

SNEAKER BUNKO 

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ロードス島戦記

灰色の魔女

角川スニーカー文庫

Record of Lodoss War

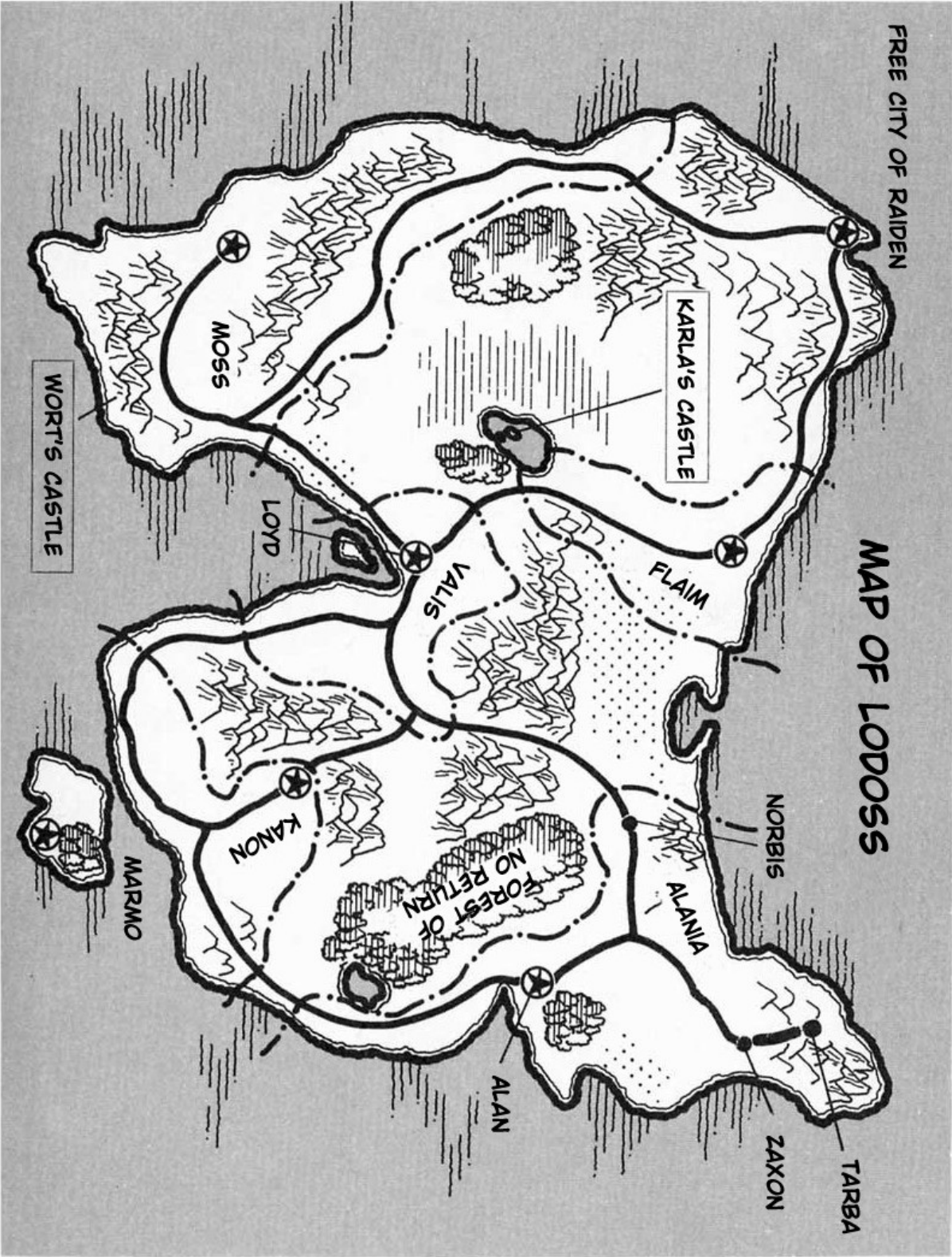


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Part I: The Adventurers

Chapter 1

It was finally spring, and the white marble walls of the temple of Marfa shone in the sunlight. Here and there, in the patches of brown earth no longer blanketed by snow, yellow-green blades of grass were beginning to show, and yellow wildflowers were growing next to the main road leading from the temple to the center of town.

Tarba was the northernmost village on the island of Lodoss. It was a small town, counting perhaps as many as one hundred residents, on a small plain surrounded by the White Dragon Mountains. Due to the cold created by the gathering of many ice spirits, spring came later there than elsewhere.

Aside from the dwarven community known as the Kingdom of Stone and the largest temple to Marfa, the goddess of the earth, in all of Lodoss, the foothills around this small village were completely covered by an evergreen forest. The villagers' livelihoods came chiefly from the forest and from trading with the dwarves, but the money brought by pilgrims was also an important source of income for them.

As spring came and the snow blocking the roads melted, young people would come from all over Lodoss to seek the blessing of Marfa, who was also the goddess of marriage.

For Neese, the head priestess, that signaled the arrival of a busy season.

“You mean you’re going on a journey?”

