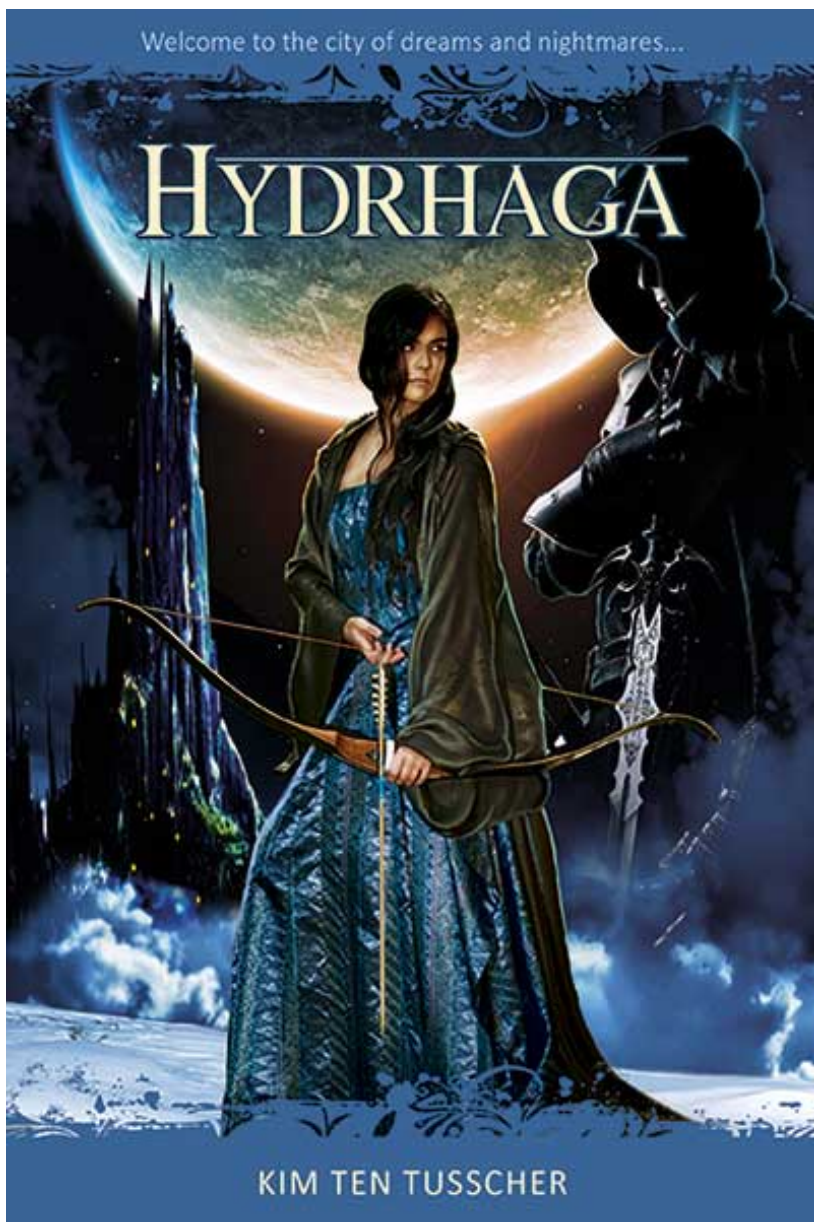


READING SAMPLE



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Hydrhaga

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Prologue

Centuries ago, the city was still called Arminath. No sign of the war between elves and men yet marred the city. It was a peaceful time, in which the elves had the chance to develop their talents.

Elvish architecture closely resembled the natural environment and it served to camouflage the city from the eyes of strangers. To the outside world, Arminath looked like a hill overgrown with trees. On closer inspection, however, the buildings of the elves could be discerned, spiraling from the boughs on high, down to the ground below. The center of the city was hidden from view by a circle of high birch. White and green marble had been skilfully carved into the likenesses of trees, each bent to form the graceful arch of our city gates.

Inside a ring of tall, living birch, structures towered above the surrounding treetops. While the elves were unable to fully disguise these buildings as natural formations, their great artistic flair and love of nature was still evident upon them. Finely-wrought latticeworks served as the walls, ushering the outside world into the interior of the buildings. Such was the skill of the craftsmen that these lattices seemed less like handmade artifice and more akin to flowering tendrils and vines that draped the buildings. The roofs of the houses were shaped like flower buds and were made from a yellow material that shone in the sun. Because of the organic nature of the architecture, not one building in Arminath was exactly alike. Flowering shrubs and bushes sweetened the air with scented perfumes, and at the intersection of every street there were bubbling fountains. The city was split in half by the river, which flowed through its heart and irrigated its soil.

