

# A KNIGHT'S APPEAL TO A QUEEN

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The boat rocked up against the glittering shore, drifting idly with the waves until Hektor, wading through the water, began to push it up onto the sand. He chose not to look back at the ship behind him that sat against the horizon like a great eyesore. For all their boasting and bragging, none had chosen to accompany him to shore, content to continue their drinking and gambling onboard the ship. But it mattered little because just up the beach was the treeline, and he could hear not far away, the sound of voices.

He secured his sword to his belt, dragging it up and out of the boat along with his shield. Hektor knew he wouldn't be using it but perhaps its crest would do something in the way of an advantage. He crossed the beach and scrambled up a small slope towards the treeline. He went slowly, not wishing to raise any alarms by crashing through the underbrush but as he entered the wood, he knew that there were eyes on him. His hands did not go to his sword, he had been trained better than that. Instead, he pretended not to notice the snapping of branches and the great sound of beating wings above him.

It was only when a deep, caustic scream filled the air to his left that his uneasiness got the better of him and he whirled around just in time to see a pretty face curled into a sharp snarl.

"Human," she spat, "you trespass in the territory of Charisma, the God Queen. Leave, and take that stench of blood and death with you."

She was perched high above him, amongst the branches of a great tree. Hektor could see nought but her face, her feathers dark and blending with the shadows cast by the foliage.

"My lady, had I the chance, I would have announced myself, but I saw no one on the shore and indeed none at all until you. I am a knight of King Geta and the court of Multitudes"

"A fool in the service of a killer. I will tell you again, begone from this place, lest I tear your eyes from your skull."

If the anticipation in her eyes was anything to go by, Hektor was confident that she would do it, and enjoy it too. But he could only shake his head and stand his ground.

"I *must* speak to your Queen."

"You will die first."

"I mean you no harm."

But it was not enough to assuage her. Her body uncurled from where she sat on the branches above and Hektor was struck, only for a moment, at her height. She did not dive at him, as he had expected, but instead fixed him with one last burning glare before taking off, the sound of her great wings echoing through the trees even as she let out a long, bellowing shriek.

Hektor watched her form disappear over the tree tops southward, no doubt to warn her comrades of his approach. He could go back; this journey had already taken far longer than he had expected and certainly there were others from whom he could get the information he needed. But no; no, he had his orders. So he started south, the harpy now nothing but a dark shape against the sky and even then, somewhere along that long strip of blue, she vanished back down into the trees.

Lush, green grass crunched under his boots and all around him the world abounded in noise. Bird song and the rush of water, wind rustling through broad leaves and the steady gait of wild game as it moved through the undergrowth. It struck Hektor that the world here went on with no fear of consequence, and with a confidence so unlike the lifeless, cowering air of the capital.

These thoughts all were fluttering through his mind as he came upon a large set of broken doors bracketed by great crumbling stone walls. A castle, long since fallen to ruin. He approached, suddenly cautious, and upon reaching the doors, he heard the sound of voices ringing out from inside. One, frantic and angry, was familiar.

He took a breath, willing his hand away from the hilt of his sword, and leaving his shield propped against the remains of the shattered door. He took a step, then another, and continued, without thought, into the court of the God Queen.

The chatter quieted some as he entered, and what remained was hushed, furtive whispers, the familiar sound of courtiers in the midst of gossip. The sentry he had seen in the woods was perched atop what was left of a high back wall built around a great stained glass window, and beside her on either side, were the most magnificent figures Hektor had ever seen.

Bigger, perhaps, than he had expected, and broad; these were no garden songbirds, for they stood as tall as he himself, from what he could see. Their necks extended down and around as they spoke to one another, and their faces - well, what could he say? They were beautiful.

His eyes followed the long line of their throats, from the fine dusting of down beneath strong jaws to the full plumes of their chests and - his eyes snapped shut, though he could already feel the heat of a blush at his cheeks. When he dared to look again, it was only to find himself, quite unintentionally, entirely charmed.

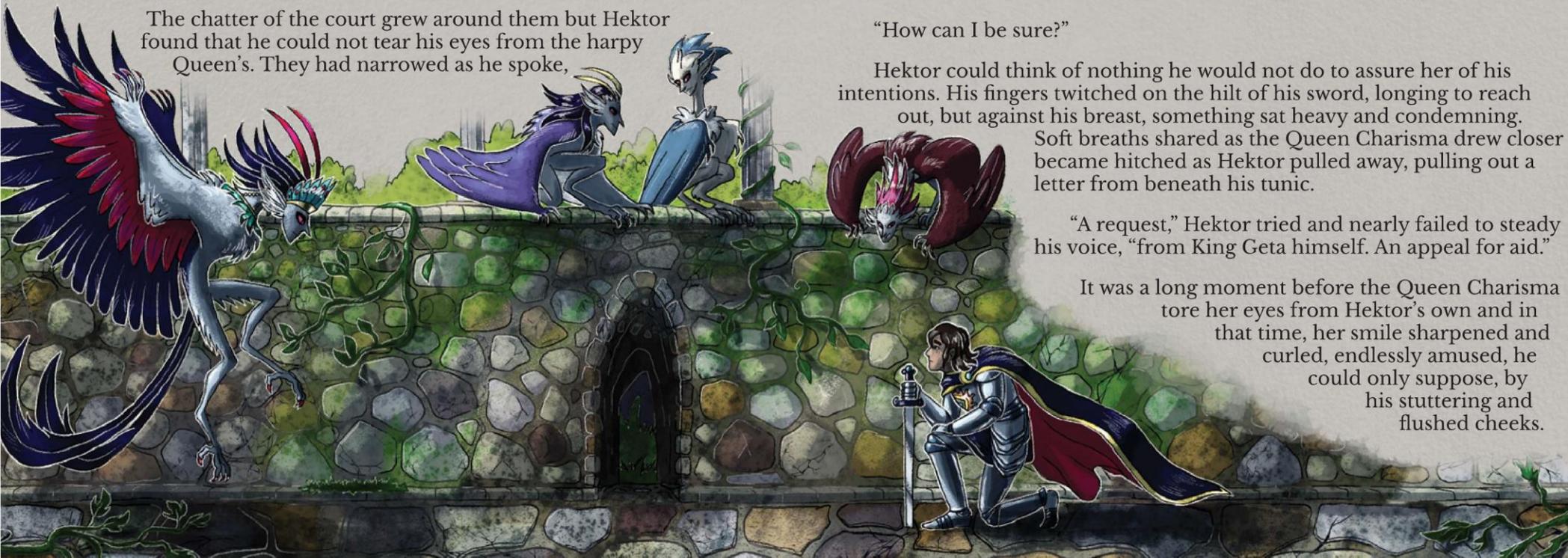
A handsome face, a sharp grin, and quick eyes that snapped and narrowed restlessly as they scanned the open area. Her headpiece was tall and intricate, a crown that certainly declared her sovereignty but in truth, Hektor would have known she was a queen without it. He had only to look at her.