Neese had received a visitor in her room inside the temple. She was wearing the white, flowing robe of a priestess of Marfa, with Marfa’s symbol embroidered in green on the left side of the chest. Her fifty-plus years of age showed in the deep wrinkles riven into her face. However, even sitting in her chair, her back was straight, and she didn’t seem frail in the least. She exuded so much vitality that people would turn their heads to look at her as they passed.

“Yes, I am taking a trip.” Neese’s visitor replied brusquely. He was short, about half

the height of a full-grown human. From his disproportionately large face there grew a thick gray beard. The pointed end hung down over his green-clad stomach, swaying with each word.

The visitor was a dwarf. What else could he be, with a physique like that! The light brown eyes in his snow-tanned face met Neese's own.

"Why?" Neese stood up from her chair and knelt near the dwarf.

"Do I need a reason? I'm leaving because I want to leave. That's all." In his brusque manner of speaking, his stubbornness, so typical for a dwarf, shone through. The same stubborn nature gave this seemingly clumsy mountain people their masterful craftsmanship. They could turn raw ore and rocks into the finest of gems or handcrafted goods.

Neese knew this dwarf's nature well. Once he got started, there was no way of changing his mind.

"If you're worrying about Leylia, you're wasting your energy. I've already given up on her."

As she said that, a grimace flashed across her face and was gone. The only time her years seemed to weigh heavily on her was when the subject of her daughter Leylia came up.

Leylia had disappeared seven years earlier. Seven years ago, in the spring, someone had broken into the temple while Neese was at the dwarven mine, healing Ghim, who had received a life-threatening injury in a mining accident. There were signs of a struggle - it seemed Leylia had fought with the intruder, but ultimately succumbed and was kidnapped.

Neese was greatly saddened by her daughter's disappearance, but Ghim the dwarf suffered an even greater hurt. From that time forward, he made constant trips to and from the temple, helping Neese in any way he could.

Ghim met Neese's remark with silence. The dwarf did not lie — instead he refused to answer. Neese gave a little smile.

"Ghim, you know that getting hurt in that accident was in no way your fault. Why would someone breaking into the temple be your responsibility? Even to the goddess Marfa, it was an unforeseeable fate."

The dwarf did not respond.

Neese gently placed her right hand on Ghim's arm and gazed into his eyes.

"I have asked Marfa about her fate any number of times. Is she alive, is she dead? Where is she?" Saying this, Neese remembered the goddess' words, the same response, repeated each time.

"And how did Marfa respond?" Ghim asked quietly.

"With a strange riddle. 'She lives, but does not exist.' Those were the goddess' words."

Ghim gazed at Neese's sorrowful face. He had known her since his childhood. She was the kind of woman who had hidden depths of strength and kindness. Before Leylia's disappearance, he had never seen her face clouded with sadness. Even knowing that he

was not responsible for Leylia's disappearance, Ghim felt obligated to look for her. He knew the pain in Neese's heart and he shared it, so much so that he could no longer stand to live peacefully in his cave.

"I'm no good at thinking, so I can't help you with that riddle. But I am strong. I've been training so that I can drag your missing daughter back."

In spite of their brusqueness, dwarves were a kindhearted people. Loving justice more than anyone, they believed in their ability to surmount any obstacle.

Neese remained silent for a moment. Then she shook her head and opened her mouth as though to say something before closing it again. Changing her mind, she closed her eyes, nodded three times and spoke.

"Thank you, Ghim. In that case, please bring my daughter back."

Hearing Neese's words, Ghim narrowed his eyes.

"Leave it to me. I will bring her back without fail. Then the goddess' mysterious riddle will be solved," replied the dwarf, raising his voice a little.

Neese pulled the dwarf in and hugged him tightly with her thin arms.

"So, when will you leave Tarba?"

"Hm. Once I pass by my house, I plan to leave right away."

"Traveling is dangerous. But it's not like it was when I once went on a journey. Even so, you can never be too careful. I will pray to Marfa for your safety."

When Neese was young, she too had traveled. But it was not for fun - no, it was a quest. It was a dark era, when many demons, once sealed in the Labyrinth of the Deep in southwestern Lodoss, had escaped and sown death and destruction across the island. In order to fight these demons, Neese had had no choice but to take sword in hand and set out across Lodoss. Having sealed away the demons after a terrible battle, she became known as one of the Six Heroes. But she did not take pride in that name.

"Thank you, ô priestess of Marfa. Please pray in my stead that I solve the riddle and bring you your daughter safe and sound, for I am not a praying man."

"Where are you headed?"

"I'll go to Zaxon first. There's no other road, and in any case my acquaintance Slayn lives there. Beyond that, I have no plans. I'll follow the road where it takes me."

Ghim the dwarven craftsman set off on his journey to the south only a few hours later. His path was covered by strangely gloomy gray clouds.

Chapter 2

There once was an island by the name of Lodoss.

It was a large island located to the south of the continent of Alecrast. To get to the island from Alecrast would take about twenty days by ship. Due to this distance, there was little contact between the continent and the island of Lodoss. It would be fair to say that the only real contact the people of Lodoss had with the continent was the trade carried out by the galleys of the free city of Raiden, located in the northwestern part of

the island.

