfit, which you managed to ruin, by the way." She tucked her book under one arm and reached for a small box encrusted with gemstones. The lock was a gold heart fastened by a dagger. Book and box went into a satchel, and she then proceeded to fight with her great-grandmother's gown, but the lace was too tight about the waist and held her like a giant's fist. "Praetorian, if you would come here a moment—"

"Princess, please, we haven't time for this," he argued. "We must—"

A loud bang interrupted him and they both stood at attention. Nothing could ever threaten her here, she had thought, not where she was born, not where father had sat when she was ill, reading her fairytales. She had not been able to imagine life ending where it began, and yet she could hear them beyond the walls, men clamoring to run their swords into her heart, and the illusion of her sanctuary shattered with the sound.

The praetorian pushed furniture against the door, but already it was splintering, throwing intricately patterned wood chips into the pool, ruffling Frilly's feathers.

"Is there another way out?" he cried. "A trap door?"

"The mirrors!"

Radia showed him to an octagonal dressing room. Tall, oval mirrors stood on each side. Reflecting at them was his scowling, hairless head, a long scar cutting through his eye and lip. Her image stood at his side, with her spun-gold hair and eyes of different colors, turquoise and violet, so much like the moons.

He shook his head. "What is this? This is a . . . a waste of time!"

"Have you lost all your faith? Look closer."

"I see nothing."

"Only our reflections," she answered. "See?" It was true. There was no wall or curtain behind them, nothing to indicate their surroundings but a blurred, glassy surface.

In the other room, a door was coming to pieces, chairs were clacking, tables were squeaking and groaning, and pottery and crystal were being shattered. Someone fell into the fountain with an obscenity, and Radia's bird gave an awkward squawk that she sensed was its last.

"Princess, I've failed you. There is nowhere to run—there *was* never anywhere to go." He drew his sword from its sheath and moved toward her, his eyes pained.

"No," she whispered, "you haven't, not yet. And you may call me Radia." She offered her hand, not as a superior, but a friend. "Tell me your name, praetorian?"

"I am called Demacharon."

The soldiers were in view now, their plumed helmets bristling like the combs of angry roosters, their arrows nocked. Radia gave them a final smile and pulled on his arm, and together they fell through the mirror.

It was like falling suddenly and unexpectedly through a trap door, like having your mind and stomach exchange places, but the moment passed quickly. Radia was on the ground

beside her protector, bent double, gasping, retching. As much as she wanted to empty her bowels, only lines of spittle dangled from her lips, as she had been too nervous that morning to take breakfast. Anabis once explained how the Zo traveled throughout Aenya, and even between stars, in such a manner. Hand-in-hand with her tutor, she had once jumped inside a mirror, but the disorientation and sickening feeling that ensued dissuaded her from ever trying it again.

Demacharon found his footing like a drunkard. "You should have warned me about that."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think there was time."

"Where are we?"

The floor was a rough-hewn flagstone covered in hay, with crabgrass and other weeds growing from between the cracks. Fires burned from sconces, throwing long shadows about the room, glittering in the oval mirror at their backs. In the adjacent hall, they met with rows of halberds, swords and spears, shields in piles and men made of straw.

"Why does it smell so foul?"

"This is the armory," he answered. "You couldn't have picked better unless you wanted to visit Zaibos's personal chambers."

"Hey—I didn't choose this place—every mirror has its twin! We end up where the other is. I had no idea it would be here."

"You should have said so before," he said, smashing the silvered glass with the pommel of his sword. "Now they cannot follow."

"Is there any way out of here?"

He examined the rack of weapons before him, weighing a gladius in his hand. "Of course, but without anyone seeing us . . . there's the rub. This might not be entirely fruitless, however."

Radia watched him mull over their options. It was a strange thing to put her faith—her very life—in the hands of a stranger. And yet, what choice did she have? There was no one to trust but Larissa, and what good was a handmaiden at such

a time? *Poor Larissa*. She could only hope that no harm had come to her, but knowing Zaibos, that hope was faint.

Demacharon pulled off his cuirass. His upper body was discolored in places, and it took some time for Radia to recognize the bruises for what they were. Lines cut through his chest and side, marks drawn by weapons. She could only imagine how such wounds must have hurt him. Her spine began to tingle at the sight, and her body grew numb.

