



**Selected excerpts from the novel**

# AELIA

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- 2) Do you think that fate is something we must submit to like servants?
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# ervitude and obedience

(Chapter I, 12)

“Are you planning to kill someone?” asked Gundred.

“Does lightning plan anything? No, it strikes. That’s all.”

“No one would take so many risks without having a specific goal.”

“You mean no one who has been raised among the paupers, to serve and obey.”

“You’ll find out very quickly that even the nobility serves and obeys.”

Aelia was looking out the window as the procession crossed a deserted and arid land. She was no longer interested in the discussion. As Gundred tried to be provocative and bold in her reasoning, claiming to know the meaning of the words *servitude* and *obedience*, Aelia understood that she agreed with Gundred on at least one point: there was a whole world between them. The servitude and obedience of the nobility of Namos surely did not result in you breaking your back, eating away at your health, shortening drastically your life expectancy, and sometimes even humiliating your modesty and your intimacy. If the words *servitude* and *obedience* did not have the same meaning at all for the stranger and the duchess, how could they understand each other?

Aelia did not try to convince Gundred that a much dirtier, bloodier, and stinkier world existed outside of Tarincour’s Castle and the king’s court.

**D**o you think that fate is something  
we must submit to like servants?

*(Chapter I, 14)*

“It’s not the disease or infections in Turian that you should fear, it’s me. Between your patience and my fury, what do you prefer?”

“My patience.”

“Then why do you put so much energy into wanting to annoy me? You’ll get exhausted, my dear Gundred. You were part of a reckless plan that had nothing against you, no more than the lightning that strikes at random. Blaming me for it is as wise as blaming the lightning. It doesn’t make sense. It goes against logic, especially since I don’t want to be your enemy either. Quite the contrary,” Aelia confessed, taking Gundred’s hand and speaking to her with touching kindness.

Maybe Aelia was not a brute... maybe unfortunate circumstances, a silly plan, and the anxiety of possibly being executed had temporarily overshadowed her heart, thought Gundred.

“We could have been friends,” continued Aelia with a softer voice. “We could have been even more than friends. Much more... But fate decided otherwise. Unfortunately... Do you think that fate is something we must submit to like servants?”

Aelia stroked Gundred’s face, pretending to remove a speck of dust.

“Mm... Not necessarily... Maybe in other circumstances...” replied Gundred, confused.

Aelia nodded, looking at her with affection. Gundred didn’t doubt the sweetness that suddenly emanated from Aelia.

“In other circumstances...,” Aelia repeated.

They looked at each other. The embarrassment and mutual fascination were greatly felt between the two. Gundred no longer knew what to think of Aelia. She wanted to hate her, but she

couldn't. After all, she was the one who threatened her with torture, and Aelia only reacted.

In such circumstances, how would I have reacted, Gundred wondered. Would I have had the courage to take over the situation as Aelia did? Or would I have let myself be led to punishment? I might not have had so much courage. I must recognize that. I don't know who she is, and she's probably a scoundrel, but a scoundrel with so much courage and gentleness may not deserve the contempt I try so hard to feel for her without really succeeding.

Gundred's thoughts and emotions were jumbled. Idleness and daydreaming often led her to overthink her emotions, without really drawing rational reasoning from them. Aelia had a past, which you will soon discover, that kept her from so many fantasies and, instead, favored purely effective thinking. She had never been around someone of the rank of Gundred for so long and wanted as much as possible to resemble her, to adopt her manners, her language, to better infiltrate this world she didn't know. The imitation of Gundred necessarily provoked a form of affection.

## **Q**ueen Estrilda *(Chapter I, 17)*

Queen Estrilda walked in the corridors of the castle with a determined step. She was known for her serious face. Or rather, for her half of a serious face. The right half of her face was covered by a gold mask, engraved with geometric patterns and adorned with tiny gemstones. This half-mask hid a hideous face, probably a wound, that no one had seen and whose origin was unknown to anyone. This mask was as cold and beautiful as the other half of the face it didn't cover. No one in Namos could

boast of having seen her smile, or even cry, or even doubt. After so many years married to King Yarick and unofficially assisting him in the governance of the kingdom; after so many wars, conflicts, and barbaric threats; after so many internal plots, breaches of respect to authority, overly ambitious courtesans who would have liked to take her place, Queen Estrilda had purged from her heart all the useless emotions in her determination to make the king's order and authority prevail.

