

## Forward:

In 2006, I started work on the sequel to my 2004 novel, *The Dark Age of Enya*. It quickly dawned on me, however, that POD (Print on Demand) was not a good way to sell books. Clearly, I had to seek an alternative.

This was a painful time in my life, having to dump four years of work (from 1999-2003) to rewrite *Enya*, which in 2013 became *Ages of Aenya*. I also had to toss out the 40,000 word work-in-progress sequel, *The Dark Age of Enya 2*.

Flash forward six years, and the magic of blogging has given me a chance to share *Enya 2* with my fans. Renamed, *The City of the Drowned*, this high-fantasy/horror adventure is reminiscent of Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Rice Burroughs. And while it may help to have read my original novel to enjoy this one, it is by no means necessary.

In *The City of the Drowned*, you will find exotic locations, pulse-pounding action, and terrifying monsters. What more could you want? Oh, how about Xandr, Thelana, Emma and Grimosse?

## The story so far . . .

Proceeding from *The Dark Age of Enya*, Thelana is forced to leave her home and family to escape from hunger. But to the outside world, her people---the Ilmar---are little more than animal. To survive civilization, she becomes a thief, until caught stealing from the Temple in Hedonia. She is rescued by Xandr, the only other of her kind, before the city is destroyed by an amphibious merquid race.

The two Ilmar have many adventures together, fall in love, and rescue a young witch from slavery. Her name is Emma. Torn by jealousy, Thelana takes an immediate disliking to her.

Through Emma, the Ilmar learn of the Kingdom of Mythradanaail, and of the doomed Princess Radia. With the young witch tagging along, the Ilmar reach the fabled kingdom in the North, but are too late to rescue the princess. Before vanishing into the ether, Radia imparts to Xandr a jewel containing her power. They battle though goblin hordes to escape from under Mount Fire, at which point, Emma is wounded saving Thelana's life.

Eventually, the three make their way to Alogas, where Thelana steals horses from a stable. Camped out in the Endless Plains, she dreams at last of Ilmarinen, her lost homeland. So opens the *The City of the Drowned* . . .

The City of the Drowned

by

Nick Alimonos

## Prologue:

In the midst of the Ilmarin wood stood an ancient camphor tree of substantial girth with great gnarled roots that looped and twisted in great amorphous bundles from the earth. Its leaves spread a nexus of light and shadow beneath its form and skirting its foot a shallow brook washed gently. Drifting atop the watercourse, the occasional leaf dipped into a niche at the bosom of the root where it was gathered among the fallen leaves. For the young girl who stood atop the rugged bark, forearm over her eyes, it was a place like any other, deep in the wood. Among the trees she was with old company, with the soil in her toes and a mischievous wind in her braided hair. The life of the wood beat against her exposed skin, and through it, her soul. Winter was passed and there was plenty of harvest. Today was a day like any other in timeless youth, much as the day before, and now only the game held sway in her mind.

“Four . . . three . . . two . . . one,” Thelana’s emerald eyes snapped open and she glanced about, searching for clues as to the whereabouts of her sisters. There were no broken twigs or footprints to follow. But there was the faintest sound of shuffled leaves. With her chestnut braid whipping behind her, she darted about the trunk of the tree. Just as she came around to its opposite side, she spotted a slender heel slipping around the bend, marked by a watery splatter and a giggle.

“Oh, gee,” Thelana mused aloud, “I guess there’s nobody here. Maybe I’ll just look elsewhere.” With the agility of a frightened hare, she circled the trunk once more, this time catching her younger sister, who looked, with her single auburn braid, much

like herself, except that she was pale and gaunt and much less boyish than Thelana, so that at times her ribs and shoulders poked from beneath her skin. Like her older sister, Nicolita was without a stitch of clothing. They were Ilmar, after all, and a covered body was an awkward sight for them. Just as their siblings, their parents and cousins, and every person they knew, they lived each and every day without shoes or undergarments of any kind, their bodies as one with the trees and the earth and the sun and the wind. Outsiders called them *naked*, but the word was meaningless to the Ilmar.

“Nicolita!” Thelana exclaimed. “You should hide further away, not just behind Old Man!” It was the name she'd given the tree, as she had given names to every plant within miles of her house. But it was Old Man she loved most, her hideout for daydreaming, stargazing, and a place of play.

Nicolita fixed her eyes on the ground. “I thought you wouldn't think to look for me here,” she timidly replied, “I thought you would think it too obvious.”

“Oh Nicolita!” Thelana sighed. It was unspoken knowledge that her eight-year-old sister was a little slow, in both foot and mind, and for that Thelana had set herself up as a kind of guardian. “Well, come on!” she exclaimed, “let's go find Britannia!”

Dashing hand-in-hand over the brook and across the leaf laden thicket, glancing here and there as they called out their sisters' name, between soaring trunks and heavy boughs, they played out the seek portion of the universal childhood game of hide-and-seek.

At last they came to a hilltop overlooking a great plain and distant mountains. Fiery-amber clouds reamed with gray unfurled across the horizon like a great crumpled

quilt. Wisps of pink sailed the pastel blue of Enya's canopy. At their feet, shoots of Ilms swayed across the slope, the deep orange and bright violet petals brushing against her knees as Thelana stooped to examine the flower from which the name of her homeland derived, 'Ilmarinen' meaning 'place where the Ilms grow.' And then a rainbow colored butterfly fluttered past, diverting her eye, and she shouted a challenge to her sister, "Let's see who can catch one first!"

Down the slope they ran, Ilms parting at their feet as thousands of awakened butterflies swarmed about them.

"Hey!" a voice shouted angrily, and up from the Ilms a third girl sprouted, much more like Thelana than Nicolita, robust in frame but blonde haired and blue eyed.

"Aren't you supposed to be looking for me?"

The girls paused and the butterflies escaped. "Oh!" Thelana exclaimed, her hands held shyly behind her back. "I'm sorry . . . you just . . . hid too well, I guess, and we got bored!"

Nicolita nodded in agreement.

"Besides," Thelana continued, bringing her arms about to reveal, frantic between her clenched fingers, a captive butterfly. "I got one, and you didn't!"

"Hey, that's no fair!" Britannia complained. "I wasn't in on the game!"

"Well then you lose," Thelana said.

The three of them converged in the midst of the flowered valley. "Let me see it," said Britannia, bending to examine the prize. Nicolita watched from afar, repulsed by the squirming thing.

Suddenly, a flying pine comb smacked against the side of Thelana's face, and the butterfly was free, and she stared angrily into the face of her laughing brother.

"Borz!"

"I am telling Mother!" Nicolita threatened.

But he continued to laugh.

"Borz!" Thelana cried again. "I am going to twist off your arm!"

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Ah, but can you catch me first?" He went sprinting into the eclipsing sun.

"After him!" Thelana shouted as she with her sisters bounded across the plain, where the Ilms flourished and the butterflies grazed, and high-hopping hares, mistaking them for predators, hurried from their path.

The chase was long and Thelana was swift, indeed swifter than her older brother. But Borz had started further ahead and now had gone from sight, whereas, far behind, the other two girls' feet fell heavily.

"Wait up!" Britannia called, panting.

"Are you tired so soon?" Thelana replied, resting her palms atop her knees.

"Let's forget this," said Nicolita. "We'll be late for supper."

"All right," Thelana replied, "but my cheek still stings."

"Where is Borz anyhow?" Britannia asked. "I don't see him anywhere."

"Oh, he's probably still running scared," Thelana answered. "I'll go find him."

They meandered through the field, shouting his name, but Borz was nowhere to be found. After a long while, when the turquoise moon engulfed a quarter of the sky and the sun reddened against it, the three children came to a clearing strewn with boulders where the Ilms were broken and wilted. Launching herself atop a high mound, Thelana peered across the plain to where the hills sloped upwards and the forest began anew. But there was no sign or mark of Borz. Something caught her eye, a curious shape glittering in the light of dawn. As she led her hesitant sisters, they soon came within sight of it, their mouths agape in wonder.

“What is it?” asked Britannia.

“I don’t know,” Thelana replied. “It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen.” It was strange to them in that it was of dull gray-silver, like the color of the lake in moonlight, but it was also hard and smooth, like the most well cut stone. Strangest of all, it was made up of perfectly straight lines and sharp angles, more symmetrical than their dinner table.

“I think it’s a door,” said Thelana, approaching it.

“I’m scared!” Nicolita bellowed, ducking behind her other sister.

“Don’t touch it!” Britannia warned.

“It *is* a door . . .,” Thelana agreed, noticing its iron handle, “but to where . . . there’s nothing here. Maybe we’ll find Borz hiding behind it. He must have known about this. He must be playing tricks on us . . .” and with that thought her lips bent into a smile. “Oh, Borz!” she called, reaching for the handle, “we’re on to you. You can come out now---”

“No!” her sisters screamed in unison, almost prophetically, for in that same instant the door flung open, and there was nothing behind it but darkness, and emerging from its metal frame came a human form, towering high above them, thrice Thelana’s height, and she could see that the man-like thing was fully suited in molds of the same, dull gray substance, without so much as a naked patch. The creature clattered forth and Thelana sensed that its clothing, if it could even be called such, was part of its own flesh, so that man and garment moved together as one entity. From its forehead a central horn protruded smooth and straight like a pike, and its whole right arm was a tremendous blade. There was no question that the only course of action was to flee. But Thelana’s limbs gave way to fear. She remained stunned as the left arm snatched her throat, pulling her through the door.

Forward: To better follow the adventures of Xandr, Thelana and Emma, it helps to know a little about *The Dark Age of Enya*. In short, the three battled a dragon and then a centaur, in order to rescue Princess Radia, the avatar of the Goddess Alashiya. During the fight, Thelana risked her life to save Emma, turning their hatred for each other into a friendship. Radia, however, was unable to be saved, and her human form became one with the natural world. After killing the centaur, Xandr vowed to come after his master, the Dark Queen Hatshepsut. But first, he and his allies have to complete the *Tripod Oath*, which means they must rally the kingdoms of Aenya to fight against the Dark Queen's army of goblins. If you *are* familiar with *The Dark Age of Enya*, you may be wondering, *horses?* When did they get horses? Originally, the horse-napping scene was included in this story, but I since have turned it into an original short story. So if you want to know how Thelana got their horses, you can read all about it [here](#).

## Chapter 1

### Orientation

Far from any gathering of mankind, in the midst of a wild, dry, hilly country that, as far as was known to them, had never been claimed with any name, a man and two women sat closely about a fire, the gnarled boughs of the olive trees filtering the green moonlight.

The man stoking the flame was, in the eyes of his companions, quite beautiful, even in his haggard state. Together they had endured the tribulations of a great journey, and if there was an ugly wound on him, they could not find fault in it, as they fared no better in that regard. His complete absence of clothing, even to hide his loins, was no distraction to either woman, even to the one who found it necessary to cover herself. But what had never become commonplace was his uncommon beauty. His shoulders were broad and his torso round and powerful. His arms and legs were taut and well defined even in his relaxed posture. He was natural in shape, statuesque in form. Only a great scar, from shoulder to hip, disfigured him. His dirty blond hair draped over his shoulders and a single unkempt braid rounded his collarbone, and his beard grew wild and disheveled. His nose sloped from a broken ridge, settling between eyes of deep blue with a tenderness and intensity that somewhat contrasted his savage appearance, eyes of a man who had lived to see too much.

The woman beside him was in every way his female counterpart. If ever she had known the habit of clothing or shame, it was far from evident. Like him, she was beautiful, but in a fashion that most civilized societies would consider boorish and unwomanly. Aside from her blatant nudity, she sat in an 'unladylike' manner, with her legs folded crossways, her feet atop her knees, her arms loose against her lap. Her skin was a ruddy bronze, lacking the complexion of high-born women, the paleness that comes from too much sitting under a roof. Likewise, she was flecked with a variety of scars, a few that might shame even a battle hardened soldier. Her flesh was hard, with fingertips like sandpaper and soles like shoe leather, but least womanlike of all, her breasts were small and stiff, barely shifting as she moved. And yet, no man could call her less than beautiful, should they become accustomed to her raw nature, for hers was a beauty universal, undefined by fickle trends. There was a gracefulness about her, in her every movement, as if her muscles were more than adequate to accommodate her, so that even motionless she contained a boundless energy. Her hair was a peppery chestnut brown, wrapped in a single braid, and her eyes glittered like emerald moons, containing depth and weight as from some sadness, but also a playfulness and innocence betraying her age.

The second woman sat across from the man and was, in this setting, the most unusual of the three, the antithesis of the first woman. Robes of pitch-black draped loosely in some places and tightly in others, worn and poorly stitched. She was both taller and fuller than that of her nude counterpart, with a robust pair of breasts showing beneath her clothing and an equally wide set of hips. The little skin that she revealed was

pale and off-color. Her hair came down in long dark waves like a raven's feathers and was nearly invisible in the night. A tiny diamond glittered in her long, slender nose, and a gold loop dangled from her left ear. Her lips were full and rosy, and her eyelashes crowned her wide, bird-shaped eyes, eyes both as dark and enigmatic as her trappings, exuding both an intelligence and timidity, and a certain yearning.

A lizard was roasting on a makeshift skewer, rotating endlessly over the campfire as the man turned it. "If that is part of the Pewter Mountain range, and we are facing south, then my guess is that we are sitting somewhere in the Endless Plains," he was saying.

The naked woman lifted her eyes to him. "We've been trekking west for cycles, Xandr, I certainly hope you're right, and that we're not lost."

"If what you say is true," the robed woman interrupted, "then it must be the opposite face, because I do not recognize it; and remember I grew up in sight of those peaks. The Pewter Mountains of Northendell have always been too high and sharp to climb, so the other side was always a mystery to us. But it offered security."

"That's it then!" the other exclaimed with frustration. "We missed the city! We've wandered too far north!"

"Do not fret," Xandr replied. "Remember that we reached Mythradanaail by ship; there may have been no way to reach Northendell otherwise. We were too far north to begin with. After all that we've seen and done, we should thank the Goddess that we still live."

“Too true,” the dark robed woman agreed. “And you were prepared to die in that abyss, Thelana!”

“I was prepared to die killing goblins, Emma, not slowly starving to death in this wasteland! Look at me . . . I must have lost ten pounds eating snake tails!”

“Oh, I believe it was *you* who first convinced me to eat such things, much to the disagreement of my palette!” she snapped.

“Well, forgive me if you high brow city folk are too good for it! But I grew up on this cuisine!” Tearing off the head of the lizard, its eyeballs were soon popping between her grating teeth. “Where is your servant now to prepare your four course meal?” said she, as innards spilled from her lips.

“Hey now, I wasn’t the one complaining about it,” Emma rejoined, and she broke a charred leg between her fingers, carefully nibbling. “Hmm, needs salt, or cumin.”

Xandr rarely said a word during these interactions, but watched with amusement. It was true that the two women were different in almost everyway, and their differences would no doubt clash, but there was no real spite in their words. It appeared to him, in fact, that for a while after leaving Fire Mountain, their relationship had grown more affectionate, but it was not to be long lived, and after some days something invisible seemed to push them apart.

“I do apologize, Thelana,” Emma said suddenly, delicately wiping her lip with the hem of her garment. “I didn’t mean to belittle your culture. After all,” she added, “you did save my life . . .”

Thelana withheld a smile. “Really, Emmalina, you don’t need to keep mentioning that. We were in a fight. You were a part of the team. I had to defend you.”

“Yes, but you threw yourself---” she cut herself short as her eyes drifted unwillingly to the scar across Thelana's mid-section.

Oblivious, the brunette continued to chew, unceremoniously wiping her face with the broad side of her arm. “Eating vermin is not part of Ilmarin culture, anyway. We ate plants mostly, and large game, only we killed it ourselves; we didn't have such things as butchers and markets.” Her perfect, emerald eyes shifted to Xandr, and they seemed to glitter all the more in beholding him, as if he were made of moonlight. “So, if we are, indeed, in the Endless Plains, and we are not going to Northendell, where are we then headed?”

“South, to the sea, to Hedonia.”

The two women gasped. “But Hedonia has been destroyed,” said Emma. “Or isn’t that, at least, what you told me?”

“I did not mean the city itself, but the empire. There are many coastal cities about the Hedonian Bay, that may or may not still be part of the Hedonian Empire. Whether the destruction of their capitol fragmented their statehood, I cannot know. But even the smaller factions are powerful, and can aid us significantly in the fulfillment of the Tripod Oath.”

“But how will we convince them?” asked Thelana. “Who are we out here to request an audience with governors and magistrates? We are but poverty stricken

nomads. They will not even let us into the city without clothing, as you may already know.”

Xandr laughed. “Do not worry about that. Tales of our exploits will have preceded us, and even in their corrupt and backward society, a poor man who has slain giants and dragons will have more value than a pompous aristocrat who has bribed his way out of military service.”

“Or so you hope,” Emma contested. “Wealthy men have the power to invent their own histories, whereas a pauper can only pray their truth be known.”

“I suppose all remains to be seen,” said Thelana. “Let us merely hope that the Endless Plains do not prove true to their name.”

“It is named after the many travelers who, in search of a northern passage to the Pewter Mountains, became lost circling endlessly within its boundaries,” Xandr explained, “as it is said that all of the plain looks similar and there is no way to navigate it.”

“. . . and the silhouette of mountains to the north perpetually goads them onward, though it is some kind of illusion, I’ve read,” Emma further noted.

“Well at least we now have horses to carry us!” Thelana remarked.

“True,” said Emma, “but wouldn’t it have been better to take them during the night, so as not to frighten those poor people?”

“Hey, we have an oath to fulfill, and who knows how far the Dark Queen’s armies are encroaching about the bright hemisphere as we speak! We came to that stable in the morning, and I was not about to waste a whole day for the sun to be hidden.”

The raven haired woman got to her feet. “Perhaps we ought to check on them.”

“I tethered them tightly to the tree,” said Xandr.

“But how are they feeling?” Emma questioned, and walked off, Thelana close behind.

As they moved away from the canopy of brambles, a dark sky loomed immensely before them, bejeweled with innumerable stars. As they approached the silhouette of the three horses, before the sunken turquoise moon that was Infinity, a purple flash of lightning branched earthward. Now the dark robed woman brushed her hand across the snout of the blonde mare, the one that had carried Thelana, and she whispered to it, and it neighed responsively.

“What is she saying?” the Ilmarin asked. “Does she like me?”

Emma turned to her. “They are frightened by the night sky. It has never been known to them, as they were born and raised in the stable. As for you, well, she does not say. But they were miserable before, and are happy to run freely in the fields, instead of being led about a tent pole. Her only regret is that she misses her mistress, the kind woman that used to feed and comb her.”

“That must have been the woman I frightened,” Thelana mused. “I have never seen anyone so terrified. Her life will probably never be the same.”

“Well, this telepathy spell is exhaustive, what else should I ask? And make it quick!”

“Oh, ask their names!”

“This one was called by her mistress,” and she grinned, “Buttercup.”

“Buttercup! I’m not calling my horse that! It simply won’t do!”

“It’s all right. She does not like the name either. She thinks it is unflattering.

Horses are a proud species. She would rather have a name befitting . . . you, actually, ‘the woman who runs free,’ or that is what she is calling you.”

“In that case,” said Thelana, “I will name her Arrow. Tell her it is the thing that flies from my bow.”

The horse neighed noisily. “Yes!” Emma exclaimed, her eyes intently shut, “that is a good name.” Breaking out of her trance, she turned to Thelana, “and I will call mine Shadow. And as for the Batal . . . the name of his horse should suit him also, so let us call him Warrior.”

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A cool wind carried down from the Pewter Mountains and even with the dying embers of their campfire and their resilience to wild temperatures, Xandr and Thelana found comfort beneath a layer of pelts. The pelts had once been arctic beasts, but were now a necessity, serving as clothing in the snow, or rolled up as supply packs when traveling, or bed sheets during the hours of sleep. But with a sudden jerk into a sitting position, the pelt tumbled down across Thelana’s thighs, and she was wide awake. Xandr, who slumbered with one eye open, his fighting hand fingering the pommel of his great sword, was also awake. He could see Emma opposite the cold circle of firestones, laying

on her side with her back to them, her robes pulled tightly about her. He turned to Thelana then, watching a droplet of terror induced sweat roll down the side of her face.

“Was it the same dream?” he asked her quietly.

She faced him, unsurprised by his alertness, and answered with a whisper, “It is.”

“Tell me again. Where did you go?”

She shifted sideways, feeling the warmth emanating from him. “All right. I will share it with you. But we must try not to wake Emma.”

At the mention of her name, the dark mages' eyes fluttered open, but she made no other motion, as if she were continuing to sleep.

“I had gone back,” Thelana continued, “to when I was a child, just before the goblins invaded Ilmarinen, just before our family fled to the mountains. I was playing in the woods by the Old Man, hide-and-seek, and oh, two of my sisters were there. I saw Nicolita and Britannia! And Borz was there also!”

“Borz? Who is that?”

“He is my brother. Oh, Xandr, I saw them, just as plainly as I see you now. There was such beauty all about us, and such peace within my heart, unburdened by knowledge of the world beyond. Then there was something there not from my past . . . something I have never seen before. It was a lone, iron door, standing in the midst of the field where the Ilms grew, and there was no wall anywhere about it. It appeared to lead simply into the field, but when it opened, there was nothing but darkness, horrible darkness, and there came an armored thing . . . a man, I think, with a sword for an arm, and he grabbed me suddenly, and oh!” She covered her eyes with her hands. “Xandr, I was powerless.”

He lowered his gaze. “I was the only one to suffer from these nightly journeys. And now, somehow, I seem to have bestowed this curse upon you. My fate has become your fate.”

Her emerald eyes fixed upon his blue, expressing all that was within her. “Oh, Xandr, I no longer care for Fate. She is a harsh and humorless mistress. It is only this very hour that matters to me. Why won’t you hold me to your bosom, for the night is cold, and let come what may.”

“All my body yearns, with great agony, to hold you, Thelana. But I fear what may come of it . . . it has been a long time since that night in the Dead Zones. It is true that we are both Ilmarin, and our command over our own desires is firm, but now that we are joined, in *love*,” and the last word came softly, “the body cannot but follow. If only you were willing---”

“Oh, but we cannot! You know that! Xandr, I want our privacy; how can we do such a thing with Emma so near? And besides, she must not know about us; she will be hurt.”

“How can you know that?”

“I am a woman, and that binds me to knowledge even two Ilmarin cannot share, of things known only to women. I see how she looks at you. It is plain to see. Sharing affection in front of her will tear her apart.”

He smiled curiously, suppressing a laugh. “You once wished to kill her, remember? And now you worry about her feelings?”

“That was once, before knowing her. But now she is my friend, and I love her. We can’t do this to her. We must wait until we reach, dare I say, *civilization*,” and the last word she spoke disdainfully.

“All right,” said he, “lay your head upon my breast, and I, with an iron will, will think on other matters.”

She pulled herself alongside him, one arm wrapped tightly about his broad torso. Their bodies seemed to fit like two pieces of a puzzle. But it was, otherwise, a platonic union. “Oh!” she muttered under her breath. “And to think that in the Dead Zones, by the oasis, it was a hollow incident, an action of no greater worth like in that of a brothel.”

“No, Thelana,” he said gently, “it was not so. I loved you then as I love you now.”

She hugged him more closely, never having known such happiness. “As do I.”

But unbeknownst to them, silent tears rolled from Emma’s eyes and were smothered in the dust of her sleeping grounds, for there was a wound in her far more painful than any spear point or arrowhead could ever make, a perpetual, gaping wound that would not close and time could not heal, and its name was loneliness.