As he searched among greaves and gorgets and sallets, she reached out, gently touching him. The skin on his shoulder was raised in the shape of a trident. "What is that? Did they—did someone brand you? Like a horse?"

"It's nothing," he said, donning a breastplate of boiled leather. "A memento from another life." He strapped the gladius to his hip beside the longsword, and turned to her, pressing a dirk into her palm. "If something should happen to me, do not hesitate to use this."

"A knife? I don't think I could ever—"

Voices filled the room and Radia knew they were no longer alone. There was no place to hide or to run. Demacharon tightened his belt and walked into the common room, where a contingent of soldiers awaited them.

Eight surrounded them, weapons in hand, and a young man stepped forward. He was uncommonly handsome, even for a soldier, and the unicorn emblazoned across his torso galloped in the torchlight.

"Did you think you could escape us, traitor? We have men posted at every exit and mirror. Hand over the princess and the king will make your death a painless one."

"What a generous offer, Captain Sligh." Demacharon slid his longsword from its sheath. "How could I pass it up?"

"Wait!" Radia cried. "Traitor? How can this man be a traitor? He saved my life! He is the only one loyal to me."

"You have been misled, Your Highness," the captain replied. "Alas, you are a child, and could not have known better. You are not to be blamed."

She stood between the two men, trying to look tall, but she was short for her age, and barefoot. "What are you going on about?"

"Did you truly believe you were being rescued? That this man—*this man*—an admitted outsider, would risk his life for yours? The world does not work this way, princess. This is not one of your fairytales. No one gives his all unless there is something to gain, and a princess of Tyrnael is no chimney sweep's daughter—no, you are a jewel among women. The crown on your head alone is worth his weight in gold!"

She snatched the tiara from her head, tossing it to the floor where it rolled out of sight. "Is it true?" she said, turning to Demacharon. "Are you a foreigner?" But she knew the answer before asking. Why did he look older than her father did on his deathbed, yet move like someone half his age? And why did he have trouble pronouncing his words—a detail she had not noticed while fleeing for her life—if the language was not new to him? It all made sense now.

Demacharon lowered his sword. "It is true I was not born in Tyrnael, but I am sworn to you, the true heir, not the half-breed monster who would call himself king."

"The throne is his birthright," the captain rejoined. "After all, he is eldest born."

Radia could feel her cheeks boiling with rage, a rage that came in the face of blatant lies. "Zaibos is not of my blood!" she cried. "His father was not my father! He is the usurper, the traitor!"

"Politics aside, our liege has taken the throne for the betterment of the empire, but does not wish harm upon his kin. He told me so himself."

"I may be young, but I'm no fool," she answered. "I heard my brother's words. He intends to kill me! Shot arrows at me!"

"Not at you, Your Highness. If we had wished you dead, you would be. Consider that a hundred arrows came your way, and miraculously you were left unharmed. It was the conspirators who were executed—your praetorian guard—led by this man whom you fancy a hero. We suspected the plot from the day *he*

requested the position. Otherwise, we never would have allowed him near you."

"So . . ." she murmured, "all this was some sort of charade?"

"Forgive us, but it was necessary to uncover the truth. When this man came forward to speak, we knew our people were involved, that they meant to steal you away to the South, to lands beyond the Crown. Come with us now, and King Zaibos promises you will sleep safely tonight in your own bed."

"No," said Radia. "He is an honorable man. I can . . . sense it."

The captain raised his blade. "If you will not surrender peacefully, you will be forced to watch him die!"

The two men came together faster than Radia could have imagined. Swords flashed, painting the air silver, ringing with deadly music. Sligh seemed sure of himself, dancing around her praetorian, lunging and parrying more swiftly. Demacharon retreated against the wall, defending blow after blow.

"I've always admired your way with a blade, but I never trusted you."

Demacharon pedaled backward into the narrow recess of the hall as the captain pressed and taunted and mocked, his longsword flying wide, chipping at the masonry, raining dust on them both. Her champion seemed to be weakening, and Radia feared for his life.

"Tired, old man?"

There was a sudden, somber look in Demacharon's face that startled her, a darkness she had not yet seen. "You've never killed a man, have you? Never watched a man's eyes as the life ebbs out of him?"

"W-What does that—?"