Among the people of the continent, there were those who called Lodoss “The Cursed Island”. Truly, on Lodoss there were many places that one could not help but consider cursed. The Forest of No Return, the Desert of Wind and Fire, and the Dark Island, Marmo. In underground labyrinths throughout the land, horrible monsters slithered, and the teachings of the dark god Falaris still held sway.

Thirty years earlier, powerful demons had broken the seal of the demon palace known as the Deep Labyrinth, enveloping all of Lodoss in the depths of terror.

The fight against the demons lasted three years but in the end, the humans, dwarves, and elves renewed the seal, trapping the demons once again. After thirty years, even the scars left by this battle had healed, and life had returned to a boring but peaceful rhythm. But tales of this incident reached as far as Alecrast, confirming the rumors that Lodoss was cursed. To the residents of Lodoss, their island’s reputation was a trifling matter - they were too busy with the important matters of their day-to-day lives to care.

On Lodoss, several kingdoms flourished.

The biggest of these was the mountain kingdom of Moss in the southwestern part of the island. The ancient gold dragon Mycen, known as the Dragon Lord, still lived there, and had become the patron diety and the symbol of the kingdom.

In the center of the island was the Holy Kingdom, Valis. It was a peaceful kingdom ruled by one of the Six Heroes who had shut the demons inside the Deep Labyrinth, King Fahn. The followers of the supreme diety Pharis being numerous, his temples were of course powerful in Valis. Since the king himself was crowned on the authority of the temple, the strict laws of Pharis were enforced throughout the land.

The desert beyond Valis had recently become the kingdom of Flaim after a heated battle with the desert tribesmen. Lead by the Mercenary King, Kashue, who had the reputation of a great man, and his knights, it was a lively young country.

Kanon, the country in the southeast, was lead by a scholarly king. There, the land was bountiful, and it was famed for its riches.

The island to the south, Marmo, was also known as the Dark Island. In addition to great numbers of evil goblins, most of the criminals exiled from the main island of Lodoss took refuge on Marmo. Twenty years earlier, a soldier calling himself Emperor Beld had conquered the island and made it into an empire. Of course, many were those who disobeyed the new emperor, and the flames of insurrection blazed across the island on multiple occasions. But each time, Beld personally lead his troops, ruthlessly crushing the rebels. In recent years, Marmo had enjoyed a sort of peace, though perhaps only in appearance.

Finally, in the northeastern part of the island was Alania, the oldest of Lodoss’ kingdoms, known for its vibrant culture. Its cobblestone streets and the marble castle built by dwarves were the pride of its people.

In the kingdom of Alania, there was a town called Zaxon. It was a small town situated in the middle of a peninsula to the north of Alania’s capital city, Alan. Though it was less than a ten days’ journey from Alan, it was a simple village, in contrast to that

great city.

The people of Zaxon were faced with a great problem.

“I said I would defeat them!”

The bang of a fist on a table resounded through the only tavern in Zaxon. The wooden cup that had been sitting on the table fell over, spilling its contents.

About thirty villagers were assembled in the tavern. A young man was standing at a table in the front, and the others were sitting here and there in a variety of chairs. The young man was fully clad in plate armor, with a bastard sword hanging at his waist. The sword had a long hilt so that it could be used two-handed if necessary. Since he also bore a thick shield on his back, if he'd had a helmet he would have been the perfect picture of a knight. But on his breast, instead of the insignia of some king or lord, his armor bore only a few deep scratches.

“Listen up, Parn.” The village chief spoke to the young man glaring at him as though rebuking a child. “Even if you go by yourself, it won't solve anything. Yes, the enemy is just a band of goblins, but they are numerous. No matter how much confidence you have in your prowess, there is no way you can defeat so many of them.”

Parn scowled at him, not hiding his frustration. This whole time, the villagers and chief had kept repeating the same arguments. Their stubbornness and cowardice knew no bounds.

“That is exactly why I came to you for help! As you say, Eto and I have little chance against such a large band of goblins on our own. But those of us assembled here can fight! If we show fear before a mere band of goblins, we will bring shame upon our village!”

Parn looked around the group. Everyone avoided his gaze, and he waited patiently for someone, anyone, to lift their head and look him in the eye.

The village's problem was, of course, goblins. As soon as the snow had melted, a band about twenty of them had set up residence in a nearby cave. It had been three months since they moved in, but they had yet to make any move against the village. Knowing the evil nature of goblins, though, it would not be long before they would visit some calamity upon their neighbors.

Parn had called together all those villagers who seemed fit to fight in the hopes of defeating the goblins. Thirty villagers ought to have a clear advantage over only twenty goblins. But he had not counted on their reaction...

“Nothing bad has happened yet. Maybe nothing will ever happen. Why should we go seeking trouble, and give them a reason to fight us? And if anything goes wrong, they will surely take the opportunity to attack the village as well,” murmured one of the villagers. Parn looked at him in despair. It was Zamjee the hunter. Parn had been counting on his prowess as an archer most of all.

“Zamjee, that's a dangerous idea. You know as well as I how awful the goblins are. If we wait until the village is in danger, it will be too late. But if we beat them now, the danger will be gone.”

