

Zari and the Citadel

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Chapter 1

THE AMBER-EYED GIRL

Zari came into the world during a stormy night. The whole day had been humid and everyone in New York knew a big thunderstorm was about to roll in. As the evening turned dark, it started to rain while lightning bolts flashed across the sky. Thunder rumbled over the city, scaring children and pets. One parrot even learned how to curse, so scared was the poor bird.

Zari's mother gave birth in a small hospital with only a doctor and a nurse by her side. She was sweating and kept staring outside the window, watching the lightning bolts and the rain pour against the glass. She looked exhausted and sad.

Zari was born and screamed like all healthy babies but quickly fell asleep after being washed and fed. The nurse who handed Zari to her mother noticed that the baby had strange eyes. They were the colour of amber — very unusual for black babies.

Zari's mother watched her newborn daughter with a strange expression. There was joy but also sadness, which surprised the nurse. However, she didn't say anything and eventually the mother handed Zari back. The nurse left the room with Zari and before she closed the door she saw that the mother was already asleep. The nurse carried Zari to the room where the doctor conducted the usual tests. After that, the nurse brought Zari to the nursery and watched her until those amber eyes closed and Zari was asleep.

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The following day the nurse picked up Zari and carried her to the mother's room. When she opened the door, she saw that Zari's mother wasn't in bed. In fact, she wasn't anywhere in the room.

"What in the...?" murmured the nurse and stopped herself because one should not curse in front of a baby. She brought Zari back to the nursery and went to the floor supervisor.

"Do you know where the patient from room 217 is? She's supposed to be in bed."

The floor supervisor, a large man with thick glasses, frowned. "What's her name?"

"That's the thing," said the nurse and shrugged. "She just walked in last night. Barely spoke to us, but her waters had already broken, so we started delivering the baby. We planned to take her details today, but she ain't in the room."

The supervisor scratched his head and checked something on his computer. He also asked some of the nurses who worked night shifts, but no one knew anything about the mysterious woman.

"Let's check the security cameras, okay?" The nurse was distraught. This was highly unusual. She went with the supervisor to the room where several monitors displayed all the footage of the hospital's security cameras.

The man on duty, a bored-looking fellow, rewound the tapes. To their amazement, they didn't see anyone leaving the room.

"This is impossible," said the nurse to no one specifically, and after talking to the hospital's chief of security, she called the police.

The investigation didn't reveal anything they didn't

already know. No one had left the room and the windows were bolted shut, so the woman couldn't have left that way. It was a complete mystery — Zari's mother seemed to have vanished into thin air. The police asked for security footage to search in their databases but no camera had actually caught her face. The woman had only appeared on a few cameras inside the hospital but was always covered by someone or had her face down. The police tried to create a sketch from the nurse's description but even after several tries the picture still didn't look like Zari's mother. The police asked the doctor as well, but the result was the same. For some reason, no one could recreate the woman's face.

Since Zari was now an orphan, the state got involved. The nurse held the quiet baby while she answered questions from a stern-looking woman in a blazer scribbling on a notebook.

“African-American female, you said? What age?”

The nurse frowned as she thought back. It was hard to say how old Zari's mother was. Eventually, she said, “Could have been 30 or 40, to be honest. She had that sort of face.”

The stern woman just nodded as she took her notes.

“She barely spoke, you said. Was there an accent?”

“Yes... but I can't place it. It wasn't like any accent I've ever heard. But she told me the baby's name right after she held her for the first time: Zari.”

The baby looked at the nurse as if she knew the grown-ups were talking about her.

“Anything else you can tell me about the mother?” asked the woman, sounding slightly annoyed.

Defensively the nurse said, “Her clothes were strange. Like she made them herself or somethin'. Also, she was

barefoot, but her feet didn't look chafed or hurt. And her clothes were dry even though it was raining. Must have driven or taken a cab. But she didn't have anything on her, no keys, no wallet, so not sure how she would have driven or paid for a cab."

The woman noted everything down but didn't reveal what she thought of all this. She probably had heard weirder things. This was New York, after all.

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A few hours after Zari was born, six people met far away from New York. They were dressed in peculiar clothes and some of them were barefoot. Their faces were ageless, neither old nor young, though in them was written the memory of many things both happy and sad.

They looked tired and their bodies were covered in wounds. The dried blood and the exhausted look on their faces spoke of a terrible fight that must have happened. They were breathing hard and leaned on their weapons: swords, spears, bows, and shields, all dirty and bloody. Around them lay pieces of armour they had taken off and thrown to the ground.

The six people each wore a different-coloured gem. Three of them wore it on a necklace, one on a ring, and two on circlets that wound around their heads like crowns.

Thick fog swirled around them. It was so dense one could barely see further than one could throw a rock. It was quiet, like in a cemetery. Around the six peculiar people, hundreds of bodies lay on the ground, all dressed in different clothing, some ancient, some modern, all with terrible wounds. There were also other things lying on the ground — creatures, animals and some things that could not be described.

"It was him," said Sabira. She wore a single piece of

cloth the colour of red earth, fastened around the waist with a leather belt, reaching down to her bare feet. Her damaged armour lay around her on the ground. Her hair had managed to stay in a complicated knot, adorned with golden hairpins.

“I fought him... but I failed.” She looked ashamed, but Ayara, a tall woman with many rings, armbands, and other ornaments, shook her head.

“Don’t blame yourself, Sabira. Pendragon was too powerful for any of us. You couldn’t have stopped him.”