This was my town. My whole life has been dedicated to the elves, with my wealth allowing the realization of my vision for Arminath, much to the satisfaction of its inhabitants. During this time they accumulated ever more wealth and knowledge. Due to my own reforms, science was lifted to a higher level. I introduced the guilds and each masterpiece they

manufactured was proof of our artisans' masterful talents. During that peaceful time we mostly made luxury goods, such as silver brooches or gold bracelets and glittering tiaras. Weavers produced supple fabrics with complicated patterns, which the tailors then fashioned into glorious attire. Even though they severely limited movement, these clothes provided an unparalleled silhouette, and they were designed primarily for the many feasts that made life in Arminath even more pleasant. In everyday life we wore simpler clothing, though no less ornate in detail.

That is how my future should have been, living without a care in the luxuries Arminath offered. Together, with my beloved, I wanted to enjoy all that I had achieved, while the elves were held in high esteem near and far.

Unfortunately, I had not foreseen that the many riches I gave to my people had a downside. Arminath was theoretically accessible to everyone, and yet no other race than the elves lived there. Humans only rarely showed themselves in the center, much to the increasing satisfaction of the elves. Our preference for beautifully-crafted items slowly changed into vanity, which made us feel even more superior. We saw the humans as lesser beings, and instead of feeling compassion for them we emphasized our superiority by arrogantly looking down upon them.

This attitude was not wholly unfounded. The humans that lived in small villages close to our city shamelessly lived like fleas off of our society. They greedily collected the items we carelessly threw away, resulting in a blooming trade of castaway elven goods with distant tribes, bringing great wealth for the humans living in the shadow of Arminath.

I did not see much harm in it, at first. It was a simple form of charity, allowing the humans to create a better existence for themselves, but many of the elves disagreed and despite repeated pleas for more compassion with the humans my words fell upon the ears of the deaf. Of course the humans did not have the means of survival without our people, but more and more elves could not bear their profiteering from an aspect of our society that we would have rather forgotten. Before long, contempt changed to disgust, and nobody bothered to hide it. Whenever a man or a woman dared enter the city, they were avoided on the streets like lepers. We turned our backs on them, and the negative tone was clear when the elves spoke of humans.

Naturally, the humans reacted in kind. They did not feel inferior to us at

all; to them it was a sign that we lacked wisdom while we indulged upon and wasted such riches. In return for our derision, they treated us as we had them. Very soon, villages near Arminath adopted the same sneering tone that marked our speech when dealing with humans. We discredited and slandered each other; every offense met in kind by the opposite faction and were soon embroiled in a downward spiral of prejudice.

Unfortunately, I seemed to be the only one who noticed the situation as it steadily deteriorated, and as tensions rose, distrust heated to outright hatred. By then, it was too late for anyone to stop it. The elves closed Arminath to the humans and nobody dared venture outside of the city's birch walls without protection.

The final spark that ignited the fury within the hearts of the elves was the burning of the richly-embroidered banners that flew outside of the elven council house. While there were no witnesses to the crime, the humans were blamed for this most recent display of hostility.

Nobody discarded their unwanted goods any more, and the human economy quickly collapsed. It was obvious now that we had been right, that the humans could not survive on their own when they could no longer lean on the crutch of elven society. Their riches quickly evaporated as hunger and poverty spread through the villages. Instead of showing remorse about their condescending attitudes towards the elves, the emptiness in the humans' stomachs only increased their hatred of our fair race.

I can only guess at what happened that one night, but it led us all beyond the point of no return. A few humans had been drinking in one of their many taverns, while in their cups the conversation must have turned more and more often to the elves and their pompous attitudes. I can picture it now: someone taking the floor and stirring up the others with a rousing speech while everyone listened to an ever-increasing list of crimes that were laid at the feet of my people. Perhaps only a few people react to the words at first, when the man was silent long enough to take a swig of ale from his tankard, but by the end of the evening, when the beer had flowed in abundance, the men and women would cry out in agreement, punctuating each sentence spoken by the drunken demagogue with a cheer of their own. As they egged each other on, the accusations grew worse. The atmosphere in the tavern must have bristled with unfounded anger and evil plans.

Unfortunately, an elvish woman was forced to leave the city that night. To her misfortune, she chanced upon the mob of drunken men. Incited by the talk in the tavern, steeped in alcohol as they were, they ravaged the woman. We found her maimed body the next morning, hanged from one of the new banners decorating the council house.

What the humans had done to her was horrifying. It gave witness to the barbarity of their race, and our smugness felt justified. A group of elves, incensed and in haste, went to the human villages seeking justice and a slake to their thirst for vengeance. They were unkind in their search. Their anger seethed, and in their quest for information they mishandled the humans. For all of their inquisitions, the elves found only grim silence. The culprits were never caught.

I do not believe the humans approved of what their own men had done to the poor woman, but our own rash acts only made the situation more untenable. The villagers ended up protecting the culprits and part of the blame for the whole mess was put on our doorstep. After all, we had taunted them with our contempt and now we raged violently through their villages. Under the cover of darkness, the humans struck back and Arminath's isolation increased. Repeated retaliations from both parties fanned the flames of revenge and both races suffered.