## Chapter 2

### The Highwaymen

Three horses swept across the grasslands of the Endless Plains, Xandr upon the bulky white stallion, Warrior; Emmalina upon the ebony Shadow, and Thelana upon the lightest and most swift, the toffee hued mare, Arrow. Before them a strong gale whistled and frolicked through hair and clothing, and to their backs the ominous Pewter Mountains faded to a distant silhouette of overlapping grays. Thelana basked in the elements contesting playfully about her senses, her chestnut braid snapping like a whip, the ravished hairs along her body, the power of Arrow's warm and throbbing muscles. The Ilmar possessed an intimate relation to the world, to the air, to the earth, to the water, and Thelana felt a similar bond to the beast beneath her. Its nature was her nature. Together they could fly effortlessly across the entire field and beyond, off the face of Enya. To cripple Arrow, any horse, so that it could not run, was to destroy its soul, and Thelana was aware of this as if the beast had told her itself.

The remainder of the day would have continued uneventfully, if something had not appeared above the western horizon. It was like a shifting mound rising above the wheat, expanding and contracting. Thelana steered the mare toward it and the others followed. Soon and without much commotion, the thing came into view, lumbering lazily out of the haze that billowed with each thunderous step, an enormous lizard. Its tail and neck were like cedar trees, and a tiny cranium swiveled like a pendulum from side to side

as it walked. The body to which these appendages belonged was more than adequately immense, the size of a galleon. Thelana was enthralled, and called out, "Let's go closer!" turning into its path. The lizard, known as a bronto, was not a remarkable thing, at least not to the three adventurers who had recently slain, among other things, a dragon.

Sensing no threat, the bronto did not offer them as much as a glance.

"Isn't he magnificent?" Thelana asked, daring to race between the bronto's legs.

"It is indeed," Emma replied. "I read that they were hunted to extinction . . . it's nice to know that few exist somewhere on this world."

"Careful, Thelana!" Xandr shouted, but she was already ducking beneath the animal's many tons.

Emma sighed as she slowed her pace and closed beside him. "All of life's a game to her, isn't it? I wonder if she even knows what death is."

"She knows how easily men can die," he replied. "But in her mind, she is immortal."

For a time they traveled with the bronto, watching the peculiar way in which it managed to keep up with the horses with its slow yet far-reaching feet. Crowning the sky, the greater moon of Infinity shone faintly in shades of blue and green, and the bronto offered welcome shade as the western rays glittered against its body. At the edge of the horizon, shapes in the noonday haze suggested other such lizards in lands untouched by man. At last, the russet field receded giving way to a rocky expanse of sloping hills. Buried beneath centuries of growth was a narrow road of hand-laid stones.

Here was a welcome sight, and in their hearts new hope brewed, that the Endless Plains might come to an end.

The bronto parted from their path and the travelers came upon a two-wheeled wagon drawn by a different kind of lizard, a beast with a head half the size of its body, with a shell forming from its skull that fanned outward in an array of horns. It was a trike. They approached to inquire as to their whereabouts, slowly so as not to startle the trike or its crew.

From the surrounding thicket came others. Xandr and his companions were unsure as to their number, but their intentions were without doubt. Some of them had spears or swords, others bows notched with arrows. They were from all avenues of society, from farmers to sailors, merchants to soldiers. One of them stepped forward, brandishing a crude bronze-tipped spear, wearing the garb of a Hedonian soldier, but the helmet was lacking polish and the traditional feathered plume. His clothing suggested a patchwork of cultures, hard leather boots from Northendell, a gold-trimmed vest from Abu-Zabu.

“Stop right there!” he ordered. “Where are you three going?”

“We’ve come from the Endless Plains,” Xandr replied, tugging at Warrior’s mane.

“Is that so?” said the man. “There’s no land north from there but from the mountains, and those are bitter winds indeed. I say you are lost.”

“And what makes you think so?”

The man smiled. “By the habit of your dress, of course; you are Ilmarin, are you not?”

Xandr raised a brow. "You know of the Ilmar?"

"Certainly," he said with an edge to his voice that Xandr did not like. "When I was captain in Hedonia, I ushered a whole lot of you into service."

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Thelana inquired.

He glared at her with an offensive eye. "We helped them adjust to their new home. We taught them to dress themselves, and offered them a way to repay our kindness."

"You enslaved them!" she cried.

"Indentured service is hardly slavery."

"We— *They*," she corrected herself, "didn't ask for help!"

He directed his spear toward Arrow. "We could have let you rot instead! In fact, we should have, you undeserving, half-human filth!"

Emmalina, having kept quiet till now, muttered under her breath, "I don't like where this is leading . . ."

"Enough!" Xandr exclaimed. "Tell us what you want or let us be."

"Well," the man said, as from poisoned lips, "if you're heading south, you should know that this land isn't free. It is in the bounds of the Hedonian Empire, and there is a tax to come through here." The others in his company could be heard suppressing their laughter.

"A traveling tax!" Thelana blurted, "That's outrageous! We won't pay it."

“A lady should learn to hold her tongue!” the Hedonian rebuked. “But you’re not a lady, are you? You’re an Ilmarin whore, shaking her ass in plain view for every man to grope!”

Like lightning out of a cloudless sky, Thelana was in possession of her gold and jade bow, an arrow emerging from the tips of her fingers. “I’ve killed men for less.”

Emma wished she could bury herself in the folds of her sleeves, wondering why no one bothered to mention her plainly un-Ilmarin appearance.

“Thelana, please,” Xandr cautioned, waving a hand of restraint. “Look, good sir, we don’t want any difficulty here. As you can plainly see, we are Ilmarin, and as the Ilmar possess no currency, we have nothing to offer you.”

“Ah, but you do . . . you might give us your mounts. They’d bring a fair sum.”

“Never!” Thelana scoffed.

Now Xandr could feel a raging burn within him, and he answered, “See here, I have tried to show you kindness, but it is plain to me that you are no more than lowly highwaymen robbing any and all passers by, and we will not succumb to this.”

“Oh, come now,” the spearman protested, “you are Ilmar . . . you don’t even know to fight. Do you really long to die in defense of your horses?”

Xandr’s countenance grew cold and grim, and a shadow passed over his eyes that made him appear like some brooding god. He glanced at the brigands that had come, and even their Hedonian leader stepped back in hesitation. “All of you, listen to me, I am the Batal of Legend; I am the slayer of Moontalon, the ancient dragon of a thousand generations; he who slumbers beneath Fire Mountain slumbers no more . . .” With that

he slipped a hand into the bundle at Warrior's side, and his fingers enveloped a shaft of gleaming silver. "I have wallowed in the blood of merquid and halfmen; I have trod upon a sea of goblin corpses; I have cut down men like weeds, and I tell you now that today I do not wish to spill the blood of men, but Emmaxis, the Sword of the Ancients, shall not sleep in its sheath if you leave me the choice. Part ways, I beseech you, for you have challenged the wrong people this day."

There was a quiet after that, followed by a mumbling amongst the brigands, and some turned slowly and quietly away. But most remained.

"Powerful words, indeed! But you expect us to believe you slew a dragon? An army could not kill a dragon, even if one could be found!" And he turned to his men. "He is bluffing, you fools! What knows he of war? Look at him; he is a naked barbarian . . . He has nothing to meet the points of your steel but his bare loins! Let him boast all he wants . . . there is no Batal in this world, only those who take what they will."

The time of discussion was ended, Thelana knew. But there was no fear in her emerald eyes, only a contemplative determination, making note of the three archers among the attackers. They were amateurs to say the least, waving their ill-made bows threateningly. Of the three, only one appeared to even know how to hold a bow properly. The others would miss her even if she sat still. But Thelana did not intend to sit still. An eternity passed between the last words of the Hedonian and her next breath. Her arrow lodged between the eyes of the archer to her left. Not enough life remained in him to stretch back his bowstring. The other two bowmen panicked, spinning their arrows into the ground.

The dark eyed sorceress, not wishing to take part in the ghastly ordeal, began singing. Her robes folded about her steed and a raven emerged where she had been sitting.

Xandr ducked beside his mount, using Warrior as a barricade, then moved at his attackers carrying a long, narrow object wrapped in an earthen shroud. The men were quick to surround him. He unfastened the threads in his hands, leaving the shroud to the wind, revealing a gleaming sword, silver as a mirror, the length of a man from tip to pommel, six feet in measure, wrought as from one piece of iron. A terrible feature emerged from it like a thing longing to be free of its confines, with teeth like elongated thorns, a metallic, fiendish, grimacing, inhuman skull. Where the eyes would go, the emergence stared, as if a living thing.

At the mere sight of the sword, the brigands fell to the ground screaming, covering their ears. Others simply ran. But their leader was too preoccupied to notice, thrusting his spear at Thelana and her mare. She deftly avoided its point, and then hacked at its bronze tip with her bow-sword. Not far from her, a ring of spears closed about the Batal, but Emmaxis shredded their weapons, deflecting and crumpling their bronze tips like tin. The second to fall was a brigand who had dared to step near Xandr's blade—his lower leg separated at the knee, and he collapsed in agony in a shower of blood. Thelana pounced like a great battle cat from the seat of her mare, and with a hand atop the Hedonian's helmet, she brought him down. Before he could fully realize what had happened, her emerald eyes met his, and he could feel her breath against his throat,

smell the sweat glistening from her brow. There was a gash behind his thigh and a hilt protruding from a space in his vest, clasped in the bloodied fingers of a woman.

She smiled at him. "I found a bare spot."

Already the group of brigands was disintegrating, only a few remaining to challenge the Ilmar. It was apparent they were unprepared for battle, perhaps never having had the need. A fourth brigand became mortally wounded by Emmaxis' newly made cleft in his jugular, nearly removing the brigand's head. It pained Xandr to do it.

"Is there anyone else that wishes to die?" he shouted.

The brigands fled all too agreeably, some dropping their weapons as they turned. Three bodies remained. The man with the severed leg was already cold and pale. Life ebbed quickly from the other, whose head bobbed loosely from a thread of flesh. But the captain remained breathing.

Emma swooped downward, her feathers lengthening into hair, her talons softening into feet. In human shape she snapped up her cloak, to quickly hide her nakedness, and accosted Xandr.

"Your sword," she said. "Did you see what happened?"

He was silent.

"It terrified them. Some fled at the mere sight of it. There is power in it, like I've never felt before."

"Yes," he murmured, lifting the blade to his eyes, "I've felt it too, ever since Moontalon, ever since Nessus."

Xandr turned from her to the Hedonian.

“Please!” he begged, “spare me!”

Thelana glared where she stood, dagger in hand. “And why should we, you scoundrel?”

“Please,” he said again, “I was once a captain in Hedonia. I was in the city when she fell, when the waters came and the merquid . . .” Tears began to roll across his cheeks, “I have a daughter— eight months to the day, I swear it . . . We’ve been forgotten . . . left to wander the lands, homeless, penniless, seeking ways to live . . .”

Thelana’s eyes remained as steely as ever. “So you chose the way of the highwayman?”

“We didn’t mean to harm anyone, we just—” and he started to cough, violently.

Xandr brushed a hand across her. “Let him be.”

“Are you sure? He probably won’t survive the stabbing I gave him. Might as well end his misery.”

“No,” he said, “he’ll live. We can bind him. Send him back to his daughter.” Then he turned to the coughing man, saying, “Tell us, if you are truly a captain of Hedonia, and not just the thief of some poor infantryman’s helmet, where we can find the nearest city.”

## Chapter 3

### The Bizarre Bazaar of Thetis

Beside the orange-red wall, beneath the square guard tower, a typical lady of Thetis set out to dry her laundry in the noonday sun. Her clothesline was already sagging with the weight of newly washed sheets, and to it she added her husband's kilt and her daughter's white sleeveless tunic. She then stooped to her wicker basket to grab another set of clothes. But upon returning to the line, she found herself utterly dumbfounded, for the kilt and tunic were gone.

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Thelana turned her foot from side-to-side, showing him how the leather laces crisscrossed up her calves.

"You also stole someone's sandals?" Xandr said.

"Hey, you know I had no choice . . . *they don't welcome Ilmar in the summertime,*" she quipped, a snatch from a childhood rhyme, "*or accept the sky as raiment.*"

He gazed over the gleaming white tunic that fell from her neck to her thighs. It was strange seeing her this way, with clothes. She seemed giddy and radiant, like any young girl with a new outfit. "How you look beautiful."

She smiled lovingly.

Ghostly quiet and unnoticeable as ever, Emma watched her Ilmar companions, puzzled by their sudden difference in attitude.

“Change is welcome,” he said, fastening the kilt about his waist, “. . . from time to time.”

“Yes, but,” Thelana replied, “it does feel awkward, after so long.” She tugged at the neckline of her tunic, “. . . and is this chafing usual?”

“You will adjust,” he answered.

Their horses were tethered at the main gate, an open archway flanked by wooden doors inlaid with iron rivets. The main street was wide enough for several wagons to pass through, bustling with the traffic of pedestrians, lined on each side by simple, two story buildings of reddish earth and stone, with doors and shutters painted a vivid blue. The walls were draped with purple bougainvillea. Islands of myriad flora were set between them, with windmill-shaped jasmine and fragrant gardenia, tall cypress and leaning palms. As the three strolled along the jigsaw of pavement, narrow avenues made themselves apparent between the houses and the shops. At the central square, children could be found kicking at an empty gourd. Stripe-tented arcades led to the more densely populated bazaars, where craftsman went about their daily routines, as did the basket weavers with their baskets and tanners with their oils and ox hides and sculptors with their spinning pottery wheels. Towering above it all, a ziggurat-shaped monument rose some distance away.

Thelana shook her head disapprovingly. “So many people, living such oblivious lives . . .”

“I prefer it to shrubs and rocks,” Emma retorted. “I was beginning to think we were the last three humans in the world.”

Rubbing his unkempt beard, Xandr turned to his two female companions. “We should split up. These cities can be bewildering.”

“Maybe for you,” said the dark eyed sorceress, “but I can find my way. We’ll need to find an inn before the moon eclipses.” She sighed with relief at the thought, *An inn!*  
*An inn at last!*

“I’ll look for a change merchant in the bazaar,” Thelana chimed. “I doubt we can spend the jewels I have here.”

Xandr cautioned them with a look. “Be careful, both of you, we do not know the customs of these people, and we cannot draw any attention to ourselves. The least you say and do the better, especially you, Thelana.”

She folded her arms, mocking offense. “And where will you be off to?”

“There,” said he, pointing to the ziggurat. “Do not forget our Oath. We must gain audience with the ruler of this city. I aim to find the way.”

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Rounding another narrow spiral of steps, Xandr found Thetis to be more labyrinthine than he had at first believed. The great pyramidal structure, what he assumed to be a

government or religious center, or both, was clearly visible but beyond approach. From the look of his surroundings, Thetis had in earlier days gone by other names, as old streets, fractured by time and foliage, oftentimes led nowhere, into walls and houses, and newer streets overlapped them. Foundations had collapsed and been rebuilt or abandoned. Even the rusty-orange outer wall with its square guard towers showed evidence of changing materials and building techniques.

After a little while, the sensations of the sea drew him up a flight of stairs that ran along the perimeter wall to an aperture overlooking the harbor. Gulls glided in pairs distantly below, over rich blue waters, between arms of sloping hills that embraced the Sea like the crescent of a waning moon. At his feet, the red-orange wall disintegrated into salty white boulders beside the mooring docks, where fishermen untangled their nets to count the day's bounty. The merchant galleons were anchored, as were the warships, consisting of the fifty-oared pentaconter and the trireme with its sleek hull and double-decked set of oars, one hundred and seventy in all, tapering elegantly to a solid bronze battering ram. Xandr had longed for the Sea, for its scent, the calming sound of undulating waves, the moist wind breaking against his bare torso. But his meditation was interrupted as angry shouts rang from the city below.

In the streets behind the Sea wall, homes were stacked like white cubes, with tiny windows and doors barely sufficient to pass through. Two men stood quarrelling at one such door. The one was reaching for a blue-painted doorknob, while the other cradled a swaddle of rags Xandr surmised to be a woman. It was this second man that was shouting, in desperation.

“Please! My wife—my wife should not be out here as it is. But I brought you to see her, to see how badly she is!”

“I told you already,” the other man answered, his voice cold and measured, “there is nothing more I can do.”

“But—but once she is well . . . I can return to work and . . . you know I cannot leave her alone, you told me so yourself!”

“I need payment today,” he said, “not tomorrow.”

“But we have nothing!”

“Sell your house if necessary.”

“Sell my house?” The peasant’s voice broke into sobs and his wife slipped momentarily from his grasp. He pulled her back up. She suppressed a whimper. “But where will we live? How will we survive?”

“I do not know and neither do I care. I am not a charity. What if everyone said that Tsigunis gave away his medicines for free? They would all come flocking to my door, not a one willing to pay. Business would be ruined. Conjure up the dirham, or let me be!” And he hurried back to his doorknob.

“But she’ll die!” the husband cried, and he laid his wife across his lap, falling to his knees to beg.

“That’s your problem.”

Xandr knew he had heard enough. Approaching suddenly, he halted the apothecary at the shoulder. “Hold a minute, sir.”

Tsigunis was short and unimposing, and turning to face the wall of bare muscle and the great scar crossing it, he became startled. “May I be of service to you?” he asked the Batal after regaining his composure.

“Yes,” said Xandr, “you may indeed. I am . . . a good friend of your patient and of her husband here.”

“You are?” he said in disbelief.

“Long time friends. But I have been out of town, in the barbarian lands to the north. I overheard your predicament, and suggest you let him pay you later.”

The peasant, seeing this, did not know what to think, and a mixture of joy and despair passed over his face. He half-stood, his wife sitting upright, and opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out.

“My apologies, but that is not possible,” Tsigunis replied. “I have my policies.”

Xandr looked on him unhappily. “Ah, but I assure you, you will be paid. I will see to it myself.”

“Do you have the dirham to loan him?”

“No, as I am a barbarian, I carry no worldly goods. I do have, however, *this hand*,” and Tsigunis became suddenly aware of the sinews in his shoulder as they compressed in Xandr’s grasp. “With this hand, I could break your every bone, leaving you a mangled sample of humanity. Children would flee at the sight of you. I do have my sword, but I feel not like having to taint it with your remains. No, this hand will do. Keeping it far from you is all the payment you should need.”

Tsigunis did not relent, but became very nervous, and started to shake and stammer. “You cannot threaten me! I will shout out! The guards will come! We are a city of laws and the law is with me!”

Wrapping his fingers about the man’s throat, Xandr pushed him through the door. The room was small and dimly lit. Shelves with small jars lined the walls.

“Show me what my friend needs,” Xandr ordered. “Show me now!”

Scampering to his feet, the doctor reached for a small brown jar and handed it to the Ilmarin. Xandr did not immediately notice it, the root soaking in its own murky fluids, but memories soon materialized, of himself as a boy walking quietly through the mist of the Ilmarin wood. He remembered QuasiI schooling him in the names and purpose of every living thing that grew in the earth. Many of these could be eaten or be ground to enhance the taste of that which was eaten. Some were for healing, others never to be touched. Opening the jar, Xandr plucked a brownish root with many finger-like threads that ended in hooks like tiny red sickles. *Curare root*, he mouthed to himself, a good substance for hunting.

“This is what you have been giving him?” asked the Batal at last.

Tsiguni’s eyes narrowed to gashes, and he reminded Xandr very much of a snake man. “Why . . . yes.”

From outside the small pharmacy, the peasant couple watched as the door tore from its hinges, followed by the doctor landing with a thud. The Ilmarin was quick to follow him out, a terrible countenance about him. He stooped over Tsigunis and it looked as though he would tear the man to pieces. “What treachery is this!” he screamed.

“What heinous trickery! . . . What loathsome greed!” Xandr stared at the husband with pity. “Poison!” he spat, “this man has been giving your wife poison! How did this come to be?”

Now the peasant looked wide-eyed with a new sense of horror. “W—We came to him one night, many eclipses ago, my wife with fever. He gave us this medicine . . . this root . . . for a small fee, told us to grind and mix it with water, said it was potent. She did get better, for a time, but later felt poorly. We kept returning for more of the—the root. It always seemed to help. I did not know . . .”

Xandr looked down at the apothecary, radiating hate. “I should tear out your eyes, one-by-one—I should—”

“Stop!”

It was not a voice that he, or anyone, had expected to hear, and at first Xandr thought it to be Radia, the Princess of Mythradanaail, Avatar of the Goddess, so soft and melodic it first seemed, but then he looked to see the ailing woman, who had pulled back her hood. The effects of her illness had yet to spoil her simple beauty. “Don’t hurt him,” she murmured.

His hands, hooked like talons, released, and Xandr could see the fear in Tsiguni’s eyes, and his hate subsided. “Why?” he asked. “Why should I let him live?”

“You are the Batal. Do not let this small man ruin us, make murderers of us.”

The Ilmarin stood slowly. “Your wisdom and compassion are matched only by the grace of Alashiya.” He turned to her husband. “What say you?”

“I am proud of the wife I have chosen, and I . . . I agree with her. Let this rat crawl back to the cesspools of Thetis. The gods will judge him.”

“But what of your wife?” Xandr asked. “How is she to be made well again? Is there no other apothecary in this city?”

“It is too late,” answered Tsigunis. “The curare has saturated her being. Nothing can stop it now. She will never recover.”

“No,” the woman declared, and she stretched out with feeble fingers, brushing the hem of Xandr’s kilt. “He has come as I have foreseen . . . the Batal will make me whole.”

“Please, woman,” said he, pulling away, “I have no power over illness or poison.”

“Ah, but I believe you do. I have seen you before, in my dreams. I believe.”

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Thelana wandered through the bazaar of Thetis in a daze. Never had so many sights and sounds clashed for dominance against her consciousness. If she looked at any one thing for too long, it seemed, she might never get out. In the center square, where the streets branched away to different market areas, she came by a rug and two men with a fondness for serpents. One was an adept flutist, forming powerful and hypnotic tones through his gaita, a long trumpet-shaped instrument. The music was traditional to the region, known throughout the southern regions of the Endless Sea. It continued to play without beginning or end, an endlessly cyclical middle. Snakes were bundled on a rug like twigs, slithering between themselves, and the second man’s job was preventing their escape by

herded them in his hands again and again. Passing too closely, the snake handler grabbed Thelana by the wrist. There was a long cobra about his arm, and he removed the simple round fez from his head to show her a stash of coins. He spoke the common tongue, but it was broken and heavily accented. "Touch cobra, is good luck."

Thelana blinked. "What?"

"If no bite, good luck." He jingled the coins in his hat.

"That's quite all right, thank you." The man did not appear to understand, or feigned ignorance, and in a polite attempt to escape, she freed her wrist with a strength surprising the snake handler and proceeded to another rug to accost another merchant. "Excuse me, do you know where I can find a money changer?"

The man smiled through a mustache that looked to be eating his face. A baboon ran along his arm hopping over to her shoulder. The simian was preferable to a cobra, so she let it gaze with curiosity at her face, exploring her nose and ears with its tiny hands. She did not expect how warm and human-like they would feel.

"Money," the man said suddenly. "Give me money."

Thelana looked at him perplexed. "Money . . . for what?"

"You touch baboon: twenty dirham."

Before she could protest, a second baboon appeared atop her opposite shoulder, and there was another man with his fez awaiting coins. Frustrated, she shook herself free of the baboons, launching them to the floor, and pushed herself from the men attempting to block her path. "And they call me a thief!" she grumbled to herself. Not that she could have paid them anyway. All that she had in her possession were a few gems recovered

from the ruins of the Septheran tombs, which had been safely stored in her stomach for quite some time.

Finally, she neared a man with a pen of yellow birds, tall as her waist, with beaks that could crush a watermelon. He was loudly displaying them as exotic baby ibs, but she was not so certain, never having known of any domesticated by humans. Only the fabled bird men of Nimbos had ever managed such a feat. Nonetheless, she was sure not to stray too closely, or make eye contact, lest she have giant birds pecking at her knees and men asking for more money.

She pushed through the throng of patrons at the mouth of another tented avenue. There were many, many things being sold in the bazaar. Offers were being shouted over alternate offers, and the sound of haggling over prices permeated every niche where sound might find purchase. Taken at once, the street was a mind-boggling kaleidoscope of colors and shapes, a diorama of beautifully ornate patterns with amorphous stacks of junk, a recess where planes, angles and curves functioned sometimes harmoniously, overlapped, or were consumed.

