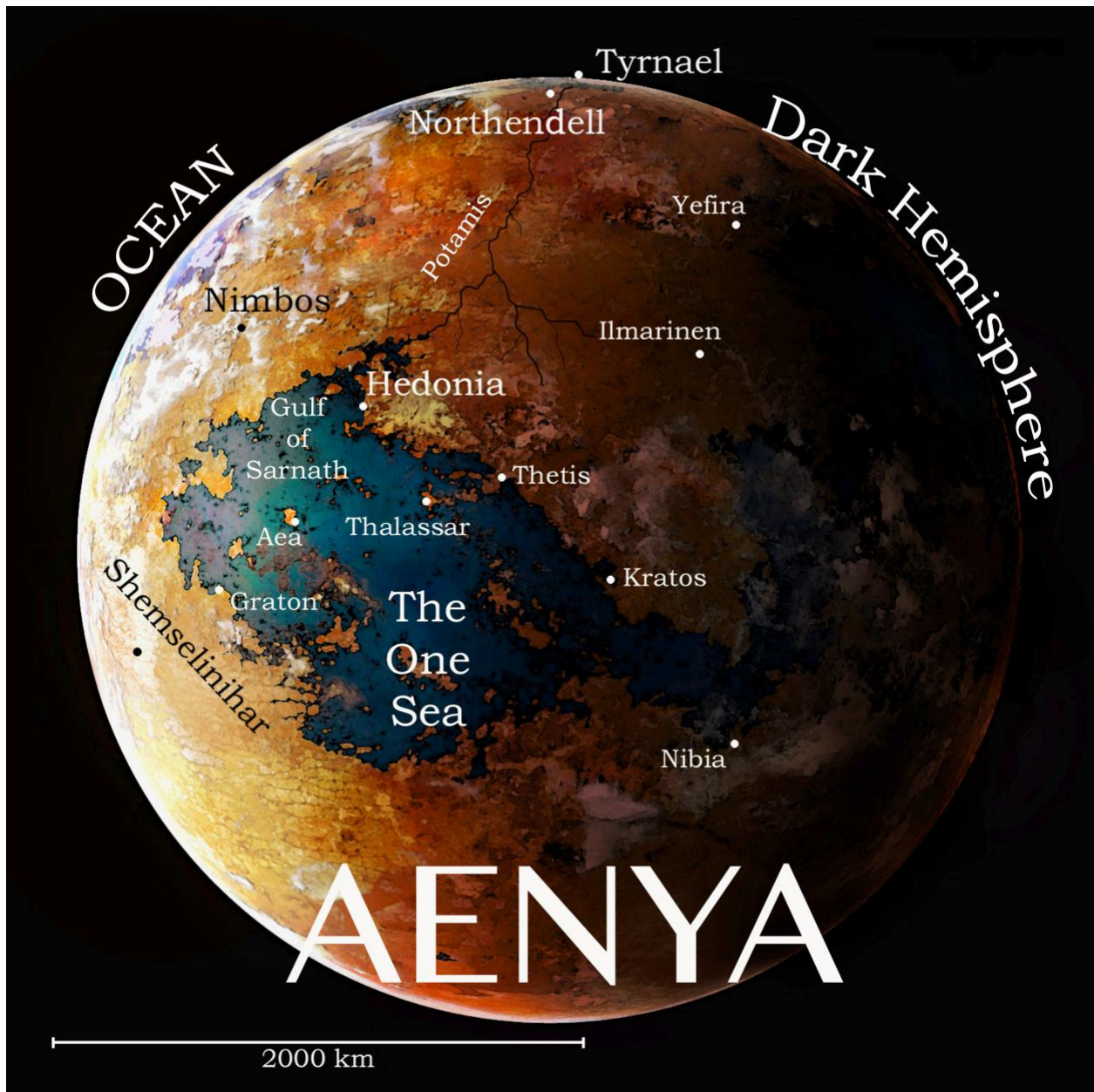


# AGES OF AENYA

Nick Alimonos



*Knowledge not tempered by wisdom sows destruction.*

—Kjus

*There is a land called Ilmarinen, between the Light and the Dark Hemispheres, named after the flower of orange and violet. In Ilmarinen, it is said, there is no poverty or war. Grasses brush softly so that children might chase through fields unblemished and aeons-weathered boulders make beds for lovers and poets and stargazers. There the Monastery of Alashiya stands, ancient beyond memory, repository of forbidden knowledge.*

*Of all Aenya's peoples, only the Ilmar remember the age before the Greater Moon, when we failed to save the world from Cataclysm. In memory of song, they remember us, our hubris and our wisdom.*

—From the *Ages of Aenya, Volume II*, as recorded by Eldin

**T**he blood rushing to her head made her skull ache. She could feel the throb of her heart, flowing through her limbs, bringing spasms of pain to her ribcage. Dizzy with dread, she glanced back and saw it—not far now—a blur of crimson. The halfman was still following.

Dapples of sunlight percolated from the treetops. The leaves were wet and slick with dew and stuck to her soles. Soft dirt came up between her toes, slowing, weakening her grip on the earth. Arrows jostled in her quiver, eager to fly in every direction. A bow of twine and oak smacked her backside at every rock and ravine impeding her passage. Without slowing pace, she fumbled at the harness between her breasts, discarding the bundle of arrows, and the bow, which followed in the dirt. She kept on, free of everything but muscle and skin—a true Ilmarin born of Nature—her auburn braid swaying like a banner caught in a storm.

She could hear the arrows snapping like twigs with heavy, inhuman footfalls, and knew the halfman was close behind. Strengthened by fear, she kept momentum as brambles reached for her ankles and river rocks cut into her soles. She would never tire, or waver. After all, she was not like other humans. Her sense of touch was as keen as her vision. She could feel the Goddess everywhere, in the rain, in the wind, as part of the wood and part of her.

But she was far from the wood she knew.

An immense camphor tree stood in a depression of leaves like a parent over the forest. Her fingers and toes were still covered in sap from sleeping in the branches. The stickiness helped her dig into the brittle bark, scurry up the sheer trunk with little effort. She came up through the foliage into the open sky where she squatted along a bed of swaying twigs.

Certain the halfman could not follow, she placed a hand to her breast, feeling her heart grow calm, her breathing settle into rhythm. No more running. She had lost him in the high places like so many other predators that had stalked her in the past.

Shades of green stretched below, split by a deep, waterfall-studded gorge, which fed into the azure ribbon that was the Potamis River. The river spilled into the turquoise moon that filled the horizon. The smaller moon swam like a purple fish across the face of the greater, marking the passings till nightfall.

In quiet moments when she was in hiding, she doted on the ilm her father had given her, now lost in the quiver with her arrows. The scent of the flower conjured memories of home, and she would never think to eat it or make it into a tea, unless gravely injured. Jagged rocks punished her soles often, when she neglected to watch where she was running, and the

branches of some trees left scrape marks across her shoulders and forearms and sometimes her cheeks, but these were mild discomforts she learned to ignore and did not warrant use of the ilm's healing properties. When she was confident that the halfman was gone, she would go down and look for the flower, and when she had it in her palm again she would try and recall the orange and purple that colored the hills of her homeland.