And so things went for a time, until one day the humans decided that the situation could no longer continue. They sent a group of men and women to Arminath to negotiate; these messengers were unarmed and carried with them a white flag. Suspicion and paranoia, however, had taken possession of the elves to such an extent that nobody could or would believe that these men really wanted peace.

I knew we were about to make a capital mistake, but I was powerless to prevent it. For hours I pleaded to the Senate, but my words came too late and in the end my attempt at reason was in vain. From the tower of the council house the humans were shot down by arrows, before they could even make their motives for the visit known. Of course, this further stirred up the anger that the humans felt towards us and they formed an army. Humans from outlying regions came to aid their brethren who dwelt in the villages. Full of disbelief and indignation, we witnessed the proceedings and hurriedly readied an army of our own. After years of veiled tensions,

the siege of Arminath was a fact.

The bloody war dragged on for more than a year, in which the elves were forced to acknowledge the humans as their superiors. It appeared that I had made another mistake, one which cost our race dearly. Our armors were beautiful, artfully crafted and fluted with designs that declared our superiority to all who chanced to gaze at them, but on my orders the masters of the blacksmith's guild had spent less and less time refining the key function of any article of war; to protect the bearer and defeat the enemy. Our armor was too thin to effectively protect the wearer, and as we had not waged war in a long time, we had thus neglected to forge new swords. In our arrogance, we presumed that none would dare attack us, the greatest of races. Our old blades proved serviceable, but there were not enough to equip a whole army.

As time went on, the fighting became more grim. Men were hanged at the gates as a warning to the humans not to enter our city. Elvish women found the heads of their husbands on their doorstep. Even the children of both peoples were not safe from the warring adults. We were less versed in the art of war when compared to the humans, and I am ashamed to admit that we resorted to the use of underhanded and dishonorable techniques. Our victims were mostly humans who were either too sick or too old to properly defend themselves, but their race had left us with little choice.

More and more people from the surrounding areas started interfering with the war, so that the elves slowly reached the conclusion that we were far outnumbered. It was a lost cause. The only thing we could do was run, leaving the humans behind as victors. They celebrated their victory by destroying our buildings, tearing down our graceful city. From afar, I watched as fire consumed my city. Everything I had lived for was destroyed, reduced to ash and broken husks of its former grandeur. Their own structures seemed to spring forth from the very ground, such was the speed at which their city replaced our own. Only an errant fountain or paved street section remained to indicate that elves had once dwelt in that place.

Still, the destruction of our race was not complete. The new kings arose, and as is the way of victors in any war, history was rewritten to fit their purpose. Their history depicted my race as diabolical monsters who arrogantly hoarded their wealth and fortunes over a repressed human race.

The overturning of such a corrupt society was justice for the many human lives which the elves had destroyed. Conscience and the humans' own mistakes were conveniently forgotten as the true account of things was buried.

Our flight left us as nomads, with nowhere to go. When we had left behind the turmoil of battle and the quiet had returned, the shame for our own actions quickly followed. The history written by the humans was spread across the land, and soon, everybody looked down on us. Generations passed, but nobody in our region had forgotten what the elves had done. We stayed hidden, and, contrary to most guilt-stricken elves, I never could forget what had really happened.

Since then, I have been searching for a way to undo the damage of the past. I did everything I could to secure the future of my people. The road was longer than I had foreseen and I even walked among the people I despise so much. But every sacrifice I made was meant to restore the honor of the elves, because they deserve better than the way they have been treated since the end of the war. For all of those centuries I brooded on my revenge, but—soon now—the fate of the humans will be sealed...

I

The gondola rocked as the airship banked right and Lumea saw Omnesia laid out below her. She could clearly see the rectangles that formed the city, with their narrow and dark streets running between them. Even though the lanterns were lit, she couldn't see anyone moving in the streets.

The sun had all but disappeared behind the horizon when the bird-like airship hovered over the city. She heard the wooden wings creaking as the captain steered the ship from the helm. A long sigh followed, signaling the air releasing from the balloon, and their altitude decreased. Lumea looked out over the countryside. Somewhere nearby, hidden in the gloomy twilight, there was another city. Omnesia, the gondola's current destination, was only a brief stopover on Lumea's journey.

The gondola's interior lights came on, and Lumea's face was suddenly reflected in the window. For a moment she studied her features, pulling back her hair to reveal the tattoo etched on her temple and cheek, with its elegant lines connecting the different symbols. Her clothes covered the golden-hued drawings from her neck down. The airship's light was weak, but still the tattoo shone as if it were reflecting sunlight. Lumea was proud of the ceremonial decorations. They proclaimed her heritage even though, at times, her faith and culture felt as confining as a straight-jacket. That was her main reason for responding to the letter she had received some months ago.

The letter had explained that she had been chosen to live in Hydrhaga, which was described as a peaceful land where everyone could live without worry. Lumea felt honored to be chosen and the letter had made her feel special. She had begged her parents to let her go on this journey, and though at first they had not wanted her to go, after a lot of begging and fighting her father had relented. Now, after a long gondola flight, she was finally getting close. Though she knew Hydrhaga was out there, she couldn't see it anywhere in the twilight that encroached upon the city of Omnesia.