"It means you're green, boy. You can't cut me down because you don't want to. Me? I've killed my share, men much younger than you—watched soldiers die before you were born. And I have nothing to lose."

There was an edge in his voice, enough to make the captain hesitate, and in that instant Demacharon lunged forward,

embracing him. Radia was suddenly afraid for them both. She had witnessed the horror of men felled at her feet and did not wish to relive it again. In her most authoritative voice, she demanded, pleaded for peace, stopping short of throwing herself on Demacharon's arm, but when he released the captain, she could see the blood flowing and the red-stained gladius in his other hand. The boy's brow beaded with sweat and the color rushed out of him. She could see the disbelief and confusion written across his face. Radia watched him shudder and grow cold and his pain became her own. She moved a hand to her nostrils to staunch the flow, her blood spilling over her fingers, across her lip and chin.

"Not again," she heard herself saying. "Not now."

Demacharon was calling her name, but his voice was a distant echo. The boy was dead and she was falling beside him, down and down into the dark spaces between worlds.

# 2

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## Demacharon

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When there is only silence and darkness, I find myself comforted. There is peace in not remembering. But sometimes, when exhaustion forces my eyes, I go deep into the maelstrom, down into the abyss between realms.

It is not a dream. An awful clarity pervades every little detail. I could describe, if you were to ask me, the shape of each rock on that damnable plain. But at first I am only aware of dread, not merely the feeling of it, but a pervasive, palpable reality, like a knife entering my very being, causing me to sweat and tremble.

No sun casts its light over this land. No stars. No moons. What dim glow permits my sight to function, I cannot say. The sky is the wrong color—perhaps you could call it violet, the deepest shade one could fathom—but is in truth like nothing the eye can perceive. Only rock and gravel populate the surface, and the bottomless trenches and distant mountains create an austere panorama. Even in the most arid of deserts, there are cacti and lichen, and lizards and serpents crawl over the earth. In this place, not a soul abounds. I look for direction, some sign to lift my spirits, but I am utterly lost. The terrain is without feature but for the hilly silhouettes on the horizon.

Might those peaks promise better pastures, a city perhaps, a place where vagabonds gather? I wonder, holding fast to hope, and yet the way the mountains are arrayed—how they loop and twist at impossible angles—disturbs and disheartens me.

Who am I? What is my purpose? How did I come to this unfinished creation, this place abandoned by gods? And how can I still breathe where there is no vestige of life? At the fringes of my mind, my name teases me, but it is a long-lost memory. I cannot even be certain as to the nature of my existence, of whether I am a man, woman, or other, or if, before this very moment, I ever lived at all. The only clue to my identity is a tiny wooden carving in my palm, a trireme the length of my forefinger, meticulously engraved with a battering ram and a double tier of oars flat against the hull. The standard etched into the lateen sails, the trident, is familiar to me also. Was I a sailor once? A captain? I only know that the ship is dear to me.

The carving is the one constant, for I sometimes find myself in rags or in the full regalia of a centurion, or else entirely naked. It matters little, for clothing is unsubstantial here, as is the flesh. My body is numb to cold, and thirst and hunger are but wistful memories. Rocks tear across my soles, but no blood appears, and I feel no pain. I am a hollow vessel adrift in the waters of beyond.

Solitude consumes me, and I long for nothing but to expire, to cease this tired existence. I have fallen through all the layers of being, and there is no greater depth for despondency to take me to, and still, even in this remotest of hells, there exists a glimmer of light. I cannot tell its nature, whether it be a sun or star or some great lighthouse-fire calling lost souls to hopeful shores, but dread and despair recede from it like the night shrinks from the day. The light is life. Hope. I cannot but follow it.

For how long do I trek across that plain? A day, a year, a hundred thousand years? There is no answer, for in this *otherwhere*, time does not exist. And yet, however great my travail, the light remains eternally beyond my reach.

At last, I come to a pen for goats and hens and other livestock. The fence is unremarkable as fences go, with rivets showing between the seams, but to me, it is a work of exceeding beauty. Anything besides rock and gravel is a sight for weary eyes. Even the earthly feel of it—its grainy cedar planking against my fingertips—gives waves of pleasure. I wonder where the farmer must be, and his animals. I stand awhile, delighting in my discovery, as the ethereal light continues to beckon. But I fear to leave that place, *because it is a place*, a memory, a tether to my childhood.