How many eclipses had come and gone since leaving home? For cycles, she followed the Potamis, maintaining a southerly course, keeping the greater moon to her left. The river served as a guide on her journey, but also a source for drink and bathing. When the waterway dipped through barren valleys, her sustenance consisted of grubs and beetles, but in the wood she drank dew from leaves and relied on her marksmanship to sate her hunger. Despite their efforts, her parents could not have prepared her for the vast, nameless stretches of Aenya. They could not have known of the unfamiliar and ever-changing flora, of the fruits their daughter could only guess the relative safety of, fruit which could either soothe the hollowness in her belly or leave her aching and vomiting. The farther from home, the harsher the touch of the world. Days were scorching and nights made her shudder. Dragon-mosquitoes found her blood sweet as she slept in the trees, and even the flowers had thorns. But she refused to mask her body in the protective covering her mother had given her. Even the occasional thorn was preferable to the constant grating, the heaviness and sultriness and numbness, brought on by clothing. The outside world was unlike Ilmarinen, but every new sensation—even the painful ones—heightened her awareness of life, of the Goddess that resided in all things.

The darkness that came with the fully eclipsed sun, the depth of night, seemed to

belong to other gods. In Ilmarinen, she had lain down on the roof of her father's house under a universe of twinkling fires, her eleven siblings slumbering below before a warm hearth. But here, lonesome but for the surrounding trees, she shut her eyes and willed sleep to come, fitfully separating the harmless noises from invisible things that hunted in the dark.

Leaves whispered and branches crackled, rousing her from her thoughts. Her foundation began to sway violently, threatening to fling her hundreds of feet to the ground. Something was making its way up towards her. As it burst through the foliage, she caught a glimpse of howling teeth and fur like the color of blood.

She scurried away like a four-legged animal. Without realizing it, she was in the adjoining tree. He was in the other, growling in his guttural language, shaking the bone talisman in his fist. Careful to watch his footing, he moved uneasily across the makeshift bridge of touching branches. She reached for her bow only to realize she'd thrown it away. The limbs of the trees groaned in protest as she pulled herself to the twig-like fringes of the camphor's height. The wind gushed fiercely about her, testing her balance. Being twice her size, she was certain that the halfman could not follow, that the branches would snap under his weight. But he could still reach—she could feel him, clawing her heels, drawing blood with his nails. She navigated through the maze of branches, finally evading him and locating a way in which she could move down and backwards, blindly reaching for anything to hold onto, clutching at twigs no thicker than her fingers. When she could no longer see his red hide, she allowed herself a moment to breathe, and then the halfman dropped from above. She slunk away again, her feet kicking empty air, and suddenly her stomach lurched into her ribcage as the sound of splintering timber rounded in her ears.

She broke through the branches as she fell. The ground was strewn with leaves, but hit harder than dirt. Lifting herself carefully, she tested her body for pain, for broken bones—and was off again, her feet slapping against a flat unyielding surface. In a blur of stone and iron, she could feel the strangeness of her surroundings, the runes etched into the floor, the obelisks and massive rings, tall as trees, teasing her curiosity as she gasped for air. Vague human shapes towered over her, faceless giants lining the path. *Golems*, her people called the statues—they were everywhere, even in Ilmarinen, masquerading as boulders. But she'd never seen so many, standing upright like sentinels. The place was old beyond memory—a great city from aeons ago, from before the greater moon. Every stone in every courtyard echoed with the memories of the dead. But the forest was reclaiming it. Grasses sprouted between tiles. Roots cut through walls without doors or rooftops. Yet, she had no time to wonder at it all—she could not hope to lose the halfman here, in the open.

Turning toward a broken archway, beyond the watchful faces of stone, she flew deep into the thick of the wood, hoping to be concealed by the fan-shaped leaves. She moved with the grace of a hunted treer, navigating streams and slopes and thickets as though she had run through them a hundred times before. But the halfman was not giving up the chase. Any moment, her legs would give out, and he would be on top of her. Hiding had failed her and running no longer seemed the wisest course. If there was any chance to fight, it could not happen with her back to it. But there was no hope of turning. Even now, its monstrous breathing was raising the hairs of her neck. The shock of its raking claws threw her off balance and she collapsed hard, repeatedly punished as she rolled across the uneven, volcanic terrain.



She could feel the heat of his growl, smell the undigested meat between his oversized molars. The halfman overshadowed her, beating his muscled breast with arms thicker than her waist. But she did not show fear. With equal ferocity she returned his glare, with eyes of green fire, giving the monster pause. But her fists would not be enough. She frantically searched her surroundings, looking for anything she could use to do harm—a rock, a branch, anything at all. She was touching it before her eyes could follow. Spreading beneath her feet were hundreds of volcanic shards. Never having worn shoes, her soles were tough as aurochs' leather, but she could still feel the jagged pieces prickling her instep. She groped for the largest fragment. The obsidian edge cut into her palm as she lifted her arm to the moon and down again, the shimmering blade plunging between the halfman's eye and nostril. His howl stung her ears, and she stumbled away, mesmerized by the horror of it, by the black glass jutting from the mutilated face.

*You should be running.*

Before she could see it happen, his meaty fingers closed about her wrist and yanked hard, snapping her body like a doll. Tendrils of pain shot through her shoulder. She could not hope to wrestle free, even with two good arms. The halfman roared, pounding his chest again. She winced as it flexed for the killing blow. Her final thoughts were of home, of the brothers and sisters she would never see again. But the blow never came.

The halfman's grip died away, and her arm flopped lifelessly. His ape face, she could now see, was contorted in a mix of rage and confusion. An arrowhead jutted from its throat.

She blinked through the pain at the shapes emerging from the haze, hardly recognizing them for what they were. Human bodies were supple and hairy and did not

gleam in the sunlight—at least not the kind of human bodies she was familiar with.

“The rumors appear to be true, Captain Dantes,” one of the men said to the other. “Halfmen,” he added, nudging the lifeless mass of fur with his boot, “and so close to camp.”

“Aye,” said the man on the right, tilting his faceplate open, “but what of *this* one?” He fixed his shaggy brows on her, astonishment showing through his age-sunken eyes.

She felt suddenly very young, lost and vulnerable, her gaze wandering with intense curiosity over the leather and bronze of their armor, over their belts and boots and gloves, as if never having seen clothing before. But outsiders were not entirely unknown to her people. It was what had brought her so far from home.

“Why, she’s bare as a newborn!” the older man exclaimed. “It’s a wood nymph if ever I saw one!”

“Her grace kindles the heart, indeed, Torgin,” the Captain replied, “but she’s just a girl, a feral child, perhaps, lost to the wood when the bogrens came to her village. And she’s hurt.”

She felt their stares, and though she could see they were branding her every curve to memory, she did not know to feel shame any more than a fish can know what it means to be wet. She simply stood, awaiting her next move, focused on holding herself still as a morning dewdrop, her right arm limp against her side.

The man called Captain pulled off his helmet. He had dark eyes and an ebony beard and was pleasing to look at, and did not seem capable of hating her, despite her parents’ warning. Her instinct was to dash into the wood, but she did not flinch as he unhinged his cloak and stepped closer, wrapping her in it. She tugged at the hem, finding the fabric richer and more finely worked than her mother’s tunic. He pulled a jeweled dagger from his belt,

the finest blade she had ever seen, and with a single stroke cut a long strip from the edge of his cloak to fasten about her palm, staunching the flow of blood.

“Do you have a name?”

*My name is Thelana.*

“Can you speak?”

*Yes.*

Words did not leave her mouth and she did not know why. She understood most of what was spoken to her. It was a dialect similar to the one used by Aola, the outsider who taught her the way of the bow. But it'd been so long since speaking with anyone. Perhaps she'd forgotten how.

# The First Omen

## City by the Sea

## Chapter 1

## A Compass for Miseries

*If the body is offensive, then it is offensive to be human.*

—Kjus

**A**gain he planted his battle ax into the gelatinous head, squeezing slime from an antenna as he wrestled to stay seated aloft the snail's olive-green shell. With that final stroke, the cloven head submerged without a squeal and the warrior slid from its neck to the rim of the marsh. Under the turquoise moon, he gazed over his kill—at the monster that had fed on so many passersby—and spat.