In a wide section of the street, Thelana's eyes fixed on a single market, where weapons of bronze and silver were prominently displayed. Most were daggers, beautifully fashioned with minute detail, studded with semi-precious stones, pearls, topaz and lapis lazuli. Others were entirely of alabaster or ivory. Swords hung in rows above her, exotically crafted in "S"-shapes. She reached to examine them when her hand drifted to a rack of bows. But before she could ask for prices, her attention was diverted again, to a tall, attractive woman with hair of flowing red. What was most unusual was the woman's

attire. The redhead was laden in armor, with a saucer-shaped brazier cupping her breasts, a length of gold chain jangling between her thighs, and a pair of boots binding her feet and calves. Thelana was accustomed to battle with nothing but her Ilmarin hide before a bristling phalanx, but the purpose of this woman's armor was beyond comprehension. Aside from an attack directed solely at her boob or womanhood, the woman was defenseless, her armor serving but to encumber her. With these thoughts, the woman turned to Thelana, appalled by her bemused stare.

“Why do you look at me so?”

The Ilmarin blushed. “I—I apologize. It's just that I've never seen a . . . what are you supposed to be?”

“You dare mock me!” the woman shouted, and turned sharply, revealing the tall halberd in her hand. “I am a warrior maiden of Thetis, of the high-born warrior class!”

Thelana suppressed a laugh. “You're no warrior . . . at least not a very good one.”

“You—!” her face creased with rage, “what would you know of war? Of battle?”

“More than you, I should hope, as I'm not wandering the streets in a preposterous costume like that!”

“You have insulted me for the last time, peasant! Apologize or be smitten!”

“I'll do no such thing. I already gave you an apology. You don't deserve another.”

The woman's browsing hand flew to her weapon. “I'll cut you down where you stand!”

Thelana, simultaneously, slipped a bundle from the pack at her shoulder, revealing a gleaming gold hilt. The redhead was a little more than taken aback, but remained steadfast.

“Let’s get away from all these people,” the Ilmarin added, “someone other than you might get hurt.”

## Chapter 4

### A Witch in Love

A crowd was gathering at the center square with the snake handlers and baboon profiteers, where the baby ibs ran aimlessly. Thelana stepped out of her tunic like a bathrobe, placing her sandals beside it. Onlookers stared aghast, with laughter, in mocking whispers; a few shouted, “Whore!” But she remained oblivious to their jeers, continuing her routine of stretching. The red-haired woman was equally surprised, throwing her an inquisitive look.

“Oh, um, I fight naked,” Thelana explained with an awkward smile, pulling the sole of her foot against her cheek. “It makes me more agile.”

The midday sun cast a warm glow over the Ilmarin’s shoulder, and the two stood eyeing one another, opposites in almost every way. Thelana looked diminutive in front of her, a muscular waif. The warrior maiden was tall and shapely, heavy of hip and bosom. But the difference in their demeanor was even more striking. To the aristocratic spectators, Thelana was more animal than woman, hunched low with heels lifted, like a battle cat ready to pounce, a single braid dangling between her bare thighs. Her adversary, on the other hand, stood tall and proud, her arms slack against her sides, a sarcastic grin on her face, her bracelets and arm bands intricately embroidered, matching her knee-high boots, plated brazier, and skirt of gold.

The little Ilmarin was confident of the other's misplaced pride, so confident that she awaited the first blow. As the edge of the halberd flew at her neck, she glided and rolled, crouching safely to a flanking position; she could have followed through to an unshielded rib, but it would have been a fatal blow, and she did not wish to kill the stranger who had done her no harm. But Thelana was ignorant as to the other's willingness to kill. With the halberd positioned for a second attack, Thelana was back on her feet. Down came the ax-head, clumsily and with a groan from the warrior maiden, as if to split her foe like a log. Somersaulting away, the Ilmarin proved too swift, and in this way she continued to toy with her assailant, like a squirrel chased by a woodsman. The armor-clad woman soon lost her composure, panting in unladylike fashion, slouching as she neared exhaustion. After a long minute of near misses, Thelana decided to end the embarrassing ordeal in the most humane way she could think of. With a twist of the wrist, the link keeping the redhead's brazier together split against Thelana's sword. The heavy garment went clanking to the ground and the warrior maiden's face flushed as red as her hair. Shielding her pale bosom with her arms, she turned and fled as the delighted onlookers laughed in her direction. Victorious, Thelana let out a broad smile. Humane, yes, and humiliating. What's more, she'd won a prize, lifting the golden brazier into her backpack before anyone could seize it.

Much of the crowd pressed about her now, but Thelana was not about to stand like some exhibitionist pandering to the fancies of the male, and perhaps even some of the female, audience. She snatched up her tunic and concealed herself again, blending into the modest crowd.

Only the children, whom she could tell were of the lowest class and who had not been shooed off by their parents, refused to leave her side. The boys mimicked her maneuvers while the girls marveled in silence, never knowing that a peasant could grow to become so fierce and able a fighter. In their hungry faces she saw younger versions of herself, and could not turn them away. But she could not afford to attract more notice. Quietly, in an alley where the impoverished went and were forgotten, Thelana appeased the children with the tale of how she slew Moontalon, a black dragon, and as young children are oft to do, they listened dreamily and without skepticism.

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Far from the entertainment at the center square, Emma found herself lost amidst a plethora of objects. The bazaar was no less mesmerizing for her. Every object was crammed into narrow passageways. If she were to stand with both arms outstretched, she would have touched either wall. What was more disorientating was the absence of architectural planning. The walls snaked along the streets, devoid of any pattern. Even the ground was made of uneven stones. She would be trekking uphill one moment when suddenly the street would dip downhill. Chandeliers clustered about her like bronze vines. Tables chafed her thighs, laden with ceramic vases and ornamental plates, elegant oil lamps, shining teapots and glass-stained hookahs with swirling hair-thin lines. There were fine jewelry boxes of lemon wood, hand drums and belts and shoes and djellabahs and keshabahs, rugs of reds and royal blues. The jewelry was handmade by the

shopkeepers. No two markets were identical. At times, Emma held her breath lest she choke on the dust from items that had sat for years without so much as a smudge from a customer's finger.

Emma did not see anything that interested her, for the only real thing she desired was to eat something other than an insect or a lizard. The bazaar lacked in nothing, and her nose eventually led her to a vendor of spices. *Salt! What I would have given for a month of salt!* Across from the first vendor, another tantalized her with cashews, dates and dried figs. Off in the corner, where the street widened, a whole boar roasted slowly over a flame.

"Merchant!" she called towards the man with the fruit cart, "have you anything special today?"

He gestured to a small basket of black bulbs. "The hockenberries are in season, as are the watermelon-grapes," he added, motioning her to the small pile of green and yellow-striped fruit.

"How are they?"

"The hockenberries? Eh, sweet at first, but leave a sour taste afterward."

"I'll take a grape then," she said, but groping at empty pockets, realized her stomach had spoken out of turn. "Actually, I haven't any coin on me."

"For one so fair, methinks, one grape won't be missed," he replied.

Redness rushed to her all too-pale cheeks, and without so much as a gesture of gratitude, she snatched up the watermelon and popped it into her mouth. It burst in a

shower of sweetness against her tongue, a welcome change from dry, salty lizard. “My apologies,” she replied, wiping her lips. “I’ll return with payment soon.”

But Emma had nothing of value with which to barter. She would have to wait for Thelana to return from the money changer. With all the sights and sounds about her, she then realized, she’d forgotten to find an inn for the night.

Again Emma was distracted, from a small tent in a less crowded part of the bazaar. A soft melody resonated from a reed flute of the same type stashed in her cloak. The music was out of place, not of the Endless Sea, but more akin to that of her home in the Pewter Mountains. It was an uplifting change and she found herself inexorably drawn, like the cobra to the flutist, toward the tent.

Emma stooped under the flap and looked inside, finding astrolabes, hanging beads, expired candles, shriveled animal heads, and organs preserved in jars, among other things. The lady at the center of the clutter looked as though someone had crumpled her face in a ball and then attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to straighten it. Placing the flute in the folds of her lap, the ancient woman smiled toothlessly and gestured for Emma to sit.

“Come in, my child, do come in. I don’t bite.”

“I am sorry,” said Emma, “I did not mean to disturb you. It’s just that . . . I play the flute also, and your music was so . . . so haunting. I just had to see where it was coming from.”

“Of course you did. Of course! Now please, rest your weary bones. I can see you’ve come a long way.”

Though her surroundings were unsettling, Emma was obliged to do as etiquette demanded. “Thank you.” She paused to think of something more to say, to break the disquieting silence. “Um . . . where did you learn the flute?”

“Oh, here and there,” the old woman said. “I just do it to pass the time.”

“Oh? So what is it you do here in the bazaar?”

“I do henna,” she replied, letting her long sleeves slide down to her elbows to reveal the intricate markings along her forearms, hands, and fingers.

“Tattoos?”

“No!” she said. “Art for the skin, made from plants. Wears away after some cycles. Popular at weddings, here in Thetis, it is.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Would you like me to do some henna for you?”

“Well, I don’t have any money—”

“No matter!” said the decrepit lady. “You look like such a nice girl. Reminds me of a daughter I once had.”

“Once? What happened to her?”

“I outlived her,” she replied soberly. “I’ve outlived all my children, and grandchildren— it’s why I’m sitting here all alone in this foreign place.”

“Wait, did you say you outlived your grand—?”

“Give me your hands,” she insisted. “Or just one hand, please. It would make me so happy to sit a while with good company.”

“Well, all right.” Emma stretched out her left arm.

The old woman picked a small dish from a stack to prepare the muddy, dark green mixture. Starting with a line across Emma's wrist, she peered intently through a single, bulging, yellow eye, inquiring, "So . . . do you have . . . a man in your life?"

"You mean a husband?"

"No," she groaned, "I can tell you're unwed. I meant . . . is there someone you love?"

The dark eyed sorceress blushed.

". . . or is in love with you?"

"Well, I am not really sure," she replied uneasily.

"Not sure of what? Whether you love someone, or whether someone loves you?"

"Maybe both."

"Pish-posh! A woman always knows when she's in love. And I can see it now, in your eyes . . ."

"You see it in my eyes? What?"

"The longing, the daydreaming, the sleepless nights." She smiled mischievously. "I've been around a long time to know."

"Well, I suppose there's no use hiding it."

The woman's face fractured into a grin. "You have been hiding it from yourself, as well as from your colleagues, haven't you?"

Startled, Emma looked at her now, mouth agape. "How do you know so much?"

“I guess you could say I am a lay practitioner of the mystic arts, or as some might call me . . . a witch . . . but I don’t like the sound of that. You don’t have anything against people with our special gifts, do you?”

“No, of course not, in fact, I’m a—”

“Don’t speak, my dear, don’t speak. I know all about you. What I want to know more about is . . . *him*.”

“Oh, him.” The blood rushed to Emma’s cheeks. “Well, he is a great man: honorable, wise, and full of courage . . . He is destined for great things.”

“But that is not why you love him, is it?”

“No,” she admitted, biting her lower lip.

“Is he handsome?”

Now Emma felt the walls about her heart, which she had so steadfastly guarded, suddenly collapse. “He is the handsomest man in the world,” she said adamantly. “And . . . and I love him. Yes,” she continued, reaffirming it, “I love him.”

“That’s wonderful, dear! Wonderful!”

“No!” she exclaimed, and her voice broke. “No,” she said again in a half-whisper, “it’s terrible.”

“Terrible? How can that be so? Love is never terrible.”

“Oh, but it is! Can’t you see? He loves another, and the other he loves, well, I love her also . . . like a sister. I could never come between them.”

“Ah, but do not despair, there is always hope.” The lady pulled away, and Emma could see the abstract forms crisscrossing her wrists and hands. It was beautiful, almost

too beautiful. How could the feeble old woman have done it so fast? She hardly noticed the artwork come into being. Was this the result of some sorcery? As if in answer to her thoughts, the ancient witch leaned forward, murmuring, “My henna can sometimes have . . . special qualities.”

“You cast a spell on me!”

“Oh, don’t be angry. It’s a small thing, really. My powers are meager.”

“What does it do?” she asked, relenting.

“It speaks of your . . . possible future.”

“It’s a fortune?” asked Emma.

“In a way.”

“Then I want to know about Xa— about the man I love.”

Peering with that yellow eye again, more intently now than before, the archaic woman smiled. “You have studied the ancient books,” she intoned with sudden vitality, “you know the future is not definite, that it is a river with many branching tributaries, a maze of possibility.” She fingered a line across Emma’s palm, as if demonstrating just such a model. “To have what you desire, *someone must die.*”

The words struck Emma’s ears like daggers. “Die?” she repeated, and only one name came to mind. *Thelana*. Emma snatched her arm away. “It was wrong of me to come here,” she muttered. “I should have never—”

“I apologize,” said the aged woman. “I can see that I have upset you. I did not mean to. It is merely the future that I see.”

Standing abruptly, the younger sorceress rubbed her arm vigorously, as if washing away the blood of a murder victim, but the henna would not even smear. “When will this go away?”

“I told you . . . in a few cycles.”

“Can it be sooner?” she said, guilt tainting her voice.

“No. But it isn’t what’s on your hands that matters . . . the real markings, the true art of the self, is in you, is in your heart, and that won’t wash away.”

## Chapter 5

### Riot for a Savior

She and Xandr did not hesitate for a breath. When they entered through the door, he seized her, his arms about the pits of her knees, her ankles at the back of his neck. Warriors of lust, they collapsed to the floor, disregarding the soft bed, consuming one another like cannibals, swimming in the oasis of their entwined flesh.

From the balcony, the lights of so many candle lamps spread across Thetis like constellations. Thelana breathed in the cool night air, so full of the Sea. For the first time in many cycles, a roof was about her head. Not since Mythradanaiil had she felt so at ease. But exhaustion came down hard. Soreness permeated every fiber of her body. Things long past were taking its toll: days riding the plains, pains that recalled the dragon, burns from rivers of ash and frost. She'd been racing from these pains for many moons, but they caught up with her. She felt as worn as a blacksmith's mallet, and knew that should she ever live to be old, there would be a great price to pay. But that was the fate of all aged warriors, she supposed. With the youthful vigor that she still possessed, she returned to her waiting lover.

“Are you ready for me?” she asked.

He was sitting at the edge of the bed, hands clenched.

“What is it, my love?”

“There was a woman in the streets,” he said, “she was poisoned, dying. And she touched me . . . no, merely my kilt, and the gods only know her fate, but when last I looked on her, the blood was returned to her cheeks. Her husband brought her on his shoulder to the apothecary, but she walked home alongside him.”

“Xandr, what in Enya are you talking about?”

“Better that I show you.” He opened his hands and a bluish jewel, radiating from his palm, bathed them in light.

She bent to examine it and almost fell backward. As far as her eyes could be trusted, it was, within the crystalline boundaries of a blue sapphire, the golden spires of the Kingdom of Mythradanaail, right there in his hand. “Why did you not tell me about this?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I waited to find . . . the proper time.”

“How did you come by it?”

“It was bestowed to me, by Princess Radia, before her disappearance. She said it was like a seed, for a new kingdom, a new utopia. I still don’t understand what it means.”

“She was sure a mystery, that one.”

“Yes, well, I believe it made that woman whole today. This might even be what has kept us from death these many moons. The princess trusted many secrets to me and to me alone. We must respect her wisdom. I suggest that we never speak of it, not even to Emma.”

“Yes, but why not-?”

“Swear it to me!”

“All right,” she said, with little enthusiasm. “I swear.”

“Swear to the Goddess, to Alashiya.”

“Don’t you think you’re being ridiculous? I am a master thief, remember? I know to keep secrets.”

He smiled, and in closing his palm, they were left in the dim light of the turquoise moon. “You are also Ilmarin, and there were no secrets in our land; there was not even such a word in our language.”

“Well,” she said, kneeling, “I guess I’m a contradiction—a naked thief. Now come and sleep with me. The moon is high in the heavens.”

“What of this fine bed?” he asked. “It’s filled with goose-feathers. We paid a mighty sum for it.”

“Oh Xandr, do you wish to soften me with such luxuries? I’m no princess to be pampered. I am Ilmarin, born in a cradle of straw, shared by my brothers and sisters!”

To this he gave no response, but slid neatly to the floor where her warmth enveloped him and all was made right in the universe. But in the uneasy quiet her thoughts drifted, and she pulled from him at last, letting a foot against the wall and an arm under her head. “Tell me again, as you did in the volcano, how you love me.”

He did not turn, but answered, “You fear the words have devalued with time’s passing?”

She smiled in the darkness. “I fear nothing, brave Batal. But your revelation was in a dire circumstance, when rivers of flame licked our heels. One might be afraid to die without ever having known love.”

He laughed at her accusation. “Your mind is burdened with nonsense in these late hours! Better to let actions prove love’s worth than words which may be fickle.”

“But love’s actions should be proven in the day-to-day, not merely atop fiery volcanoes, as a husband and wife.”

“If that is your choosing . . . we shall be joined by morning!”

She grinned at him, taking his meaning. “Is that it? You wish to make me a simple housewife?”

“Perhaps, some distant day, we might raise little Ilmar . . .”

“Never,” she replied. “You think me to wake, day after day, like some fattened heifer, to the same walls, to the same chores? Better I chase the horizon, over a thousand lofty hills, through summits high and low, and plains forever long, to die someday without aching bones and wrinkled flesh, but as a young maid, with my beauty about my bloodied corpse, and sword proudly clasped in hand. That is the way I will die, Batal. Do not forget it.”

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With the arrival of the sun came shouts from beneath the balcony. At first, they were few in number, but as the golden disc of morning separated from the faint turquoise moon, till both hung in the sky like a pair of great round pendulums, the noise intensified, waking the slumbering Ilmar.

“What is all the commotion?” Thelana asked, wiping the crust from her eyes.

Xandr sat upright as she rolled off of him, saying, “Stay, my love. I will go.”

Wrapping his kilt about him, he hurried to the curtain, pulling them apart and stepping onto the balcony. The inn was a mere two-story building, and the crowd was but a short distance below. From what he could tell, two kinds of people had gathered. The larger group was much like the ailing woman from yesterday. They were in tattered clothing, some with eyes completely bandaged, more than a few with stumps where an elbow or a knee should be. The smaller group was attempting to push through the center, Thetis soldiers in bronze helmets and armor. Upon seeing Xandr emerge, an old woman fell to her knees, crying, “Save us, Batal!”

Before Xandr could react, he noticed Thelana beside him. “What’s happening here?” she asked.

“I am not sure.”

Leaning through a bramble of human limbs, a guard caught the old woman by her graying hairs, his mace looming high in his other hand. “Silence, peasant!”

“Stop!” Xandr cried. “What goes on here?”

“These peasants are causing a ruckus,” the soldier replied. “Never you mind. Go back to your room.”

“It’s him!” the old woman declared, and the people swelled into an uproar. The soldiers became more agitated and their actions proved desperate. Somewhere amidst the tide of faces, Xandr could make out a familiar couple, the husband with his wife. Already the old woman, along with a number of peasants, was receiving a beating.

“Stay your hand!” Xandr cried over the shouts and the turmoil. “Stay your hand!”

The guard looked back, pausing, a drop of blood falling from the tip of his mace.

“What are they to you?”

“These are . . . these are people, by the gods, just like you and I!”

“Not like you or I,” he replied, “these are *untouchables*. They’ll spread disease throughout the city if they’re not quarantined.” He turned back to the woman still squirming in his grasp.

“Stay your hand or you will know that I am the Batal!”

“You—” said the soldier. “So you admit to this blasphemy?”

“What blasphemy?”

“These people here claim someone in this inn can rid them of all suffering. They even claim to have a witness, but he won’t come forward.”

“What have I done,” Xandr muttered to himself. And then, speaking to the soldier, he added, “I never claimed to have such power. Tell these people to get to their homes.”

“But you do claim to be the Batal?”

“I am.”

“He is the Batal!” a man in the crowd shouted. “Save us!”

“Save us, Batal!” another voice pleaded, and it became the common refrain “—I am ill!” they begged, “—I am dying!” “My mother—please—my mother!”

But the soldiers collided again with the growing masses, making their commands heard through bludgeoning maces. “Silence! Back to the streets, all of you!”

Tears started about Xandr's eyes. "These people . . . I did not see . . . Alashiya have mercy on them!"

Thelana tugged his arm. "It's not your fault."

At last, the old woman, who had implored Xandr for aid, slumped to the earth, clutching the soldier about his greaves, whether alive or dead nobody could tell. "Do you see," said the soldier, looking up to the balcony, "what happens when men come making outlandish claims? These people's suffering is the will of the gods. No man may challenge it."

"And by whose authority do you act under?"

"By the Queen herself."

"So there is a queen in Thetis?"

"She is, Queen Frazetta, rightful successor to the Hedonian Empire."

"And I suppose Thetis is its new capital?"

"Quite right! Now do you deny being the Batal—the Batal that legends speak of, he who shall end the suffering of the Dark Age and unite Enya under his rule?"

"I do not deny it."

The soldier drew his short sword and waved to signal his men. "In that case, you and your companions are under arrest, for blasphemy and treason."

## Chapter 6

### Queen Frazetta

Beams of sunlight angled through openings in unseen walls forming an illuminated square about a raised platform. At the periphery of this square were four arcades, each to a domed ceiling, flanked by pairs of narrow pillars. Impressions marked every wall, arch, and dome, a matrix of such perfect symmetry and detail as to boggle the mind, to make envious the greatest of architects, rivaling in smallness the awe one experiences before the immense. But it was the negative spaces that gave the throne room its texture and form, where substance receded to absence.

A dozen magistrates stood along the arcade, in the same black robes and hats, with the same white beards. They could be heard mumbling over legalities. Beside the raised throne, dark skinned slaves used long shafts of bundled peacock feathers to fan the sultry queen.

Frazetta was middle-aged, with skin like chalk and a figure like an hourglass. Her eyes were murky and feline, with black lines drawn thickly about the lids and across her face. Gold hung about her ears like tiny chandeliers and her ample bosom lay buried beneath meshes of gold. Pearls, jewels, and other trinkets adorned her wrists and ankles, and a long dress extended from her broad hips to the steps of her dais. An enormous black panther sprawled lazily about her knees, her one hand grazing the back of its ear.

“Bring in the next one,” she said, suppressing a yawn.

A soldier came into the light, wearing bright Hedonian armor with a scarlet cape and plume. His face was like a slab of raw meat, large and red made up of sharp angles, the stubble of his chin was like spikes. Following him were a pair of guards and a gray-bearded man.

“This fisherman, your Highness, is accused of conspiring with the terrorists.”

“Is that so?” she said. “What proof do you have, Cambses?”

“He does not deny it. And the proof, your Highness, is here with me. Would you permit me to bring it in?”

She slouched against her cheek. “So be it.”

Cambses gestured to the guards and a human-shaped thing was brought forward. At the mere sight of it, the magistrates gasped, some even recoiling in horror. Even Xandr was unprepared, who looked on, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. It was short, like a boy of about eight, its limbs thin as bones, and it hunched forward. Unlike a human, the creature was covered in greenish-gray scales, and its hands and feet were flat and webbed. Where its head met the shoulders was difficult to guess, as its neck was amorphous with pink and pulsing gills. If its face were human, it would appear as though someone had flattened it, as it possessed no noticeable profile, no lips or nose of any kind, just openings for similar organs to function and fins where ears would be. But its eyes were the most disturbing, large and round as teacups, and black as polished obsidian. With no eyelids, the boy-creature seemed to stare and stare perpetually.

Even the queen sat up in her throne with sudden interest. “Is this the merquid the fisherman has been conspiring with?”

“Yes, your Highness,” said Cambses. “We caught him at the docks. He appeared to be . . . speaking to it.”

The fisherman stumbled forward, kneeling at the steps of the dais. “Please, your Majesty, let me explain—”

Cambses drew his sword with remarkable speed, pressing the man’s back. “You have not been given permission to speak!”