Beyond the pen, shapes flit to and fro, inking the ground with elongated shadows. Only living things move about so, and whatever their manner, I think it of no consequence. To escape my loneliness, I would befriend a bogren, but the fence prevents my crossing. It stands to my thigh and yet I cannot climb or leap over it. Some force keeps me and does not let go. With every part of my being, I struggle against that barrier, until I surrender upon the railing, resting my palm against it, and the fence is suddenly behind me. It was the little wooden ship—my key—permitting me passage.

The space beyond is choked with people, though I did not see any when I was still on the other side. They press me, shoulder to shoulder, knocking me about as they bustle past. Some are dressed in rags, others in fine embroidered silks or gleaming mail, and more than a few are utterly naked. Paupers and merchants and soldiers, highborn aristocrats and priests and kings—they are all mixed like fish in a fishmonger's net. I recognize the garb of the Hedonian, a man from my own city, and a great many from Thetis, Thalassar, Northendell, and Shemselinihar. But an even greater number are foreign to me, perhaps races from beyond the map, or extinct peoples from the pages of history.

They do not seem to notice me, nor do they speak to or acknowledge their own in any way. Here is a continent-sized population—a host too vast to measure—and yet they are blind to themselves, each man and woman and child a stranger. Their eyes are soulless, lost and bewildered, but

some power drives them, causing them to swarm about like gnats, eternally searching. It is a placid mob, a procession of the mad, and a thought seizes me with terror, that I must count myself among them, that I am surely no different.

Again, with the talisman in my hand, I find my way. The ship is my identity, my purpose. Holding fast to it, I push through the mob, shouting and beating them with my fists, but my blows do not sway their desperate course. No matter, I am determined to persist, to not become one of them. The light is my salvation and the ship my passage.

Ages ago, I leapt from a high place, and the ground raced up to meet me, and I found myself in this dreadful place. But now, guided through this sea of faces, I find them at last, and know myself at once. They are within my reach, the two I came in search of, the people for whom I surrendered everything. She wears the same black tunic and shawl. Our son clutches her hand, and she is leading him through that awful gathering, her face despondent and broken, her hair ashen, her face resembling a drowned woman's. The boy at her side, despite his age, shares her deathly aspect.

I push bodies from my path, reaching, screaming their names lest she move away and is lost to me again, but she cannot hear. Fighting for every step, I finally reach her and grip her by the shoulder, forcing her around to see my face.

"Niobe!"

She stares and stares, as if through a window, offering no reply.

"Don't you recognize your husband, Niobe? It is me!"

I tilt her chin, so that she might gaze fully into my eyes, but she is dead to the world. The boy holds to his mother out of some habit, I realize, like the fingers of a corpse stiffened about some precious remnant from life. No tenderness resides in their clasped-together hands, for he does not know his mother, nor she him. The thought occurs to me how the two came to be joined for all eternity, yet strangers to one another. Before my fall, Niobe came seeking our son, and after finding him forgot

herself and was lost, just like the others. Surely, I am to follow, but I refuse to accept the truth of it.

I shake her, lovingly, angrily. "Say something, Niobe! Speak to me, I beg you."

I plead with her, embrace her as if she might become immaterial and slip away, and still she does not know me. On my knees, sobbing and quaking, a terrible certainty takes root in my mind. It is imperative that they know me. If they do not speak my name, I will soon forget it and, by not knowing it, will cease to exist.

Surrendering hope for my wife, I turn to my son. How often has he run into my arms? For how many countless nights have I cradled his head and heard him whisper that he loves me? Surely, he will remember—gods be good, let him remember!

"Astor, please look upon me. Look kindly upon your dear father, so that I know that you know me." But he only stares, his face contorted as if searching for a memory.

I can feel his wrist, slender as a sapling, and yet there are no veins, no pulse—he is just as I found him all those many years ago, the day my Niobe came down to this place in spirit. I touch his side and recoil. The gash is still there, from when the creature spilled his entrails on the sand. I reach for my face, finding my own scars, each one a reminder the monster left me of the life I failed to save. He had been playing by the shore that morning, playing with his . . .

"Wait!" I cry. "The token!" Pressing the wooden ship into his palm, I watch as he ponders it. It was my gift to him on the day I shipped out for war. He was never without it. He will remember the ship and remember me. I do not doubt it.