*Emmaxis* reached over his shoulder, the skull-face trapped in the steel quivering with lust. He could feel the sword's eagerness like a flame coursing through him to his ankles. But it would not taste blood today. The attack had come from beneath the murky waters, offering little time to unsheathe the great sword.

Aside from the baldric he wore to carry his weapons, his clothing was the mud caking the muscled clefts of his torso, the leeches clinging to days' old blood, the dirt and twigs crowning the long blond tangles of his hair and beard. Standing in the midst of the swamp, he was like a statue worn by the ages, where the granite is chipped and made coarse. He gazed down at the reflection forming on the now still water. Only his eyes were soft, untarnished, seeming to belong to a different man.

A maple leaf, curled and brittle, was sticking to his shoulder. The tree that had dropped it did not belong to the swamp.

*What winds brought this to me? From how far have you traveled?* The gale carried the leaf from his fingertips, over and beyond the brambles of the marsh. Another shape was soaring in the crimson sky, a wing taking form as it approached. He shielded his brow from the eclipsing sun and there was now a creature where the shape had been, a man feathered from crested scalp to winged heel.

Familiarity loosened the grip he had on his ax. "Ouranos!" he called through gold tangles of beard, his voice hoarse, thirsting.

The avian shifted into a glide, taloned feet pointed earthward, the feathery membranes between his hips and wrists waxing to fullness. Ouranos shimmered, flexing his wing beyond his fingertips, changing hues like a peacock from silver gray to shades of blue.

"What brings you from Nimbos, Ouranos?"

The avian studied him, disappointment stretched across his angular face. "Always to the point with you, eh, Xandr? No time wasted on mere formalities? No polite chatter regarding myself or the nest mate?"

Xandr betrayed nothing as he scraped the muck from his chest to reveal the long, winding scar that defined him. He had many similar scars, like pink script, tales of battle written across his body.

"I should have known to find you in such a place," Ouranos continued. "Drowning your miseries in misery."

Xandr knew the bird man hated the swamp. Growth choked the air with muddied

greens and browns—moss-coated willows weeping like maids in mourning and boughs that twisted at odd angles to meet the sky. Only the smaller violet moon hemming the tree-line beckoned with a promise of hospitable lands beyond.

“This is no home for a human,” the bird man admonished. “When will you return to the family of men?”

“Men are cruel and stupid things and no longer interest me,” Xandr replied, amid the ear-pinching whine of a fist-sized dragon mosquito—a poisonous shade of green with wiry tendrils—which floated up from the moon to drink from the snail’s corpse.

“So you are satisfied here, in this *Marsh of Melancholy*? You would be king among the . . . the mosquitoes?”

The avian could see that Xandr was unmoved, so he tried again, twittering in a gentler tone. “How have your wounds healed since last we parted?”

“I still have scars to remember you by,” said Xandr, taking an overgrown root for a seat.

The avian made a noise strange to the Ilmarin’s ear, an amalgam of human laughter and a parrot’s squawking.

“How does the world look from above?” Xandr asked, letting his wet braid fall against his collarbone.

“All the lands are in disarray,” Ouranos replied. “Everywhere I look . . . there is suffering.”

“Yes, that much I am able to assume. But what is it to me? That is the way of things.” Pulling the sword from his shoulder, Xandr impaled the ground between them. Xandr

watched Ouranos eyeing his own reflection in the sword, and could sense that the avian hated the way the folds of the metallic skull face twisted the image of his face. The blade was a mirror surface, free of nicks or smudges, as if it were just born from a blacksmith's molten fire. Xandr cleared his throat. "The people can keep their miseries. I am done with them."

"Are your senses still attuned to the elements? Feel about you," the avian implored. "There is great change in the air. The middle lands grow colder . . . Omens of change abound."

Xandr's braid whipped about as he turned away. "Leave me alone." Somewhere in the heart of the marsh, a beast brayed with agony as something massive snarled and stomped. Numerous other creatures raised their voices in a fearful clamor, but Xandr paid them no heed. Only Ouranos' milky white-on-white pupils darted with apprehension—his bones were hollow and many an animal considered him prey.

"When will you stop wandering?" Ouranos persisted, reaching out to him with his feathered palm. "You cannot hope to outrun the gods, nor unfasten the strings of Fate."

"What do you know of human gods? Or of my fate?"

"I am your only friend. Who but I would know? It is ignoble to hold to the memory of the dead."

Xandr stared off into the distance, to a place he knew Ouranos could not see. "The dead are all I have."

"No!" Ouranos objected. "There are others like you. I have seen them, I—"

"Have you come here to torment me?" Xandr cried, the blue of his eyes receding under an angry brow.

"No, I've come to deliver a message."



“A message?” Xandr could not imagine who would do this. For nearly ten years he’d lived as a recluse, avoiding civilization, scavenging for food, sleeping—whenever fortunate—under shade of the wood.

“Two cycles past, a human came to the Tower of Heaven. He scaled Mount Spire to address our council, a feat we believed impossible. He hailed from the city by the Sea, from the capitol of the Hedonian Empire. They were at war, he told us, with the waterlings, with those they call *merquid*. It is strange that this should happen now, that waterlings should rise against groundlings when the two have coexisted for untold millennia. I fear it is a sign of the darkening times. The Hedonian spoke of a *Batal of Legend*. He offered a talent of gold so that we might seek him out, and so I knew I had to find you, as you are the only one who has spoken this name to me.”

The name floated between them, no less poisonous than the dragon mosquitoes gathering at the corpse of the sinking snail.

“The bones of Batals have long become dust,” Xandr replied. “For all anyone knows, they may never have existed at all.”

“I was sent to find this Batal,” Ouranos screeched, “to deliver the plea of Urukjinn! And since I believe you are this person, to your ears shall this plea fall!”

“Urukjinn? Should I know him?”

“He is the High Priest of the Sargonius Temple. Lead a contingent of hoplites against the merquid and he promises his virgin daughter to you, with such a dowry as to make a man king.”

“Dowries and spoon fed princesses do not entice me. What of Nimbos? Is the Ascendency too cowardly to lend arms?”

“Since the Age of the Septhera we’ve kept to the mountains, and as a result we have never seen the face of war. You know this, Xandr. No groundling or waterling has ever posed a threat to us. If we were besieged, perhaps . . .”

“Avian cowards!” Xandr spat. “Your tongues should be cut off to speak of heroism! Even so, there’s no Batal—it is a fiction born of hope, by desperate men.” He tugged his sword southward, but the blade remained fixed in the damp soil. “I shall go my own way!” he barked, half-speaking to the weapon. With that, Emmaxis surrendered into a wild arc, nearly kissing Ouranos’ lip. Still gripping the hilt, Xandr turned on his heel like a weathervane against a changing wind, the sword parallel to the horizon. A shaft of sun ran platinum white along its side, its tip shining like a jewel. He could feel Ouranos’ eyes, amused and righteous, on his back.

“The sword directs you south, to Hedonia.”

The Batal cursed and spat as he wrestled with the weapon.

“It is your destined path.”

“No, Emmaxis follows blood. It is,” he added tiredly, “a compass for miseries. Remember that its name means *blood spiller* in the Ilmarin tongue. It senses war, an opportunity for slaughter.”

“In that case, that sword is a wicked thing. Why not toss it in the swamp and have done with it? It is unbecoming for one of your race.”

Xandr’s eyes fixed on the devilish intricacies of the skull face as though looking upon

a long-departed friend. "If I do not carry it, who will? It is my *purpose*."

"You do not know that for certain, Batal," Ouranos said, "but if that is so, I suggest you do as it wills."

