

ERETZEL
A PTI Press book

ERETZEL
The Sword of Fire-Book Two
By William R. McGrath

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Weights and Measures used in this story and their closest modern equivalents:

Fathom

Cubit

League

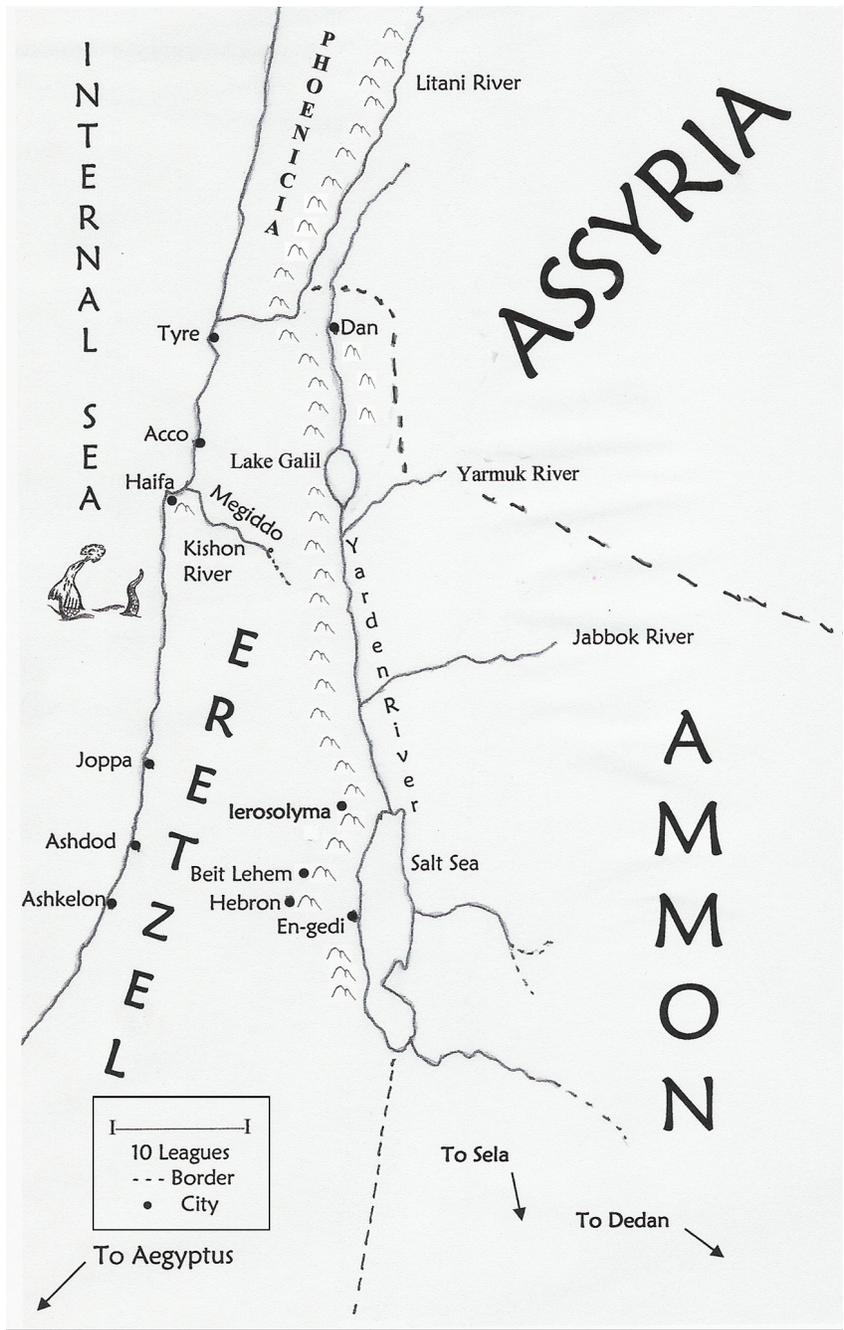
Stone

Six Feet

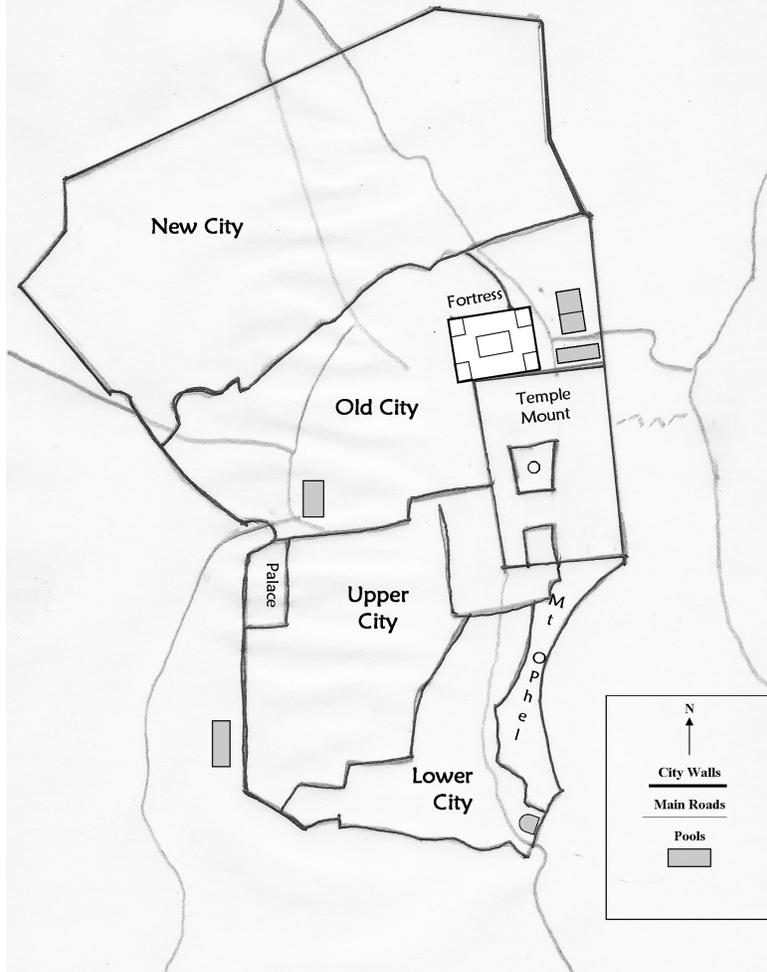
Eighteen Inches

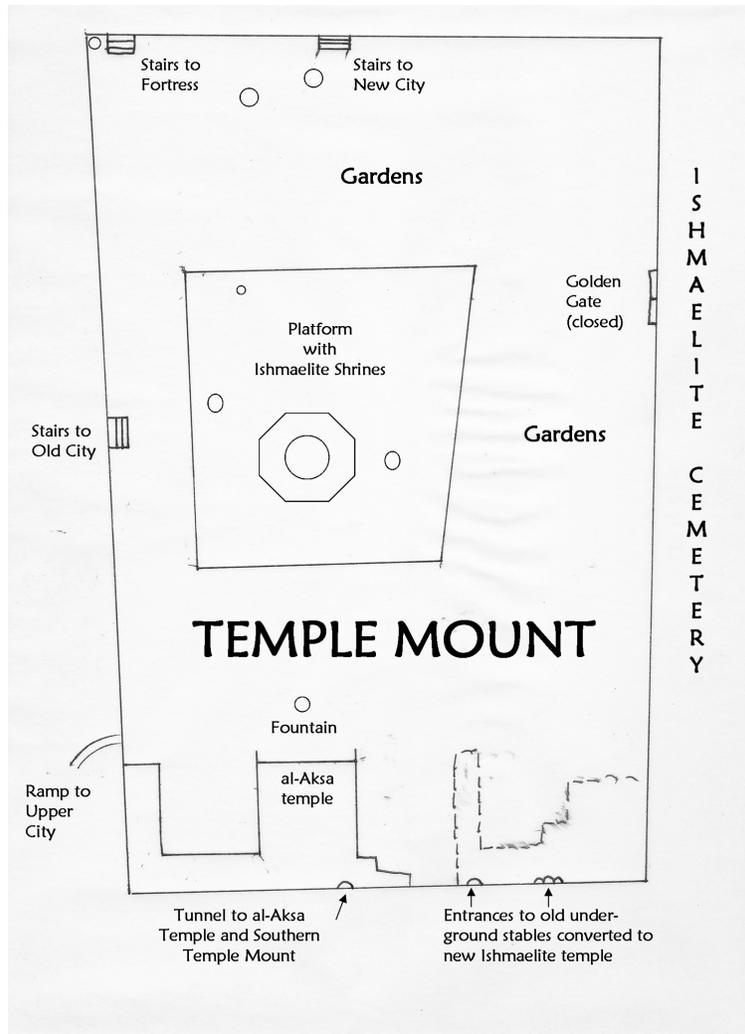
Three Miles

Ten Pounds



IEROSOLYMA





THE CODE OF THE PALADIN

The Warrior Virtues

DISCIPLINE

LOYALTY

COURAGE

HUMILITY

The Kingly Virtues

WISDOM

HONOR

CHARITY

JUSTICE

The Godly Virtues

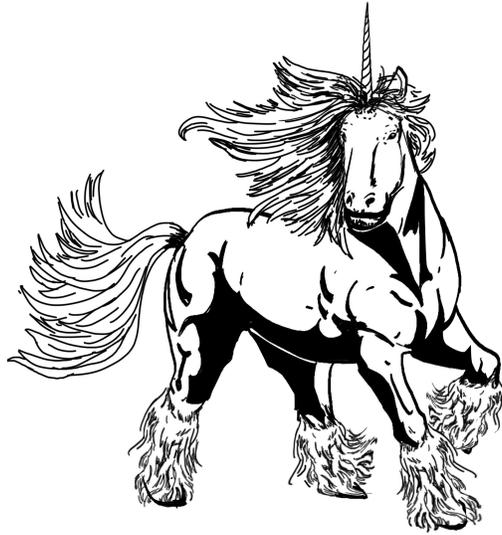
FAITH

TRUTH

MERCY

LOVE

NON OMNIS MORIAR



CHAPTER 1 THE UNICORN

Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy feed-trough?
-The Book of Job 39:9

THE fortress of Caer-Albion was built of granite, as were most fortresses in that region, but the granite here was covered on its outward face by the purest white marble, and, on its inward face, by marble slabs that alternated between deep crimson and emerald green. The walls were high, standing ten times the height of a man, but higher still were the Towers of Anak at the four compass points of the fortress. Common men could see the tops of these towers from thirty leagues away, and from them Anak was said to see all across the land of Logres. But strong walls and high towers were not the only things that made a fortress. Most of Anak's old servants were gone now, replaced by Antiochus' people. Two such servants went before Antiochus and Ferragus, each holding a lantern aloft to light the way across the courtyard.

The fortress has not changed visibly, thought Ferragus, but I can feel the difference, and I approve.

Anak's servants could be, if not outright surly, then not as deferential towards foreigners of his rank as Ferragus would have liked. When your family has served the same king for a thousand years, you tend to take your job's security for granted. The servants Antiochus brought with him had no such illusions and knew their continued

employment, and perhaps much more, depended upon how men such as Ferragus were treated.

“Ferragus, I tell you truly that the world is run by very different personages than one would imagine,” Antiochus said, breaking in on the Gaul’s thoughts.