As Parn said, he knew of the evil of goblins. Like elves, they were fae, but in the distant past they had entered the service of the god of darkness and their forms had become twisted and ugly.

“But-” Lyott, the woodcutter, looked up and raised his voice in protest. He was the strongest man in the village. Other villagers spoke up as well, but none of them agreed with Parn.

Given into his anger, Parn struck the table again. This time the table itself gave a jolt and fell over, landing on the floor with a loud bang.

“My father fought against thirty bandits! Are you saying that you don’t have even a tenth of his courage?”

“I’ve heard that story before. Didn’t your father abandon his post as a knight, meet those bandits while running away, and get himself killed?” Mort, the owner of the general store, said this in a sarcastic voice. Along with old Jet, the owner of the tavern, he was considered one of the most knowledgeable people in town.

All the blood drained from Parn’s face. “My father... don’t you dare insult my father!”

“I’m just repeating the rumors. If those rumors are false, why has the coat of arms of the Holy Knights been scratched off of your armor? Why did your mother have to leave Valis for a tiny village like this?”

Parn put his hand on the hilt of his sword. The urge to draw it and cut Mort’s head off boiled up from deep inside him. But taking arms against a civilian would have been an act of evil.

“I understand,” he muttered weakly, releasing his grip on his sword, “if that’s how it is, me and Eto will take care of it.”

Parn strode out of the room, flinging the tavern door open in front of him. Until the sound of his armor had faded, the villagers stayed in their seats, hanging their heads.

“He can’t seriously intend to go there with just Eto for company,” whispered Lyott to his neighbor, Mort.

“Of course not! Even he wouldn’t do such a reckless thing...” Mort said, as though trying to convince himself. The villagers were familiar with Parn’s character. If it was in the name of justice, he would rush into danger without a care in the world.

The village chief listened to this exchange for a moment, then quietly exited through the doors Parn had flung open and walked to a house just outside the village.

Parn returned to his house and opened the door. His heavy strides made the floor squeak, and the spikes on his boots dug new scratches into the wooden floor.

“How was it, Parn?” asked a voice from inside the room.

“Awful,” said Parn to the man standing in the room. It was a priest. He was wearing a bleached white cotton robe with a bright blue sash around the waist. The amulet hanging from his neck bore the symbol of Pharis.

The priest, Eto, was Parn’s childhood friend. Both of them had lost their parents at a young age, and this had drawn them together. Eto’s personality was the opposite of Parn’s - he showed little emotion and always acted with discretion and prudence. But

both of them had the conviction to see their goals through to the end, regardless of the obstacles in their way.

Listening to Parn's speech, Eto took his amulet in one hand and chanted the name of Pharis in a low voice.

"Well, it can't be helped. The villagers haven't gotten themselves mixed up in this, and even in the last war against the demons, this country was the only one that remained neutral."

"But I can't fight twenty goblins all on my own!" Parn sat down at the table in the center of the room, pulled his leather waterskin off of his back, and drank the contents in one gulp. Once he had finished, he let out a great sigh and dropped the waterskin on the table.

"That said, we cannot afford to leave the goblins alone. Everything is fine for the moment, but we don't know when they might pose a threat to the village." Placing his hand lightly on his amulet, Eto had taken the tone he used to convey the teachings of Pharis to the villagers. After four years of religious studies in Alania's temple of Pharis, Eto had finally been ordained a priest and returned home to Zaxon quite recently. He was not yet permitted to head up his own temple, but merely to teach at the side of the road or in meeting-houses.

"But can the two of us really do it? There are twenty of them! That's ten times as many!"

Perhaps an experienced warrior could have defeated ten, twenty, or even thirty goblins. But it would be years before Parn could hope to reach that level.

"There might be a way." Eto stood stock-still, deep in thought. His chin sunk into his chest, his eyes stared at nothing.

Since Parn had known Eto for most of his life, he knew better than to interrupt him when he was lost in thought. In any case, as a warrior, if he could train his body to cut down his enemies, that was enough.

"I don't think this is a very good strategy but..." Eto lifted his head and turned to face Parn.

Parn grinned. "You've made up your mind? Good, let's go."

Chapter 3

Slayn Starseeker's house was at the far northern edge of Zaxon. He had moved there two years earlier, and started teaching the villagers to read and write the alphabet, becoming a well-loved teacher.

But he also had a reputation for being odd. In his little house there were piles of books everywhere, and many cabinets full of carefully labeled and organized bottles containing dried herbs and insects. He also had the habit of staring up at the sky late at night, muttering to himself. For those reasons, few dared to approach his house, but on this day, not one but two visitors stopped in.

Philmar, the village chief, was of course surprised to see another visitor, but his shock doubled when he realized that visitor was no human, but rather a dwarf. The aforementioned dwarf awkwardly introduced himself as Ghim. At that moment, Slayn was opening a bottle of ale for Ghim.

Philmar told Slayn everything — that Parn and Eto were headed off to fight the goblins. That none of the villagers wanted to help them. He asked Slayn to go save the two youngsters.

“Goblins!?!”

The one who had yelled this in anger was not Slayn, but rather Ghim.

“How many are they? Did those dirty bandits come here to get their heads cut off by my battleaxe?”