Hundreds of lights lit up beneath her. A colored platform emerged

underneath the 'Phoenix' and the ship descended rapidly, accompanied by the tell-tale whistle of released air. A soft *thud* announced that the airship had landed. Almost immediately, the door opened and two men rolled a staircase from the side of the ship. After that, they helped Lumea descend the stairs. As she stepped onto the ground, whorls of sand clouded her feet and were summarily carried away by an errant gust of wind.

As she scanned her surroundings, Lumea felt disoriented. The distance to Omnesia had seemed insignificant in the airship, but the reality was that the city still lay an hour distant by foot. She was nervous, for she knew neither the way nor the people in this faraway place. Until now, she had never set foot beyond the countryside that surrounded her village, and most of her life had been spent within the walls of her family's house.

The men pointed to a high building and as she hurried towards it, her cape flapped in the wind, which had free reign over the near-empty airport. A small, elderly man in formal dress approached her.

"Welcome to Omnesia, my lady. My name is Gabe, and I am a coach driver. Is there anywhere I can take you at this late hour?"

"Thank you, lord Gabe, but I was hoping you could tell me where I might find an inn? I'd rather walk there. I could use some fresh air."

"Of course. I know where to find an inn, and if you would like, I'll tell you how to get there, but I would still advise you to use my coach. The nights here are clear, it gets cold fast, and the city is farther away than you think. A ride isn't expensive, so if money is a concern, you shouldn't let that stop you."

Lumea hesitated. She would much rather walk, but the man's words sounded like an honest warning.

"If you want to walk, it'll take you about an hour, but I can have you at an inn within ten minutes. Of course, if you still need fresh air by then, you can always take a walk through Omnesia. Most inhabitants don't step out of their houses at this hour, and the quiet gives the place a special atmosphere."

Lumea's doubts were dispelled, and Gabe opened the coach door for her. He climbed onto the box seat and pulled a lever, which made a cloth roof close silently overhead. Then the man shook the reins. The trip started slowly, but the pace increased quickly as Gabe spurred on his horses and

the sand whirled up behind them. Every now and then, the coach shook violently, and Lumea had to hold on tight to the handle on the inside of the door to prevent a tumble through the carriage.

From the driver's seat, Gabe yelled his apologies to her, but his words were lost in the rush of wind caused by the speed with which the horses raced. As they arrived into Omnesia's city limits, they slowed their pace. The houses here were still low, although the farther they went into the city, the buildings grew taller.

Finally, the driver stopped in front of an inn. Murmured sound hinted at the occupants on the other side of the door and light shone through small, bare windows. The old man laboriously climbed down from his seat, opened the coach door and helped Lumea out. She paid Gabe and stroked the horses, silently thanking them their speed. Their sides steamed and the cold night air changed their heaving breath into fine, white fog that escaped in irregular puffs. Lumea was glad the man had convinced her to change her mind about walking. She gave him a friendly wave and opened the inn door. When she stepped over the threshold, she turned around, but Gabe had already pulled his coach back into the dark city streets.

"I should have asked him to bring me to Hydrhaga tomorrow," Lumea realized, too late, as the light of the coach's lamp shook around a corner.

The inn was crowded, and some men looked up at the new stranger. They were all dressed in the same fashion: their breeches reached to their knees while the shirts had a smooth cut to them. Their half-length vests hung over their chairs, the materials dyed in dark, sombre colors. Women carried platters deftly between the patrons, tables and chairs. Their clothing were of the same colors as those worn by the men, and their dresses were cut in like fashion. At the far wall, a fire crackled.

Lumea went over to the bar and waited for someone to notice her. She looked around uncertainly. In the end, the bartender had to summon the innkeeper, the latter having sat himself down with some patrons. The bartender informed him that Lumea was waiting for him. The innkeeper stood but didn't walk away from his table immediately. Instead, laughter filled the air and bounced back off the bare walls. Only then did he approach, giving her the opportunity to study him. He was dressed entirely

in black, his collar high and clasped with a silver pin. Around his waist he wore an immaculate apron. Everything about him was dark, including his hair and eyes, but his appearance was friendly, nevertheless.

"Welcome, my lady. I apologize for keeping you waiting."

Lumea smiled at him and asked for a room. He nodded and handed her a book, and while she filled it out in her elegant hand, she felt him scrutinizing her. She returned his pen and he skimmed over the page.

"Lunadeiron? That's quite a journey."

She nodded.

"It is an honor to receive such a high guest in my inn," he said, judging her by her clothes.

Lumea had pulled back her cape, which allowed the man a glimpse of her red skirt made of silk, with large embroidered birds, and while she didn't know it, in this town bird heraldry was reserved for royalty. Lumea shook her head. "I am but the daughter of a musician."