"Should I have done so," Xandr replied, "you would already be dead." But Xandr could not deny the bird man's reasoning. If the sword was his purpose, he would have to follow it.

"Hedonia is the greatest of all cities," Ouranos chirped softly. "If you go there, you may even find . . . whatever you seek."

Xandr maintained his gaze, a painter before an empty canvas, saying, with finality, "Yes. Perhaps there is something there for me in Hedonia."

"I am uplifted by your change of heart and shall tarry no longer," Ouranos replied. "Farewell, my friend, and good journey." The avian caught the gale, his feathers bristling and billowing with fullness, and with a sweep of his arms he was distant again.

The village was like any other. Irrigation channels radiated like the spokes of a wheel, splitting the fields, but the channels ran shallow or dusty. The huts that followed the riverbed were of thatched straw and stacked dung, with spaces left open for windows. Lone doors hung open, captive to the irregular whims of the wind, and age-old chips of paint hinted at better days. A three-legged beet dog looped in circles about the village square, losing a race to a lanky rooster.

The children were curious to approach him. Their ragged tunics were colored by age and human excess. Too poor for shoes, they pocked the hard dry earth with bare feet as they gathered, staring aghast at the man who wore no clothes but a baldric for his sword and ax,

his weapons chiming with each step. Mothers and women of marrying age moved about hastily, their wicker baskets teetering overhead, embarrassed stares hidden under their shawls, as fathers and sons labored in the field, hacking at lifeless clay, dredging up water from wherever it could be found. After a short while, the children with older relatives were pulled away from the gathering, led back to the safety of their adobe domiciles with frightful whispering and hushes. No one else greeted him.

From the time he stumbled out of Ilmarinen as a boy, his nakedness was met with averted eyes, shouted insults, sometimes stones. They called him savage, and spoke of primitive people, like the Ilmar, as if less than human, so that in time he learned that the outside world despised him and his ilk. *Mankind should share no affinity to animals or the lesser species.* Civilized gods taught that humans reigned above other life forms, fashioned by the divine from a different substance. But his gods were not theirs. In cities, they worshiped before altars of stone, venerating symbols, idols of gold and silver and all that was rare beneath the earth. To the Ilmar, only things that grew were precious—*life*—and so Xandr rejected the local taboos, choosing seclusion over conformity, living far from the places where populations amassed. He was a man without home, without country, without kin. Having nothing, he feared nothing. Fearlessness served him in the untamed lands, in the dark, wild, lost places of Aenya, where the city-born went to die. But if he were to enter into Hedonia, the very heart of the civilized world, he knew he could not go as himself. Xandr would need to hide behind custom, become familiar again with the trappings of men. Learning to wear clothing would not be enough. Having survived, until now, by hunting and gathering, he had no currency and nothing with which to barter. His only possessions were

his body and his weapons.

Finding no inn or tavern, he accosted a man hacking at rows of dirt with a rust-flaked hoe. Beside him, a humpbacked aurochs shackled to a plough hoofed at the clay, its frilled horns crisscrossing above the two men. “Blasted scrabs,” Xandr heard him grumble. “They’re more each year!”

“What place is this?” Xandr asked the farmer.

The man nudged the brim of his hat to better look at the stranger. “No place you’d want to be, I can assure you,” he said, his nose dipping under his lip. “Most folk that pass through here don’t know they did. But should anyone ask, this here’s Akkad.”

“You are different from the others in your village.”

“And how’s that?”

“You do not fear me.”

“Should I?” A chuckle caught in his throat. “Fools just haven’t been around as long as me. On the planet, that is. It’s all in the eyes. Only Ilmarin-folk have eyes so fair.”

Xandr smiled. “You have a gift.”

“And you’re a well-built fellow, even for a wild man,” he replied, straining under a crooked spine. “You might not be some kind of god now, are you?”

“I confess I am not.”

“Always good to be kind to strangers, see—never know when they might be a god.”

“You have nothing to fear from me. Your kindness is your own.” Even as he said this, Xandr could sense the man’s growing unease. It was not an uncommon reaction. But the farmer was more intrepid than most, and Xandr did not have to guess the reason. Loss was

camouflaged beneath the old man's unassuming demeanor—a plague or a raid had likely stolen his wife and children, and such men feared neither the loom of Fate nor the scythe of the Taker.

“How grow the crops this season?”

“Scrabs,” he replied. “I’ll be damned if you don’t need a pickax to crack those buggers. They chew up my roots, but you can turn ‘em into a nice soup and bowl. I only just got planting—ollyps, blums, watermelon grapes, napshins, hockenberries, tomatoes, the usual sort of thing—but harvest is smaller each year. I say—we’re headed for famine again.”

“Perhaps the Goddess shall favor you.”

“Well, sure’s hot today,” he answered, with a wipe of his brow, most likely unsure of which goddess was meant. “I’d be grateful just for a cool breeze.”

“Can you show me the way to Hedonia?”

“You mean you don’t know? All roads lead to the city, or so they say. Don’t you see it?” Silhouettes stretched across the turquoise moon, no bigger than the hairs on his arm. The shapes were unnatural, angular, like a ghostly fleet drifting in the ether. “You only have to follow the Phayus to the Sea.”

“I am glad it’s so near. I expected another cycle of walking.”

“Three, I’d wager, if you got strong legs and keep a good pace,” he said. “Or you could go by boat, if you had the coin for the ferryman. On a clear day like this, those monuments rise like mountains.”

“I see.”

“Tell me, son, why go to Hedonia?” His bitterness was evident, and even his aurochs

seemed to agree, rattling in its harness and braying with distaste.

“I am summoned there.”

“Well, you can’t go as you are!” He attempted a laugh, but his mouth was too full of dust. “You’ll be turned away at the gate! I was, once, when my wife was ill. Dressed too much like a beggar, they told me. Haven’t you anything at all to wear?”

“I am Ilmar—we do not need *clothing*,” he replied sharply, defensively, and immediately felt the fool, knowing he could not go without. Apologetically, he added, “I have long to join the company of men.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. I’ve got sandals to spare, made from my own hide. Well, not *my own* hide, but you figure my meaning. On lunar days I work as a tanner, when so many shoe worn travelers pass through here seeking the city.”

Xandr could not tell whether the offer was purely out of kindness, a plea for self-preservation, or some measure of both. “I am grateful, but have no coin for it.”

“Alas,” he said with pity, “there are no poorer folk than Ilmarin-folk.”

“I am not—we are not poor! No man is poor who wants for nothing. But I will return the favor, somehow.”

“Pff!” He gestured him away. “*Blessed by Sargonius are those who show kindness to strangers*. But be forewarned—should you find yourself caught in the wheels of civilization, sooner than you realize you’ll be laboring like my beast to repay some debt. It is a land of riches, to be sure, but those who go there hunger for want of the soul, living to forever quench their greed, their appetite for wine and meat, their lust. See what the name itself has come to mean—*hedonist*.”

“Do not preach to me,” Xandr said. “When my people made their exodus from their lands, the men were made beggars and the women forced into bondage. I know of what it means to be civilized.”

“Now I meant no offense, and you have my apologies. But my offer still stands. Come daybreak, I can provide you with footwear and something to gird your loins. Until then, may Sargonius watch over you.”

With the farmer’s words fresh in his ears, Xandr took shelter under a eucalyptus tree, which sprang from the riverbank. Bathing in the Potamis—what was here called the Phayus—could wait until sunrise.

Solos melted like the yoke of an egg into the surface of the greater moon in the celestial ritual that turned day to night, and slowly he drew forth Emmaxis, gazing at his distorted reflection. He had days to succumb to the lure of sleep. Gold and turquoise and violet streaked the dying sky and in shifting clouds he sought familiar faces. And one by one, the stars emerged, glinting like tips of daggers.