My son does not speak, but I can see the change in his eyes, a spark of recognition. Niobe is also beginning to see me, and I come to her aid, recounting memories, from when our lips first touched on the shores of Sarnath, to our wedding day when we danced on gold-painted litters, to the evening when our newborn son first wailed and trembled in my hands. Slowly but surely, they are coming to know me. We will exist together, be it in this horrid place, yet no longer in solitude.

But, in piecing together my identity, I become recognizable to others I knew in life. Like vultures to carrion, they swarm about me, whispering awful things in my ears. Shame falls on my heart like an anchor, and everywhere I look, there are faces—faces without bodies—growling and hissing and murmuring. This one I slew in battle when he was very young. Another was unable to pay his taxes and so I had his home burned to ash. Still another lost his sons at my command. They are pulling at me now, tearing my clothing and hair. I try to fight them but am outnumbered and overwhelmed. Hands pin my arms and legs. Niobe is calling out to me and to the crowd, weeping for mercy, as is my son, Astor. The two of them know my name, but have no knowledge of my misdeeds, and those I have wronged will not release me. I am dragged away from my family, watching my wife and son shrink from my eyes, framed by those horrid faces. Fingers fill my nostrils like worms, bury my mouth, and dig out my eyes. Having given my token to my son, I am dragged back to the fence, thrown over it into the blasted plain. My eyes are gone now, yet still, I can see it—somehow I can see the light. In that last moment, I recognize the source. A city. By the gods, the light is a city!

I do not fear to die as other men do. The great mystery does not cause me to dread my eternal sleep. It is the certainty of that undiscovered country, and in knowing what awaits me.

# 3

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Hugo

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Hugo found he was unable to concentrate, his head full of the rumors that were spreading exponentially, like a wildfire, from one terraced neighborhood to another. If even half of what he had heard was true—no, he could not allow his mind to follow such a dark path. Besides, nothing of the sort had ever happened in Tyrnael. History was rife with calamitous moments, but they were not living in such a time. The present was dull, ordinary, and secure. *The Lawgivers*, in their vast wisdom, had made certain of it.

He continued eastward along the stony promenade, following a pillared arcade heavy with vines, scarcely noticing anything but his feet, and the way in which the gold-limned pavers gave way to featureless gravel. Few people traveled this route, and fewer highborn. The eastern edge of the city was a place for manual laborers, for crop-workers and trash collectors. For eloai.

The pathway narrowed to an open plateau, which stood apart from the monoliths and white-gold spires dominating the city. The landing extended out to a natural outcropping, overlooking the Great Chasm in the East. The morning air was crisp and cool against his face, and the turquoise moon hung

low in the sky, having almost vanished against the blue horizon. Larks called for lovers, dandelions swayed in the hills, and leaves quivered from their branches, and in his reverie, he walked suddenly into a wicker basket brimming with hockenberries. The tiny round fruit sprawled every which way, rolling off the path to fit neatly into the spaces between the paving stones, and he found himself simultaneously apologizing and stooping to gather up the result of his carelessness, staining the ground with dark purple splotches with each of his steps.

"I am so terribly sorry," he repeated.

The young girl was barefoot, wearing the white, knee-length peplos common to the eloai. She was too busy squatting over berries to look at him, answering, "No, no . . . it's entirely my fault."

"How could it be?" he urged. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No," she insisted, never lifting her gaze. "I should learn to be more careful."

By now he had gathered a good handful and was beginning to refill the basket. "You may need to rewash these. Goats tread through here sometimes."

She glanced his way, saw what he was doing, and gave a short gasp of alarm. "Please, kind sir, you needn't help me."

He dumped another handful into the wicker receptacle and bent down again. The work was tedious, but he was delighted all the same. "I don't mind. Really."

"You shouldn't," she remarked matter-of-factly.

"But why?"

"Well, because . . ." She stood to face him for the first time, her cheeks reddening, depositing the last of what could be salvaged into the basket, and in her pale gray eyes, he could see the wheels of her thoughts turning. "Because, I'm an eloai, and you're a . . ."

"A soldier?"

A streak of fear shot across her brow. "You're a soldier!"