Surrounded by her personal guard, she arrived at a door guarded by two soldiers. One of them opened the door for her.

(...)

“Have you heard of the arrival of the stranger?” asked Estrilda.

“What are you talking about?”

“It seems that Gundred has brought a strange woman who intrigues the whole court.”

The king turned his head a few inches.

“How will gossip help me rule my kingdom?” he asked curtly.

“If the gossip is true, the stranger has some feats of arms and would be of a lineage that deserves attention, either because it is very honorable or because they are false. In either case, one might well wonder why a lady like Gundred is scheming with this stranger at the court.”

The king turned around. They exchanged a look that showed, for both of them, the desire to clarify the situation.

“The ladies of the court are not all your enemies,” he said.

“Unfortunately, I fear that all of them are not necessarily your allies either,” replied the queen, with the cold relevance that was unique to her and that the king particularly appreciated.

**E**verything is to be taken  
by force and by rage

*(Chapter I, 19)*

“My only lucky star is dead. I’m walking through darkness now.”

“If you wish to have a lucky star again and come out of the darkness, come back to me, and I will be your lucky star.”

Aelia didn’t hear Gundred. She couldn’t. She was indeed in the darkness. If she had heard it, a lot of blood would not have been destined to be spilled, and perhaps she would have known, if not happiness, at least a certain respite.

But what occupied Aelia’s mind was not her lucky star, the happiness that Gundred wanted to build with her, and for which she was not ready anyway. Maybe later. For now, after the last events that turned her vision of the world upside down, including this night with Gundred, another thought was forming in her mind....

So everything is to be taken by force and by rage, everything is to be enjoyed in the present moment, thought Aelia.

Gundred spent the night with a feeling of happiness she’d never known. Aelia spent the night with a desire to conquer the world she never felt before.

**T**he two types of people  
who lower their eyes

*(Chapter I, 21)*

“Hear ye! Hear ye!” exclaimed a crier. “Please welcome the king’s guest of honor! She is the daughter of a great general of the Kingdom of Amerya. She has commanded battalions of

soldiers several times to defend her kingdom. She comes straight from the very faraway and ruthless lands of Amerya, Lady Aelia!”

The large doors of the great hall opened. Silence reigned in the hall, and everyone watched her with curiosity, jealousy, or more often with admiration. Aelia, with a masterly look, went to sit in the place of the guest of honor at the empty table of the king. How could the others have doubted the greatness of Aelia’s character when she herself was more and more convinced of it? She was slowly becoming the one she had never dared to be. In the assembly, many, if not all, felt inferior to her. A simple staging was enough to define everyone’s roles. Aelia’s role was that of an admirable and majestic guest, with impressive military conquests. The role of Namos’s nobility was to admire her. Everyone played their part perfectly.

So, we only bow to kings because they have a crown, she thought. Even if they are all too human, after all. Common and dispensable like everyone else.

If they all looked up to her, it was natural for her to look down on them.

Have you noticed that there are two types of people in the world who lower their eyes? Those who do it out of fear, and those who do it out of interest. The former don’t even think about it; it only takes a slightly too imperative order so that their survival instinct, their natural submission, makes them look to their feet. The latter, impressed by no one, do it only by pure calculation. The former restrain themselves from not crying, the latter from not smiling. The former are cowards. The latter strategists.

Guinevere belonged to the former, Aelia to the latter. And Guinevere was becoming more and more Aelia. Maybe one day she could be part of a third type of person, she thought – those who no longer lower their eyes.

# **T**he spectacle of torture

(Chapter I, 25)

Without Aelia even realizing it, the hours had passed, and it was already the end of the show. Each of the spectators would go home with a crazy desire to respect the law and authority. Aelia, who had come with apprehension, realized that she had nothing to be afraid of. If the queen had forced her to watch torture, it was to frighten her. But if the queen needed to frighten Aelia so much, it was because Aelia was to be feared.