*Watch the sky.*

Those had been the last words of his mentor.



## Chapter 2

## Dreams of Ilmarinen

*Let me run the hills of Ilmarinen  
With soles in soil and grass  
Where braids play the gale  
And sun splashes sharp shoulders.  
I wrap the sky around me  
And birth myself to freedom.  
Let the universe swell my lungs  
And stars scorch my heart.  
My feet pound the river rock  
as I run the hills of Ilmarinen.*

—A song of the Solstice Night

**H**and over foot, the young boy managed his way to the top of the plateau. The air was crisp about his pores and the green scent of the Goddess filled his lungs. His arms spread across the horizon, across the turquoise crescent that was Infinity, the greater moon. The other moon, Eon, glittered like an amethyst in the morning sky. Melting snow cascaded beneath his battered soles, vanishing into mists below. All around him, water could be seen pooling over sheets of rock, feeding into the sun gilded Potamis River. A thousand shades met his eyes, from the jade of the leaves to the amber of the oaks

to the purple of the ilms. To the north, the Mountains of Ukko met the heavens like strokes of gray-white chalk.

Apart from his wooden sword's baldric and the lapis lazuli in his braid, the young monk was clad in nothing but sky, with all the ground his shoes and the sun his coat. The sparring weapon and the blue mineral were his only accouterments, but in this moment, he was more interested in the stone, remembering the River Girl who had given it to him—she had a pleasing face and an easy gait and he had admired the skill with which her henna was applied, the pattern running up her thigh to form an arrow between her breasts.

Effortlessly, his hands and feet met the nooks in the olive tree's roots. Descending the hill, he spotted his mentor rounding the path.

"Queffi!" the boy called. "I am here!"

Xandr was well aware that QuasiI did not appreciate his sudden disappearances, yet his mentor never punished his boyish eagerness to explore. Blinded by the sunbeam reflecting off the old man's scalp, the boy suppressed the urge to laugh. It was not that his mentor lacked for hair—his ash white locks reached to the middle of his back and his silver streaked beard concealed the whole of his collarbone. But the top of his head was as barren as the western hemisphere.

"Recite the names again," his mentor droned, steadying himself on his quarterstaff.

What enthusiasm Xandr had shown earlier that morning drained from his voice. Not ecology. Again. Why couldn't they learn more about saurians or mammoths or horgs? He doubted he would ever face mortal danger from an elm.

“High in the canopy there, I see a camphor tree, with elms all about it.”

“Good.”

But these trees were easy to name. Oak and camphor were made into homes, the walls of each room integrated with the living whole, a good example, QuasiI loved to remind him, of how every life is connected to another. Lesser known flora, like the dead looking baobab tree, Xandr mistook for a fledgling oak, for which his mentor had rapped him on the head.

They continued on, the boy directing his mentor to things he was certain to recognize, through a grove of twisting bark with dull green leaves. “. . . and these here, of course, are olive trees . . .” The fruits were small and flat, not yet ripe for the beating. It’s odd, he mused, how the younger limbs are smooth but the trunk and the older branches are rough and gnarled . . .

“Xandr!” a voice rumbled. “Focus! What of these flowers here?”

The boy suppressed a groan. “Um . . . blue orchids?”

“They are blue, indeed, but are only similar to orchids in their appearance. Did you forget?” Disappointment gnarled his mentor’s face, making him look more like an olive tree. “You must not forget the names of the Goddess, or she will forget you.”

“Yes Queffi, that *is* true, but—”

QuasiI bent to examine a sapling, pressing the tiny leaves between thumb and forefinger. He was not so different from his pupil, often distracted, aloof, but Xandr’s respect for him never lessened. Despite his great age, his mentor’s hands looked strong enough to squeeze water from a rock. And QuasiI knew things no one else did. He could tell when rain was to fall days in advance, knew the age of any plant by touch alone, and he referred to each

animal as part of a great family, explaining how the rabbit was cousin to the deer and the deer to the ornith.

Every year on the morning of the Solstice, the keepers would descend to the village to select among the wisest of the youth a protégé to be raised in the monastery. A boy or girl showing an aptitude for metallurgy was taught the secrets of metals, and after a lifetime of study was expected to replace their mentor as Keeper of Metallurgy. So it went with all the secrets of the universe. But Xandr was unlike the others. For as long as he could remember, he lived with the keepers, and though he cared little for plants, he was expected to know everything about them. As QuasiI often reminded him, the discipline of ecology was the greatest of all the sciences, but Xandr could not bring himself to agree. He much preferred tales of the Zo, with their planet-spanning cities and fantastic machines and weapons. The boy could not understand why the Ilmar, despite seemingly limitless knowledge, had no such things as the Zo—why the Ilmar were, in fact, forbidden possessions of any kind. Whenever he asked the keepers about it, he was simply told, “You are the Batal,” and nothing more.

“Shall we go over flowers, then?” QuasiI suggested.

Leaves crackled and seeds popped underfoot as the boy circled. Xandr was a jumble of energy, nimbly ducking branches and hopping roots. “Queffi . . . there are things I wish you to teach me that you never have.”

“Such as?” He arched a bushy eyebrow, and the boy understood that his mentor knew what weighed upon his heart, and was testing him.

Xandr settled on a simple question, in order to loosen his mentor’s tongue. “I want to know of the things beyond Ilmarinen. Is it true that people south of the river must hide their

bodies?”

“It is true,” he replied matter-of-factly. “Clothing, or fabric, is woven from many different plants, animal skins as well. The most common method is the loom, by which—”

“Queffi!” the boy interrupted. “That is not what I wanted to know.”

Quasil feigned confusion, but the boy remained adamant, rooted to a mossy boulder.

“With whom have you been speaking?”

“Brother Zoab,” the boy admitted.

“I should have known.” He cleared his throat, as though he were about to recite from the philosophers. “We are as diverse as the flowers, Xandr. Just as the soft soil suits the ilm so that it may flourish, so do human customs vary. Ice does not fall here as in the Dark Hemisphere, nor does the sun scorch the flesh as in the West. Here in the *Womb of Alashiya*, we live as simply as we are born, as Kjus teaches.”

“But Queffi,” the boy went on, hopping from his perch, “Brother Zoab told me that the Ilmar cannot venture beyond our borders without clothing, that we are hated otherwise, that the women in some cultures may even be killed—with stones—should their bodies be seen. I do not understand these things, Queffi. I asked Brother Zoab about it, but he gave no answer.” The boy stood in silence, staring into his own palm, wondering at its complexity, at the faint blue lines beneath the skin. “Are we not to roam freely about the world? Or is there some flaw in the people of the outer world?”

“No,” Quasil asserted. “The body is an absolute good. Mankind is born of the Mother Goddess, just as our cousins, the merquid and the avian. We are lovingly and minutely refined over the aeons. The flaw is not in us—I fear—but in the stars. Since time immemorial, before

the greater moon loomed in the heavens, we were all Ilmar. For hundreds of millennia, humanity knew nothing of want or possessions.”

“What happened?” Xandr asked a little too loudly. “Was it the *Cataclysm*?”

“No.” he paused, addressing Xandr with uncertainty, with half-truths. “It was not the external world that changed us. It came from within. The Zo ate of the fruit of knowledge, but did not drink from the well of wisdom. They looked upon themselves and saw that they were fauna, and became ashamed, and in their hubris longed to separate from the Mother Goddess, to become gods themselves. Of all the species of this world, only humans reject what they are. This shame is a perversion. If one does not see the Goddess within himself, he will not see it in others. If man can hate himself, he will hate others of his kind ... and even those not of his kind. ”

The boy rocked uneasily, disappointed. He never cared for abstractions, for ideologies that forced him to ponder until his head hurt. For once, he wished for concrete truths. The history of Aenya was a puzzle, one in which many of the pieces were missing.