The dwarf was wearing a full suit of chain mail and carried a huge double-edged battleaxe. With his sturdy helmet decorated on both sides with horns, he looked more like a warrior ready to charge into battle than a traveler.

“Goblins and dwarves have been fighting since time immemorial,” said Slayn by way of explanation to Philmar, whose jaw had dropped at the dwarf’s sudden transformation. Since hearing the word “goblin,” Ghim had gone stock-still, as though turned into a statue.

“That’s right, they’re nothing but a band of hateful thieves! Without even knowing what to do with them, they steal the beautiful gems and metal from under the earth. Since the dawn of time, us dwarves have cut off as many of their heads as there are stars in the sky, but the bastards breed like rabbits.”

“Well you know, there are infinite numbers of stars in the sky,” said Slayn softly to the dwarf. “Fortunately, there are only about twenty of them around here. But Parn and Eto can’t face that many. Did they really go on their own?”

Seeing the chief nod, Slayn realized that it was indeed likely that Parn would do such a thing. But though Slayn had only met him on his return from training, Slayn had taken Eto for a more level-headed fellow.

“Young people are no good at thinking logically, after all,” he muttered to himself. “Well, I can’t just stand by and let two such promising youngsters die. I ought to be able to take care of twenty goblins with my magic.”

“And my axe.” Ghim picked his battleaxe up off of the table and fastened it to his back.

“You’ll go?” Hope written on his face, the chief bowed deeply to Slayn.

“I, too, live in this village. Do not worry about it.”

Slayn stood as well and walked to the back of the room, where he picked up a wooden staff. It was a strange, twisted staff, with writing in a mysterious language scratched into its surface. But of the villagers, only Philmar recognized it. It was a Sage’s Staff only those certified as mages by the Academy of Sages were permitted to own. The owner of such a staff could easily accomplish great acts of magic. That is why, when no villager answered Parn’s call, Philmar had thought that Slayn might be able to help. Of course, he had not counted on finding a goblin-hating dwarf as well...

“Knowing Parn, he must have dashed off with minimal preparation. If we don’t hurry, we might be too late. Let’s go.”

Slayn pulled a single hefty tome out of its disorderly pile. On its cover, strange words were printed in gold. To those able to decipher ancient runes, the title read, “Slayn Starseeker’s Spell Book.”

About three hours east of Zaxon, a small cave mouth could be seen in a stone knoll. Once, a cheerful family of little people had lived there, but twenty years earlier they had moved and the cave had become a shelter for hunters. Children had also found it a wonderful playground, and even Parn and Eto used to play there. But since the goblins moved in, no one else had dared approach it.

Emerging from the forest and continuing along the stone path, Parn and Eto surveyed the disorderly scene in front of them. Huge boulders were scattered here and there, offering ideal hiding places where the goblins were unlikely to find them. Since goblins were creatures of darkness, they hated the midday sun above all else. The nocturnal creatures that they were, they ought to be fast asleep inside the cave during the day.

That was, of course, the reason Parn and Eto had decided to attack during the day. As long as the sun shone in the sky, Pharis’ power to destroy the darkness was at its strongest and the races of light had the advantage. Soaking up the spring sunlight, Eto and Parn closed in on the goblin den.

Eto’s strategy was a simple one. First, shoot the sentinels with bow and arrow. Then light some saplings on fire at the entrance to the cave in order to smoke out the goblins. If all went well, they would come dash out in a disorderly manner, reducing their ability to fight. They would pick off as many as possible from a distance, then Parn would fight the remaining goblins with his sword and Eto would use his mace. If they put their backs to the hill so as not to be surrounded, they would probably prevail against the goblins, weakened by sunlight as they would be.

Parn was no fond of archery, but given the goblins’ number, he had reluctantly agreed. As soon as they had decided on a strategy, Parn was as cheerful as if their victory had been assured, but Eto, who had come up with the plan, was still nervous. Watching Parn unsheath his bastard sword with a confident expression on his face, Eto grasped his amulet and uttered a brief prayer to Pharis.

When they arrived at the cave, seeing that his worries had been realized, Eto reflexively looked up at the sky. Parn was also chewing on his lip while looking at the two ugly goblins in front of them. Their reddish-brown skin partially covered by dirty rags wrapped around them, they wore shoddily-made shortswords hanging from the straw ropes they were using as belts. They bore wooden shields in their left hands and stood with their backs hunched, squinting into the sunlight. They looked somewhat like humans, but were about half as tall, and their bare limbs were thin and knobby, like gnarled wood. They had no hair at all, and their eyes and ears seemed too big for their faces. Their noses were so flat that they looked like little more than two holes, and their mouths formed a wide gash in their faces, revealing their yellowed canines and blood-red

tongues.

Not seeing Parn and Eto hiding in the shade of the rocks, the goblins were fidgeting, as though bored.

“Looks like we need to change our plan,” said Eto. They had only expected one watchman. If there had only been one, they would have been able to take him out in one go, with both Parn’s bow and Eto’s sling. But that plan had crumbled. If one of them missed his target, the rest of the plan would fail as well.

His uncertainty showing, Eto took his sling out of his pack and cast about for stones to throw.