“Oh, let’s hear what he has to say,” she replied. “Speak, old man, but only if you have something worthy to say. My time is not to be wasted.”

The fisherman cupped his hands together prayerfully. “Thank you, your Highness, thank you! This merquid you see here,” and he gestured to the creature, “is no terrorist. He is my son!”

The queen sounded surprised. “What?”

“It is true—he is . . . like my son. Years ago, I cast my net wide and far, and Sargon smiled on me that day and the fish were plentiful. But in my net I also found a giant pearl. I knew them in Hedonia to be prized, but a fellow of mine, an appraiser, told me it was worthless because of its odd shape and color, so I kept it for myself.”

The queen reclined in her throne. “Does this tale have a purpose, or should I have you executed now?”

“No!” he cried. “Hear me out! The pearl . . . the pearl, it broke and a merquid was inside! A merquid infant! The pearl was no pearl, see—it was an egg! My wife departed this world ages ago, and I am without sons or daughters, so in my loneliness I raised the infant to health, feeding him from my catch, letting him swim alongside my boat. Just

look at him! He is only a child. He knows nothing of his own kind. He does not understand the trouble between our two peoples. How can he be called a terrorist?”

The man’s tale touched the hearts of Emma and Thelana and even Xandr, who had slaughtered his share of merquid. Even the magistrates looked to show pity. But the queen’s face was impassive as the panther at her feet. The man waited, in silence, for a sign of understanding and compassion that would not come.

“Did you not know the law?” she said, “that it is forbidden to be seen cavorting with merquid, to commune with or aid a merquid in any way? Did you not know that any act other than killing a merquid on sight is treason?”

“But–,” the fisherman muttered, “but he was only an infant–”

“You should have smashed it with a rock then! Cambses, execute them both.”

“No!” the man screamed. “I beg you, take my life, but let the merquid boy alone! He is not to blame! He knows nothing . . . nothing!”

The fisherman’s voice could be heard resonating throughout the halls as he and the merquid were taken away.

Queen Frazetta suddenly looked bored again. “Who’s next?”

“A man here is claiming to work miracles,” Cambses replied, “claims to be the Batal of Legend. He is an outsider, and there are two others with him. They caused quite the riot in the streets today.”

“Let him come forward.”

Xandr did not hesitate. Upon seeing him, she straightened, and for the first time, let loose a wicked smile. She was no longer the cruel judge sending men to their deaths, but a woman aroused. “So, you claim to be the Batal?”

“I am,” he replied.

“And you very well might be,” she added. “Tell me, stranger, do you have any proof of this claim?”

“I do indeed,” said he. “If your Highness will permit me?”

“Show me.”

He reached into his backpack, removing a round, bandaged object. Slowly, he proceeded to unravel the bandages. When all the wrapping lay strewn about the floor, he lifted the object from its top, and thrust it into the light for all to see. For the second time that day, the magistrates gasped with wonder. But Thelana and Emma were well aware of that which had been hidden, and been carried, for so long amongst their belongings. It was slightly decayed, but the expression on the obsidian face was preserved, the horror and disbelief. From a clump of red hair, the severed head dangled from his hand. “Look closely, your Highness, it is the head of Nessus, the Dark Centaur, the bane of empires.”

“Is it truly?” she asked, marveling at the sight.

“I offer it as a gift,” he said, “as proof of my identity, and my good will.”

One of the magistrates came forward at her behest, and took the head away. “And what,” said she, “is your intention in coming to Thetis?”

“I come to act upon my destiny, to prepare you, your citizens, of the coming peril.”

“And what would be the form of this peril?”

“War,” he replied somberly.

She laughed. “We are already involved in war, and are preparing for a second!

Now you bring news of a third?”

“What wars are these you speak of?”

“We war with the merquid, of course. Do not imagine that the destruction of Hedonia will go unanswered.”

“And the other?”

“We must deal with . . . rebels.”

“Rebels?”

“You heard me! There are those who refuse to accept my birthright! The High Priest Urukagina was my brother, and there are no other heirs to the Suppilumiuma dynasty. After the fall of Hedonia, the local governor of Thalassar assumed power! He and his followers are traitors to the Empire and I will destroy them, raze Thalassar to its foundations should they refute me.”

Xandr paused, and thought, and chose his words carefully. “With all due respect, your Highness, these wars are as spats between comrades, compared to the horrors that march on us from the Dark Side. I come to you as an emissary from the Kingdom of Mythradanaiil, to fulfill the oath that I have taken. I am here to rally the kingdoms of Enya to confront the Dark Queen Hatshepsut and her goblin legions.”

Frazetta glared at him coolly, weighing his words. “Does not the prophecy of Batal speak of one king to unite all Enya? One world under one ruler?”

“It does indeed.”

“And is it not convenient for you, that you now stand before me claiming to be Batal, seeking a way to unite Enya against some presumed threat?”

“Do you doubt the prophecy?”

“I doubt whatever would have me surrender power. Hedonia is the greatest empire this world has ever known, and I am its master. Would you challenge my rule to fulfill this prophecy?”

“Ruling Enya is not my desire, but protecting its people.”

“And how are we to know whether this so-called Dark Queen even exists?”

“You have heard of the destruction of Nibia and Kratos, have you not? You know of the sieges in Northendell? My own homeland, Ilmarinen, was lost to the evil growing in the East. I have fought the goblin hordes; I have ventured into the Dark Side myself, seen whole battalions decimated by horrors unthinkable.”

“You have just brought me the head of Nessus,” she answered. “The centaur is the only creature known to human eyes. Perhaps, with his demise, the armies of the East are scattered to the four winds; perhaps there is no other tyrant brooding from the time of the Great Cataclysm to retake the bright lands; perhaps there is only you, seeking fame and glory with the severed head of a notorious marauder.

“But even if what you say is true, and there is a monstrous host marching to our ruin, Hedonia cannot stand divided. I must regain Thalassar, as it is second only to Thetis in power, and then united we must deal still with the merquid.”

Xandr sighed. “Your dealings with Thalassar are your own. But I have fought the merquid. I have witnessed the crumbling of Hedonia’s proud walls. Hedonia was doomed by its own hubris; it was the will of the gods that it be unmade. Now that the city is no more, there will be no merquid raids. Let it remain so.”

Queen Frazetta crossed her arms defiantly. “No! Their treachery will not go unpunished. We will root out all the merquid that have gone into hiding.”

“And upon finding them, what shall you do?”

“What must be done with terrorists! Enslave them, interrogate them, eliminate them.” Her icy demeanor reminded him of her late brother.

“What of mercy?” he asked quietly.

“Mercy? What mercy did they show us? As they murdered our innocents, so shall we slaughter theirs!”

“You belie the meaning of innocence, your Highness. Even enemy warriors are shown mercy when the fighting is ended. And the merquid, they are not fighting. There is peace now.”

“Peace must be maintained through aggression. If we show weakness, it will only spur them to strike again. I will never allow what happened in Hedonia to happen here. I will not fail as my brother did. I shall strike them at the root!” And with that she gestured as if uprooting a flower.

Xandr’s eyes narrowed, laboring to keep his annoyance in check. Still, he could not help but object. “Violence begets more violence. Seeking to destroy the merquid will only give them cause to retaliate.”

“I did not expect this coming from such a renowned warrior!”

“Even a just war must be carried out with the heaviest of hearts. The bards who sing its praises have never seen battle, and the queens who persist in pursuing it do not suffer from it, only their people. Of those who have known war in its most gruesome guise, few live to speak of it. There is no honor in genocide. Only the gods can decide such heavy-handed vengeance. To believe otherwise is hubris.”

“You speak of genocide when tens of thousands perished at the hands of those cruel barbarians! What god can show them pity after what they’ve done?”

Xandr gazed at her in frustration, torn between rage and despair. “You Hedonians were not without blame . . . In labeling the merquid evil, none can judge your actions against them. But know this; your brother plundered thousands of merquid eggs, to use as currency! These acts continued for decades and the merquid retaliated in kind.”

Frazetta stood angrily, her earrings jostling in place. “Your tongue strays too closely, I fear, to treason. Lies are not tolerated in Thetis! Besides, I know that the merquid killed my brother, and so there shall be no mercy for them. Wherever they are hiding, they shall be found, and wherever they are running, they shall be hunted. And if you are not with us, Batal, you are against us, and I will show no more tolerance for you than for them!” With a wave of her hand she dismissed him. It had become quite clear that she was unwilling to listen. The tragedy at Hedonia clouded all of her thoughts. Now there was only hatred and fear.

With that, Cambses came forward. “Shall I escort them to the dungeons?”

She turned suddenly, as if remembering some important matter. “No! No,” she added more softly, “take them to the guest rooms, but make sure they are well guarded.”

## Chapter 7

### Sex and Politics

Thelana walked like a caged battle cat about the beautiful surroundings of their bedchambers, with its twin-pillared arcades, chandelier oil lamps, and seashell shaped fountains. “Of all the spoiled brats!” she muttered. “If I ever step foot onto paved earth again, it will be too soon!”

“Hush!” It was Emma. “You’re going to get us executed!”

“Oh, honestly, I could take out these guards, and that runt Cambses, with my bare hands! The door’s not even locked, I should—”

“Patience,” Xandr interjected. “There are more things going on here than meet the eye.”

“I agree,” said Emma.

“Notice that she did not send us to the dungeons, when Cambses clearly wanted to? They did not even take our weapons. We are guests, not prisoners.”

Thelana continued to pace, bounding with uncontainable energy. “Guests that can’t leave?”

“We are being held for some higher purpose, it would seem,” said Emma. “Say what you will of the queen, but she is no dolt.”

Not listening, the girl from Ilmarinen rambled on, “I bet she sleeps on silk sheets every night! And sips from golden spoons! . . . A new one for each meal! She thinks she’s

so high and mighty, but in the jungle she'd be no more than prey, no more than bait. I even doubt—”

Boot steps and a creak of door hinges and she was silenced. A guard stood beneath the arch. He addressed Xandr directly, “the queen wishes to see you, alone.”

Xandr followed the guard a short while into a vast recess, bordered by the inner walls of the ziggurat, yet open to the sky above. At its center was a rectangular pool of greenish waters, framed by a concentric hedge maze of exotic flowers. Tending to the garden was Queen Frazetta herself, as bejeweled as upon her throne. Her dress draped to the ground from the hoops at her wrists, and shimmered in the sunlight between green and blue. Her substantial breasts and pointed nipples were left bare, framed between the sarong tied about her belly and a cascade of gold necklaces. Upon seeing Xandr, she moved to a near fountain and rinsed her hands, then turned to the guard. “Leave us.”

“But, your Highness, you would be unprotected.”

“I won't ask twice,” she commanded, and the guard backed away.

Xandr remained silent and apprehensive.

She walked toward him, and as her dress shifted he noticed she was barefoot. She smiled. “You must forgive my rudeness in the throne room today . . . I must maintain a stalwart appearance, otherwise, the guards themselves might assassinate me.”

“You sound like a prisoner,” he replied.

“I am, in a way, a prisoner of politics. It is the lament of all rulers, I believe. But it is a life I have known since birth. Why do you think the kings of old built this

magnificent garden? I could never step foot beyond these walls. The untouchables would tear me apart.”

“It is a lovely hideaway. Such flowers are rarely found in the wild.”

“Do you like it? I am pleased. It is my only respite from my duties to the Empire. I come to be at peace with my thoughts. Come, walk with me.”

He followed her through a narrow passage lined by tall shrubbery, and as they were now hidden, he did not imagine anyone could stop him should he choose to strangle her. “You know,” she said, “Thetis was not always part of the Empire. This place was built centuries ago, when Hedonia was but a small city. When my great ancestor, Suppilumiuma the First, conquered it, its culture meshed with ours. They never lost their old ways though; they merely learned new ones.”

“Have you brought me here for a history lesson?”

“I’ve brought you here for two reasons that I shall shortly explain. But first, let me show you something.” She led him further, then pulled her long sleeve away to reveal a single flower, leaving him speechless. It was as large as a wild tulip, glistening with dew in the sunlight, its petals layered with oranges and violets, more vivid than any in the garden.

“By the Goddess!” he said softly, and motioned as if to touch it. “I thought they were no more.”

“Ilm-ari-nen,” she pronounced. “Nen means ‘the land’ and ilm is—”

“The flower,” he answered. “Land of the Ilms. I had forgotten just how beautiful they are. They don’t grow there anymore, I don’t believe. And they do not thrive long in captivity—they need wilderness to bloom.”

“Well, it would appear I hold one in my possession, to do with as I please . . .,” she eyed him, contemplating his features. “Take it. Offer it to your mate.”

“No, I couldn’t,” he replied. “Once broken from its stem, the ilm would begin to wilt, and . . . and Thelana would mourn for her lost country, should she behold it. Why . . . why show this to me?”

“I wanted you to see that I am not my brother. He was an overzealous fool, believing only that Hedonian customs mattered, and that in conquering all Enya, he would make of it one society. But even under centuries of control, Thetis remains little changed. Under my rule, Ilmarinen would be no differently affected. You could keep your Goddess, and go on living shamelessly in the nude, as you do. I have no qualm with your traditions.”

“Ilmarinen is lost,” he replied, “nor could it ever be, under foreign domination, no matter how benign. Ilmarinen is not Thetis. You cannot depose one ruler for another. We had no kings, no queens. We were free. And do not think that in baring your bosom to me, you might win my favor.”

She laughed, fingering a nipple as if noticing it for the first time. “Oh . . . did you believe the Queen of Hedonia would expose herself for just such a reason? You’ve let slip your ignorance! For the highborn ladies of Thetis . . . this is a traditional garment.”

“My apologies.”

She stepped closer now, enough for him to feel her breath. “But if you so desire, I could strip this off, and you your kilt, and we could see where it would lead us.”

“As you are not Ilmarin,” he replied, “I believe it would take us where I do not wish to go.”

She persisted, pressing her bosom against his, “Why do you resist, when you can take me here and now, in the garden? No one will see. It would be quick, and meaningless. Or do you not believe in pleasure for pleasure’s sake?”

Already he could feel the lust swelling in him, but remembering Thelana, he pushed her away. “Keep as you are! And I will do likewise.”

“Do you think me chaste?” she answered, clawing playfully at his chest. “I am a queen! And I am bored of the stock from my guards. I yearn for flesh seasoned in battle, for a rare, Ilmarin breed.”

“You’re nothing but a whore!” he exclaimed, throwing her back.

She smiled. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” Righting herself, ironing the creases in her dress, she continued as if nothing uncommon had taken place. “On to the subject of Thetis. This city has always been ruled by a monarch. It was not difficult, therefore, to assume the status of queen, after all other heirs were done away with, of course.”

“There were others?” he asked.

“Naturally. But they were unfit to rule, and so I had to make certain arrangements, you understand?”

His eyes narrowed. “I do.”

“Never could I have imagined that the governor of Thalassar would challenge me!”

“And by what right does he claim authority?”

“By divine right! Recall that Hedonia is a theocracy, so my idiot brother tried to convert all the colonies, to worship Hedonian gods, to worship Sargon. Under Hedonian law, it is Sargon who rules the Empire. The High Priest acts as the mouth of Sargon. So after the death of my brother, the governor of Thalassar proclaimed himself as the new High Priest, and the colonies devoted to Sargon followed him! It is an outrage!”

“And so it comes down to war with Thalassar, is that it?”

“No,” she replied. “War might still be avoided. According to law, the position of High Priest must be selected, upon the deathbed of the former, and for this my ancestors have been selected for generations. To thwart the governor’s claim and ensure legitimacy, I intend to carry out my own ritual, pronouncing me both queen and high priestess. But to do so, I need two things: the sacred scrolls upon which the laws of my Empire have been set down, and a sacred relic, the Trident Scepter of Sargon. The High Priest, as a symbol of divine authority, carries it always. Perhaps you have seen such a relic?”

“I believe I have. It was the top of the staff carried by Urukagina, a small trident with golden prongs in a circle.”

“You remember!”

“I do.”

“Then you must retrieve it for me, and the scrolls.”

“Why not fashion your own?”

“Impossible,” she said. “The scepter is from the time of Suppilumiuma, and has all the weathering of time. A forgery would appear to be just that, and if the governor were to attain the true scepter, I would be made to look illegitimate. As for the scrolls, there have never been copies made, as it is considered blasphemy to do so, and even the magistrates of Thetis, who know it by word, could never write it in the exquisite calligraphy of my great ancestor.”

Xandr thought carefully, assessing the consequences of his answer. “. . . Should I obtain the scepter and the scrolls for you, would you make peace with the merquid?”

“Impossible. The citizens are so filled with dread and hatred that not even I can abate it. Should I even suggest peace, they would mutiny against me.”

“Then loose the merquid child to the sea.”

“You still dwell on that? Strange where your loyalties lie . . .” She sighed with resignation. “Very well, if his execution has not been carried out, he will be freed. But you did not come here as an ambassador for the merquid, did you?”

“No,” he replied.

“A campaign to the Dark Side would be costly, but may also prove profitable, and an empire is not an empire if it is not expanding.”

“Make me this oath, then, to do as you have spoken, that should you break it, the fate of Thetis will be as that of Hedonia.”

“I swear it. I swear to Sargon, and to all the gods, may their wrath not fall upon me.”

“Tell me then: what must I do?”

“You will go with Cambses and a party of fifty men, and return to the city, to the ruins of Hedonia. Seek out the place where Urukagina died and bring back the sacred relics.”

“And why not send Cambses alone?”

“Because you, Batal of Legend, managed to bring me the head of the Dark Centaur. That tells me you are a man above others, and it is just such a man that I need. What was once a capital is now a graveyard, where a hundred thousand angry spirits reside, drowned in a single, terrible moment, without the proper rites of cremation to send them to the next plane. The ruins are cursed. Of all the parties I have sent out to retrieve the relics, none have returned.”

## Chapter 8

### Mare Nostrum

They sailed two days from the port of Thetis, along the Hedonian coast, toward what had been the most trafficked harbor in the world. None of the fifty oarsmen or their captain, Cambses, believed they would find any ships moored at its docks, unless manned with corpses. It took three days to reach Hedonia or what remained of it, but as the final day neared, the wind and waters became deathly still, a canopy of clouds obscured the constellations by which they navigated, and the air became wet and heavy. Fog unfurled over their ship, turning even the occasional reef into a danger. Tales of fishermen daring to venture too near the ruin already stretched across the land.

The ship was the *Mare Nostrum*, a *pentaconter*. Including the short drummer rhythmically directing the oars, there were fifty-one in their crew, a man for an oar, *pentaconter* meaning “the fifty”. Compared to the one hundred and seventy-oared trireme, it was small for a warship, having been selected for stealth, to enter the harbor unnoticed. Oars were used for battle, for sudden bursts of ramming speed and sudden evasive changes in direction, but now this maneuverability helped navigate the troubled waters. After retracting its folding mast into a compartment at the center of its hull, the fifty sailors manned their benches. With mechanical precision they tugged at the fifteen foot cedar planks extending from the apertures alongside the ship, and the *pentaconter* lurched forward. They were not slaves, but well trained professionals. Warships were as

expensive as temples, taking years to build, and near impossible to control. An unskilled rower meant the difference between ramming or getting rammed. And each man was a fighter, with a scabbard at the waist.

Thelana was on deck, clutching the railing, surprised by the ship's sudden quickness. Pentaconters were unusually designed, from what she knew of ships, as the upper deck, where she now stood, was mostly bare save for the compartment with its folded mast and sails. The lower deck consisted of their quarters, supply rooms, and stables. She imagined the interior could be rearranged to suit any number of containment needs. Between the upper and lower decks, down a short series of steps, the oarsmen situated themselves in the middeck, in niches set for rowing. It was an unenviable position, since the lower decks did not comprise of enough room for all, so the oarsmen were accustomed to remaining on their benches throughout the night, close enough to the sea to taste the salt air, being roused at times from their dreams by the cold sea-spray.

The cold air permeated the thin weave of her tunic, making her shudder. With nothing to see but fog, Thelana decided to go below. Down ramp, she came to a passage as broad as her shoulders, where she ducked into the six-by-six room. Emma lay on her fold-down bed, droning lazy notes on her flute. Xandr knelt beside a narrow shape swaddled in rags that, even slantwise, chaffed at the plank roof.

“Do you pray for us?” she asked.

He turned to her. “The Goddess rarely leaves my thoughts.”

“But,” she said, stepping closer, “you pray on the sword.”

“Thelana,” he replied, “I do not truly know anything about it, only that it seems to—” *possess my destiny*, he thought to himself, but instead remarked, “—thirst for blood.”

“What do you mean? It’s your sword. The sword of Batal.”

“I am Batal, Thelana; I have accepted it. But the people of Enya have made me so. In darkest times, men seek hope among champions. The sword has nothing to do with me. It just is.”

“It gives you strength.”

“But did you see how the brigands outside of Thetis reacted to it? They covered their ears, ran off stricken with dread.”

“Well, the sight of such a blade, in the hands of man like you—”

“No,” he interrupted. “It has never done that. All I know is that the monks kept it in a kind of altar. I retrieved it as a boy before the monastery was lost to the fire. QuasiI told me that it came in the talons of the Goddess, but, Alashiya has never mentioned it.” Gently, he pulled the cloth from the shaft, as if unraveling a mummy. There, the face stared at them, more ghastly than ever. “The sword mirrors my soul,” he said. “I see in it all the faces of the men I’ve killed. It is my burden to carry, and though I long to be free of all trappings, I must endure it.”

“Curious that this should be so,” Thelana replied, “that an Ilmarin should be chosen to shoulder such a thing, when even the slightest of clothing, for us, becomes wearisome.”

“I’ll tell you what I think,” said a vaguely familiar voice behind them. It was Cambses, fully armored in his battle-worn breastplate, bronze greaves and armbands,

with his red-plumed helmet under his arm. “I’ve seen that monstrosity you lug everywhere. If we’re missing an oar, I’ll know where to come.” On his finger, Emma noticed an unusual ring of rough-cut granite, with an imprint of some kind—a royal seal.

Thelana spun on the ball of her heels. Her mind raced for a witty response, but all she could come up with was, “Oh? And what would you know?” Then she winced at her own dimwittedness. Verbal dueling was not her forte.

“I know war, miss. It is my business. Wars I fought made the Empire. Now take this here,” he said, sliding his sword effortlessly from its scabbard. He twisted it in his palm, pommel toward her. The blade was of a highly polished silver-bronze composite, shorter than three feet and sharp enough to cut the stubble from her thighs, with a beautifully carved hilt made of bronze and gold. “Feel its weight, its balance,” he added, almost seductively, and to demonstrate, he let the weapon teeter on its hilt across his two-fingers. “Your sword, Batal, wounds, but my gladius kills.” The last word rolled off his tongue with relish.

“Kills men, merquid, perhaps,” answered Xandr. “But against dragons, it falls short.”

Cambses’ battle-hardened face broke into a laugh, as if he was uncertain whether the Batal was joking. “Against the likes of dragons, my friend, we all fall short.”

Emma, who lingered like a ghost in the room, shot up and broke between them. “Oh, what nonsense! What difference does any of this make? Boys and their toys!”

The Hedonian raised a finger in rebuttal, but shouts rang down from the top deck, giving them pause.

“Man over the starboard bow!”

The four rushed to the prow of the ship, where many of the oarsmen were gathered. “You there—” Cambses commanded, stammering for a name, “—Meridius! Who’s missing?”

“No one, sir,” answered Meridius, his eyes gone white and wild. “We’re all accounted for.”

Cambses peered over the railing as if the man’s response was irrelevant. “If nobody is missing, who’s in the water?”

There was a body, facedown, bobbing carelessly off the pentaconter’s prow, froth lapping gently about its unusually large torso.

“Do you think he could be . . .?” Meridius murmured.

Cambses cut him short, anger tinting his voice. “Don’t be a fool! That was over a year ago. This poor bastard sailed too far in—a reef probably claimed his dinghy in all this fog.”

Emma stepped forward, her robes and raven-hair exceedingly dark in the midst of the white vapors. “There is only one way to know for sure. Bring him up.”