“But Queffi,” he began, squaring his shoulders and choosing his words carefully, “when the greater moon came into being after the Cataclysm, something changed. Man changed. How? Did it have something to do with what Brother Zoab told me, about the star called *The Wandering God*?”

Quasil paused to glare at him, then hurried off, his staff clacking against the stones. “I am not so certain Zoab should speak to you of such things. You are not yet a man.”

Xandr held his anger in his fists so that it not show on his face. He was no longer a child. When a boy or girl began to show hair about the loins, they would partake in the rituals

of the Solstice Night. Though Xandr had yet to jump the sacred bonfire hand-in-hand with a girl that was to be joined to him, the time was upon him, as evidenced by his maturing body. “No,” he protested, “my hair has grown and my chin is coarse. Soon I’ll be bearded, and a man!” Xandr had never challenged his mentor so openly before, but he still lacked the courage to meet the deep well of wisdom that were his mentor’s eyes.

“Have you been practicing the technique we went over?”

Devoid of thought, a hand flied to the pommel at his hip. “The *delayed counter*?” Yes, I have. Every day and night!”

“Show me.”

“Wait! You always trick me into forgetting my questions this way. But not this time.”

And he folded his arms defiantly.

“So the Batal has come of age, eh?” It was more a question than a statement. “Come.” Without a further word, they followed a path clear of vegetation, formed by years of treading feet.

Layers of limestone rose above the tree line. An immense white willow grew at its peak. Its trunk always made Xandr think of a bent woman with a cane. It was a place for bloodless battles, long discourses on philosophy, and an observatory for the Zo, Alashiya, and Skullgrin constellations. As was their custom, QuasiI let his staff against the mossy stone and was seated. Xandr folded his legs atop the boulder below, tucking his manhood between his thighs, a thing which had become a bother lately, especially when the young girls bathing in the waterfalls in the valley below crept into his mind’s eye. He assumed it was a part of his

growing to maturity, but he was destined to be the Batal, which made him wonder whether he would ever join in the festivities of the Solstice Night.

“The sapling,” Quasil began, “too feeble for the outer world, remains safe within its seed. There it waits till ready, till strong enough to break its shell and lay roots in the earth.”

More metaphors! If there was one thing Xandr disliked more than abstract answers, it was metaphors. “But teacher,” Xandr objected, “I’ve already bested you with my sword!”

The old monk waved a dismissive hand. “That is not what matters. Do not forget the sayings of Kjus—‘knowledge not tempered by wisdom sows destruction’. I may know to destroy this jasmine,” he added, caressing the violet bulbs of a flower sprouting from between the crevices in the rock, “yet I may not have the wisdom to hear it speak to me.”

Xandr threw his shoulders back, the sunlight turning his hair to gold. “But I am ready, Queffi. Ready to leave Ilmarinen, to become the Batal.”

“And how can you be so certain, my son, when you do not know what lies beyond the Potamis? Look there.” Quasil pointed to a tree as tall as the sky, with branches thick enough to walk upon. “The Batal is like the mighty camphor. It begins as a berry no bigger than your thumb, but then it grows, becoming a home to many species . . .”

Having heard the lecture countless times, Xandr’s mind drifted. Quasil was either stubbornly repeating himself or becoming forgetful. The boy longed for Brother Zoab’s tales of magic and monsters and heroism.

Shifting in his limestone seat, he pulled at his ankle to study his sole. The underside of his foot was black as tar and rough as bark, the cracks in it like some form of lettering. In his fourteen years of pounding up the jagged slopes to his monastery home, of navigating the



river rocks lining Ilmarinen's southern border, of stomping through raw earth and twigs, his feet could have borne him across half the planet. But today—he could not remember from when or where—a sharp sensation followed his steps. Being Ilmarin, it had to have been a long splinter for him to notice. Running a thumbnail to his heel, he discovered what he'd taken for a splinter was in fact a knife-edged seedling. His fingernails drew blood as he worked to remove it.

After his mentor was finished speaking, he looked up from his sole, saying, "But am I not already the Batal?"

Quasil rubbed his skull, forming new folds of flesh. "No. Not yet." He gazed into the sunrise, drawing images with his hands. "Only by relinquishing pride, by surrendering possessions, can one hope to escape the mistakes of the past. It is why the Goddess chose *us*, for of all the world's peoples, only the Ilmar desire nothing."

"But will you not tell me, plainly, what I am meant to do?"

The wizened monk drew a long, tired breath. "You will know when you learn to listen to the trees, to hear the voices of Alashiya."

As if remembering something urgent, the old monk's attention came away and they became aware of it—between the turquoise moon and the violet glow of the smaller—a gray ribbon of smoke was diffusing over the orange sky.

Xandr could see the turmoil in his mentor's eyes, but his own imagination did not lend itself easily to horror. "What could it mean?"

“No. Not this,” he murmured, never straying from the ribbon of smoke. Instantly, the staff was in his hand, no longer a stick for walking but a weapon, as Quasil transformed into a warrior of commanding presence. “We’ve been found! Hurry, Xandr! Today you prove yourself!”

And for the first time the boy sensed real fear in his teacher’s voice.

## Chapter 3

## Jewel of the Sea

*Cities rise and fall with the tide. Gods of stone and symbol vanish in the winds of ages. But the children of Alashiya are eternal.*

—Kjus

**B**anners rippled in the air, blue and tapered and hemmed with tassels, each with a truncated trident emblazoned in gold. Bridging each tower, battlements rose and fell with the slope of the land, atop which hippocampus-driven chariots patrolled two-by-two.

In a canvas of disparate humanity, a multitude of peoples crashed like waves against the city's arches—moneylenders from Thetis, fish mongers from Thalassar, craftsmen from Northendell, and traders from the far eastern provinces of Shemselinihar. Lizard jerkins mingled with distantly embroidered muslin tunics, while pleated kilts married striped djellabas and clanking chain mail challenged revealing chitons. Many were of a displaced people, Xandr knew, populations which, due to invasion or famine, no longer possessed lands to call their own. Whether any were of his race, there was little way of knowing. Despite the plethora of customs on display, only Ilmarin fashion—or rather the complete absence of it—was shunned here. Individuals attired in clothing from a hundred different cultures coexisted in a semblance of harmony, but the sight of a human body was to be abhorred or pitied, as one would an animal, a beggar or a slave.

He tugged at his kilt, the one the farmer in Akkad had been kind enough to give, keenly aware of each and every loose stitch—it grated his skin and was damp with his sweat, and the seams pulled in opposition with his movement, the constant sensation almost unbearable. But the girdle about his waist was a far greater discomfort, roping him like a man on the gallows, stemming the tide of blood to his loins. He supposed that he would learn to adapt, as he had learned to ignore his baldric and the weight of his weapons. Splashes of morning sun warmed his bare shoulders, and a cool mist from the Sea rolled over and around his upper body, but the lower half of him was numb to the touch of the world. Bound in sandals, he could not feel the hill beneath him, the soft shifting sands, the sunbaked limestone, the dew from the tall coastal grasses that grew between the rocks. There was only the dull leather sole, step after step.

Continuing down to the coastline, a multitude of tongues jarred his eardrums, as few could be counted to converse in the same dialect. Hedonian speech, which to the Ilmarin sounded overly syllabic and flowery, was omnipresent, contorted to suit the enunciations of conquered languages. Adding to the noise was the twang of the sitar player's F-string, the trombone-like bray of a saurian as it tugged at the chains tethered to its three gilded horns, the purr of the green-striped saber tooth pacing in its cart, and the sympathetic applause for a strongman swinging his daughter from the rope in his teeth. The chiming of the merchant nomads' wares—from ivory prayer beads to wards of eyeball-and-hand—added to the cacophony.