“I’ll aim for the one on the right, you shoot the left one.” Parn pulled his bow off of his shoulder and strung it. He removed two oak arrows with falcon feather flights from his quiver and put them to the string.

Eto put a stone in his sling and slowly began to swing it around. Parn pulled back his bowstring.

“Now!”

As soon as he was sure of his aim, Eto gave the signal and fired. The arrow and the stone flew towards the watchmen at the same time.

“Gah!”

Both the arrow and the stone hit their targets and the two goblins wobbled on their feet. One of them crumpled to the ground.

But Eto saw what had happened. His stone had hit one goblin on the head, but Parn’s arrow had missed the other goblin’s vital spot and hit its shoulder instead. It was still alive!

Kashunk!

Parn shot the remaining goblin in its misshapen belly. Bright red blood gushed from the wound as it collapsed to the ground.

“Well, we’ve got no choice. We’ll just have to kill them one by one.”

With a great clanking noise, Parn and Eto shot out of the shadows of the rock in unison. Parn draw his bastard sword and lifted it up as though aiming for the sun. For a moment, light flashed along the blade.

While rehearsing his plan, Eto pulled two flasks filled with oil from his pocket. He threw them towards the cave mouth. They broke with a loud crack, splashing their contents around.

But by the time he got out his flint, he knew he wouldn’t make it in time.

Disgusting creatures were pouring out of the cave.

Luckily, a number of goblins slipped on the oil covering the ground around the entrance. One of them fell down the rock face with a strange grunt, hit its head, and stopped moving.

“Die, you bastards!” Parn’s yell echoed.

“Parn, let’s put our backs to the rock so they can’t surround us.”

Eto stopped Parn from charging head-first into the group of goblins and backed up against the boulder where they had hidden. Parn followed his example.

“Careful! They poison their blades!”

Since they had their backs to the rock, there was no risk of being surrounded, but they still had to fight against no less than twenty enemies. With many of them all around, it was too late for Parn and Eto to run. The fight would go on until they either collapsed or defeated all the goblins.

Parn was of course skillfully wielding his sword and shield like a true warrior. While blocking one attack with his shield, he struck out at another enemy with his sword. The goblin injured by his attack dropped like a rock, blood spurting from its shoulder. Parn finished it off with a blow to the back. It was nothing compared to what a veteran soldier might have done, but it was good enough for fighting goblins. Eto, too, had received combat training at the temple of Pharis. He could hold his own with mace and shield. And Eto moved faster than Parn. Dodging a goblin’s attack with deft footwork, he put all his power into a strike of his mace.

The sharp sounds on metal on metal and the dull sound of metal smashing into flesh filled the air. The goblins went down one by one under the blows of the two young men.

But there was a limit. Eto, inexperienced in combat as he was, began to tire, his breath growing ragged and his hands shaking.

When he noticed Eto’s fatigue, Parn began to fight more vigorously, in the hopes of finishing it quickly. With wide blows, he attacked the goblins facing Eto as well. Because of this, Parn too began to tire, but his greater combat training gave him more reserves.

Somehow they had reduced the goblins to half their original numbers. The foul stench of ten bloodied goblin corpses floated in the air. But the remaining goblins climbed over their comrade’s corpses and fought with a renewed determination, as though their anger had overcome their fear. Goblins who felt sure of winning were fearsome enemies.

“I guess this is it,” muttered Parn.

Even he was weakening. Seeing Eto burst into a coughing fit and lean weakly against the rock, Parn made up his mind.

He threw down his shield, held his bastard sword in both hands, and leaned forward. To motivate himself, he let out a strange yell.

“Ooo!”

And then he began.

He rammed into the two goblins trying to deal a finishing blow to the weakened Eto and on into a clump of four goblins, swinging his sword wildly like a berserker.

I wonder if you can call this an honorable death? Parn thought as he swung his sword. Dying in battle ought to be a good death for a warrior. But when his own father had met his end in a desperate battle against bandits when Parn was little, it had been called a dishonorable death, and he and his mother had been forced to flee Valis. Parn’s mother had died in an epidemic when he was ten. Since then, Parn had lived by hunting in the forest and helping in the fields. At sixteen he had donned his father’s armor and signed on as a mercenary in Flaim, where he fought the desert tribes for two years.

Afterward, he had returned to the village, where he helped defend the village, all while waiting for another chance to sell his services as a mercenary.

If he died dishonorably, what meaning was there in his life?

Just then, he felt something hot burn into his left shoulder. The pain shot through his body. A goblin had stabbed him from behind. Blood spurted out and stained his shoulder red.

Enduring the tooth-clenching pain, Parn spun around and cut down the goblin that had injured him. But, fighting in such difficult conditions, Parn lost his balance. As he crumpled under the weight of his armor, he tried to dig his spurs into the ground. Parn was helpless as he struck the ground with a great clanging and banging. Sparks flew where the metal hit the rock.

Another goblin leapt forward, taking advantage of the moment. Parn felt pain shoot through his left thigh. He saw that a goblin had thrust its short sword into his thigh and was trying to pull it out. As the goblin yanked on the sword, waves of pain washed over Parn. When he thought the pain had passed, he felt himself lose control over his muscles. The poison on the blade was starting to take effect.