“All right, bring him up!” Cambses echoed, and the men titled their oars flat, halting the procession of the pentaconter with uncanny suddenness. They went to work fastening a harness out of thick mooring rope and after some disorderly scrambling and nervous hands, the looped rope was lowered into the water. No one volunteered to jump from the ship, though it was common habit, and with the aid of those skilled in net casting, the corpse was brought up.

The sight did not alleviate their anxieties, and a number of men stepped away with wrists pressed to their nostrils, so offensive was its odor. The man, or what had been a man, had not been of larger proportion in life, as was presumed, but had only lately increased in girth from the water absorbed by its corpse. Its skin was pallid as could be, a green-tinted white, slick to the touch like the raw innards of an oyster. Dust sized crab mites skittered between its teeth and lolling tongue. But most perverse was the way in which its lidless eyes stared, like egg whites pitted with brine, only an impression of pupils noticeable beneath the recess of white, ocular orbs much like those of a hanged fish at market.

Cambses bent like a man defeated, his shoulders weary. “Give me some space, for gods’ sake!” he bellowed. With thumb and forefinger, he separated a hem from the white flesh, flesh both peeling from and becoming part of the disintegrating clothing. The vaguely discernible pattern, popular among Hedonian nobles, could not be denied. No sailor would take to the sea in such attire, he knew.

“This man has been long dead,” said Meridius.

“We should throw it back!” said another, appearing to have been made more ill by the sight, or stench, than the others.

There was a clamor of disagreement, even as their captain called for order. It was not as though they’d never seen the morbid renderings of Death. But with the continual torrent of pale fog overlapping, blinding, passing through them, and the newly discovered corpse that, to their experience, should have long littered the seabed floor, their soldierly resolve was beginning to splinter. Only Cambses remained unshaken.

Just as the men quieted down, Cambses face contorted with confused terror. Like brittle timbers, the corpse's fingers enclosed about the captain's throat. He stumbled backward, slipping upon the wet flooring, and it was quite a sight for the others, who had never known their captain to flinch even in the worst of battle. Before he could catch his breath, words escaped from the corpse's dead lips; from what tongue formed the words, or what collapsed lungs drew air to give capacity for speech, no one knew. As strange a spectacle was this, so was the pattern of its speech.

“BURY ME!”

The words escaped between its teeth, through its body cavities like air passing through a windpipe.

Cambses wrestled awkwardly with the dead body, tearing the lifeless fingers from his throat. He groped for his gladius, as though he had forgotten where it was, and drawing the blade, severed the limb at the wrist. Seized with terror, he continued to hack at the corpse, removing its head. The oarsmen did not hesitate, but tossed the body and all its members back to the sea, where it was, at last, swallowed up by the waves.

Emma came forward quietly, robes shifting in the subtle wind. “This place, all around us, I sense great sorrow. It permeates the air, the water . . . it is all thick with sorrow.”

Cambses turned to her, annoyance creasing his brow. He was not a man of feeling. “Do not offer us your thoughts unless asked.”

In the corner of the Mare Nostrum, away from the others, Thelana quivered and reached for Xandr's palm. He clasped it without word. She was a creature of sensation, as

all Ilmar, but here she felt nothing . . . the goddesses of the wind, the water, the sun; they did not speak to her, and she tucked at her all-too thin tunic more tightly. “We should not have returned,” she whispered. The Batal had no answer.

Pushing through the crowd, a man came hurriedly up to Cambses. He was smaller in frame than the others, and in his hands he held a compass and a makeshift looking glass. “Captain, there is a problem.”

“What is it now, Nabonus?” It seemed nothing would please the Hedonian today.

“We’ve been drifting, sir . . .,” he stumbled for words, “and there was a numerical error in my trigonometry . . .”

“Can you not speak plainly, man! Just tell me what it is or keep to yourself.”

“Right. It would appear, sir, that we should be there already.”

Cambses stared at him as though he would toss the navigator into the sea.

“Where?” he shouted.

“In the city, captain. We should have hit land by now.”

As if affirming this statement, the whole of the pentaconter groaned from prow to stern. Cambses led the men away in a hurry, to the opposite ends of the ship, and where the fog grew thin a white slab materialized, hitting the hull, a Korinthian pillar fashioned in the flowery style of the famed architects of Korinth. It was the base of a wide flight of steps, and somewhere in the distance, disappearing and reappearing in the haze above, an ornate rotunda beckoned.

Meridius gasped. “We’ve breached the outer wall and didn’t even know!”

“I remember this . . .” Thelana murmured, finding it awkward that none of the Hedonian citizens recognized a landmark of their own capital. But then again, a thief had to know location details, routes for quick escape. “It’s the library.”

“This isn’t what we’ve come for,” Cambses replied.

Xandr spoke, his voice heavy but certain. “Perhaps not. But navigating the waterways *inside* the city will be dangerous. Let’s explore this ruin, and we may learn what to expect throughout the rest of the city, if it is, as we suspect, cursed.”

## Chapter 9

### Ex-Libris

Mist rolled about the domed edifice, caressing the corroded stone, entwining the Mare Nostrum as though something living, coiling about the tall pillars and the oars. The fluted columns reflected in the ebbing water like the tendrils of some monstrous cephalopod waiting to greet the wary sailors.

Cambses donned his helmet, its horsehair crest bristling like flame. With little cheer, he led ten of his best to the topmost step of the library, the plank groaning and shuddering under the weight of their oval shields and bronze-tipped spears. Xandr followed in nothing but his kilt and sandals, with his sword at his back, as did Emma behind him, drifting like a wraith, and sure-footed and bare-footed Thelana, her quiver at the shoulder and bow firmly in hand.

The Hedonian raised a pair of fingers, and without word, the naval warriors spread across the steps, their shields half-masking their front. Complementing their formation, Thelana nocked an arrow in her bow, scanning the impenetrable haze for targets. Only the Batal stood tall, somber and unwavering.

Sunlight penetrated the cracked dome like a lance and a cloud of vapors drifted from the keystone like a silk to reveal the words etched in stone across the pediment: EX-LIBRIS. Cambses turned to Thelana, as if to confirm her assertion. “It means books, I

think, in the old tongue.” Emma’s eyes reeled. She wondered whether any of the brutes had ever visited a place of learning, or even knew to read.

Passing between the pillars, under the great shadow of the library, Xandr could sense the growing unease in the others. The *tale of lost Hedonia* was known within trading distance of the Empire.

“Come, men!” Cambses voice resonated powerfully. “There is more to fear from the living than from corpses that jitter like marionettes.” And with that he motioned them beyond the heavy black doors of wood and bronze, which opened into a dim recess.

The walls vanished in the shadows, the boundaries of the chamber remaining in obscurity. Silhouettes hinted at ornate moldings rimming unseen balconies. A garish light washed over the center of the library from the crack in the dome high high above, which gave the sense of untold vastness. The air was stagnant and felt—not cold—but devoid of warmth. Dust the thickness of snowflakes spun in the air as if caught by some spider’s invisible thread. And there was the unmistakable stench of rot hanging over all.

Emma’s voice disturbed the silence, “This is all wrong,” she said. “The lines are all backwards; it’s like giving birth in reverse.”

No one, not even Xandr, had any idea what she meant, nor did anyone wish to know. Cambses noted her trance like state and grumbled. As if his men weren’t spooked enough! “Hey, Batal, keep that witch of yours quiet!”

Xandr started to speak on her behalf, but decided it better to hold his tongue.

Moving further inward, they found what was expected, and that was comforting. Passageways of books on marble shelving like towering colonnades, tomes set higher than

the tallest man could reach. Despite adequate storage, amorphous mounds of papyrus lay scattered about the marble floor, while other books were stacked with apparent intention into bizarre, towering forms, enough to bury passersby should it topple. But the large granite slab directly beneath the dome was what gave the visitors pause. Behind a desk with decorative Ionic curves, in a chair like a throne of thick cedar and blood-red velvet, a corpse glowed luridly where a beam of sunlight touched it. The corpse wore a small black hat, and its head lay, as if resting, against an open tome. As if stricken dead while writing, the corpse' bone-fingers still held to a peacock-feathered quill, leaving a crooked line upon the page.

“He was a publican, in life,” Cambses murmured.

“What’s that?” asked Emma. “And how do you know?”

“Look, you can tell by his hat. Only publicans wear them. They decided which books went into the library and which were unsuited for the public. In truth, I know little of such matters.”

“It looks like he died writing,” said Thelana.

“You mean he *drowned* writing,” Cambses corrected, making her realize the absurdity of her statement.

And yet, there it was, the ink running long against the yellowing paper. Xandr joined the others about the desk, brazenly tearing the tome from under the corpse. The crooked line formed a single word: REPENT, with the last letter drawn to the edge of the page in a bubbling inkblot which had grown from under the tip of the quill.

“Repent,” Cambses intoned. “For what?”

“Wait.” It was the voice of Meridius. “I know–knew–this man. Here lies the body of Ptolemns! I had many a chance to speak with him.” He gnawed on his fist, terror and despair growing in his eyes. “Where are your jests now, my friend? Where the laughter that so oft rang from those merry lips?”

“I knew *of* him,” Cambses replied. “They said he was a philosopher, a critic of the Empire. He believed we had become a society of greed, that we were too focused on wealth and pleasure.” The captain’s disdain for the man and his beliefs was evident in his tone.

“He predicted,” Meridius continued approvingly, “that doom would come to the city, and to the Empire, due to its waywardness. Even the word, *hedonistic*, has come to mean, in other kingdoms, a life of waste, of decadence.”

Emma came forth, daring to speak. “What was he reading?” Xandr passed the book to her. It was a collection of poetry. On the page where Ptolemns had written, the stanza read:

*I looked out across the waters  
and there came Tsunamis  
mightiest of the depth's demons  
that with flailing arms,  
shook the seas,  
and split beams of ships,  
and made cities fall*

“Tsunamis,” she whispered to herself, letting the book slip back to the desk.

Xandr looked into her dark eyes, seeing more than she wished to reveal. “What is it, Emma?”

“Just a poem,” she replied. “Words on paper.”

“Alright!” Cambses cried suddenly. “No reason to tally longer. Spread out; search this ruin. There may yet be survivors.”

As the men scampered cautiously about, Emma approached the shelves with wonderment. “Have you ever seen such a collection? Here is all the knowledge of the world! I could spend . . . a lifetime here. We must seek out what is of importance, carry what we can onboard . . .”

“We take nothing,” Cambses retorted. “We came here for one thing and one thing only.”

Thelana stumbled across a book that had fallen to the floor. She lifted it, flipping to a random page:

*In the 333rd year of the Suleimani Dynasty, Empress Tetè expanded the Empire to include the northern provinces, of what is today known as the Massad Province, having conquered and subdued the primitive mountain peoples of the Assanti and the Verber tribes, and the even more primitive Argolith, after only one month of sieges.*

There was more history, detailing the glorious conversion of the primitive peoples to the religion of Hedonia, as directed by the glorious Empress Tetè, but Thelana was

too disgusted to read further. “You want to save this self-righteous drivel?” she asked Emma.

“It’s not all *drivel*, Thelana,” she answered. “Look, a book discussing the writer and his struggle with his craft.”

*A sentence can play and play until it becomes madness. This is the burden of the writer. He does not tell the story; the story tells him.*

“Writing about writing?” she replied. “How ridiculous! Besides, everybody knows writers are weak and effeminate. What do they know of struggle? Let them forage for food in the wilderness! Then they’d know the meaning of struggle.”

Nabonus returned at last with a small contingent of men. “We checked the upper levels, Cambses, but found no one alive.”

“Good. Return to the Mare Nostrum and bring me a flint and a tinder box.”

“What do you intend to do with that?” asked Emma.

“Burn the place. There are enough books here to set a mighty blaze.”

“You’re mad!” she wailed. “This is the culmination of all your history; the fabric of your society is here, preserved on each page, all its discovery—”

“I am not a savage,” he replied coolly. “I know the value of this place. But as we cannot bring these books to Thetis; we must not allow the knowledge to pass into foreign hands.”

“You’re a greater fool than I thought! This knowledge belongs to all men, not only to citizens of Hedonia.”

“No, witch, this knowledge was paid by the blood of countless citizens. No one else has any right to it!”

“I won’t let you!” she scoffed.

Cambses turned, at last, to Xandr. “I thought I told you to control your wench!”

The Batal stepped between them. “She is not my wench, nor my witch, and I can no longer control her as you. But should you put a hand on her—”

His threat was cut short as a scream resonated from the desk of Ptolemns. It was Meridius, who had remained behind to study the remains of his old friend. He was reeling backward, wrestling against the quite animated corpse of the publican, the quill pen inked with the blood spouting like a fountain from the oarsman’s neck. The once articulate orator, writer, and poet, had lost, in Death, its capacity for argument, but words still managed to escape from some part of its frame.

“BURY ME!” it said, it asked, again and again.

Xandr was the first to action, unleashing Emmaxis in a flurry of silver. But the sword felt unusually weighted in Xandr’s arms; it pulled toward the ground like a battleaxe, ringing against the marble tile. Cutting through the rotted flesh was like sinking his sword into a beehive, slow and sticky, not like the effortless severing of living tissue. Nonetheless, the thing that had been Ptolemns lost its hat, with its head soon following to the floor.

“Meridius,” he asked. “Are you all right?”

He had already removed the quill from his neck, though the collar of his leather jerkin was darkened with blood. "I did not expect that from an old friend," he stammered, forcing a smile through a sweat drenched jaw.

Jolting backward, his spear over the shoulder, the Hedonian signaled to one of the other men. "Get him back to the ship!"

But even then they could see it, things that should not have been, shambling silhouettes from beyond the bookcases. Since they were drowned, their bodies were more slowly decayed, and thus more horribly preserved in varied stages of rot. Skin hung from gaping wounds made by barbed teeth; pink flesh flowered grotesquely along half-devoured limbs; swollen organs dangled along the decorative tile leaving slippery trails of gore. Whole sections of body were missing for some, and it seemed hardly possible that the shambling bipeds could keep from collapsing in on themselves. But reason, as the living trespassers were now discovering, gave quickly way to the irrationality of terror.

Cambses was familiar with battle in its most gruesome guise, and yet, the look of sanity receded from his whitening face as though sanity were a reflection of skin tone. "By the gods!" he bellowed. "Will horrors never cease? Back to the Nostrum!"

Some of the oarsmen tossed their spears upon instinct, but most, with their quivering limbs, missed their mark. Of those well-placed throws, the steady advance of the smitten did not slow, nor did the drowned bother removing the shafts from their impaled bodies, but left them as new additions to their non-living forms. Thelana drew an arrow to her ear. The point struck the forehead, and the sound of it, like a bone rattle, raised the small hairs of her skin.

“BURY ME!” the words came, over and over, from many distinct voices.

Everyone fled, save for Emma, and Xandr who pulled at her arm as though she were cemented to the earth. He noticed she was muttering, so quietly as if to her own ears. “We cannot bury you,” she was saying, “the city is flooded, but we can release your spirits in the old way, by smoke, through fire.”

“Come on, Emma!” he cried. “We haven’t the time!”

“But they’re suffering! Can’t you feel it?”

The drowned were nearly upon them and as he had no time to argue, he swept her into his arms and carried her out of the library.

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Volley of flaming arrows were sent into the Ex-Libris, though none could tell which lit the fires that set the structure ablaze. The flames parted the fog enough so that the Mare Nostrum could be navigated further into the interior of the city. As he watched the flames rise up, Cambses lamented, “Tall Hedonia, jewel of the world . . . what centuries’ wisdom was lost with you, and what dark epochs once trod lay before us!”

As there was not a gust to be felt in any direction, and the waters were still as a bog, Cambses ordered his men to the oars. They obeyed despite much grumbling and gossiping. Only one was absent. Though his neck was heavily bandaged, the blood had flowed excessively from the pen wound, so Meridius remained below, trembling, pale, and sweaty, as though afflicted with sudden fever.

After some strange time, which could not be determined without sun or moons, the bands of white thinned out, revealing much of what had been hidden. And of the fog

the oarsmen once cursed, they immediately wished would return. It was as if Nature, in her wisdom, had blanketed the city in a shroud woven from air and water, so that no man might look upon such horrors. Now the shroud was removed. Bodies plagued the eye, refusing to sink, drifting along distant avenues; others gathered on street corners like rafts of flesh for maggots, the air blackened by flies. Occasionally, bodies would entangle the gently dipping oars, and the men would curse and blaspheme the gods.

The white rolled low over the streets. Domed and vaulted temples were overwrought with seaweed and green glowing plankton, passing from view like galleys adrift in the mist. Columns of marble reached up to nothing, and rings of granite, ripped by vines, lay submerged in the silvery stillness. Statuary of forgotten men stared outwardly with smiles betraying their state of degradation, brine eroding their once gleaming shoulders, their stone lips and stone ears homes for skittering crab mites and lichen. In the far reaches of doomed Hedonia, magnificent monuments emerged from beneath distant veils of fog and were swallowed up again, passing in and out of view like lucid bits of memory, like a dream of some great empire.

A bronze statue passed into view, green with lichen, of a warrior in full Hedonian armor. "Alas, who remembers mighty Damakles?" said Cambses with a sigh, "who slew a hundred merquid with his bare hands? Oh, how fleeting is all things, how temporal the world and every proud thing in it!"

Overhearing, Emma accosted him. "I misunderstood you," she said. "I figured you for a dumb brute. Truly, you love your country."

He turned to her, his face a solemn mask. “Madam, I am no mercenary. A man does not risk life as I, for a nation he does not love. Burning the library was akin to slaying my own child. But I would readily do so, before letting my children into captivity.”

Her eyes settled uneasily over the rail. Aspects of architecture rose from beneath the rippling surface, startling in contrast: great colonnades without walls or roof, the upper seating of an amphitheater, a coliseum turned to rubble. “I suppose we did not need the horses.”

“We expected the sea would have receded by now.”

“The world is ever changing,” she murmured. “Our lives are too brief to see things as they are. If we could live for millennia, as the Ancients did, mountains would race before us, and the seas and continents change shape, as they did after the Great Cataclysm.”

“For this reason I do not devote myself to personal matters, but to that which benefits the Empire, which may last for untold eons.”

“Your empire has already been lost, with the shifting of the sea.”

“Ah yes,” he said, “but this is *our sea*—*mare nostrum*, and the kingdom that controls it controls the world.”

“Once, bodies of water called oceans covered this planet. The Dead Zones was an ocean that would make your sea look like a fish pond. Enya does not care for your religion or your politics; it simply is, and will be long after we’re gone.”

“Until then,” he replied, “I will fight for what is mine, with my dying breath.”

Over the bronze ram of the Mare Nostrum the Batal stood with troubled a brow.

Thelana longed to embrace him, her heart aching without knowing when she could again do so. “What troubles you?” she asked. “Or do you hate ships as much as I?”

“Emmaxis did little against that animated corpse in the library,” he replied. “I’ve seen it cut through the iron-hard scales of a dragon, split the heart of a giant made up of flesh and steel, but never has it felt so heavy, so sluggish against mine enemy.”

“It wasn’t alive,” she replied. “Emmaxis thirsts blood, living flesh. The body of that poet; it was not living.”

“I know, Thelana, but why does the sword thirst? It is a piece of metal, finely wrought, but nothing more. It has no tongue to taste or throat to swallow, no stomach with which to hunger.”

“Do not ask so many questions, my love, accept it as a gift of the Goddess.”

“I do trust in Alashiya, but—”

A scream like Xandr had never heard resonated from middeck, and the sound of crashing waves. Over the hull, a rowing bench and an oar were drenched in blood, its oarsman gone. In seconds, the forty-eight remaining sailors abandoned their positions, milling in a panic about the top deck.

“He’s gone!” Nabonus was shouting. “Gone!”

Cambses threw one hand to the pommel of his gladius, sprinting across the deck. Where the oarsman had been, a trio of claw marks marred the blood stained wood. “I had feared this,” he muttered to himself.

Xandr moved quickly to his side. “You had feared . . . what, Cambses?”

“Did you see the wounds of those corpses in the library?” came the answer. “Did you truly believe fish could do such things? There are worse things here than drowned men. Older spirits, more angry, more terrible . . .”

“Cambses!” Xandr cried. “What have you not told us? What are you hiding?”

“Frazetta lied to you,” the Hedonian replied, resignation in his voice, and already as he said this, webbed-fingers were reaching over the bow, milky-white, with gray scales, so thin and gelatinous as to be nearly transparent. Eyeing the thing that came climbing onto the vessel, Cambses blood went cold, his palm shuddering at the hilt, “some men *did* return from the previous expeditions, but they were insane, completely insane, gibbering on about . . . impossible things . . .”

“What things!” Xandr demanded, drawing Emmaxis from its sheath.

“First they spoke of corpses that walked, but they also spoke of merquid, of, *dead* merquid. They called them the Gray Ones. *Grayquid*, they called them.”

As if summoned by its name, the gaunt creature leapt onto the deck with unnatural agility, its legs frog-like. Its face was broad and flat and finned, but it was wrong somehow; its flesh was a most unnatural hue between white and clear, and was slick with mucus. The mouth was implausibly broad, with painfully barbed teeth, and its eyes were cold, clear, lifeless. Without the slow, awkward gait of the human drowned, the grayquid leapt again. Too close to use his spear, Nabonus fumbled for the gladius at his hip, but his face contorted strangely, and even from ten paces the onlookers could tell that something was choking him, like hands about his throat, a pungent odor emanating

from the grayquid like rotted fish multiplied a thousand fold. Paralyzed by his absence of breath, Nabonus stumbled and the slimy creature pounced, eviscerating him, digging through the man's entrails with its great hooked fingers as if in search of some digested morsel. Organs were tossed across the deck and blood spilled between the beams to the lower decks where the horses in the stables neighed with distress.

Before any of the crew could react, more gray-white hands clawed up over the bow, too many to count.

"Get below deck!" Xandr shouted, and Cambses gave the nod of approval. All rushed to the narrow steps, trusting in the safety of the cedar roof. But of the forty-seven oarsmen left after Nabonus, only thirty managed the descent, to the illusion of safety.

## Chapter 10

### Demons of the Deep

All eyes fixed on the beams not three feet overhead. A latticework of sunlight and shadow played over their terror stricken faces. The men moved frantically in the narrow quarters below, watching, waiting, listening. Little noise came from the upper decks, as the forsaken oarsmen did not have armor or shields or spears, only the swords at their sides, which, if used at all, none in the shadows could guess. Shortly, the sound of panic echoed onto tranquil waters and died away. Where the slaughtered were fallen, human shapes blocked the light that spilled from between the beams, deepening the darkness in the bowels of the ship.

The walls of the lower deck pushed on the survivors, too narrow a space for thirty-one oarsmen, its captain and three passengers. Through the seams of the outer hull, the air came thinly, fouled by the brine of the sea and the stench of sweat. The most cowardly among them snatched at breath like netted fish. Despite knowing war and death, when faced against something so ravenous and supernatural, their most primal fears had taken hold. And then the blood poured from between the timbers, bathing them in the gore of their comrades as if in some perverse ritual. Meridius cursed the shipbuilders for not better waxing the upper deck. When the blood turned to drips, the roof groaned and bulged under inhuman feet, followed by a scratching sound. Half-seen claws were raking and raking, splintering the beams.

Meridius moved under the light. The wound in his neck looked to have worsened despite their healing efforts, the purple flesh spreading from beneath his bandages. And he was pale, so pale, some feared a *drowned* had materialized in their midst.

“My wife and daughter live in Campania,” he began, out of nowhere. “She, my wife, has dark hair like a raven’s wing that falls in curls and always smells of pine. It is on a small lot that I own, in the plains of Campania. We grow potatoes.” He smiled weakly. “My little one is nearly two and just learning to speak. She can say ‘up’ and ‘down’. But, who knows what new words she’s learned since last I saw them? It’s been more than a month . . .