“Do we know where *she* went?” asked Chatan. He wore the clothes of a Native American chief and had long black hair stained with sweat and blood. His piercing dark eyes went around the group. “She was pregnant with Pendragon’s child! How could she just have vanished?”

Sabira looked at him. “She’s not here; that’s all we know.” Her beautiful face became distorted by hate. “We should worry about what to do with Pendragon.”

“He’s locked away in the mines, Sabira,” said Gilgamesh, a short and muscular man in old-looking leather armour that was torn to shreds. “Whatever happened in the fortress — it destroyed his mind. He’s mumbling like a drunkard and his spirit is far away. He’s not a threat anymore.”

“But for how long?” asked Chatan. “His fate is linked with his blood. Should his child grow up to be a Realmwalker, he might recover his old strength.”

No one answered and for a while they just stood there while the fog gradually lifted. It revealed a tall gate made from stone, wood and metal. Parts of it were broken and the shape of something big and dead lay in front of it. Something that once moved and hunted with deadly precision.

“We can’t kill Pendragon,” said Mythra, the woman with the intricate tattoos on her arms and a sapphire on her necklace. “I tried... and failed.”

The others looked at her with surprise but no one said anything.

“When I locked him in the mines, I used all my power to pierce his heart with my sword but it dissolved into dust. Chatan is right; Pendragon’s fate is tied to his bloodline,” continued Mythra. “He must have discovered the forbidden rituals to create a barrier against harm as long as his child lives.”

“So we have to find the child and...” Sabira didn’t finish the sentence. What she suggested was too horrible to mention out loud. The others shook their heads.

“No.” Romulus, a tall man with black hair and a nose like a hawk, looked at the others with piercing eyes. “We are talking about a child! We will find it, but we will not harm it. It deserves a chance like all the others.” He absentmindedly touched the purple gem on his ring.

“It won’t be like the others,” said Chatan. “It is born out of evil and dark rituals!” After a pause, he added, “The child might inherit Pendragon’s evil soul.”

“That remains to be seen.” Gilgamesh had to kneel down for a moment; he had begun to feel weak from his wounds. “The future isn’t written yet and we know little about the forbidden rituals. Now, let’s destroy Pendragon’s fortress and lay our friends to rest. Sabira, will you take them?”

Sabira nodded. “After we break every stone of this accursed fortress.”

Mythra took a deep breath. “I will go to the mines again and make sure Pendragon is guarded well. Maybe he’ll reveal something about Niobe and her child.”

The others nodded and Chatan said, “We need to celebrate Pendragon’s defeat as if he died in battle. No one can know he’s still alive. His followers might continue the war in his name and try to find and free him.”

They looked at each other with serious faces. Such a big lie was dangerous, yet they knew it was necessary to end the war. One by one they nodded.

“Agreed. The lie must live so that the Realm can heal.” Gilgamesh looked at the others. “This is a victory, even if it is bittersweet. Pendragon is defeated and locked away in the depths of the Earth, guarded by our best Paladins. His followers have fled and will soon perish. We’ll finally have peace. Now gather whatever strength you have left — Pendragon’s fortress cannot be left standing.”

As they walked through the gate in silence, ready to finish what they started, they all pondered two questions: where was the child of Niobe and Count Pendragon and what would its fate be?

Chapter 2

THE DRAWING AND A STRANGE WOMAN

It had been seven years since Zari's mother vanished into thin air at the hospital. Zari had been adopted by a lovely couple, Mr and Mrs Taylor, who raised Zari in their flat in the Bronx. They weren't rich, but they ran a popular little diner in the neighbourhood and their community was strong.

Zari was a quiet girl and from an early age always had her nose in a book. Sometimes she put her nose against the paper because she loved the smell of it. She didn't play with the other kids very often — not because she was shy or didn't like them — Zari just really loved books and the others eventually stopped trying to involve her.

Mr and Mrs Taylor were concerned because their daughter wasn't playing with the others. But they were also proud since Zari was smart and always did her homework quickly because she couldn't wait to return to her books.

Zari read books about adventures, mythical creatures, lost treasures, and sunken ships and cities. Some books were about the Wild West, some about old legends and myths, like King Arthur or the Battle of Troy. Zari had a vivid imagination and sometimes she thought she could smell and hear the places described in the books. She would look up from the page to make sure she was still in her tiny room and not aboard a ship or within the ruins of a temple in a faraway jungle.

Because she often dreamt about being an explorer herself, she liked to dress like one. She loved her little brown hiking boots, rugged jeans with patches, and khaki-coloured long-sleeved shirts. Zari's hair was a wild mess of thick and curly strands of hair standing out from her head in all directions, just like she thought explorers would wear it in the wild. Her mother tried unsuccessfully to convince her of more civilised hairstyles, but Zari wouldn't budge, so she let her be.

Zari was happy and aside from the fact that her eyes had the colour of amber, which her parents told her was a bit unusual, she was a very normal girl with a normal life. However, some time after her seventh birthday, Zari noticed something strange: she started to have very intense dreams. Everything about her dreams felt completely real and when she woke up, it always took her a while to get back to reality. The dreams were always mysterious and she started to write down what happened in each dream and began to draw the locations she found herself in every night.

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One day she started dreaming about a face. Almost every time she slept, Zari saw the face of a man as clear as a picture in a book. She began drawing it, but it was hard; the result was disappointing every time. Zari became obsessed with it and continued, day after day, until one day she had a detailed drawing of the face that matched what she saw in her dreams.

It was a strange face. Weathered and with deep lines but also youthful in a peculiar way. It was a face of a strong and powerful man, Zari thought. It looked a little bit like

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