Parn desperately tried to stand, but he no longer had the energy. As he gave in to his intense fatigue, Parn turned his head to see how Eto was doing. As he did so, the immense blue sky filled his gaze. The sight of it, with not one cloud in view, seemed to fill Parn with a strange satisfaction. Looking up at the sky, he let go of his sword and lay spread-eagled on the ground.

Parn watched the disgusting creatures plunge their swords towards his chest as though it was happening to someone else.

It was right then! An arrow sprouted from the chest of the goblin that was trying to kill him. With a sort of sigh the goblin collapsed, and Parn could hear another voice call out.

It was a language Parn had never heard before.

Along with that voice, the air seemed to thicken, and the world seemed to go dark as Parn passed out. As he lost consciousness, something bright flashed through his mind.

I see, that's how it is... Dad! Parn shouted inside his heart.

And then the darkness took him.

“Well, it looks like we made it,” muttered Slayn as he watched Ghim finish off the goblin with a crossbow. As the other goblins turned to look, Slayn uttered a few words in the ancient runic tongue.

“Ô peaceful airs that bring sleep.”

While reciting the spell, Slayn slowly waved his staff in the air. Three of the goblin reinforcements suddenly fell as though the life had fled from their bodies. Only two were left.

Ghim switched from his crossbow to his axe and jumped into the fray. Victory was decided in an instant. The goblin's head flew through the air, its face frozen in shock. The one remaining goblin turned to run, but Ghim cut it in half. The goblin's upper body fell to the ground with a thud, while the legs staggered unsteadily forward before

collapsing in turn. The blood gushing from the wound stained the ground red.

“Please finish off the sleeping goblins.”

While saying this, Slayn carefully surveyed his surroundings. He couldn't see a single goblin that was still moving.

Slayn faced the cave and concentrated. Then he chanted briefly in the ancient tongue. Using magic to magnify his perceptions, he cast mental feelers into the cave. He tasted the air in the cave, seeking out any remaining goblins. When his mind had touched the back wall of the cave, Slayn stopped chanting.

“It would seem the coast is clear,” Slayn said happily to Ghim, who was busy cutting goblin necks.

“I'm all done here too. I made sure all of them are dead.”

Slayn nodded. Then he walked over to Parn, who was still lying on the ground, and touched his neck. Something warm seeped onto his hand.

He's alive, but badly wounded. Slayn called Ghim over in a loud voice. “Help me out over here! If we don't hurry and get him home, it could be too late!”

Chapter 4

Slayn and Ghim took the injured Parn back to his house and laid him to sleep on his bed. Upon examination, Parn's wounds were deeper than they had appeared. Eto had no visible injuries, but Parn had injuries on his shoulder and leg as well as a head wound of unknown origin, the wound on his shoulder being the most dangerous. As soon as Eto had recovered from his fatigue, he demonstrated his priestly power by closing Parn's wounds. But the poison coating the goblins' blades had already spread throughout Parn's body.

Though his wounds had closed, it seemed he would not yet recover from his injuries. He tossed and turned in a fevered sleep. Eto and Slayn tried every remedy they could think of, but in the end, all they could do was trust in Parn's strength.

Three days after the battle, Parn's fever peaked. It seemed as though his whole body was burning, and no matter how often Eto went to get water from the stream, it was never enough to cool Parn off.

Whether Eto's efforts finally paid off, or Parn's inner strength was enough to purge the poisons, on the following morning his fever broke and he slipped into a quiet sleep. That evening, he awoke at long last.

Once he had awoken, Parn's recovery was rapid. Even so, it took him another three days before he was able to get out of bed.

So it was that one evening, Parn and Eto called on Slayn while he was wrestling with yet another arcane text.

“Oh, it's you lot.”

Ghim's brusque voice came from the entryway. While seeking news of Leylia, he was staying with Slayn.

Slayn had spread ancient texts across his desk and was chanting unintelligible words.

When he reached the entrance, Parn and Eto were waiting respectfully. Whether Ghim was vigorously cheering him on or insulting him, Parn consistently leaned down to listen to Ghim.

“Well, it would seem you’ve recovered.” Seeing the improvement in Parn’s complexion, Slayn nodded as if in approval. He still looked a little tired, but color had returned to his cheeks, and his eyes shone with a youthful radiance.

“I’ve been a bother to you.” Parn bowed his head deeply.

“If you want to thank anyone, you should thank your friend over there. If he hadn’t nursed you that faithfully, you might have died, no matter how strong your life force.”

As he spoke, Slayn realized that something was bothering Parn.

“I doubt you came here just to thank us. Please come in. It’s small, so please pardon the mess.”

“Thanks.” Parn bowed as he entered.

As Slayn had said, the room was small and crammed full of odds and ends. With four men inside, it was positively claustrophobic. What’s more, since there weren’t enough chairs, Eto and Ghim had to sit on the bed.

“It is as you say.” Though he was itching to get the words out, Parn was having trouble, but on Slayn’s urging he spoke. “I think I want to set out on a journey. I never intended to spend my whole life in this village, and we were made a laughingstock by those goblins. But for some reason everyone’s treating me like a hero. It pains me to get called a hero when I cannot claim the credit for our victory. You understand, right?”