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

“No!” she exclaimed, a little too loudly. “Of course not. It’s just that—I’m not even supposed to be here. I switched jobs, you see, because I wanted to pick berries. I thought it might be fun. You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“Why would I? What’s wrong with—?”

She ran off before he could finish speaking, hockenberries jostling in her arms, more than a couple dropping and rolling off into the dirt. Hugo could not help but snicker as he watched her go. Eloai did not wear makeup, fancy clothing or jewelry, and their hair was trimmed to the shoulder, falling whichever way nature allowed. Male and female alike, they were born to be simple, and yet for Hugo, they were like certain ordinary trees or flowers, often going unnoticed, yet possessing an unassuming beauty, if one was to simply stop and take notice.

He continued down to the foot of the Great Eastern Gate, and the bridge spanning the divide between the two hemispheres. The colossal arches were worn by wind and sun and the ravages of time, overgrown with blazing stars and chicories and perennials. On the north flank, the stone creature rising from the base had collapsed into a mound of rubble, leaving only its hindquarters, but on the southern end, Hugo could make out the semblance of a bucking horse, dressed from hoof to snout in green creepers, with a single horn spiraling up from the head like a conical lance broken at the tip. He stood fretfully upon the landing, overlooking the sheer drop of the Tectonic Chasm. It was like peering beyond the end of the world, the bridge crossing the divide vanishing into the gray ether. Whether he could continue along the expanse until reaching the eastern half of the world, he could only guess, but the distance, he knew, was many leagues. Turning north to the Celestial Hill, he observed the Compass Tower, which loomed like a gilded spear rising from a white fist. His impatience growing, he tried to gauge how far the violet moon had traversed across the broad face of the greater turquoise disc, and his eyes drifted again to the statue of the unicorn, to the standard of his people. He had only chanced to see the animal once in his youth, on guard duty at the royal

stable, and did not know whether other such creatures existed, only that the one he was fortunate enough to have witnessed was hundreds of years old. Legend had it that the thirty-third descendant of the first king, Queen Lumina, was so pure of heart, that after she had fallen asleep in a neighboring glade, a unicorn came to rest its head on her lap. The divine creature became enamored by the princess's charm, and in time came to dwell with the royal family. And so the embodiment of the sigil Hugo wore on his breast remained, upon centuries, among the king's equine stock.

His appointment arrived at last. Hugo watched him emerge from the direction of the tower, his black charger sidling up to the gate. The man was meticulous in the handling of his beast, wasting no time dismounting, the unicorn crest emblazoned across his cuirass gleaming in the morning sun. Hugo recognized his pale face and gaunt cheeks, and embraced him from wrist to elbow.

"Mandos! What's this all about? What's happened?"

"It is . . . a great day," Mandos answered hesitantly. "Not only for us, but for every citizen of Tyrnael."

"Oh?" Hugo could sense some measure of insincerity in his voice, even as the other looked upon him in earnest. "I'd heard differently. That there's been some kind of violence. That several people have been killed."

"I won't deny it. Good men were taken from us today. Brave souls. Praetorians mostly. But the lot of them were traitors."

"Traitors?" Hugo mouthed the words incredulously. "How can that be?"

A look of resignation crossed Mandos's face. He was middle-aged, but appeared much older. "You'd best believe it, my friend." He fastened his charger to a spiral of rock, and the animal remained motionless, as if turned to stone. "These are troubling times, which is why I so urgently sought you out, to prevent the lies from clouding your judgment. I also needed to know, for my own sake, that you could be trusted. That you could be loyal."

"I would never betray the princess, Mandos," he said softly. "You know this."

He stood quietly before speaking again, choosing his words carefully. "Aye, but that's the rub. The princess is missing. She might even be dead. Which is why we must turn our attentions to the greater good. Think upon what is best for Tyrnael and its people. Our allegiance is to them."

"Of course. And I agree. But you say the princess may be . . . dead?" His heart ached even to say the words. "That can't be, Mandos."

"We are still uncertain as to what has happened to her, precisely." He turned to his horse, casually brushing its shimmering dark mane with his gloved fingers. "After the guards were massacred, Sligh attempted to rescue her, but was killed in the process."

"Sligh was a good man! I knew his family. Generous people. I supped at his house many a time, attended his brother's joining."

"He will be avenged. All of them will."