The innkeeper did not press the issue and opened a drawer. Lumea was obviously not the only guest, for she noticed that most of the key shelves were empty. The innkeeper gave her a key and pointed to the stairs, as Lumea's room was situated on the fourth floor.

Her ascent through the inn gave her a view of each floor as she passed. All were solid oak and uniform in their clean corridors. Lumea arrived before her own door. She opened it but did not step inside, instead she halted on the threshold and looked into the small space. Next to the window there was a simple table with a chair, but most of the room was taken up by the bed. Its frame was also made of oak, with long corner-posts that gave support to beams from which light curtains were hung. The curtains were the only decoration in the otherwise bare room. Heavy curtains hung to either side of the room's only window, which seemed heavy enough to shut out all light. In a corner stood a simple screen with a toilet behind it, as well as a small wash basin with a towel and a sliver of soap. The wooden floor creaked as she entered the room.

Lumea walked over to the bed and sat down on it with a tired sigh. She collapsed backwards onto the immovable and too-firm mattress. She stared at the white ceiling and the single lamp hanging from one of the wooden

beams. The lamp suffused the small room with a wavering light. Almost immediately someone knocked, startling her. The door opened and a woman silently brought her something to eat. Lumea asked if she knew where Hydrhaga lay, but the woman disappeared without speaking a word. Pensive, Lumea stared at the closed door of her room.

“Perhaps she didn’t hear me?” she wondered aloud.

She stood up and moved to the table, where she sat down again. She shifted her drab food with the fork, before taking a tentative bite. It tasted as nearly as bland as the Omnesians looked, and while it offered nutrition, that was all. She had to force herself to swallow the stew, but took a second bite nonetheless. When she was halfway through dinner, she put down the fork. The food was so alien when compared to the meals her mother used to cook. Those were colorful, beautifully presented, and almost a shame to eat. When you finally bit into them, the exquisite flavors and aromas were intoxicating.

It was a skill that her mother had undertaken countless attempts to teach her. In the hours they spent together in the kitchen, the woman bored her to tears with the exact proportions of different ingredients while Lumea had stared out of the window. Her mother had organized many parties designed primarily to emphasize what a wonderful housewife she was, but Lumea had not learned fast enough and it had not been long before she was banned from the kitchen when the house had guests.

Her relief was short-lived, because her mother relentlessly continued the lessons, determined to try and force her daughter into a “proper” lifestyle. It had become a battle between the two women, but Lumea had stubbornly held on to her resistance. The way her brothers were allowed to live their lives appealed to her more than what her mother wanted her to swallow, but in her culture that type of lifestyle was out of the question for a woman.

Lumea took up her fork and sniffed at the stew again. It smelled just like it tasted, but she reluctantly decided to finish it anyway. Afterward, she went to bed, for she wanted to be up and about early the next morning. She could hardly wait to continue her journey and finally get to Hydrhaga. She was convinced that, like everything else, the food there would be better.

II

The following morning, Lumea awoke to a single beam of sunlight piercing through the curtains, which she had failed to close properly the night before. Judging by the light, the morning was still fresh, which was just what she had been hoping for. She got out of bed and opened the window. The rising sun painted the sky in bright hues, and a cool wind caressed her face, carrying with it the scent of herbs. From the window, she could see over most of the city. The sun painted the yellow stone buildings an orange hue, and cast long shadows on the ground. Omnesia was still slumbering, the only people on the streets were a couple of men who had spent the night carousing and were only now staggering their way home.

Lumea could see the grassy plains stretching out behind the city, and beyond them the salt plains. She could discern some scattered clusters of trees, but otherwise the landscape consisted solely of plains. Contrary to her homeland, Omnesia's surroundings were savannah-like. The waving, yellow landscape piqued Lumea's curiosity, so she quickly dressed and threw on her cape. She decided to go and see if the cook had some breakfast for her, the better to be on her way without wasting any more time.

When she stepped out of the door half an hour later, workmen were already busy in the streets. Their job was burdensome, and the men looked tough. Their clothing looked very different from that of the other townsmen, and was threadbare from their heavy labors. The men wielded their foreign tools skilfully and did not stop working even when they looked up as she passed. Inexplicably, Lumea found that was afraid of these men. She pulled her cape tightly around her, as if the azure fabric could ward off anyone with evil intentions, and she hurried on.

On a street corner, she paused and surveyed her surroundings. Far away, she could see the fields that she had seen and smelled that morning, so she turned right down the fork in the road which lead to the distant fields. She had always felt more comfortable in nature than among people and

buildings. She was curious about what she would find, and expected to see Hydrhaga nearby.

She soon found herself outside of the city. A soft breeze caused the verdant plains of grass to dance and weave underfoot, rustling and disguising the sounds of a slowly-awakening Omnesia. Setting her feet on a drover's trail, Lumea headed west, chasing her slowly shrinking shadow. For some time, she saw nothing interesting. The grassy plains stretched on with no sign of Hydrhaga, the green vista was broken only by a single hill a short distance away. She left the path and angled toward the hill in the hope that higher ground would provide her with a view to her elusive destination.