“Oh yes, of course,” replied Ferragus. “The commoner will give little thought to men such as us, men who really move events in this world, little thought until the day we are crowned as his king. One of Anak’s old ministers had a saying: ‘The world is divided into three groups: a very small group that makes things happen, a slightly larger group that watches things happen and the vast majority that wonders ‘What happened?’” It has always been thus and always will be.”

“Nay, Ferragus, I do not speak of men such as you or I,” Antiochus said. “I speak of spiritual beings, principalities and powers, rulers from on high. One day you shall meet them, Ferragus, perhaps not to know them as I do, but you shall meet them nonetheless.”

Ferragus could see that the Emperor was in one of his strange moods and knew enough from dealing with men like him—true believers in a world beyond our own—to keep silent and nod as if he understood what Antiochus was talking about.

The two men entered the stone stable where Anak’s unicorn, Fleotan, was housed and tended. The stable had been kept dark in an attempt to calm the animal, as it would allow none to come near since Anak’s death. Only a single lamp was burning, throwing tall shadows upon the walls. Here as elsewhere, Anak’s old servants had been dismissed and replaced with Antiochus’ own men.

They came to the unicorn’s stall. Great and noble beasts were the unicorns of that age, as strong as the largest warhorse, yet as swift and nimble as the fleetest pony. Fleotan’s coat was a pure silvery-white, and a spiral ivory horn, as long as a man’s forearm, jutted from its brow. Thick muscles danced beneath its skin as it stomped a hoof and snorted a threat to the men approaching its stall.

“The common people revere these creatures, Ferragus,” Antiochus said. “They believe the unicorn to be the last of the animals that walked in Eden to survive into our own time. The people will more readily accept me as Emperor once they see me riding a unicorn before them.”

“Then why did you not ride here on the mount of the king of Etrusca?” asked Ferragus.

Antiochus gave a thin smile. “The first time I tried to ride the beast, the unicorn of my late predecessor galloped off a cliff attempting to take me with it. Had I not leapt off at the last moment, it would have carried me to my death. I will not make a like mistake again and have ordered my servants to tame this creature before I attempt to ride it.” The Etruscan studied the unicorn for a moment. “They have not been successful as yet, even though the best horsemen in the empire have been brought here to try their hand.”

Ferragus knew that Antiochus was growing impatient. The people seemed to accept the word from Anak’s ministers that the king had lost his life while inspecting a coal mine that had accidentally collapsed upon him. A mine did in fact collapse. But this was deliberately done some days after Anak’s death, and those buried there were those same ministers of Anak who had betrayed him—Antiochus deeming it wise that the secret of their betrayal should die with them. But Antiochus still feared that without a unicorn as his mount, the people of Logres would not accept him as Emperor. Ferragus knew all

these things, but spoke nothing of them. Allowing silence to be taken for wisdom was a course he had learned long ago to follow when walking beside men such as Antiochus, men who believed themselves to be more than mere men: men who believed themselves touched by the gods.

Antiochus noted the lack of a saddle on the unicorn and turned to the stable master. “Well? Was the Iberian any better than the others?”

“Master, we have tried for many days, but none but their own lords will unicorns allow to sit upon them. As you have ordered, we have removed all the straw from the stall, given the beast nothing to eat and just enough water to keep it alive these many days, but still it resists us. It has broken the backs of four expert horsemen so far. All my men fear it. You have forbidden us to beat the unicorn, lest we leave marks that the people may see when you ride it. I know not what more we can do to break its will that will not kill it.”

Antiochus sighed. “I had hoped it would not come to this, but if one wishes a task to be done right...” He pointed to two stout stable hands. “You, there, pin the beast against the side of the stall.”

Knowing how dangerous an angry unicorn can be, Antiochus had ordered a special stall constructed for the taming of the animal. The front and sides were made of thick oak beams rather than planks, and one side could be pushed inward by an iron rail set into a winch, so that the unicorn would be held tight between the two walls of the stall.