“Last night, I dreamt that my wife was washing beside the porch where the bougainvillea grows. She looked at me, smiled, beautiful as I remember. White sheets hung from the clothespins, but as I stepped closer to embrace her, the sheet she pulled from the basin, I saw that it was red, all red as blood.”

Cambses, who listened across the space of three men, pushed his way toward him. “What good is telling us this? Save your remembrances for later, the bawdy bits about your wife, for when we feast in the high halls of Thetis.”

“Aye, Cambses, very well that I should,” Meridius answered, “but if I don’t return, who amongst you will go to Campania, to seek out my waiting wife and child and tell them of my fate? It is not marked, you know, and there are no paved roads leading to it. But if you look with a will to find it, you shall.”

“You are not the only man here with those in waiting,” Cambses replied grimly. “And if none of us survive, none will know our fate.”

“Quite right,” Meridius somberly replied.

A woman sounded, her voice as uplifting as a nymph song, for the men longed for the comforts of their wives and lovers. “I will go to Meridius’ family.” It was Thelana. “I am Ilmarin, and do not know your customs, but in our country we do not fear Death as you; if he comes, so be it; we are born again in the Goddess. But now is the time for action. Let us rise up and meet our doom with bravado!”

At that, a plank cracked between them, and through the open space a milky hand groped for someone’s hair. “We need a plan!” Cambses exclaimed. “We cannot simply run out blindly.”

“Sir, there is the Hellenic fire,” came an answer, from a short, gray-bearded man.

“The Hellenic fire? Are you mad, Archimedes? We’ll burn down the ship.”

“What is this Hellenic fire?” asked Xandr.

“It is a wicked concoction,” Cambses replied, “an alchemists’ brew; it burns like kerosene, only worse, much worse. Its flames can scarcely be put out. Just a thimbleful may turn a house to ash. There are times I wish it’d been left to the denizens of hell where it belongs. But still, we carry it aboard, to ignite enemy ships.”

Xandr was quick to reply, “If we die by fire, that is our choice---better than be ripped apart by those fiends. Who agrees, say ‘aye’.”

As none wished to await Death trembling in the cold and in the dark, the chorus of approval was clear. But it was Thelana whose voice rang again above the clamor.

“Wait, we cannot march out, one by one, as sheep to the slaughter. We’ll need to startle them.”

“Startle them?” a question sprang, “they are soulless fiends, what could startle them?”

“I have a plan,” she said. “But I will need one other, someone who knows to work this Hellenic fire.”

“I will do it,” said Meridius without hesitation.

“Then what would you have me say to your wife and daughter,” she asked, “should I need to meet them?”

He smiled. “When the moment is certain, I will tell you.”

Without warning, more of the planks crumbled about them, and hooked hands sprouted down like demonic weeds.

“Wait,” Cambses interrupted, facing the Ilmarin woman, “you will need armor. Nabonus died with his breast unshielded.”

“Your armor won’t fit me,” she replied with a grin, “and besides, when I’m naked, I’m invincible.” She then turned to Emma, who stood like a long shadow at her side.

“Enchant me.”

Across the flat double doors of the Mare Nostrum’s cargo hold, which served as both stable and storage for rations, citrus and water, there was an iron latch with a simple loop and hook. Normally, the cargo hold was not connected with the crewman’s quarters, but with some effort, a passage was made. Rather than be unhooked, the latch burst from the wood to which it was nailed, and to the surprise of the gray creatures skulking and disemboweling and devouring, a lone raven fluttered skyward, followed by a toffee hued mare. Mounted atop the shaken but intrepid beast was Thelana, the jade and gold of her

bow glittering in the faint sun. Following from this compartment was Meridius, Cambses, Xandr, and a contingent of warriors. Without pause, the grayquid abandoned their feast to pounce, letting bodies and parts of bodies slip quietly to the sea.

A simple, unmarked pot was in Meridius' hands. No shield or spear was on him, only the gladius at his waist. As he ran across the uneven flooring toward the grayquid, Meridius uncorked his flask. Clear liquid spilled in globs about his feet and jerkin as the cork rolled into the sea. Old Archimedes, all the while, handed an arrow with a flaming tip to the mounted archer. Pulling the arrow to her ear, its flame flickering in the breeze, she aimed for she knew not what. Meridius then did what none could have imagined, a last moment modification; turning the flask over, he emptied the fluid down his own throat and let it wash over his lips and trickle from his clothing.

*Meridius.* Thelana mouthed the words, but could not speak. *No . . .*

The grayquid, being mindless killers, did not heed the other men, but piled atop the single being who dared to charge into their midst. As they tore at him, he turned peacefully to Thelana, saying, "Tell my family it was a good adventure."

Moisture pooled about Thelana's eye, smearing her aim, and for a moment she feared missing her mark, but she did not fail him. Her fingers loosened and the taut string snapped. Whether those fingers were the death of him, or the grayquid pulling out his spine, she did not know, but the flaming point struck Meridius squarely in his breastplate and instantly the fire burst from his vestments like a furnace beneath his sternum. The whole of the man became fire. Even the grayquid, in all their uncanny swiftness, were unable to escape. It engulfed them. Other grayquid leapt over their

disintegrating brethren. But Thelana slowed their onslaught. The fire of her arrows caught scent of the Hellenic liquid below, erupting along the floorboards, up to their lower extremities.

But her quick timed shots were unable to avail the whole crew. Fires streamed along the beams of the groaning ship. Cambses, disregarding the imminent peril, let out a cry of battle, and pushed against the gray mob with his long oval shield. Claws glanced off his mail and toad-like feet hopped and raked at the crest of his helmet, but he kept a protective stance, and brandishing his gleaming gladius, hacked at their soft sinews, finding that their heads and limbs rolled from his blade with ease. The oarsmen, likewise, stood ground, forming a wall of shields across the narrow portion of the bow, but the lashing webbed-fingers found gaps in their defenses as the ship swayed, and the less steady fell away with their throats missing, slipping and writhing.

The fire continued to rage and the beams began to blacken. All the while, a high-crested wave started along the starboard bow, as on the port side, a pillar came quickly from a great rectangular pedestal, threatening to smash the pentaconter to pieces. Leaping down to mid-deck, Xandr grabbed an oar to brace the ship, as grayquid descended upon him, their claws inching for his throat. He caught the slippery wrists in his hands, but the pungent odor was overwhelming. Fighting to maintain consciousness, he twisted away, his last meal gushing from his lips to the waves. At last, there was respite, in the form of a gust of fresh sea air. With a single, desperate gasp, he tugged at the grayquid's loose limbs with all his enduring might. The lank arms dangled lifelessly against its sides, but it did not feel pain, and lurched forward once more, snapping at him

with jagged teeth. In shock and horror, Xandr toppled over the railing, hard against the long oars. Icy waves licked his bruised ribs, and down the grayquid followed, many more of them, clawing their way from oar to oar. But the throbbing in his side gave birth to an idea. He wrenched an oar free of its porthole and the nearest of the monsters paused, having lost a step in its path, and like a giant with a tremendous mace Xandr hoisted the broken shaft and knocked the creature beneath the briny waters.

A sound like thunder turned every eye away. Waves crashed, filling the ship with white, extinguishing every trace of flame. The whole of the Mare Nostrum shuddered against the pedestal, tilting onto its side, throwing every man and creature against the rails, and more than a few overboard. Thelana slid across the beams with the others, nearly falling from her mare and from the ship, but Arrow dug its hooves into the deck as she coiled her fingers about its mane. Xandr caught himself, the oars under his knees, the frothy current rolling overhead. He found his footing again, pushing off the marble that had hit, but not penetrated the hull, and made his way up, hand-over-hand.

As the white waters washed across the bow and receded, the Mare Nostrum righted itself, and where the flames had been was only ash. Snapping her bow into a sword, Thelana kicked at her mare and charged. Mist flared from Arrow's nostrils and the glimmer of terror in its eyes darkened to bold ferocity. Together, horse and rider dashed between the hooking claws, across the swaying upper deck, her blade swiping clean through whatever mesh of scales and cartilage kept the grayquid's heads attached. Her charge came up short, as the flooring vanished ahead of them, but there she spotted her lover, clinging from the port bow.

Clasping his arm to the elbow, she caught him, and he came up with his fifteen-feet of oar. Only his massive arms could handle such a thing, albeit clumsily, for he was wise in the use of ungainly things. In the narrow passage the grayquid lunged at him but did not reach. The oar splintered with a WHOOSH and CRACK, swatting them back to the depths, and when the paddle broke away, the makeshift weapon became a spear in his hands, with which to impale their lean bodies. Cambses and his men, having overcome their dread, rushed to aid him, their swords cutting effortlessly through the dead flesh.

When the battle was done and the grayquid were but husks of mucus, the crew counted their dead. Not even ashes could be found of Meridius, but the three bodies that remained were bandaged and tossed into the sea, to Sargon, with all the rites accorded them.

It was during the last ceremony that it appeared, white as a sail in the mists, casting a shadow over everything in sight. The whole structure was enmeshed in vines, its three walls sloping inwardly to a flattened point, forming a low, wide pyramid. The sea beat against the ancient stones and clouds of soot swirled in a fury at its peak like a volcano. A great flight of steps protruded from it like a man's nose, ascending to a broad archway, but the stairway was incomplete, having weathered to ruin. Three obelisks stood adjacent to the pyramid and evidence of others could be seen beneath the surf, great toppled stones and bronze ribbing that threatened to rip the dwarfed ship to pieces. A fourth obelisk, having collapsed against the pyramid, formed a breach in the wall where the water gushed and foamed violently against the debris.

Cambses straightened at the sight of it, looking weary but triumphant. “At last!” he said. “The Temple of Sargon!”

## Chapter 11

### The Maelstrom

Circling high above the turmoil, raven eyes watched, as Thelana and Arrow burst from the stables and Meridius erupted into flame, as the grayquid were vanquished. When all appeared calm, she glided from her crow's nest again onto the ship.

The feeling of transformation was like the climax that comes with copulation—it stirred every fiber of her being, the feathers sprouting to tickle her as bones and flesh shrank away. It was at once nauseating and liberating, like casting away heavy manacles while plummeting down a cliff. Now, in human form, she felt supple and heavy. Hastily, she snatched up her robes lest anyone see her unclothed body in the dim corner of the ship's stables.

Climbing to the top deck, Emma surveyed their situation. Before them was a thing she had never seen before, but had heard much about, the Temple of Sargon. How much of it extended below the water, she could only guess, but it was already more massive than she had imagined.

“We have only twenty-seven men,” Archimedes was saying to Cambses, “one of our oars is broke thanks to the Batal, and Nabonus is no more! Who will navigate?”

Cambses gritted his teeth, fingering the stone ring on his hand nervously. “Do not tell me my crew perished in vain, now that we are so near!”

Having witnessed many acts heroism, Emma overcame her timidity and attempted to be of use, approaching the men on soft feet. “What seems to be the problem, Captain?”

Archimedes stared at her aghast. “Where in Sargon’s briny beard did you come from? Has she been aboard the whole time?”

“There is no problem,” Cambses answered her, “should my men show some backbone. Look!” and he pointed, describing what she could plainly see, “There’s a maelstrom about the pyramid; the sea is drawn to it, and the ruins that linger beneath the surface will tear the hull apart.”

“And at half crew,” the old man added, “we’ll have less than half the power to resist the current! We’re at Sargon’s mercy, like a dinghy without a rudder!”

Xandr and Thelana, returning from the laborious task of returning the horses to the cargo hold, were quick to join the debate. “I can row for two men,” he boasted.

“And I for three,” Thelana quipped.

Emma glared at them both and shrugged. “Doubtful I could row for one.”

“Then it is agreed!” said Cambses. “Archimedes, you are the most able sailor, but the years have been unkind to your limbs; you shall man the tiller, and I will join in the rowing with Xandr and the lady Ilmarin, if she truly feels to the task.”

“I counted more grayquid dead from my hands, than from you or your men,” she answered.

“Pulling a bow is not like pulling an oar, miss. This is man’s work if ever there was, and it will wear every part of you like wheat on the millstone. But since I am short of recruits, you’ll have to do. Keep with the pace or lay off.”

Xandr rubbed his beard, still moist from the sea, and looked out over the railing at that uninviting monument. When last he laid eyes upon it, it was from the clouds, soaring upwards in the arms of a bird man. Within its confines he had been witness to many horrors, to the massacre of the Hedonian people by vengeful merquid, to the suicide of the High Priest’s young daughter and the revelation of an unspeakable secret. He wondered what Cambses or his crewmen knew of these events, whether any of them would believe his recollection of that fateful day, when doom came to the city. But beneath the dungeons of the temple, he had also met Thelana, and his lonesome wanderings had come to an end. It was impossible to believe that only a year before he’d climbed those steps into the pyramid temple’s cavernous interior. So much transpired since, it seemed a lifetime ago. Looking again upon those steps, he turned to Cambses, saying, “Should we reach the foundation without capsizing, where do we anchor? The stair is broken and the archway is too high above.”

“There!” Thelana pointed, before Cambses could contemplate the matter, “We will make for the fallen obelisk, away from the maelstrom, and from there cross to the pyramid. Ships are not my trade, but I am well versed in strongholds such as these.”

“Too risky,” Xandr replied. “Besides, how do we get inside once we cross?”

“We can climb the outer wall,” she said, “as I did once, but with the help of the vines.”

“Then to the obelisk we go,” Cambses answered. “Every man to an oar! . . . And woman also.”

Thelana fought with the oar and it fought back. Whether she was rowing well enough for three men, or even for one, she could not guess. The *Mare Nostrum* rocked and tumbled violently, and with each shudder and groan of its ribbed frame a swell of water crested hard against them, blinding her with spray. The sea poured onto the benches, numbing her quivering body. Sounds of angry waves rolled about like thunder, drowning any drumming that might have guided their strokes. Only Cambses’ shouts rang above the din, but in the maelstrom’s fury, his commands came in fragments and lone syllables. Whether the crew maintained an even pacing, she was doubtful. Through the porthole, she could make out the oars, flailing like an upturned centipede. Somewhere, Xandr wrestled against his own oar, but she could not hope to see him through the blinding mist and the incessant pounding of waves.

Should Emma have remained in raven form, she could have watched the pentaconter climb toward the base of the pyramid, carried by the winds and the vortex like current, over a rolling swell of blue and white webbing. Teetering at the water’s apex, where the air blasted the surf to streaming white vapors, the whole of the ship pitched on its broadside and went down. Oars cracked down the middle against the submerged ruins, but the ignorant crew continued to battle the water, with desperation, with broken shafts, gritting their teeth and swearing profanities.

Now the sea rose up to assume a vaguely human shape, and a wave like a hand lifted the *Mare Nostrum* up into the sky, as if Sargon himself regarded them like a toddler

would a bath toy. And then, as though uninterested in what it saw, the wave hurled the pentaconter down, letting it skim along its broadside toward the sharp end of the collapsed obelisk.

Cambses' keen eyes caught sight of the threat, knowing from a succession of naval battles that should the *Mare Nostrum* be rammed on its broadside, it'd break apart like a stalk of wheat, outer planking, ribcage and all. Their only chance was to rotate the ship into a stronger angle, where it could take the hit, where it had been designed to take a hit. He only hoped his men would hear him.

"Reverse oars, men!" he bellowed, as loudly as his lungs could carry. "Turn this ship around or we're dead men!"

Somehow, whether from hearing the command or understanding the threat on their own, the oarsmen reacted with miraculous uniformity. Every oar struck the water at a precise angle, in a way only experienced sailors could manage, rotating the pentaconter backward. All Thelana and Xandr could do is brace themselves in their benches, and Emma against a support beam in the deck below. The obelisk grew rapidly in their sights—to immense proportions—until its basic shape vanished and only a wall of ancient writing spread across them.

The thunder of cedar striking granite made Thelana and Xandr certain that the ship was destroyed. But to Cambses experienced ears, the pentaconter was saved, its stern knocking and grating against the obelisk intact. He released his oar, the wood a dull crimson from the blood of his palms, and stood contentedly. He made his way across a floor of seawater, sweat and vomit, and accosted Thelana directly.

“You said you could get us up this slope. I got us this far. It’s your turn to lead.”

The waters were calmer about the temple complex. Only where the surf broke against the obelisk wall, a white mist surged, showering the already damp crew. Cambses hand picked ten of his finest warriors, including old Archimedes for his craftiness, to join Xandr, Thelana, and Emma into the pyramid. They donned their breastplates and greaves, torn and tainted with gore, slipped helmets to their heads, set spears and shields to their backs, and followed. Thelana had only her tunic, which was in tatters and concealed little of her lithe figure, but it was also damp, which made her feel numb with cold. She agonized over whether she should cast the hateful thing away, to let it vanish forever under the sea, but the rapacious eyes of the oarsmen made her feel ashamed, despite never having worn clothes for the first decade and a half of her life. Xandr came behind them, his blond beard and braid disheveled, his pale eyes impassive. Emmaxis gleamed faintly from his shoulder, a kilt was about his waist, and his powerful, scarred torso was bare but for a simple baldric. Making their way forward, a raven fluttered atop his opposite shoulder, and Archimedes turned and stared with wonderment.

“Now where did you come from, little bird?” he remarked playfully, reaching out a hand. Its black beak snapped and he snatched his finger away with a yelp. “Bad omen, these wretched birds.”

The Batal simply grinned and followed the trail led by Thelana, already a dozen paces above. They followed her example, planting foot and hand into the fissures and niches formed by the weathering winds and waters, and where there were none to find, the glyphs carved deep into the stone served instead. For some time they climbed this

way, across the width of the obelisk to the vines growing on the other side, which were as sturdy and thick as rope.

Atop the slanted surface of the obelisk, the tail of the company of climbers could see the whole topside of the *Mare Nostrum*, tethered to the jutting ruin, bobbing with the current. Sea spray no longer wetted their heels, but the air grew thin and icy, and dragonflies the size of Xandr's hand buzzed about their ears.

Where the obelisk had crashed into the pyramid, there was an irregular shaped opening, like the entrance into a cave. Crouched panther like, Thelana moved through it, and the roar of the sea hushed to a whisper. The quiet was startling. Jagged bits of debris scraped her bare feet as she climbed further and deeper into the cave of debris. Feeling blindly along the wall, her sole touched upon more refined granite, and she knew she had come to an inner passage, albeit a slanted one.

Signaling to the others, Cambses and his men followed Thelana, crawling on their bellies, awkwardly with shield and spear, through the rocky aperture. Xandr guarded the rear, with Emma perched on his shoulder, slipping more stealthily within.

Archimedes used his flint and tinder to light two torches, and in doing so, the darkness receded to reveal the walls, roof, and floor of the hall. Since the whole of it was slanted, it formed a diamond-shaped passage, which was disquieting to the already spooked seamen.

"These are the mason's passages," Cambses murmured. "They were used when the pyramid was being built, as ramps to drag the heavy stones. We are fortunate. They should lead us down to the altar where we will find what we're after."

Cambses instincts proved accurate. The hall sloped ever so perceptibly downward, the fourteen encroachers carefully making way, feeling along smooth walls to orient themselves to the crooked passage, while Thelana at the head studied the stability of their surroundings with nimble feet and fingers. Ceiling and floor reflected like gold about them, dimming as they crawled.

After a short, awkward march, the light of their torches hit upon a solid barrier, glowing faintly as they approached. It was the corner of the pyramid, but the hall continued, turning nearly back on itself and at a steeper incline, and they followed. Here the walls were damp. Sheets of water flowed from seams where the walls met the roof, steadily pooling about their feet as they went, numbing their limbs, increasing their misery. Thelana could only pray that the many tons of masonry not bury them, as they would have little warning should it occur and no time to escape to where they came in.

On they trudged, their minds turned to unspoken fears, three times across the diagonal of the pyramid in a zigzag pattern, till coming to the foundation where the water deepened to Thelana's knees. The passage ended in a narrow alcove, where the light hinted at patterns etched in stone, at carved human shapes and runes.

Archimedes felt along the alcove, as though he did not trust his eyes. "Sealed!" he exclaimed. "There is nowhere left to go!"

"No, Archimedes," Cambses replied, his voice dipping to unusually low octaves, "I was prepared for this." He handed his torch to the old sailor and lifted his hand ceremoniously. The strange stone ring reflected dully upon his finger, and he stooped in the torchlight, examining the features of the barrier more carefully. Finding a round,

coin-sized hole, he clenched his ring and thrust it forward. There was a series of heavy clicks, like the unlocking of an immense bolt, as he slowly turned his fist, and with an echo of stone against stone, the wall slid into a recess. Cambses brushed the dust from the plume of his helmet and peered through the veil of darkness and into a waiting chamber.

Suddenly, he turned toward his followers, suddenly brandishing his gladius. There was a mad gleam in his eye. “Swear to me, by my sword, that what you witness here today you will never speak of! Swear by pain of torture and death.”

The men, including Archimedes, stared at their captain with bewilderment. They were numb, near exhaustion, and filled with dread, and here was a new thing to weigh on them, an oath to the death. It was an over taxation of their faculties.

“Swear it!” he commanded. And without understanding, or even the capacity for disagreement, each man touched a hand upon the gladius, all except Xandr and Thelana, at whom Cambses intently glowered, but said nothing.

## Chapter 12

### The High Priest of the Faithless

Tripods were found and erected, their brassieres set ablaze, and the altar chamber took form. Ripples radiated from their ankles, the crests glinting like jewels as they moved through the shallow water. Xandr was overcome with an awful sense of recognition as the tomb-like chamber met his eyes. Shattered bits of marble, green with algae, were all that remained of Sargon and his seashell chariot of life-sized whales. When he closed his eyes, he could see what it had been—a glorious work of art in gleaming white. But in his mind’s ear, the voices of the dying still echoed, Aeneas and Diomedes, who had given their last breath in battle beneath that idol, by the lip of the sacred pool.

“There,” he said to Cambses, “the idol was there, as was the altar, but I do not know what we can hope to find.”

From raven form, Emma made herself known, and everyone looked on, baffled. “Something is terribly wrong, it’s a wrongness I can’t describe . . . all the city’s *sorrow* is focused here. It both emanates and drains from this place, like a . . . a maelstrom. It’s as if the temple is drawing the surrounding sorrow, only to unleash it back out in a torrent of ill will.”

Cambses rushed at her, his sword quivering under her chin, as though driven mad. “You should have stayed on the ship!” But already the men were beginning to

murmur, of their deepest, superstitious fears. Before she could react, Xandr drew forth Emmaxis, striding between them. “Calm yourself, Captain. These ruins have unnerved you, all of us for that matter; that is all she is trying to say.”

The two men, Xandr and Cambses, approached the center of the shrine with caution. Thelana took the rear guard with Archimedes and Emma. The other eight, dreading what they might find, remained further back, hands tight about their spears. An immense head met their gaze, lying on its side like a sleeping giant; its handsome features were half-submerged so that part of its nose, lips, and left eye were but a reflection mirrored in the still water. In view of this face, there was the altar, a black slab rimmed in gold circular patterns of Ionik design.

“If the scrolls are here,” said Cambses, “they should be placed there, below the topstone. Archimedes, come with me!”

The Hedonian and the old sailor trudged to the black form, but in doing so, something was disturbed. All warmth went from the room. Rising straight from the dark water, as though brought up by some invisible pulley, a tall, gaunt shape cast its shadow across the face of Sargon, which in the dim circle of burning tripods proved vaguely human. Archimedes shook with terror, yet he was somehow drawn to it, the water beneath his shuffling feet like a black undulating mirror. Xandr stood frozen, watching the tapering bishop’s miter and the soiled gray tatters, which were once so white, billowing like silk in a whisper of wind. The face was pallid, and as the light played across the clefts and nodes of the remaining bone and sinew, the truth of it could not be denied, for it was the High Priest Urukagina himself, the flesh of his face hanging loosely from

his skull like the threads of his robe, and in its skeletal fingers was a long staff, crowned by a small symbol, a gold trident in a circle.