The sun was reaching its zenith when Lumea finally came to the foot of the hill. Brimming with anticipation, expecting to catch her first glimpse of the promised Hydrhaga, she crested the hill. To her dismay, the grassy plains extended as far as the eye could see. The verdant green fields swayed in the breeze, defying her perception that Hydrhaga would be within sight. Deeply disappointed, she decided to return to the city.

Back at the inn, she found a place near the hearth from where she could observe the patrons. The innkeeper brought her a pot of tea and a cup.

"Is there a farrier nearby who I can borrow a horse from?" she asked when he had filled the cup.

He put the pot down in front of her and plucked a small feather from his apron. The Omnesian inhabitants usually went around on foot, he explained, in the narrow streets it was the best and safest way to get from one place to another, especially during the day when everyone was heading for work. There was, however, a woman who lived on the outskirts of the city who owned many horses. He provided Lumea with directions, and she noted that the horse woman's stables were only a few streets away

"Omnesia doesn't seem to be your final destination. It is rare for anyone to venture out of the city limits, foreigners especially take care not to go outside. Do you mind my asking why you came here?"

"Of course not, actually, you might be able to help me. I'm looking for Hydrhaga. Omnesia is only a brief stop on my journey.

"You'd do better not to continue your travels."

“Why is that?”

The innkeeper did not answer, and quickly continued with his work instead. Lumea was perplexed and wondered why the man had reacted like that. Lifting her tea and enjoying its warmth, she took a sip and let her gaze drift over the common room. The place was filling up, but nobody spoke to her. She noticed some men at the other side of the room who were obvious foreigners. They wore long, light-colored robes and talked together loudly in a language Lumea did not understand. She refilled her cup and settled back into her chair, deep in thought.

The following day, Lumea went to find a horse at the residence recommended to her by the innkeeper. The woman's stables were at the very edge of the city. A brass knocker in the shape of a horse's head was mounted on the door, and Lumea knocked upon it once. Immediately, she heard noises coming from behind the closed door, but it soon opened. Before her stood an elderly woman, dressed noticeably different from the rest of the Omnesians that Lumea had previously witnessed. Her overcoat was long, reaching down to her ankles, and it was dyed a warm orange color. Her hair was tied up in three different braids. The old woman seemed to have been expecting Lumea's visit and she led her towards the stables.

As they walked past the stalls, curious horses poked their heads out. At times, the old woman's hand would disappear into a deep pocket and bring forth a bit of apple. She would feed it to the horse with one hand and stroke its nose with the other. The row of stables seemed endless, though the woman eventually selected a small gray for Lumea. They saddled the animal and, taking the reins, the pair walked the horse to one of the farrier's gates. In silence, the old woman handed the reins to Lumea before retreating into the stables and out of sight.

Lumea climbed into the saddle with a practiced movement and shook the reins. As soon as she was outside the city, she increased their speed, and soon they they were at the hill she had visited the day before. They rode on, but the landscape hardly changed, and all she saw was the yellowish-green grass rolling ahead of her for miles. Guiding her horse, Lumea circled the city, hoping that she had merely been seeking her destination in the wrong direction. Eventually, dark and imposing shadows marred the

horizon, and Lumea's heart leaped with the hope that they were distant buildings. Sensing her change in mood, the horse increased its pace, and the shadows grew in size, until she realized that what she saw were enormous trees. Her initial disappointment, however, quickly changed into wonder.

She had never seen trees like these, and if someone had told her about them, she would not have believed they existed. The trees towered above her, defying her senses that anything could grow so large; their bases were so thick that Lumea guessed it would take ten men to encircle just one. It seemed to her that the gods themselves must have planted these trees. The multitude of branches overhead were crowned with tiny leaves, which seemed incongruent when compared to their enormous trunks.

Lumea discovered one tree that was not as tall as the others and decided to climb it. She pulled herself up, using the rough bark as leverage for her feet. When she reached the top a small flock of brightly-colored birds flew from out of the boughs, surprising her as they screeched their indignation. Curiosity compelled her to look down for the first time. Where the branches met the trunk a depression formed natural bowls which caught rain and dew. She quenched her thirst with water from one of the depressions, and as the birds returned to their perches she surveyed the vista afforded to her. Everywhere she looked there were trees. Most of them were standing alone, but farther on they became a dense forest. However, the only thing she saw was nature. Nowhere could she discern a sign of the city she was looking for.

For days on end she and the gray scoured the countryside surrounding Omnesia. In the south, she discovered a forest. She dismounted and left the horse near a small pond, tying the reins loosely around a branch. She enjoyed walking among the shadows of the trees. Springy moss softened her footfalls while insects buzzed about her head. Then she saw it: a pile of rocks which could not possibly have been formed naturally. Her pace quickened. She discovered more and more stones, shaped by hands, and finally she arrived at a gateway. Vines reached up over the arch, dotted with flowers that hung down in white clusters. They gave off a sweet scent and attracted busily-flying bees.

