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The Marble Princess

by Lawrence Buentello

The beautiful palace of Zir, circled round by verdant forests and stone bridges spanning clear rivers, and inhabited by a proud and elegant people, had fallen in the siege of its enemies in the warmth of the summer months. Upon the throne within the palace sat the Princess Mira, who had assumed the seat of power in her father's absence; but the King of Zir had been vanquished in war against the barbarians from beyond the mountains, and now the lovely young girl sat waiting in the alabaster halls as uncouth men broke through the barriers enclosing Zir's vibrant reaches, until at last they breached the gates of the palace and marched to slaughter those residing within.

Her father's court magician, an affectionate old man loyal to the crown and skilled in the art of conjuring, bade her flee from the palace and join a bark upon the River Sies, even as the royal guard hurried to the courtyard to delay those invading soldiers on the ward.

"I will not leave my father's rule," she declared, gazing determinedly upon the chamber doors through which murderous soldiers would soon enter. "He gave me instruction to retain our family's rule even unto his death. And now I must abide by his wishes, even if to do so brings my own destruction."

"Let it not be so," the old magician implored from his knees. "You are young, and beautiful, and to see such youth and beauty destroyed would offend the gods. You must flee!"

"I will abide my father's throne," Princess Mira said, wrapping her robe over her breast. "Flee for your own life. You have been loyal to my father, and so I give you leave to save yourself."

As the commotion rose beyond the doors of the throne room, and shouts of frenzied soldiers echoed through the alabaster halls, the old magician fell weeping before his new and youthful sovereign, knowing he could never convince her to abandon her father's chair.

But because the inward vision of her destruction so filled his heart with pain, and because he knew the violence which awaited her defiance of the men who were even now clambering down the hallway toward the throne room, he raised his hands before the young girl and uttered an unthinkable spell. Though he didn't possess the skill to defeat an entire army of men, he did possess enough of a magical gift to bless the resolute princess and transform her into a marble likeness of herself—

When the soldiers burst into the room, their armor bloody with the gore of the magician's brethren, he knew they would not divine the statue they beheld was in truth the princess of the realm, and so her life would be spared until, through stealth, he might utter the mystical words by which she could again achieve mortality.

When the soldiers demanded the magician disclose the princess's place of hiding, he claimed she had fled the palace to escape upon a bark down the great River Sies.

But so angry were the soldiers for having been cheated of their stately execution of the princess that they gathered round the old magician and dropped their blades upon him, forever sealing the youthful sovereign within her enchantment.

The marble princess sat upon her marble throne, gazing imperceptibly upon the barbarians ransacking the treasures of her realm; but when they regarded her stony likeness, as beautiful as any work of art they'd ever beheld, they left it unmolested as an ornament to be bestowed upon the steward who would sit upon the throne of the defeated realm of Zir, once

their own King Brocus had assigned the duty.

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The stewardship of Zir fell to the son of the conquering king.

Prince Jonis rode into the kingdom with an entourage of soldiers and warhorses clad in brilliant armor, for his father was king to a violent people, and he'd only known the cruelty of tyrannical philosophies. The beautifully carved bridges and houses of porphyry seemed so unlike the dense granite fortifications of his father's donjon, which had been built to withstand the assault of lethal war machines. The frozen expressions of graceful statues met his gaze as he paraded through the smooth paved streets even while laborers still carried the dead from the places where they'd fallen, and this juxtaposition of profound art and human carnage settled in his heart with a heaviness that belied his militaristic upbringing.

These glorious exhibitions of gifted sculptors and architects touched his sensibilities but did not significantly impact his attitude, for he must sit on the throne of Zir as his father's minister and enact all of his sovereign's commands, even unto the destruction of the civic beauty he beheld.

But when Prince Jonis entered the palace of Zir, intent on establishing an uncompromising presence on the throne, he spied the marble princess within the throne room of the defeated king and stood transfixed before her beauty.

Though a prince may have all he pleases in the role of majesty, quiet any hunger, fulfill any desire, Prince Jonis had never known a tender feeling for another, for among his people the men were raised to become warriors and conquerors, and human sympathies only interfered with soldierly duties; but when he beheld the vision of Princess Mira, as radiant in stone as in life, he could not surpass the barrier of her beauty which lay between himself and his responsibilities.

"Who is this woman?" he asked, to no one and to everyone, because he'd lost his sense of himself in the shadow of her beauty.

"This is the likeness of Princess Mira," an old adviser said, bowing, one of many such men assigned to serve the prince. "The daughter of the vanquished King Ezis."

Prince Jonis laid his hand upon the marble of her throne, feeling the coolness of the stone and wishing he felt warmth instead. "Where is she now?"

"Exiled," the adviser said, perplexed by the young man's fascination. "Or slain with her people."

Prince Jonis turned upon the old adviser, his eyes wide with the thought that such a lovely woman lay burning in a funerary pyre. "Find her. If she lives, bring her to me. If she is dead, bring forth her body that I may confirm her passing from this world. Now!"

Despite his surprise at his sovereign's command, the old adviser quickly left the room to gather a legion to search the realm, for he knew quite well the whims of tyrants.

Prince Jonis stood gazing upon the marble princess, studying the lines of her white body, the flowing tresses of stone, and the lovely face which returned his stare as if the girl's soul still resided within the sculpture. Her eyes of pale marble watched him sadly, and he felt her sadness in his heart, which should have been impenetrable and cold, but now beat with a growing affection for the woman he observed.