Cambses and Xandr drew their weapons as Thelana's fingers fumbled for an arrow. Emma chanted to give them protection, but behind her the naval warriors recoiled, hiding beneath their shields, palms sweaty at their spears, greaves clanking fretfully against the clasps of their sandals. With uncanny swiftness and a purposeful gait unlike the *drowned*, the corpse moved toward Archimedes, who stood trembling, but curiously still. Bony thumbs pressed against the old sailor's eyelids, as if the High Priest intended to blind him. What happened instead was far worse than any could have imagined. Powerless to help their shipmate, they watched, as Archimedes' beard grew long and ashen, his face yellowing like parchment, becoming increasingly wrinkled and brittle, until the skin peeled off him in flakes. By the time the priest released him, what was left of Archimedes dipped beneath the shallow water, his body aged to a lifeless husk that crumpled in paper thin layers about his skeleton.

Emmaxis felt long and heavy, its lust for slaughter absent, but Xandr pressed on. "Urukagina!" he called out.

The thin gray form shrank away, appalled by the name, and then it gave reply, a high-pitched whine tainted with something distant and otherworldly. "I am not he, but what remains of him."

Cambses' eyes were like eggshells, his pupils receded to inkblots. Sweat drained from his helmet and down his chin. His gladius felt loose in his palm. This was a thing unprepared for, inconceivable; it unfastened the knots of his brain. "He is not our priest!"

he blurted. “We do not owe it allegiance; it is but a puppet of bones and sinews that makes a mockery of Sargon! Batal . . . do you see it? Seize the staff!”

The priestly figure accosted them, appearing not to walk, but moving through some form of locomotion that defied logic or description. Xandr and Cambses met the apparition with flashing steel, water raining from Emmaxis as it came up out of the water and down again. But the foul thing possessed an uncanny swiftness, and was so terribly emaciated that the two men could only guess where the points of their weapons might strike effectively. It was like dueling a silken sheet in a windstorm; they could but hope to shred it into strips of cloth. Rarely did the priest retaliate, and even when doing so, it only seemed to want to touch them with the tips of its icy fingers, which the two combatants did not dare risk, lest a single caress steal years from them, or worse, rob them of whatever vitality they still possessed.

All the while, Thelana’s arrow sat idly against her bow, for the cursed creature shifted too suddenly, so that she feared hitting one of her own. Behind her, the oarsmen rounded the black altar, and after much discussion, the two bravest hurled down the slab cover. It shuddered and split as it struck the ground and she watched a man lean in, pulling forth a pair of cylinders.

Still fighting, Xandr and Cambses were drawn into the shadows, and only then did they realize their folly, as the being against which they struggled became more animated, the empty sockets of its eyes glowing with an inner flame. “Look closely, Xandr, for you shall someday be as I am.” It cackled horribly, and a wave of despair clutched at Xandr’s heart like an invisible hand.

“What are you!” the Ilmarin cried, and faltered, as his sword become suddenly heavy.

“There is no rhyme or reason; I simply am, and am no more.”

With its attention drawn to the Batal, Cambses swung his gladius at the back of its neck, certain the corpse could not see him, but the unholy staff repelled the blow, the edge removing the headpiece from the shaft. With a covetous glare, the Hedonian snatched up the trident symbol and shrank quietly from battle. Seconds passed before Xandr became aware of his absence. Whether his ally was struck dead in the shadows or ran off, he could only guess. Undeterred, he gathered up his courage and strength, Emmaxis tearing through the gray robes, through bone and tissue like brambles, but to no avail.

“I killed you once,” he shouted, “I will do so again!”

“You murdered a high priest of Sargon,” the voice replied, “you peeled mine eyes to the truth; I saw the empty void, and I led my city to the new faith, to the nothing that is. Only the faithless see.”

The words came plainly, but were senseless, or so he hoped. As the priest continued to rant—or was he preaching?—Xandr was overcome with the sick feeling that comes with awful realizations, for the priest’s words seemed to possess some aspect of truth, of terrible truths no mortal was meant to hear. “You’re insane!” Xandr cried at last.

With Cambses removed, Thelana and Emma scurried into the ring of light. Finding her mark, the archer loosed her shaft, but it passed through the filmy robes

without resistance. The sorceress came next, her dark trappings and raven black hair swallowed by the gloom.

“Ye gods!” she gasped, for she looked with different eyes at what had been Urukagina, and what she saw was an absence, a thing that existed apart from the substantive reality around them, its presence known only through the luminescent swarm—its event horizon—giving it form and dimension. “It is like a black hole,” she muttered, “trapping all the light. Alas, Nabonus and Archimedes is among them, lost souls like captured fireflies.”

The tip of Emmaxis fell with a heavy bell tone, and the priest’s miter dissolved into the earth through the cracks of the tiles, leaving the priest bald and more hideous. “Damn it, Emma!” Xandr groaned, as what-had-been-Urukagina grazed his rising beard hairs, “Start making sense!”

“His power grows from despair,” she responded. “He is the cause of all this, the focus of the sorrow. Only a priest of Hedonia can give the final rites of burial, can let the spirits pass to the next plane. This, Lich of Urukagina, is abusing his priestly authority; he’s not letting them go.”

“Xandr . . .,” Thelana murmured anxiously, “my arrows aren’t helping, and neither is your sword. Cambses got what he wanted; let’s fly!”

In that instant, Xandr found his opportunity, driving Emmaxis to the hilt through the lich’s sternum. But in following the stroke of the sword, he came within reach of the High Priest, who, with skeletal fingers, hooked Xandr by the throat and thumbed at his eyes. Already, Xandr could feel the change, the fringes of his beard whitening.

“Let me show you, and you will know,” the lich of Urukagina said to him. “Let me peel back your eyes—”

He struggled to tear the arms away. They were lean as branches, but possessed an incomprehensible strength, or seemed so, the Batal’s own strength waning as great age weakens a man. Finally, Xandr looked about him, seeing only Emma in the glow of the fire, and the silhouette of Thelana behind. “Cambses!” he shouted. “Where is he?”

Thelana looked about also, but saw no one. With none left to help her beloved, she snatched up a flaming brassiere, spun it overhead like a sling, and tossed it into the face of the lich. What-had-been-Urukagina let out a horrid shriek as embers danced about its robe, and Xandr pulled free. With Cambses’ betrayal, his fear turned to rage, and he hurled himself at the corpse’ back, snatching at the skull, groping at empty eye sockets and loose knit jaws. But it was not the power of his limbs that overcame the abomination, but his courage, his insatiable zeal for good, and the pure vitality that radiated from him, channeled through the conduit of his rage. Remembering Emma’s words, he let himself laugh like a drunken barbarian, and it echoed from the high angled walls and parapets of the unholy shrine, and the High Priest of the Faithless shriveled in his clutches, till the skull came apart in his hands, no more animated than any unearthed from the grave.

In their triumph, Thelana turned her attention to the nearest candelabra stand, tossing it javelin-like toward the entrance. It landed, its oil wicks wafting to smoky ribbons, the lingering flare revealing a contingent of men filing into the niche behind the sliding barrier.

“Don’t leave us!” she shouted, half threateningly.

“I am sorry,” Cambses sounded with sincerity, his face a broken mask of light and shadow in the gloom. “But, no one must know what has transpired here, least of all foreigners.”

“Stop him!” Xandr groaned, but already the wall was rumbling to a close. With a tremendous leap she made for the exit, but a flank of spear-points stopped her short. “We had a pact, Cambses!” she cried. “There is no honor among you Hedonians! You’re nothing but deceivers!”

“No, Thelana, I love truth, and honor. But I love my country more.”

She rolled to a crouch with an arrow nocked to her bow. It sailed low, skewering a bootstrap to a calf muscle. The man folded in agony. Thelana cursed. It was their captain she was aiming for. By the time she got a second arrow, the shutting of the wall resounded in their ears, and as the candelabra rolled about the dank floor, the last of the burning wicks smothered, shrouding them in complete darkness.

## Chapter 13

### The Curse

Screams rang in the darkness followed by flickers of light. Though familiar with the voice, they shuddered at it. Nothing enraged the Batal like betrayal.

*“Novae!”*

With the Ancient word, Emma made their surroundings visible. It was a faint glow without origin, turning the dust to glitter.

Emmaxis sparked again against the weathered patterns of the entryway—  
“Villain!”—Xandr was beating the stone like a man possessed, screaming. “Pernicious, devil-spawned villain!”

Emma called his name in dulcet tones. “We must come to our senses. The wall is not your enemy.”

He lowered the sword. “If Cambses were before me, I’d run him through! Alas, we are trapped! Vengeance is denied me!”

“My wings can carry me to an aperture in the ceiling,” she answered, “I am sure of it. But I would not dare leave *you*.” Her voice faltered, lingering on the last word, on him.

“No trap can keep me.” It was Thelana, paying Emma no heed. Peeling off what little remained of her garments, her bluish skin prickled in the chill. Emma was tempted to make a joke, but it was not a time for laughter. “There is a way out,” she continued,

“the way I would have escaped last year, if Xandr hadn’t ruined my plans.” Her violet lips curled into a smile.

Xandr came away from the wall, wrath given way to curiosity. “When you came for the Eyes of Sargon, I had thought you climbed in from the top.”

“I did, but I couldn’t very well go out the way I came in; they would have been expecting that! There’s an aquifer that cycles fresh water in and out of the temple, or used to before the Sea swallowed this place. The sacred pool led to it.”

“But the city is a ruin,” he cautioned, “and the aquifer is likely flooded and teeming with horrors!”

“Do you want vengeance?” she replied. “This is the only way. Stay if you prefer and await my return, but I doubt we’ll have the time to catch the *Nostrum*. And without a ship, we’re forever doomed to wade through this muck.”

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Two bodies coursed through space, weightless, straining with desperate limbs against inaction. It was a test of muscle and mettle, the ever-present void choking all notion of warmth from their memories. Upon entering the water, the cold turned to pain, but now the pain became a total lack of sensation.

Where the light penetrated the watery depths, they could see the flat masonry curving into a long, winding, circular tunnel. Xandr and Thelana clung to every mossy niche, searching through eyes burned by the salty sea, for escape, for respite against the

fire in their lungs. Then the aquifer wall receded into the gloom and there was only darkness, and into this darkness they pushed, as though seeking to vanish entirely.

Xandr was uncertain as to whether Emmaxis proved too great a hindrance, but Thelana moved like a creature born of the sea, her arms and legs and torso undulating with graceful unity. He watched her move higher and further away until she disappeared in a cloud of opaqueness. There was nothing around him now, no sound, no sight, no awareness of anything. *Death* could not have been much different. But the sharp throbbing of his will kept him alive and kicking, that, and his burning desire for vengeance.

Out of the pitch blackness, a gray haze came into being, and if what had been prior was much like Death, this was rebirth. Air pained his lungs, but it gave him courage. Thelana was grinning. Without a word he pulled her close, so their thighs brushed together as they kicked to remain afloat, and in each other they found warmth.

Shaking them from idleness, a man-sized fish clawed its way through the water. Rows of unpleasant teeth defined its maw. Its fins were ridged with finger-like bones. It was of no species known to them, but like those prehistoric fossils found in formations of rock. Gelatinous eyes pondered the human visitors, but the creature did not pause its awkward padding, and the wake of its bony tail rippled against their bosoms as it passed.

With some effort Thelana found her voice. Her words came heavily, through clutches of breath. “Over there . . . an opening . . . we can climb.”

No air was wasted on useless prattle. He followed her gaze to the hill of worked stones fallen from the roof, and marveled at her eyes, how they remained bright and fearless.

Shortly they reached the haphazard slope of pyramid, formed of the natural and the manmade. They vaulted from one smooth plateau to the next, until finding sure footing and started to climb. The passage above the aquifer was much like the halls they explored upon entering the temple complex. No water came down from the ceiling, but a putrid mist obscured their vision and offended their nostrils. Vines grew from every crevice, thick as a man's wrist across the floor. They followed the sounds of dashing waves that echoed from afar, over violet poison bulbs with finger-length barbs. Warmth and light steadily increased, until they stood before a precipice where the outer wall of the pyramid was collapsed and the whole of the drowned cityscape spread before them. Somewhere along the adjacent wall, the *Mare Nostrum* was moored. Whether it still remained they could not know.

A sickly fluttering jerked them to alertness. Translucent wings spread the length of Thelana's outstretched arms as she reached for her sword. The jade handle felt smooth in Thelana's palm and she took strength from it. With knees bent and heels raised, a gold blur passed between her and the dragonfly hovering just beyond the broken ledge, splitting its thorax in two, leaving green gobs against her blade. The left wing fell into the deep mist below, the other half at her feet, buzzing the last of its life.

"Just a bug," she murmured.

Xandr stared unremarkably. “Come away, Thelana. Emmaxis hungers for blood that is red.”

The approach did not come as a surprise. At a distance, the sailors watched them clamor over reefs formed from the ebbing tide, over smooth planes of collapsed marble, defying wind and waves. They did not take heart in it, but rather, the belabored confrontation struck the oarsmen with dread. How could the Batal have escaped from the sealed tomb? And so quickly? Where they had betrayed him?

Reversing the course of the *Mare Nostrum* had not been an easy affair. The ship was locked between two towering monoliths, intermittently submerging rooftops, and a tide that threatened to rip the hull to timbers. There had been considerable discussion, consisting of both shouting and name calling, of what was to be done. During this quarrel the Ilmar came into view, like the coming of some ship-wrecking storm. Cambses face coarsened like a burlap sack. It was a look of iron will and consternation, familiar to those who had been at war with him. His gladius gripped at his side, he went out between his men to meet the Batal and his companion.

The way the winds arrayed Xandr’s hair made him look all the more a madman. In his hands, Emmaxis stared back at them, grinning like a living thing.

“There are worse things here than grayquid,” Xandr said to them.

“All you barbarians sicken me,” Cambses shot back. “Thousands fell to my gladius in the Purification Wars. Killing two more will be a simple task.”

Thelana kept her bowstring tight, her eyes like a battle cat in the grass. “War makes monsters of men!”

Twenty-two able crewmen formed behind their captain, shields and spears at the ready. One of them handed his tower shield to Cambses. The red and gold of the Hedonian trident shone dully upon it. “Your savagery is no match for us, Batal. I have seen this time and again on the battlefield. Courage and strength fail against strategy.”

“Listen, one and all: My fight is not with you!” Xandr cried. “Let down your weapons, or join the restless dead that dwell here.”

A bronze spear rang inches from Xandr’s chin, crumpling against Emmaxis broad face, in answer. Another sailor ran across the crumbling floor, putting faith in his plate and long shield. But the skull-faced sword divided him from these accompaniments, and with another stroke, the blood gushed from the man’s open neck as from a broken wellspring. Searching for its missing head, the body stumbled and slipped, and crimson foam tinged the spray of the sea.

“Marcellus!” Cambses shouted, the veins reddening the white of his eyes.

Xandr stood firm as a stone, sword dripping like a newly inked quill. “You would sacrifice all these men, for Frazetta?”

“No Xandr. She holds a temporary seat, for the true emperor, he who will resurrect Hedonia’s greatness!”

“And who would be this emperor, you?”

“If Fate wills it.”

Now Thelana came forward, balanced upon a truncated pillar jutting from the water. “There will be other great empires, fabulous nations, but the age of Hedonia is over! Fate decided this. You cannot undo it.”

“Admittedly, she is a cruel bitch, Fate. But the goddess’ influence can be bent, even broken, through the sheer power of human will.”

“If you would dare such hubris,” Xandr replied, “do not let your men die for you. Prove yourself! Attack me!”

Now Cambses charged like a bull with horns lowered. Hedonian bronze met Ancient alloys, and where the sea pooled about their ankles, they heaved and grunted to toss each other from the narrows. The old captain was wise in the ways of battle, and knew not to contest against Xandr’s long blade. Rather, he forced Emmaxis away with the brunt of his shield, thrusting again and again, the tip of tin and copper grazing the hairs of his adversary’s naked abdomen.

Crouched and barricaded, Thelana launched her arrow, and a Hedonian soldier lurched forward. She released again, and the feathered shaft ricocheted from a stony protrusion—under the shield into a second man's heel. As quickly as he could wince, she was between him, directing his own gladius against his jugular, making him permanent to the ruin.

Long sword, shield, and short sword continued their interplay of clashing and grinding and evasion. Cambses strategy proved flawless. No matter how swiftly Emmaxis came around, the shield was always there. With each escape, Xandr lost ground. Steadily the Hedonian pressed him, to where he could not maneuver, to where he would lose balance and plummet.

“Admit defeat, Batal! There is no way you can beat me!”

The words rang truthfully, but there were many games of strategy. Shifting his heels forward, Xandr attacked headlong. A triumphant grin crossed the other's lips as he tore through naked flesh, but the expression transformed to agony as an elbow loosed the clasp of his chinstrap, freeing the teeth from his mouth. Inside Cambses' defenses, the skull-face glowered, cutting across his shield arm. With a fist through the bridge of his helmet, Xandr sent him sprawling with a nose like a smothered cauliflower. Red streamed from the captain's arm, along the concave of his tower shield, the surge of the sea washing it clean and bleeding it anew. At any moment the Batal could have killed him. But Xandr knew better than to further anger the crew at his command.

"Call off your men!" Xandr cried, his one arm staunching the flow of blood from the gladius made wound in his side.

Cambses glanced around. Another of his men—of his friends—screamed, and where he fell Thelana stood streaked with red. "*Periplous!*" he croaked. "Form of *periplous!*"

Suddenly the Ilmar found themselves corralled, at the center of bristling spear-points.

"Don't lay off, Batal," Cambses said. "Kill me so that my men might take action!"

"No," he replied.

Thelana scowled, batting spears off by the edge of her sword. "Kill him Xandr and let's be done with it!"

Under beaded brows, Xandr watched their eyes, intense, determined, troubled.

“Do not let this disgrace continue!” Cambses rasped. But his men stood motionless, loving him too dearly to take action.

Emmaxis’ tip alighted atop the Hedonian’s throat. “It would seem we are at an impasse. Perhaps an agreement can be reached.”

“You would trust me, after my betrayal?”

“Any other way, we both die, and only your men make it home alive. But still, I wonder, if less than half your crew can row back to Thetis through these waters.”

“We need your strength, now that you’ve slain three more of my men. Killing you before reaching port would not be to our advantage.”

“It is settled, then?” Xandr asked.

“Not quite. For I have one more item with which to barter. Kalokus!”

Down the ramp of the *Mare Nostrum* a man came limping, his shin heavily bandaged. It was he who had been shot by Thelana in the temple. All parted for Kalokus to answer the summons. Between his fingers were the outstretched wings of a raven.

“Not too common around here,” said Cambses. “Ravens.”

Emmaxis shuddered in Xandr’s arms, and he let off the man completely. The crew pressed closer with their spears.

The feathers of the raven expanded, becoming delicate fingertips, no less helpless in the ragged clutches of Kalokus. Among the battle hardened warriors, she was like a child, lost and afraid and shivering. She blinked and peered about, her dark lashes fluttering like a bird's wings. “Xandr,” she murmured. “I’m not . . . I’m nothing to you, the third wheel of a two-wheeled chariot.”

The crash of the waves could not muffle the Batal's frustrated sigh. His steely resolve subsided. Emma had disarmed him.

"An impasse indeed," Cambses goaded, grinning through what blood-soaked teeth remained.

"What would you have me do?" he asked the captain.

"No, Xandr!" Thelana cried. "Listen to Emma. He'll slit our throats in our sleep!"

But the Batal was deaf to her.

"Join my crew, as an oarsman," Cambses went on, "but you will be tied. You will arrive in Thetis a prisoner, and from there, let the magistrates decide your fate."

There was not a murmur to be heard, no sound but the ceaseless, ever-present tumult of the sea. Finally, Xandr let out a horrible wail, like a barbarian chieftain leading men to battle, and with that he hefted Emmaxis to the shoulder, and hurled it at the ship. It sank beneath the *Nostrum's* ram, and the toothy skull became fixed, as part of the prow as any nail. The reaction so dumbfounded the onlookers—even Thelana and Emma—that they simply stood and stared.

"I agree to your terms," Xandr said softly, "but by my sword, by Emmaxis, Blood-Spiller, I do curse the *Mare Nostrum* and its crew! Curse it that it never reach port!"

## Chapter 14

### Tide of Fears

The salt desert spread with the teeming thousands. Gold stallions bucked on the red backdrop of the Nibian banner. The left flank was burnished in studded plate and banded mail. Soon, other groups joined the Nibian cavalry, a ragtag of freemen and mercenaries under the blue fist of Kratos; the blue-skinned, turbaned infantry under the jade moon and scimitar of Abudan; the plume crested hoplies in phalanx formations with their sixteen-foot sarissas oscillating in unison under the bearded god of Thalassar. Lastly, out of Northendell, holding the right flank, the Knights Dragonslayers arrived in gleaming full plate with their red standard of dragon and sword.

Under the Batal's watchful eyes, the assembled armies were as wide and vast as the grasses on the hills of his homeland. All had come to oppose him, the Flower Banner. But it was the sword itself, the true symbol of his justice, against which they were allied.

Already he could feel it, the Sword of Emmaxis, quivering lustily in his mailed palm. "What do they say?" he asked the sea of bitter faces.

The messenger boy cupped his knees with exhaustion, sucking air with his answer. "Your Grace, they will not kneel."

The Batal brushed thumb and forefinger against the rough hairs of his chin, silent.

"Shall I inform the commanders, your Grace?"

“No.” Emmaxis’ teeth glittered in the noon sun, and the boy shuddered before its presence, backing away. “If they will not kneel,” he murmured, almost apologetically, “then they will writhe!”

The sword swung over the precipice across the valley below, and its shadow fell over the assembled armies, and the commanders at his shoulder looked on aghast as the blade caught the sun. The world dimmed. Every color became muted. The Batal regarded the encroaching armies like a swarm of gnats. Emmaxis came around in a violent arc and a great wail rose up from the multitude as the earth trembled and came apart in jagged rifts. Banners toppled; phalanxes fell into disarray; steadfast warriors bent with paralysis, tugging at their helms with dread.

“How did it come to this?” Xandr whispered to himself, and in raising his arm he saw that the hilt was now part of his extended arm, and upon the skull face he glimpsed a reflection of his own awful visage.

Wood splinters grated against his beard and chin. His jaw ached and his teeth felt misaligned. His head, too heavy for his shoulders, came up from the oar clumsily. For how long he sat shivering, he could not guess, nor did he know whether his flesh was prickled because of the dream, or the damp cold and darkness that saturated him.

He was still on the *Mare Nostrum*, still roped to the benches. The sword, which extended like a ghostly part of the ship’s ram, had not been moved from the prow. The crew worked around it, whispering superstitiously, spreading rumor of its origin, predicting miserable fates. On occasion, Xandr would overhear them pleading with the

captain to release their captives, but Cambses remained stubborn as ever, keeping to his quarters, refusing even to take to the oars.

The journey home was fraught with greater misery than their outgoing voyage. The currents resisted their every effort. Nights were stale and frigid, and days were bleak and overcast so that the sunrise went unnoticed. The navigator was unsure as to whether they were even making headway. Murmurs persisted of the curse, due in part to Emmaxis, in which a circular current dragged the ship toward the center of the sea to an island of lost vessels. Xandr did not believe in such nautical lore, but was beginning to believe in the rumors of his own sword. His recent nightmares were no doubt a product of this fear.

Nets brought up little by way of food. There were strangely shaped barbed things and poison-filled sacks with wiry tendrils and hard-shelled critters with many legs and spiny feelers, but all were difficult to chew and offered little meat. In the haze of daylight, silhouettes dwarfed the ship and sank from view like coiling serpents. None dared guess at what they could be or dared to hunt them down. No doubt Warrior, Arrow, and Shadow were divided amongst the crew, or preserved in salt for Cambses' refined palette. Often Xandr wondered about Thelana's appetite, whether she would care for stew made of her own beloved mare.

Rain came in sheets, down and sideways and diagonally, for days on end. The crew was wise to fill their helmets with fresh water, but it was both blessing and curse. Death by thirst was the dread of all sailors: it came unexpectedly and with dementia, but

the gusts that accompanied the storms steered them in unwelcome directions, and the ships' saturated beams groaned underfoot.