She is right to fear me, thought Aelia. The nobility and luxury life may have numbed my rage for a few days. But why should I be afraid of death if I have nothing left to lose? And since we all have an appointment with the Grim Reaper one day or another, why not meet it in the greatest pain?

This world is not mine. I didn't make the rules. I will not suffer them. Whoever wants to torture me should do so, but they should do it without hesitation because I will not hesitate. I will not hesitate anymore. During the one night that I vaguely tasted the joys that life can offer, I promised myself to take everything by rage and force and to enjoy everything in the moment. It's up to me to make sure that these words become actions – and let those who stand in my way regret it bitterly. Very bitterly.

The spectacle of torture, which was intended to keep Aelia in a certain submission, did the opposite. It made her understand that she feared neither death, nor torture, nor suffering, and that she had a whole world to conquer. A slight smile appeared on Aelia's face as the show drew to a close.

As the torturer began to put his tools away, she walked up to the stage where the tortures took place. She put her hand on a torture table and rubbed her fingers in blood. She touched one of the torture instruments and took one to see how it worked.

“Be careful, my lady,” said the torturer. “It's dangerous.”

So am I, thought Aelia.



**W**e are in the eyes of others  
only what we seem to be

*(Chapter I, 28)*

“Good morning,” said the queen.

“Good morning,” replied Aelia with a mixture of shyness, embarrassment, and slight anguish.

The queen was wearing her mask. Only the beautiful part of her face was visible. The other part was covered by the mask that only gave her more nobility. She was wearing a beautiful dress. The carmine-red silk fabric was covered with patterns sewn with gold threads that wrapped around her arms and went up to her neck. But Queen Estrilda did not need all the pomp to command respect. Without crown or jewelry, without a mask or even clothes, the queen shone with an unmatched majesty. A cold, implacable, and dominant but nevertheless admirable majesty. Aelia felt like a teenager next to the queen. And she thought that, if she had to be murdered, she might as well be murdered at the queen’s hands.

Then, Aelia remembered that we are in the eyes of others only what we seem to be. So she straightened her head and assumed a majestic look as well. Then, she thought that, behind her majestic air, Estrilda might be tormented by a thousand passions. Maybe she was even scared to death. In any case, the queen had chosen Aelia to keep her company and felt in competition with someone who, a few weeks earlier, had her hands full of mud from the land she was plowing. A peasant girl worried a queen, Aelia thought, trying to contain her smile, which disappeared very quickly when she remembered that the queen would soon end her life.



## he attack in the Valley of Lourac

(Chapter I, 30)

The procession continued to move forward in the Valley of Lourac, surrounded by hills on both sides.

In the carriage, the atmosphere was heavy. Neither the queen nor Aelia looked at each other. Aelia watched the passing landscape. There were few sights in the world that inspired as much humility as seeing the massive beauty of natural landscapes.

A scream was heard! Then another!

“Arrows! We are attacked! We’re under attack!” shouted a soldier before receiving an arrow right in the eye.

Arrows landed violently in the direction of the procession. Some pierced carriages; others hit horses or soldiers.

At the top of the hills, brigands appeared and sped toward the procession, screaming like crazy. Some shot arrows with their bows or crossbows, and Estrilda’s men began to fall before trying to protect themselves and starting to shoot back arrows at the brigands.

Aelia looked out the window. An arrow landed right next to her in the wall of the carriage.

“Get down! Get down!” shouted Aelia to the queen.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re under attack! You have to hide. They mustn’t find you.”

The brigands arrived near the procession and the bloody and deadly sword clashes began.

Aelia tore her dress easily and took out her dagger. She opened the door of the carriage slowly and tried not to be noticed. The way was pretty clear. She walked toward a dead soldier and took his sword and shield before quickly returning to the carriage.

“Hide under the carriage. Quickly!”

The queen didn't even take time to think. She threw herself to the ground and crawled under the carriage. Her servant did the same.

“What are you going to do?!” asked the queen, panicked.

“Protect you,” said Aelia. “Stay hidden here.”

Aelia gave the sword to the servant, who didn't even know how to hold it.

“Protect the queen!”

Aelia put the shield against the carriage to protect the queen. Then, she took another sword and shield from a dead soldier and so threw herself into battle.



AELIA available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

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