For weeks the young prince sat beside the marble princess on a throne chair subsidiary to hers, ministering to the soldiers and workmen who must now labor to fortify the kingdom against further attacks from neighboring realms, for as steward he had been assigned to secure the interests of his father. Nor would he leave her side, even to sleep, but slept beside her likeness on a filthy cot bringing concerned comments from his advisers and statesmen.

At last the old adviser returned and declared that the princess could not be found,

either in life or death. “She must have fled this country for another, my liege.”

Prince Jonis, on hearing this pronouncement, turned his face away from the old adviser so the man could not see his tears. “Send emissaries to our neighboring realms. And if the emissaries cannot find her then send our best spies. Return her to me.”

“This is most unusual. What will your father say?”

Prince Jonis rose from his chair, pulled his baselard from his belt and held its blade to the old adviser’s throat. “Do as *I* say, or prepare to search for her in the next life.”

Chastised, the old adviser gathered his cloak around his shoulders and fled the throne room intent on avoiding his own execution; whatever mania attended the young prince, he would rather indulge its excesses than suffer its wrath.

While emissaries and spies infiltrated the surrounding realms, the young prince continued his uninterrupted observances before the marble princess, standing before her in rapt attention as he studied her flawless and quiet face for signs of character and attitude. In such attendance he seemed to sense her thoughts, as if her spirit were communicating with him, or perhaps this was only his desire for her company consuming his mind. He came to believe he could hear her voice speaking to him, but only within his thoughts as if he alone were privileged to hear her words.

Yes, he felt she *was* speaking to him, telling him of other times, of her life in the beautiful city, so much so that he finally left her side in the alabaster halls to walk the streets of Zir, rejoicing in its fountains and bridges, in its ornate balustrades and columns, because *she* had walked the same streets not long before. He imagined his own footsteps following in hers and came to see the same artistic wonder of delicate architectures even as workmen now labored to topple these structures in order to replace them with dense walls and bulwarks.

And because he realized they would be destroying all that was precious in her eyes, he halted the workmen’s progress and commanded their parties to rebuild all they’d destroyed, so when she finally returned to Zir she would be pleased to see her native realm in its original beauty—she would love him for his efforts to preserve its grandeur.

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But as months passed without good report from his spies and emissaries, the young prince grew despondent and tarried by the marble princess, speaking to her in gentle tones as if she could hear his words and be comforted; he believed he could hear her encouraging his efforts to uphold the philosophy of beauty and artistic grace begun by her father.

Because he loved her in absentia, he cultivated the aesthetic presentation of all within Zir, the architecture, the gardens, the smooth paved roads, and elegant statuary serving as sentinels among the terraces and bridges of the lands, for he dreamed that one day she *would* return to give favor to his enterprises.

The dignitaries who served the prince did not share his enthusiasm for art and wondered after his sensibilities, fearing he’d lost his senses over the marble princess—many began whispering of enchantments and curses, but not openly, for they feared Prince Jonis’ reprisals. But soon word of the young prince’s unsoldierly conduct reached King Brocus, his father, which confounded the king, for he’d trained his son in the ways of war and couldn’t fathom why his instructions for the conversion of Zir had been so blatantly disregarded.

So King Brocus rode to the conquered kingdom of Zir to reprimand his son and burst into the throne room where Prince Jonis stood conversing with the statue of the errant Princess Mira.

“What have you done?” the elder man said in the company of his entourage. “I’ve seen nothing of the ramparts and battlements I commanded be built within these lands. All I’ve seen are crystal fountains, carven bridges, and statues guarding the streets. Why have you not

done as I've asked?"

The young prince turned away from the marble princess, angry his father had interrupted their quiet discourse. "I have made this country beautiful for the princess."

His father regarded him as if he'd lost his reason. "I have conquered this kingdom and killed its king. I am the ruler of this land!"

"She will return and be my princess," Prince Jonis said, turning to glance at the beautiful woman upon the throne of stone. "This land will remain beautiful, as she is beautiful, to greet her on her return."

The incredulous king stared at the marble princess, astounded his son spoke fondly for an image carved into base rock. "She is dead or banished. She will never return."

"She will return! You will say no more of her!"

Startled by his son's impudence but hardened by his warrior's spirit, King Brocus turned upon his entourage, pulled a war hammer from the belt of one of his soldiers and swung violently at the marble statue which had confiscated his son's sanity. The blow struck across the perfect torso, splitting the rock and breaking the marble princess in twain.

For a moment Prince Jonis stared at his father as the man stood over the mournful face of the shattered princess; and then, without a word, he pulled his baselard from his belt and thrust it fully into his father's heart. King Brocus fell beside the fragments of the marble princess—those present swore the blood of *two* people pooled upon the floor that day.

But despite King Brocus' devastating strike upon her, the marble princess had brought her revenge upon the man who'd killed her father. And though Prince Jonis commanded his artisans to repair the broken statue, the princess never spoke to him again, nor did the beauty and splendor of Zir survive, for it fell to inevitable decay, as did the love once held in the young prince's heart.



Stained Glass Escutcheon (12.5" x 20.25")
by Phillip Fitzsimmons