Hesitantly, Lumea walked under the arch and into the square beyond.

Everywhere there were ancient buildings, all of them with plants and roots growing over their long walls, grasping at the ancient carvings. They must have been wonderful buildings once, but all that remained now were ruins. Time went on inexorably as Lumea wandered between the buildings, struck by the atmosphere of this place. The air was oppressive and stale and, at times, she thought she saw parts of the buildings' past. For the briefest of moments she would glimpse stately creatures walking about, dressed in extraordinary robes, but when she tried to focus her eyes on them, the visions would disappear, leaving Lumea to wonder if she had really seen them.

Suddenly the young woman realized she was shivering. The sun had gone down behind the walls and from far away she heard her gray neighing. She hurried towards the animal, climbed on, and galloped in the direction of the Omnesia. It was not far, and on the horizon she could soon see the glow made by the city's lamps. She rode into the city just before the true darkness of nightfall. It was not long after she had returned the horse to its stable that she herself retired to her rented room in the inn.

That night she decided to change her tactics. No matter how far she rode, she could not find what she was looking for in the country around the city. Starting the following morning, she would stay in Omnesia and ask its inhabitants if they could help her. She just hoped that one of them would know where Hydrhaga was.

III

Lumea slept halfway through the next morning, but she was in no hurry to go anywhere. By the time she left the inn, it was noon. Once again, she found herself alone out on the streets except for the groups of workmen. The morning was quiet and peaceful, and as she cast her thoughts back to the view afforded to her on the approach via airship, Lumea recalled how the city had been planned, with every street forming neat blocks. From the ground, the layout was just as obvious. Every street corner was marked by a lantern, and the watery light they provided emphasized the straight lines and corners of the surrounding buildings and lanes.

To Lumea, the streets seemed like an endless repetition of the same building, interspersed at regular intervals with street-lights. The buildings all had multiple floors and were huddled close together as though to waste as little space as possible. The houses loomed over the narrow streets, reducing the sky to a thin strip of blue which was dotted by the occasional airship that passed overhead. The walls of the houses had small windows, as if the people living there wanted to separate their own little world from the public community. The only discordant notes of design within the city were the wells, and those had been placed around the town seemingly at random. Like the men working on them, they did not seem to aesthetically belong.

Lumea did not understand how the Omnesians could feel comfortable here. In her own country, the villages were a lot more spacious. The buildings there had slender frames and subtle construction, allowing for trees to grow amongst the streets and lanes. Each building held effigies of the gods, with a strong predominance towards the Goddess Isil, the goddess of the moon and mother to her race. Her own people knew that their race needed to coexist with the natural world, and every effort was made to cohabitate with the land.

Here in Omnesia, that order seemed to be turned upside-down. Nothing whatsoever indicated the Omnesian's faith, and they had even changed the

course of the river for the convenience of the city folk. Their redirection of the river, however, was poorly-done and now a dry bed lay where the river once flowed. The arid riverbed was the reason the city was dusty, and the wind was constantly blew yellow sand through the streets. In some corners the sand and dust piled up higher and higher. The people did not seem to care, however, for once the sand settled in its corners and alcoves, it remained there for years, as no one cleaned it away, nor did they seem to care that the piles steadily grew larger.

Walking through an archway that spanned the street, Lumea paused. The adjacent wall held a small plaque: *South, 42nd, Quarter of Knowledge*. Her curiosity was piqued and she decided to see where it led. A lack of pedestrians meant she could not ask for directions, and she was resigned to rely solely on her gut feelings. From time to time she stopped and looked back, but she had no way of judging how far she had walked. The buildings she passed now had broad, double doors, but still she could see no sign of life either inside the buildings or out.

The still street was suddenly thrust into organized chaos, as bells began to toll in long sonorous peals. Doors lining the streets disgorged their hidden tenants as the inhabitants of Omnesia took to the streets in their dull gray, uniform dress. The masses formed orderly lines and headed towards the city proper, back in the direction from which Lumea had just come, and they walked with a lack of spirit that blurred the crowds from individuals into a monotone vista. With her back against a wall she watched the mob pass, and she was intrigued by their behavior and apathy. Lumea decided to follow.

The crowd moved under the gateway and began to split up. More and more people disappeared into their homes, and the streets slowly emptied again. Lumea stopped in the middle of the road, wondering about the Omnesians' behavior. For a brief moment the city had come to life, but now everything around her was quiet once again.

Twilight fell, and the young woman saw a light go on in the distance, and then another. More and more lights turned on, a little bit closer each time. Then she heard a curious ticking sound, as of metal striking the cobblestone streets. There were a few seconds of time between each tick, but they grew louder, seemingly moving closer. Lumea was curious enough to

stand her ground and peer into the growing darkness. From it, a man on high stilts emerged. He walked through the dark streets and lit the gas lanterns flanking either side of the street. His work seemed superfluous in light of the fact that the streets were abandoned of people after nightfall, but on he went. The man passed her without a word and disappeared into the darkness again. The sound of his stilts disappeared with him, but his passage was marked by the luminous glow of lanterns being lit at regular intervals.