Under the dizzying height of the central gate's top stone, centurions directed the traffic of emigrants, gleaming like bronze golems, abstracts of tridents emblazoned along

their convex arms. It was not long before Xandr's weapons drew attention. Two men accosted him. Their horsehair crested helmets, too hot for peacetime, were tilted away from their faces. One was newly ripened to manhood, and though weighted and stewing in his bronze, hopped from sandal to sandal with naïve exuberance. The other was in his middle years, idling against the lip of his hoplon. He had a wary look about him and his breastplate with its dull polish and clawed grooves gave evidence of battle.

"From what land do you hail?" he asked, swatting at mammoth-flies with his miniature cat-o'-nine-tails.

"I am from a far-off land," Xandr replied.

"And what business do you have in the capital?" he droned, grown bored with the words.

"I was summoned by your priest."

"There are some three hundred clerics here. You will have to give me a name, or—"

"Urukjinn," Xandr intoned, hiding, as best as he could manage, his newfound longing to tear the soldier's head from the collarbone.

"What?" the fresh-faced soldier interrupted, "Do you mean to say the High Priest of the Sargonus Temple summoned you?" Incredulously, he glanced toward his companion.

Ignoring the youth's presence entirely, the hoplite studied Xandr with a mix of contempt and revulsion. "The priest does not summon . . ." he began, but Xandr could see him taking in the kilt and sandals, the immense sword mirroring his face, clearly unable to decide whether to call him beggar or barbarian.

"I am . . . *the Batal*," he admitted through clenched teeth. "Now let me through."

“You!” the younger man exclaimed. “*You* are the Batal? I’d heard you were eleven feet tall.”

“Please, Finias, no one asked what you’ve heard, nor does anyone care.”

A man at the dusk of boyhood, Xandr eyed him. Brother Zoab taught how worlds existed with only one moon or none at all. On Aenya, the greater and smaller moon affected every aspect of culture and language. Infinity was synonymous with the positive, greater attributes, whereas the small moon served as a metaphor for the lesser. A child of ill-health was born under Eon. A man of sizeable stature was named after Infinity. But this *Finias* displayed no characteristic one could call greater. His greaves, breastplate and helm boasted more intricate etching than those of his comrade, but they fit him loosely. No doubt he was of an aristocratic house, his armor a family heirloom.

“Well, what do you think?” Finias asked sheepishly. “Should we let him through? Could he be the Batal of Legend?”

“Oh, I’m certain of it!” the other man answered, swinging and missing the mammoth fly buzzing at his ear. “As are the other dozen Batals raving in our streets! You’ve been filling your head with too much bard shit, kid. But as I’m in no mood to scuffle with muscled lunatics, there’s no sense turning him away. Escort him to First Commander. He’ll have fun with him.” Eyeballing Xandr, he added, “I warn you, vagrants coming here making brouhaha end up dead, or worse, in the dungeons.”

Sunbaked roof tiles and fluted marble sprawled across their plane of view as Xandr and Finias passed under the arch and into the city. Xandr allowed his senses to drown in the exotic. Carpets of obscene complexity lay draped in loose piles, and children perched in

niches high above the streets, tapping bronze into plate-ware. Housewives sat on carved benches, fingering spinning mud into pottery. Aromas from a thousand different nations confounded his nostrils, from mounds of powdered saffron to barrels of almonds.

“This is the market district,” Finias remarked. “Long ago it was a temple complex, I think, but it’s turned to ruin.

“Um, there are many things to do here,” he went on, stealing nervous glances at Xandr, who towered by his side. “From the looks of you, you’ve never seen a city.”

“I have,” Xandr replied.

“Ah, but no city like Hedonia, I’d wager. All the delights of the world can be found here. That’s why Hedonia’s called the *Jewel of the Sea*! If you like, we can go to the stadium to see the chariots, or perhaps the gladiators would better suit someone of your . . . er, profession. Father took me to the fights when I was little, said it would make me a man, but I was sickened by the blood. He also took me to the races. I liked it better.”

“I have no interest in any of that,” said Xandr. “Just show me to the priest.”

“Yes, sir.” Finias shifted uncomfortably under his shoulder plates. “I don’t suppose you’d care for the theater? There are several performances showing right now by some of our finest dramatists. One of them, I believe, is about you.”

Xandr paused in mid-stride, noticing the second wall curtaining the horizon. “About me?”

“Truly!” he said, beaming with enthusiasm. “It’s called, *Batal and the Floating City of Abu-Zabu*. I mean, the actor doesn’t share your build, of course, but actors are meant for acting, not brawling. He does have a booming voice though . . . you can hear him all the way

in the two-mite seats, which is good because I can scarcely afford better. But it's quite a riot—I've watched it seven times already. It's about your adventures. About how you slew the two-headed giant of Abu-Zabu."

"Did I now?" Xandr's lips eased into a smile. "I was not aware of that."

Courage crept into Finias' voice, though he still failed to make eye contact. "So, did you really slay the two-headed giant of Abu-Zabu?"

"No. I've never seen a two-headed giant, nor heard of a place called Abu-Zabu."

"Oh." Drained of his eagerness, the boy engrossed himself in the pavers on the street, counting the ones that were missing. "But if you didn't slay the giant," he went on, tapping a pebble from his sandal, "you must not be the one we hoped for, the Batal of Legend, I mean."

"You are fond of speech," Xandr admitted.

"Oh, that's true, sir."

When they arrived before the shadow of the second gate, Xandr peered down the alleyway framed by the face of an old library and the inner-city wall. Under dimly glowing lanterns, he could make out the tents that served as homes and the peasants in their soiled and tattered clothing.

"Do not go that way!" Finias called out. "It is a wretched place . . ."

An aged man sat amid his possessions, rattling a pair of obol in his tin. With a shift of his head, the man recited, "Good sirs, sit a spell and be moved, if you will. I am no mere beggar, but a proud legionnaire of the Stygian campaign, who lost his sight to heathen hands. Alas, I cannot longer work, and only ask a pittance for a respectable burial."



Finias lurched suddenly, kicking the man with his greave. "Get moving, worm! And take your rubbish with you. You know you can't make your homes here."

"Let him be!" Xandr cried, surprised by the youth's sudden assertiveness. But already the old man was fleeing, making a trail of his belongings.

"But . . ." Finias muttered, "they're the basest class! They sleep in their own piss!"

"He said he was a legionnaire."

"Oh, they all say that. And they don't belong here along the tower wall, Demacharon said so. Muck up the whole place with their filth. Besides, he could have robbed you."

"If I am here to face merquid, feeble paupers should hardly pose a threat to me. Do that again and you shall know my might, firsthand."

The Hedonian shrank away. "Forgive me."

Xandr scowled. Could someone of Ilmarin birth have been treated here with such cruelty? "I thought such men were turned away at the gates."

"That's the whole point, isn't it? Hedonia's bursting with such riffraff. Can't keep them all out, you know. It's a big city, and now we have gill knocking on our gates from the other side."

"Have you seen them?"

"Who? The gill?" he said. "No, not yet, but from what I've heard, well . . . they do give me the creeps."

Despite Finias' protests, Xandr ventured deeper into the shadows, where the glow of sun and moons was absent. His guide kept close behind as disturbing revelations set upon his innocent eyes.

"I've never been this far in," Finias admitted. "I'm no longer a guide here."

The Ilmarin paid him no heed. "So . . . this is where Hedonia hides its poor and downtrodden," he said quietly. "Did your father never show you this?"