Days went uncounted. It was known only that more time passed than on their journey to the ruin, which unnerved the crew. Hunger increased to desperation, and desperation to loss of reason. Oarsmen strutted about wild eyed, muttering openly of fears once spoken in hushed voices. They spoke of the walking dead and grayquid and the lich priest. Irrationality spread about the *Nostrum* like a sickness—the notion that they were dead already, that the realm in which they sailed was not of the living world but a mere illusion of it.

One day, Xandr noticed that the oarsman across from him, Gregory, did not return from his morning meal. He had been of a nervous, talkative sort with a bad infection of the skin. Years ago he had been a slave, Xandr knew, but won freedom as a gladiator in the coliseums of Thetis. After his disappearance, no one spoke of him. It was as if Gregory ceased to exist altogether.

His stomach cramped with emptiness, but Xandr did not fear starvation. Should desperation take hold, no ropes could keep him from devouring an adjacent crewman. But for Thelana, he was in the dark. Too weak to keep with the pace of the oars, she was sent below deck. But what was she fed? How was she treated? In open combat, no man could stand against her, but in the closed quarters of a pentaconter, half starved, how would she fare? He remembered her remarking that thieves did not do well on ships. The same could be said of the Ilmar. Hidden in the shadow of this fear was another. Emma was of Northendell, and her people were of a proud naval tradition. She was more robust

and well dressed than Thelana and perhaps her arcane crafts could sustain them both.

But she was also a high-born urbanite, a lady of letters and etiquette. Why had she persisted in following them through the harsh wilds of Enya? And why had she so readily surrendered her life to Cambses' men?

“ . . . the third wheel of a two-wheeled chariot.”

It was a phantom echo in his ears. He was not blind to her longings. But he had not the strength to shun a friend. Or was it something more? A single memory floated to the surface of his jumbled mind, a night in Northendell, a stolen kiss veiled in raven strands. In starved delirium, he wandered the forbidden avenues of possibility. *If Thelana did not . . .*

*NO!*

He would not permit it. Even to think it was betrayal.

As for Thelana, he never asked, knowing better than to voice his fears. A sign of weakness and Cambses might reconsider his oath, toss him and his companions to the depths.

Day after day, Xandr pulled his oar in silence, revealing only an impossible strength of will. Scraps from the nets were thrown at his feet, and he devoured these readily, and that was his only interaction with his captors.

The dreams continued. In waking hours they lingered, vague fields of ghostly armies, the shapes and colors of their banners muted by the void of the dream world. All he could recall with clarity was the horrid face on the surface of the sword, his own face, and yet not his.

The waters and the wind stilled and hope emerged with moonlight, bathing them in turquoise. With a clear sky, a navigator could find his direction by way of the moons, mark his position by the constellations. But something, a silhouette, was rising up from the shadowy horizon. Xandr's fear turned to the immense aquatic creatures they had seen before, but in nearing, sails took form, and oars. There was the swish of a hundred distant oars breaking the surf and charging against their ship was another twice the Nostrum's height.

CRACK!

The thunderous sound was followed by snapping and ripping. Oars shattered like the bones of a giant. The pentaconter groaned and pitched and Xandr was struck by a cold wave. Oarsmen stumbled out of sleep, swords clutched drunkenly, and from somewhere Cambses was shouting commands. In that same instant, fresh-faced boys in plumed helmets flew across the divide of conjoined ships, spears clutched high. Desperate screams came near and far, the crunch of bronze against bronze; and new blood spilled over old, darkening the fibers of the *Mare Nostrum*.

His wrists were like raw meat, resisting the ropes painfully. "Release me!" he called. "I can fight for you!" But his offer went unheard amid the din of battle and in the shadow of the starboard bow he was forgotten.

It was a pitched melee as violent and desperate as any, yet the flooring shifted to and fro and the battleground was narrow and unforgiving. Bodies and bronze clashed together like netted fish, squirming and thrashing, the occasional blade slipping between limbs to release entrails. Xandr watched men die for want of maneuverability: swords

remained fixed in scabbards, others caught mid-stroke against the mast or railing. There was no quarter for retreat. It was brutal, gruesome, messy. And it was not easy to tell who was fighting whom, and which side, if any, was making headway. Only one stood amongst the crowd. Cambses wallowed in blood like a battle cat amid sheep, and there was a gleam in his eye, a madness induced by the joy of slaughter, of killing that which could bleed.

The herd was now thinning and more bodies lay quietly on deck than were on their feet. At a glance, only the blue plumes remained, their horsehair crests bristling confidently in the gale. The crew of the *Mare Nostrum*: fatigued, hungered, caught unawares, had not fared well. But there was Cambses, adamant as an ox, clearing a bloody circle where he stood, cutting youth like weeds. It was as if he belonged to another crew, one prepared for war. Cambses had come out of the womb with gladius in hand.

The *Nostrum* was secured and the oarsmen coming late to battle swore fealty to their conquerors, all but Cambses, who toyed with his attackers like a teacher his pupils. But the men of the opposing ship could claim to be men loosely, as they trembled at the sight of the dreadful captain of the *Mare Nostrum*.

It was then that she appeared. Her lithe shape and purposeful gait reminded Xandr of Thelana. She was a ruddy hue in the torchlight, her hair knotted the color of redwood under a gem-studded scarf of leafy green. She wore a laced leather jerkin and boots with stiletto heels that clacked at her approach. Her eyes shone like dull gold, resolute and impassive.

“Stand back!” she commanded in an accent strange to Xandr’s ears. Before Cambses she stood like a mother over an unruly son, though she looked young enough to be his.

“Arinna,” he grunted, shaking bloody clots from his blade. “I should have known.”

“Give me the scrolls, Cambses,” she said without blinking.

He grinned through red-stained teeth. “They don’t belong to you.”

“They belong to the faithful.”

“First I’m goin’ to cut you open with my sword, then I’m goin’ to cut you open with my cock, and then I’m goin’ to take that fine trireme of yours. And if you survive me, I’ll have my men have a go at you.” And he spit a tooth at her pointed toe.

She showed no fear, turning and raising a slender wrist. A silver line suggested a blade. It nearly split his nose as she brandished it, and Xandr noted the curved edge, no thicker than a thumb, and the red tassel dangling from its pommel.

There was an explosion of frantic arms and jumbled steps. Arinna’s waif-thin sword flopped and bent and split the air with an ear-piercing whine, its tassel snapping this way and that. She handled it on her fingertips, without ever touching Cambses’ gladius or armor. But the encounter was short lived. The Hedonian stumbled drunkenly against her, pinning her sword in the pit of his arm. At her heels the waters threatened. She recoiled. He gloated over her, forcing her between the oar port and his knees.

“That was disappointing,” he spat. “The mighty Arinna, Captain of the Guard. I’d heard rumors. I suppose they weren’t true.”

Her steel bit the floor dividing them. “I am not you, Cambses, not an oaf that stumbles about flailing futilely. I am like the black widow; I ensnare.”

“Hold that tongue, bitch, lest I cut it out! Or put it to better use . . .”

A smile crept along her face. “Do you know why I call my saif *Inner Spirit*?”

His gladius came up, speckling her with slaughter. “Your sword? What are you babbling now b—”

From Xandr’s viewpoint, Cambses jerked upright, and with a chilling, almost womanly shriek, the straps about his sandals darkened to crimson. Arinna pulled the needle-thin dagger from his scrotum and pushed him aside, as though he were a mere canvas of himself, neatly fitting the blade into the handle of her saif. The gladius tipped into the sea and Cambses fell away with it.

## Chapter 15

### The Trident

“Don’t ever leave me again.” Thelana’s cheek pressed between the scarred clefts of his torso. He longed to take her, to feel her soft hair between his fingers, but new manacles weighted his wrists.

“It was the only way.”

“Perhaps,” she said, watching him as if he might vanish. “They wouldn’t let me see you and we were so long on that damned ship! I didn’t even know if you were alive.”

*The Trident* was much larger and better furnished than the *Nostrum*. The cedar framework was sanded to a golden sheen and a pentagonal brassiere swung to the rhythm of the sea, showcasing the interplay of shadows and firelight. In the far corner, Emma sat in the folds of her robes like a bundle of laundry, humming faintly. She was becoming more willowy by the day, her cheekbones white and knobby about her raven-shaped eyes. Like a cat with a ball of yarn, she batted the hanging brassier, its faint glow making her all the more ghostly. When she did lift her head to Xandr or Thelana, something more fascinating caught her eye just beyond the doorway.

“How did they treat you?” he asked Thelana, clenching his fists as if he could reach into the past and attack it. “Were you fed?”

Thelana looked tamed to Xandr’s eyes, like a broken horse, her heels sagging lazily to the floor, her voice having lost its edge. She was not the feral woman he knew.

“Whatever scraps they tossed us,” she answered at last. “But Emma, she’s had nothing since we launched. She just sits, humming that same blasted tune.”

“I don’t need food.” It came from the corner, a meager impression of the sorceress’ voice. “All I need is music. Can’t you see the music?”

Concern creased Thelana’s brow, and Xandr became aware of her aging. Time was breaking them all down. “You see? She’s been like that for days . . . muttering nonsense.”

He took Thelana’s hand in his. Emma cast them a sidelong glance, bitter and woeful. “Did you have any of the horsemeat?” he inquired.

“Horsemeat? What horsemeat?”

“Ours, Thelana,” he stressed. “Arrow, Warrior . . . Shadow?”

“No,” she replied. “They’re alive.”

His mind reeled. How long had they been from the Port of Thetis? “But . . . we’ve been starved!”

“The walls were thin on the *Nostrum*,” she started with some effort. “And you know my keen ears. I heard Cambses, drunk and raving in his quarters. The men begged to slaughter the horses, but he kept saying; ‘They’re my prize! Go catch fish, you lazy dogs!’ I suppose he planned to sell them. Honestly, Xandr, how long did you think we were on that wreck? Three horses would feed forty crewmen for a cycle.

“Xandr,” she murmured, her tone shifting with urgency, “who are these people? Where are we going now?”

“Not Thetis,” he replied. “Of that we can be certain.”

“What happened up there? What did you see?”

He tugged at his chains. They grew taut and slack again with a metallic chime. The desire to embrace her was like a wound festering in his bosom. “We were rammed,” he said absently. “Soldiers came over from this ship, and there was a . . . a struggle; our men, the Thetis men,” he corrected, “did not fare well.”

“And Cambses?”

“Gone,” he answered. “A woman came, and—”

“Is he taken prisoner?”

“No. If he lives, it is by the grace of Sargon.”

“What happened to him?”

“Let’s just say he won’t be patronizing any brothels anymore.”

There was a rusty click and the sound of a bolt separating and the door swayed open. A boyish face appeared, framed in the opening, a fresh gash running the diagonal of his cheek. “The Captain will see you. Just you, Batal.”

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The *Mare Nostrum* was put to the torch. It drifted through the darkness like a wraith of fire. About its hull the waters shone in golden ripples and as its beams blackened and crumbled to ash, the creak of timbers and the sloshing of the waters and the roar of the flames were like the death throes of some ancient dragon. It was a truly

pitiable sound. When, finally, the ship diminished to a yellow glow, Xandr lamented its passing, though he could not tell why.

The sky was azure velvet studded with diamonds. Every god presided over the night: the horned head of Skullgrin, the spread wings of Alashiya, the tri-starred trident of Sargon, and the terrible spinster that was Fate with her loom. Beneath this heavenly tapestry, amid the soft roll of white glittering waters, the ship rocked. The bow of *The Trident* was more than three times the length of the *Nostrum*. Arinna sat on a rectangle of rich patterns before the prow. The soldiers led Xandr forward. She commanded they depart and they obeyed, leaving the *Batal* alone with the captain. Then a young boy clad in embroidered silks tiptoed over to them, lifting a conical lid from a red baked pot. The sweet and salty aroma arrested Xandr's senses, making him painfully aware of his hunger.

"It's *tajinne*, a delicacy in Thalassar," she said. The coins adorning her forehead jingled as she moved. "Lamb that cuts like butter. Please, don't be shy. It's not poisoned."

The meat was neatly diced, simmering among prunes and olives. "I didn't think it was." His manacled hand reached clumsily for the the plate.

"Don't eat quickly. Your stomach will reject whatever you put in it too quickly."

He nodded, savoring the salty mix of spices, each mouthful falling into his stomach like a stone in a hollow well. Hunger precedes all things, he hazily remembered his teacher saying. "I am grateful."

Her smile added to her beauty. "It's seasoned and sealed in ceramic, then cooked for over a day in hot embers."

Hesitantly, the servant boy returned, a tray of polished silver rattling between his nervous fingers. Tiny steaming cups were set between them, emitting a powerful minty scent. He lifted the cup into the light, admiring the jade coloring, the fine gold pattern etched into the glass.

“You are in luck,” she said, handling the ornate teapot. “You do drink tea, don’t you?”

He nodded. A pale of water from a mastodon’s mud-hole would have sounded good about now.

“The mint that grows on the Oukamiden is the finest in the world.” She lifted the pot in both hands and poured from as high as her arms could reach, without missing a drop. “But the trick to really fine tea is letting it breathe.”

The minty liquid scalded him as he tipped the glass to his lips, but the flavor and the scent was worth the pain. “This place you speak of . . . is it part of Thalassar?”

She sat quite a while, contemplating a star, before answering. “It is now.”

“And you are a . . . a captain of Thalassar?”

“The Captain of the Guard, second only to the governor.”

He looked at his chains again, eyeing her with suspicion. “It is not often that a captive is offered such . . . hospitality.”

“Hospitality is central to the life of my people.”

“The people of Thalassar?”

“No. My people. The city is a hodgepodge of cultures, of displaced peoples, conquered . . . vanished peoples . . . I am a Verbeer, of the Oukamiden Mountains. Besides, you are not a captive.”

“Then why am I in chains?”

“Because I must know who you are . . . you were Cambses’ prisoner. My enemies’ enemy is my friend. But were you his enemy or the last of some brigands that tried to raid him? I cannot say why he would have brought you to the ruins if not to help in some way. But you do not look Hedonian.”

“What of the *Nostrum* and its crew? Did you slaughter them?”

“No. All who survived the battle are prisoners. And yes, the scrolls and the relic are aboard, as is . . . the sword. Would you know anything about that?”

“You have it?” he exclaimed, catching his eagerness in his throat. “It is . . . special to me.”

“Cursed, more like. It cut halfway through the hand of the man who tried to retrieve it, and cut off another of my men’s finger . . . We had to wrap it in a tarp to avoid more accidents.”

“It belongs to me,” he replied. “It doesn’t like to be touched by anyone else.”

She rested on an elbow, studying him as if painting a portrait. “Who are you?”

“I am Xandr, the Batal, of Ilmarinen.”

“Is that so?” she said disapprovingly.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I happen to know for a certainty that all the Ilmar are dead.”

The comment struck him like a fist and Xandr felt his appetite wane. “H-How would you know this?”

“If you are who you say, convince me, and I’ll set you free. But I warn you, stray from the truth, and you and your friends shall swim back to Thetis or wherever it is you would go.”

All he could do was dig his fingernails into his palms and glare at the image of Alashiya above him, her falcon form patterned in blue flickering stars. “Listen, Captain, hospitality or no, I’ve not the patience for this. You cannot imagine what horrors we’ve endured! My companions are in need of food and—”

“Thelana and Emmalina? They’ve been taken care of, I assure you. Now tell me.”

“What would you have me say? And what would you know of my people?”

“I know that your people don’t wear clothes . . .” she said, hinting disdain.

“And in this you find fault?”

“If you must know, I think Ilmarin practices crude. Perhaps at one time, even my people, all people, behaved as you do, but humanity has moved forward. Is it any wonder that you and Thelana are the last of your kind? You are a dying breed, Xandr, as are your ideas.”

“You condemn us as though you know us,” he replied. “What is the point of this?”

She lied across her side, letting the turquoise moon accentuate her hips. “Call it my form of interrogation. Now tell me, what do you have to say to one who challenges your traditions?” But he did not take the bait. He sat quietly, eating quietly, and so she prodded him. “People need clothes. We aren’t beasts.”

“Indeed,” he answered. “Beasts do not engage in the kind of mass slaughter that we call war, or torture those of its kind that differ in some tenet of belief. So in this we are agreed. Animals we are not, though we might aspire to be so.”

Lesser people had been stunned by the kind of insightful answers given by the barbarian. But she remained unfazed. “All right, Xandr, all that may be true. But mankind has brought about as much good as it has evil. Art, for instance. Animals cannot create, or imagine . . . they simply are. What good is that? Do you propose we abandon writing, painting, and sculpting, so that we might revert to scavenging and hunting? Do you prefer a man expire of some illness, or become food for some predator, without leaving any mark of his uniqueness?”

“Your wit is as sharp as your sword. Art is a divine gift, truly, and it almost makes humanity worthwhile. But how does your argument denigrate the Ilmar?”

“Because you are nihilistic. You reject the most basic qualities of humanity. People need—want—to adorn themselves. People need individuality. Clothing does not serve merely to protect against weather or to restrain lust. It is a mark of culture as a whole, the textiles produced by its seamstresses, the colors and patterns chosen by its citizens, the entire pageantry of fashion and style; it is art. But you restrict your communes to conformity, nobody looking any different, just the same naked body from one day to the next.”

Xandr was perplexed. He had not the strength for argument, and could not imagine what his captor would have cared for an extinct culture. Nor had he ever

matched words with such a foe. Ultimately, he found himself rebutting, rather feebly, “We do not prohibit clothing, Arinna. We choose the freedom to be without.”

“Well, of course you do, your people have been sheltered from the outside world. Since the Ilmar were brought into the open, they’ve abandoned their primitive habits. Who does not wish to hide his ugliness in fine woven fabric?”

“Wait, why do you speak of ugliness?”

“Admit it, Xandr; most men aren’t made as perfectly as you. Long ago, humans gazed in still waters and recognized their own ugliness.”

“But . . .” he muttered, “no one is truly ugly. How can you believe that? To the Ilmar, nothing is more beautiful, or sacred, than the unclad body.”

She swallowed a laugh. “You’re joking.”

“I have never been known for humor,” he admitted. “And you are greatly mistaken about the Ilmar. We are patrons of art, and our love of the human form attests to it. Fine fabrics and jewelry are cherished in our culture as well. But what is the shoe compared to the foot? Or the bracelet to the hand? How more noble in craft is every sinew and vein . . . How flawless in design is each organ? We are not meant to shun our own bodies, but to draw inspiration from it. That is the highest art man can achieve.”

“You may be inspired by the sight of some fair maidens, perhaps,” she replied with a wicked grin.

“It is a great evil that men should pervert the human form to something shameful, to elicit our basest instincts.”

“Come now, Xandr, you mean to tell me that your pulse does not quicken, or your phallus swell, at some wench without clothing? Clothing which can only impede the seizing of her?”

“I command myself, through reason, not instinct. That is what makes one human.”

“You would refuse me then, here and now?” she asked, as she slowly loosed the laces of her jerkin.

He studied her for a moment. She was so much like Thelana, but softer, less scarred, having known less of the sun. “You are beautiful, Arinna,” he admitted. “Woman is the fairest of all creatures.”

“Enough,” she said. “Only a true Ilmarin could speak as you do.” She motioned toward him and he noticed the key between her breasts. Yet he pulled away, tugging at his chains with a growl, until the manacles separated from his wrists, rattling loosely against the deck.

She slipped hard against her chin, astonished. “Y-You could have done that all this time, yet chose not to? Why?”

“You were testing me,” he said, rubbing the soreness from his wrists, “and I you.”

“To what end?”

“The same as yours, to decide where my allegiances lie, with Thetis or Thalassar. Do you believe the Ilmar and the Verbeer so different?”

“No,” she said quietly, “we are more alike than you know.” Her dull gold eyes searched the sky for gods invisible to him. One star shone brightest, and at this she fixed

her gaze, and spoke. “We were a peaceful people . . . once . . . high in the Oukamiden, between Hedonia to the west and Nibia to the east. I was a shepherd in my other life. My sheep grazed the single winding road that ran from plains red and rocky as the Dead Zones to peaks white as the Pewter Mountains, through green terraced fields and homes built into the cliff face. Ours was a vertical world; we climbed as you might walk. My home was near the peaks, where snow melted and dashed against stacked boulders to become the river far beneath. We had no knowledge of the outside, until he came . . .”

“Cambses?”

“Yes,” she admitted. “We were just a stain on his map, another name to be added to his log of glorious campaigns. Before we understood what had happened, we were a colony of Hedonia. It was not their swords and spears that defeated us; it was the markets, and the new gods, and the new temples. Our ways were deemed crude, simple, but they were our ways. We could have resisted. The Oukamiden Mountains are too high, too remote for any empire to hold for long. But my people brought doom upon themselves, by buying and selling and trading, moving down into the cities. I’d never seen level ground before I was sixteen.”

“At least you kept some traditions,” he replied. “Your hospitality, your food, that sword of yours.”

In a single swipe she unsheathed it from behind her. At an instant she might have opened his throat. The flat of the blade, disappearing on edge, glimmered with silver leaves and flowery patterns. Red, corded silk draped from its minaret-shaped pommel.

“Yes, we have a saying, ‘you can remove the girl from the mountain, but never the mountain from the girl.’”

Charred onions and two morsels of tajinne were all that remained in the ceramic. His stomach ached for the last of it, but etiquette swayed his hand. “What is that star you keep looking at?” he asked finally.

“It is not a star,” she answered. “It is the famed lighthouse of Thalassar. By morning, we will have arrived.”

## Post Script:

Thus ends *The City of the Drowned*. It was at this point in the writing that a review for *The Dark Age of Enya* hit the Internet, which was very critical. Armchair critics jumped all over the "let's hate Nick" bandwagon, despite the fact that none of them, save for one reviewer, had actually read my book. The disappointment was soul crushing, and I made the decision to throw out everything and start over, including this work-in-progress sequel, of which this story is a part.

It's hard to believe that was six years ago (2006). Looking back now, I feel I may have overreacted. The review wasn't even that bad (5 out of 10), and other critics, two from naturist magazines, were overwhelmingly positive. I suspect, also, that the Sci-Fi web reviewer only read the first three pages, as his comments only referenced the prologue.

I feel *The Dark Age of Enya* is on par with Edgar Rice Burroughs' *John Carter* series and Robert E. Howard's *Conan*. Tim Forcer of *H&E Magazine* was even so kind as to compare me to Homer. This is the style of writing I grew up with and adore. My thinking has always been, *If Burroughs and Howard and Homer can write this way, why can't I?* Six years and 48 novels later, and I have come to realize that fiction is an ever evolving thing, that over time, new trends and expectations develop, and that you have to evolve along with them. While rewriting *Enya* may not have been necessary, I am glad I did it. The rewrite is richer in character, deeper in its exploration of social and literary themes, more layered in its story and more nuanced in its style.

So where does this leave the original novel's sequel, *The City of the Drowned*? I can't really say. It's an odd duck, a literary fish out of water, a snapshot from an alternative universe. The first chapters set up quite a bit of plot points that are never fully explored. You may be wondering, for instance, what happens to the magic healing jewel Xandr was given? Or what happens to Emma with her impossible love for Xandr and that gypsy crone's dire predictions? What about the civil war between Thetis and Thalassar? Who the heck is Arinna? And more importantly, what does Xandr's nightmare signify? Is it possible our hero becomes a tyrant? I planned to explore all of this in *The Dark Age of Enya 2*, but sadly, lack of interest from agents, publishers and web reviewers prevented it, and crazily enough, that's a good thing. The hazing process has given me a tougher skin, and with each new rejection, I continue to improve as a writer.

Years from now, I will return to this story. The form it will take I cannot say. One thing is certain though, I'll be getting rid of those damned horses. What the heck was I smoking when I decided to write *a nautical adventure with horses*? See? You write and you learn. But Xandr and Thelana and Emma will return, in one form or another.

The fabled lighthouse of Thalassar awaits . . .