The two men began their task. At the sound of the winch being turned, the unicorn began to snort angrily and shake its head. One side of the stall moved inward, and the unicorn kicked at the back stone wall of the stall, sending hot sparks flying from its iron shoes. The winch was turned until the stall held the unicorn tight between its two wooden sides.

“You two men take ropes and tie the horn down so that the head cannot move,” ordered Antiochus.

The stablemen threw their ropes and caught hold of the unicorn’s horn. The unicorn tossed its head to one side and dragged the men off their feet. Four more men ran to their aid and, with the weight of all six dragging its neck down, managed to tie the unicorn’s head against the top beam of the stall. The unicorn was breathing heavily, both from the exertion of the struggle and because the beam was biting into its throat. Antiochus took a step forward and laid his hand upon the unicorn’s brow, right above where the ivory horn met its head. The unicorn’s eyes went wide in fear, and it struggled to break free from the loathsome touch.

Antiochus began to chant softly, “*shuma-shuma, shuma-shuma.*”

The unicorn’s struggle became all the more fierce as it pulled against the ropes that held it, trying to back up into the stall. One of the ropes tied to its horn began to slide down the shaft. The unicorn heaved its head mightily, lifting all six men off their feet; then came a loud crack like the sound of a thick tree branch breaking in a storm as the top third of its horn broke off and fell spinning to the floor.

“*Besa! Besa!*” cried Antiochus. He placed both his hands over the eyes of the unicorn and cried out the first chant three more times. The unicorn’s struggling lessened and then stopped. Antiochus took his hands from the beast’s head. The eyes were closed, and its breathing had slowed and become regular.

“Untie its head and open the stall,” ordered Antiochus. While this was being done the unicorn stood unmoving as if carved from stone.

“*Bes, poush akha!*” commanded Antiochus. The unicorn raised its head and opened its eyes.

“*Deus meus,*” whispered the stable master, making a sign to ward off evil spirits.

The eyes of the unicorn were no longer the warm, living brown of its kind. Now they were like two hard black orbs, lifeless and unfeeling.

“*Heyyo ahkah,*” ordered Antiochus, and the creature came slowly out from the stall and into the lamplight. The unicorn’s coat was now changing before their eyes, going from a moon-bright white to a faint yellowish-green, pale as a man’s skin before he dies of the plague.

“*He’moul akha,*” ordered Antiochus, and the unicorn stopped before him. “Saddle him,” he ordered.

The stable hand closest to the beast hesitated a moment, then took a saddle off a post and set it atop the unicorn. He quickly cinched up the straps and backed away from the creature.

Antiochus put a foot in a stirrup and swung up into the saddle. The unicorn stood unmoving.

“*Rkhoosh,*” ordered Antiochus, and the creature began a slow walk. Antiochus rode the unicorn out of the stable and into the courtyard. A few servants were moving about, and they all stopped and watched in silence as Antiochus brought the unicorn into a gallop and rode a circuit round the courtyard.

Ferragus came forward, and Antiochus reined the unicorn to a stop before him.

“Now no one in all of Unicornia will doubt me!” Antiochus said.

“What did you say to the creature to do...whatever it is that you did to it?” asked Ferragus.

“I gave it words of command, spoken in Chaldean,” replied Antiochus. “The unicorns are an ancient race and must be spoken to in an ancient tongue. My intelligences told me how to control the creature, but they said that there would be a price to pay if I did so. I have broken the beast’s spirit, Ferragus, and it will never be the same again. But as the peasants say, ‘you cannot have a fire in the hearth without taking some wood from the forest.’”

The stable master had picked up the broken piece of horn and now held it out to Antiochus.

“Master, should we have the horn’s tip set back in place?”

Antiochus took the piece of horn and examined it. “No, I think not. Have my goldsmith replace the tip of the unicorn’s horn with a gold cap of the same size and shape. I think the people will like that. As for this little piece of horn here, I believe I will have it set into the front of my imperial crown. It will be fitting for the Unicorn Emperor to wear a unicorn’s horn.”

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