"No, sir. He died a long time ago, on a campaign to liberate the barbarians."

Children huddled near a flame to roast pigeons and rodents. Peasants mottled with boils shuddered with fever. A few bodies lay wedged between stone embankments as feasts for mammoth flies. A newborn wailed like a distant squawking bird, its pleas going unanswered.

Someone called to them from below in a voice so strained from lack of use it could hardly be recognized as a woman's. She had not reached the third season of her life, yet her face was split from years of worry, where soot had set too deeply to be washed away. Dark strands, never knowing the touch of a blade, reached long across her face, and many spindly legs skittered freely between each hair. Finias stepped away, shielding his nostrils with a raised forearm, but Xandr knelt beside the woman, gazing honestly upon her. Her eyes were clear, he could see, as they were so often washed by tears.

"What do you want?" he asked her.

She straightened, letting the ox hide slip from her knee to reveal a thigh. "One copper drachma," she answered, pointing to the upturned helmet in her lap, "for half a passing." She worked up a smile but it was hardly sincere.

Xandr turned to his companion. "Give her what money you have."

"B-But, sir!" he stammered. "If this is what you crave, I assure you, there are better women to be had in Hedonia! This is not the place for us! Come away with me to the Temple

of Irene, choose from the youngest stock, from the most lovely females the Empire has to offer, any shape you fancy . . ." but seeing how the barbarian remained unmoved, the Hedonian added, "For the right price, there are the sacred virgins, trained in the arts of love without ever knowing a man's touch."

"I care not for whores!" Xandr cried. "Give her what money you have and I will repay you in blood on the battlefield."

The soldier emptied his purse into the woman's lap. Falling on her hands and knees, she poured the contents onto the cobblestone, counting four gold drachmae and two copper. Fearing she might be deceived, she hurried the gold into her mouth, bent the soft metal between her molars. With that, she lifted her eyes to Xandr, awestruck.

As he motioned to leave, she loosened her tunic, and they could see her pale flesh stretching tightly over her ribs.

"No," he said, turning again.

"Please, kind sir," she murmured, "do not shame me. Of all the times I've lent this body for copper, let it now be for gold."

He snatched up the garment, thrusting it violently into her arms.

"Mercy." Casting her face in shame and shadow, she motioned to a bundle against the crumbling wall. "Would you like . . . my daughter instead? S-She's older than she looks, and she has experience . . ."

With that, Xandr felt his face grow hot, and his fists clench, so that even Finias was made to tremble. "Away from me, whore! And with this," he added, indicating the coins in her hand, "buy back, if you can, her innocence."

As the two strangers retreated to the façade that was Hedonia, a pair of eyes followed, shining like emeralds amid the squalor and the shadows, hidden in that den of man's waste and the waste that had been made of men.

Throughout the city, in bronze relief across doorways and on marble pedestals, in armor donned by stone goddesses and flesh and blood soldiers, almost everywhere a traveler could look, Xandr noticed the varied forms of the trident. In some instances, the standard of Hedonia was garlanded by laurel leaves. Elsewhere, the trident included flanking hippocampi. But as they neared the Coast of Sarnath, it was more often a rising sail from the mast of a trireme. The *naval trident*, as Finias called it, greeted them at the door of the First Commander.

Demacharon was a broken man. It was clear to see upon meeting him, though Xandr could not tell what had broken him. Weaving across his handsome face, a violet discoloration divided his cheek and chin—a scar that had not healed properly. But it was little clue to his brokenness, as Demacharon wore the deformity like a medal of honor.

"What have you brought me now, Finias?" he asked without ceremony. "Another cliché?" A map spread across the granite slab between them and Xandr noticed the Empire's chalk outline, which the neighboring kingdoms could never have agreed to. Hedonia encompassed all the lands from the Dead Zones in the West to the Dark Hemisphere in the East.

"This is Xander," Finias stammered. "He claims to be the *Batal of Legend*."

"Excellent," the commander replied. "In that case, we are saved."

“Yes, um, and he seeks audience with the High Priest.”

“Oh?” He sighed with distaste, lifting his eyes to study the newcomer. “Few men look upon the High Priest. What makes you believe you’re worthy of the honor?”

“It is no honor for me,” said Xandr. “I merely answered a summons.”

“A summons?” he replied, and as if there was no reasonable way to reply, he turned to the young escort. “Finias, go do something useful, will you? Go groom my steed.”

“Yes, sir!” he exclaimed, slamming a fist against his breastplate. “*Strength and Honor, sir!*” he cried, making an overly dramatic about-face before marching out of the room.

“Yes, yes, strength and honor,” Demacharon said warily, waving him off.

As the sound of Finias’ clanking bronze softened, Demacharon leaned across the empire. “You’re a long way from home. Yes, I know what you are—the refugees we’ve taken in over the years have difficulty adjusting to . . . *modesty.*”

“To modesty or shame?” The thought of other Ilmar passing through the city made his heart thrum, but Xandr’s hardened face betrayed no emotion.

“And what would you know of shame? Or anything pertaining to civilized matters?” Demacharon demanded. “Your kind prefer living where deserters go in exile.” He stood, revealing the naval emblem of trident and trireme across a bronze breast, his wine dark cape swaying from his shoulders. “But you can fornicate with swine for all anyone cares. Leave the moralizing to the moralists, I say. My citizens and I fear only one thing, and we have it in great supply: xenophobia—a distrust of strangers, especially those with points of view.”

Despite the commander’s harsh words, Demacharon did not elicit the same reaction as the guard at the wall. There was sincerity in his convictions that made it difficult for Xandr

to hate the man. "So what's your story?" he went on. "Witness many awful things in the untamed lands?"

"No worse than on your campaigns," Xandr replied. "Though my hands are clean of innocent blood."

The commander grinned appreciatively. "We've beaten back the wild so that men might live free of terror. The lives of a few short-sighted dissenters are a small price to pay. Besides, our hands rinse clean in the holy waters of the Sargonus Temple."

"Do they?"

Demacharon stood by the tower window. A glorious vista spread before him, the center of the city, and beyond it, the surrounding cityscape with its gleaming marble colonnades, magnificent rotundas, and pediments lined with gods. At its extremity, the land sloped to the opposing city wall, where blue and white roared and rocked against silhouettes of long narrow hulls and masts as numerous as shafts of wheat in a field. Xandr was no stranger to the Sea, yet so much water never failed to impress him. Even at such distance, the salty air was intoxicating.

"My father was a legionnaire," he said slowly, "as his father before him. The cause has been in my family for generations, and you think to barge into my chambers, lob a few pointed words at me and alter my loyalties?"

Xandr was tempted to argue but chose the course of discretion.

Now he could see, through the opening in the wall, the monument complex casting its shadow over the city. In a perfect rectangle of green, the Temple of Sargonus stood in gleaming white and gold, mirrored in a pool of equal dimension, flanked by six obelisks that

stabbed at the turquoise moon. It was a three-sided pyramid flat at the apex, with a ramp of steps ascending from its base to the arched recess at its center.

The Ilmarin was dumbfounded, speaking only as words came to mind. “What giants could have built such a thing?”

“None,” Demacharon replied. “Unless men can be called giants. Slaves and freemasons, tens of thousands, laboring for decades before the time of the High Priest Callusa. Impressive, isn’t it? I’ve dragged holy men prepared to meet the Taker before the Temple and watched them renounce their gods, watched them grovel in humility.” After a pause, he added, “I don’t know what his Eminence thinks you can achieve—even if you *were* sent from Nimbos. I never would have thought it possible, the Batal an Ilmar, a small degree above animal. Yet if his Eminence believes, I must also. But mind your tongue before him. Nature worship is a heresy in Hedonia, and heresy is punished by death.”

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