“Human,” the vitriol of the word snapped him from his reverie, “I gave you fair warning.”

The sentry had taken the place beside the Queen Charisma and was glaring down at him, her lips pulled back over sharp teeth. Hektor let his eyes drift to her. The last thing he wanted was to cause a scene, not with a member of this court and not when he had traveled so far. So, he slowly lowered himself to one knee and, in a show of humility, held his sword blade lowered before him.

“Your majesty,” he began, keeping his eyes on her even as the sentry bristled at the dismissal beside her, “I beg your forgiveness; it was not my intention to come to you uninvited. But there is a matter most urgent, of which I must be allowed to speak with you.”

The chatter of the court grew around them but Hektor found that he could not tear his eyes from the harpy Queen's. They had narrowed as he spoke,



and her smile was long and sly, too full of sharp teeth. He had the feeling that perhaps this would not be so simple as he thought.

“You ask for much, Sir Knight, and we having not even been made acquainted. My forgiveness and an audience in one breath, how presumptuous.”

“My lady-”

“Desdemona believes you are here to kill me. She believes you to be an assassin.”

“They are all of them nothing but pretty butchers,” the sentry snarled; Desdemona.

Hektor listened to their heckling, the jeering of the harpies around him. Their queen laughed along with them and after a moment, took flight, the strength of her great wings blowing back the trees beyond the ruined walls. She alighted with grace before him and stood a good foot taller, kneeling as he was. The great God Queen Charisma stared down at Hektor and he, in turn, stared up through his lashes.

“Are you here to kill me, butcher knight?” she asked with a knowing smile.

“No.” The word was no more than a breath that hung in the air between them.

“How can I be sure?”

Hektor could think of nothing he would not do to assure her of his intentions. His fingers twitched on the hilt of his sword, longing to reach out, but against his breast, something sat heavy and condemning. Soft breaths shared as the Queen Charisma drew closer became hitched as Hektor pulled away, pulling out a letter from beneath his tunic.

“A request,” Hektor tried and nearly failed to steady his voice, “from King Geta himself. An appeal for aid.”

It was a long moment before the Queen Charisma tore her eyes from Hektor's own and in that time, her smile sharpened and curled, endlessly amused, he could only suppose, by his stuttering and flushed cheeks.

Long talons reached out and, with the grace and ease of water, took the letter from his hand. There was a moment where her claws, sharper than any blade he had ever beheld, drifted over his open palm, leaving in their wake a thin trail of blood and broken skin. Hektor's breath became sharp. The Queen Charisma was quick with her claws; the letter open and held in one talon before her as she balanced on the other. The hall was silent save for the soft rustling of the trees beyond.

And then, after a moment, she began to laugh. It was a cruel thing, sharp and fully belied and mocking. Hektor could see the grins spreading between the harpies above, delighting in the amusement of their queen.

"Foolish butcher!" she cried through her cackle, "Your precious king has sent you to your death!"

Her laughter rose higher, joined now by the joyous roar of her retinue. Hektor could feel the sneer twisting at his lips and he fought back the urge to snap at her, as he had all the others who had cast doubt on him. The Queen Charisma continued her jeering:

"You would not make it past the shore of bone, let alone The Woods. Turn back, little knight, and save your skin."

Hektor ground his teeth.

"My lady, if you know not the way, I will take my quest elsewhere. I would not trespass upon your kindness any more than I must."

He reached out to take the letter back from her, only to have it snatched away. Her claws came at him then, in full force, shoving against him and laying him out flat in the dirt beneath her. She stood upon his chest, her talons digging into his skin like daggers, and stared down at him, regarding him, not with anger, but with a keen interest.

The harpies around them had all gone quiet and indeed it was some time before the queen herself spoke again.

"I know the way."

Hektor let out a long breath, "Would you show me?"

"It is difficult," she said, her voice low in warning, "You *will* die."

"I will not."

Another moment passed between them before the Queen Charisma leant down, her face mere inches from his own, their lips near brushing.

"We shall see. Come, pretty fool. It seems there is much to discuss."