An evening chill settled over the city, and the wind blew unhindered through the long, straight streets. Lumea walked after the lantern man, hoping to reach the inn soon. Far away, she could see yet another lamp being lit, and she increased her pace. The walk back to the inn was likely going to take some time.

In the days that followed, Lumea discovered just how hard it was to make contact with anyone, as the city's inhabitants kept very much to themselves. In the meantime, her searches led her deeper into the city, where she discovered more about the way it was constructed. There were three distinct districts laid out in concentric rings. The inn where she stayed was situated in the outer ring. The next ring was the industrial hub of the city, where a great many offices and manufacturing buildings were located. The people working there all lived in the outer district as well, but the owners of the companies lived in the center circle, together with other prosperous men and women.

Each district was separated from the others by a high wall. The walls had intermittent gates that allowed passage between the various districts. On her first day, Lumea had followed a street that ran parallel to the center instead of leading towards it. Now that she had spent some time wandering the city, she knew that the inn was not that far from the center if you knew the way.

There were more people on the streets in the middle district. At times there were small groups of Omnesians talking to each other, although the conversations never lasted for very long. Everyone here was always busy.

Lumea had addressed several inhabitants, but she could have been talking to walls for all the reaction she received. The people walked away

from her, often without waiting for her to finish asking her question. Once or twice, someone took the trouble of listening, but as soon as the name Hydrhaga came up in conversation, they said they did not know and that they had to go.

The longer she stayed in the city, the more it seemed as though the inhabitants were avoiding her. She grew furious, because nobody was polite enough to answer her decently.

Several days later, Lumea had a strange encounter with one of the citizens of this very alien city. He approached her as she was sitting on a bench, resting and observing her surroundings. He was one of the workmen, and he had muscular limbs and was covered in a patina of dirt from his daily labors, but she pushed aside her initial fear and made room for him on the bench. She gave him a friendly nod, for she was afraid of insulting him if she ignored him. The man was dark from his work outdoors, and he smelled strongly of sweat. Lumea was surprised to find that the smell was not wholly unpleasant. His scent triggered distant murmurings in the depths of her mind, and she had the feeling that this was a smell she should know. The workman was dressed in a green tunic, but it was threadbare with traces of rich embroidery. Wrapped around his head he wore a kerchief, which Lumea assumed was part of the worker's outfit, for the workers all wore similar kerchiefs. The man sat down next to her silently, but his face was open and friendly.

After a while, he said, "I am Elion."

Lumea was taken aback for a moment, for she had almost forgotten about him and she had been deep in thought. She looked at him, confused, and he repeated, "I am Elion. That is my name."

Lumea smiled at him and introduced herself. Elion nodded and they sat in silence once again. In the end, Lumea got up and bid the man farewell. She looked around before crossing the street, and then disappeared around a corner.

That same day Lumea came upon an imposing building which was surrounded by a cast-iron fence. Behind it, soldiers marched down lanes that ran between fields of freshly-mowed grass. At the gate, four men were

standing guard. Lumea straightened up and walked towards them. The four soldiers seemed to confer with each other as she came closer. One of them looked at her over his shoulder, and when she neared, they turned toward her. Lumea bowed and waited for a reaction, but none was forthcoming. Hesitantly, she righted herself while she devised a new plan.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

Still, they gave no reaction.

“Might I inquire as to who lives behind this fence?”

The men seemed relieved that she asked that question. One of them answered, “That is the palace of the King of Omnesia and his royal family.”

“Oh, of course. I should have known. You should be proud to guard the royal family. It must be honorable work?”

“You’re right, it’s not easy to become a guard. First you have to go through years of intense combat training. Only those with the best fighting skills have a chance to be promoted to this duty.”

Lumea was glad that her plan was working and the men were talking. She forced herself to stay calm and pushed on, flattering their pride.

“But fighting skills are surely not the only criterion on which you were selected? You must have a great knowledge of this land and its history?”

The men nodded proudly. They explained that they had been trained to fight from childhood. This was normal in Omnesia, as all boys were obligated to master the martial arts. The talent shown by their physical prowess determined the status of their families. The four men had hardly been able to walk when their fathers had brought them to a fighting school. It had not been long before their talent distinguished them from other boys their age, and they had been transferred to the school within the royal compound. There, the boys were also trained in history and heraldry.

Lumea knew that now was the time to strike. Maybe they would let something slip that they normally would not.

“Then you must know where Hydrhaga lies?”

One of the men made as if to answer, but the eldest of the four was quicker. “I believe this conversation has lasted long enough.”

None of them spoke another word. Lumea bowed again and walked away. She was disappointed that again she had found out nothing at all about Hydrhaga, and wondered why nobody wanted to help her. No matter

how long she walked around and no matter how many people she asked, she was no closer to her destination than when she first arrived.