Hugo sat against the base of the arch, his legs weary. Such things never happened in Tyrnael. Their kingdom was a bastion of liberty, the envy of all Aenya for untold ages. And although he had been trained for battle from a young age, he felt unprepared for it now—for just such a trial. Instinctively, he groped at the brass pommel at his hip. "What do we know about these traitors? Where do they come from?"

"Foreign insurgents, who else?" Mandos answered matter-of-factly. "It's just as Zaibos warned us about. Though some of us refused to listen," he added with disdain. "We allow these strangers into our borders and you see what happens."

Hugo did not speak. Something had changed in the timber of Mandos's voice. There was a sudden edge to it that gave him pause. He glanced away, toward the bucking unicorn made of stone. Its foundations, he could now see, were crumbling. "That can't be. What would outsiders want with Radia?"

"They want what we have, Hugo—our prosperity, our long life—and they'll kill to get it. How many times has the

commander spoken of this? Tyrnael cannot remain hidden forever. And now that they know we're here, we must become strong, to protect the people we love. The old ways can no longer sustain us."

Hugo crossed his arms and took a step back. "Seems awfully convenient, these foreign-born kidnappers. I mean, it's just what Zaibos would have wanted."

"What *he* would have wanted? Just what you are suggesting, Hugo?" He scratched at the finely trimmed hairs of his chin. "Zaibos wants what we all do, security in Tyrnael, for everyone, for children and the elderly to live free from harm." Mandos was never one to raise his voice, but now, he had become uncharacteristically passionate. "Our ancestors were masters of the universe! All of Aenya worshipped the Zo. Now look at what we have become. Look at these ruined colonnades, these broken bridges—we are wasting away here, wallowing in the shadows of past glories. But we could rise again!"

"We needn't master others to be great. The Zo led through wisdom."

"And that wisdom came at the point of a sword." An angry glint danced in his eyes that Hugo had never seen before. "You cannot teach without authority, and authority necessitates power. That is the hard truth Zaibos has helped us to learn."

"Men who desire power never make for good rulers," Hugo stated flatly.

"Empty rhetoric," Mandos shot back. "Platitudes for a schoolboy."

"We have had peace and prosperity for ages, under the reign of Solon and his forebears. But what you are proposing . . . it can only lead to tyranny."

"If we sit and do nothing, they *will* infest our city. More are crossing every day. First they ask to barter, then they set up shops—next they will be living alongside us, cavorting with our women and our children. Is that what you want? Hedonians, Delians, Shemites—the whole stinking lot of them—diluting our culture, dirtying our bloodlines?"

"Newcomers enrich us," Hugo replied. "They bring fresh ideas, new kinds of music, art, food. That is what Tyrnael needs to thrive. Isolation is what's been killing us."

Mandos's face changed again. He looked almost apologetic. His voice came softer now, his words sounding with greater diplomacy. "Sure, we can adopt what we find useful, but we must control the flow of who comes in and who doesn't. Without borders, we surrender our sovereignty. And now that the old dynasty is gone, we have the opportunity to strengthen ourselves."

"Gone? Wait—I thought you said the princess may still be alive?"

"Alive, dead . . . what matters is the imminent threat to our homeland."

Hugo was beginning to see with whom he was speaking, and it frightened him to realize that the man he thought he knew was no more. "Are those your words, Mandos, or the commander's?"

"*King* Zaibos," he answered icily. "And yes, he has taught me much, for he is a great man! A man of vision, and strength."

"But, is he a good man?" Hugo challenged.

"At times like these, we cannot afford to be fastidious. We must sometimes take a step back before moving forward. Zaibos is doing what none have had the will to do. He is making the hard decisions."

"I don't trust him. Zaibos will say and do anything to get what he wants. Don't forget—hubris caused the downfall of the Zo, and the cataclysm that followed."

"Well, you know me. I was never very good at history. I chose to focus on my sword."

"Then you should listen to someone who paid attention to the lecturers!" Hugo's fists were clenched at his sides. He felt betrayed, by everything he knew of the man, a fellow defender of the dynasty.

"No, you listen. I've always thought very highly of you, and that is why I am going to pretend this exchange never took place." Slowly, Mandos turned away, clutching the reins of his

charger. “Things are going to be different from now on, and if you are wise, you will know where best to stand. Please don’t take this as a threat. This is me . . . at my most charitable.”

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