“You know, whatever the result, your actions could truly be called heroic. There’s no need to be humble.”

But Parn was not the kind of man who could be satisfied with such words.

“There are many equally... no, even more wicked creatures than those goblins in the world. But I don’t have the power to face down such evil. All the more reason to leave. And Eto agrees with me as well. Not only would companions hearten me on my journey, we would be able to confidently face the dangers in our path.”

Slayn listened intently to Parn’s speech.

“So, you want to travel and get stronger. I understand that. What I do not understand is how you want me to help.”

“In short... in short, I would like you to accompany me in my travels. You’re a mage. Your magical powers would serve us well against the dangers we would face. And rumor has it that here in Lodoss there are any number of monsters that can only be defeated with magic. What do you think, Slayn? Would you oblige us by joining us in our travels?”

“Hmm.” Slayn pondered this, nodding to himself.

“That’s a good idea. I second it. I plan to leave this town to wander soon. If this mage comes too, he can earn our bread with his craft.” Ghim let out a deep belly laugh.

Slayn met the gaze of the young man who was staring him in the eye. He’d seen that look before.

His friend had proposed that they defeat the thieves' Guild of Alan. Even with Slayn's magical powers, the task was too great.

Slayn had refused his request. He had tried to stop his overenthusiastic friend. But he hadn't been able to change his mind. Slayn had even given him his own invisibility ring. But three days later, in the night, Slayn's friend was stabbed with a poisoned blade and was never seen again. After that, Slayn heard that the widely feared Guildmaster had been killed and replaced by one who forbade the use of force. Even so, Slayn believed he had made a mistake. Shouldn't he have stopped his friend on that last night when he had seen him alive? Slayn had never forgotten the sincerity in his friend's gaze. And now another youth turned that same gaze on him. He was about to set out on a journey he did not understand, fighting something unknown. Those eyes were saying, "follow me."

Slayn simply said, "That's a dangerous idea."

"What do you mean?" asked Parn, his expression perplexed.

Are the gods giving me a chance to make a different choice this time? Slayn wondered if the god of knowledge, Rahda, that he worshipped, might be at work.

Slayn closed his eyes for a moment, maintaining his silence, but at length he spoke in a quiet, hoarse voice.

"I understand. I will accompany you. Ghim has his own reasons to want to travel as well."

Opening his eyes, Slayn caught a glimpse of Parn exchanging a look with Ghim.

"Mmm," grunted Ghim, and turned away from Slayn.

"But let's hope there's no danger. I'm a bit of a wimp, you see."

Ghim was unable to hold back any longer, and roared with laughter. Eto and Parn merely looked at each other, surprised to have convinced Slayn so easily.

Part II: A Black Shadow over Alania

Chapter 1

At the edge of the forest, there was a gently sloping hill. The sides of the hill were covered with thick grass. A gray shadow, standing in the knee-deep grass, lifted both hands in the air. A strange voice lifted and was carried away by the wind.

Soon a shooting star split the dark night sky. Crimson, the afterimage of this missile hung in the air. Growing larger and larger, the track it had left became a rain of giant fireballs that pelted the hill. On the hill, there stood a solitary castle.

The light flared. Moments later, a loud boom, the sound of an explosion, could be heard. As the castle walls crumbled, the grass around them burst into flames. Illuminated by this inferno, the land around Kanon's royal palace, Shining Hill, shimmered like a mirage.

The emperor of Marmo, Beld looked upon this sight with all the solemnity of a priest officiating a ceremony. Mounted on a massive black warhorse, he wore a black cloak over his blood-red armor. So attired, he commanded the respect an emperor was due.

Beld was over sixty years old. At that age, many a ruler would have been dozing away the days in his throne room. But he had the body of a man in the prime of his life. Even Beld, looking on his own reflection, saw a demon in the glass. That was thanks to the magical power held in the longsword he wore across his back. The longsword once held by a great demon still let forth an evil aura now that the one who had defeated the demon carried it. The sword had taken countless lives and destroyed many souls. Even now, it was vibrating in its sheath, as though in ecstasy from killing so many new victims.

Behind him, the hundred-some mounted knights who had come to look over the blazing ruin of the castle let out an exultant victory yell. But Beld's expression did not change.

Beld had been hiding in the woods at the foot of the hill, waiting for this moment. But the battle was far from won. Even in the chaos of the burning castle, the enemy's

numbers were ten times that of Beld's forces.

Stepping out of the shadows and advancing slowly through the long grass, Beld turned back to look at the elite fighters waiting for his signal. He slowly lifted his right hand, then brought it down in a flash.

With a rumble that shook the earth, Beld's knights, all clad in identical black armor, charged out of the forest and up the hill towards the castle. The battle cries they screamed melded together into an earth-shaking song of death. Beld himself took off after them, drawing his sword and holding it straight in front of him. It was an evil sword that seemed to swallow all the light around it. The dark aura emanating from its blade was visible even in the darkness of the night. The air grew heavy under the weight of its evil energy.

"Are you heading out yourself, your majesty?"

Suddenly a voice rang out from his side. Beld reined in his horse and turned to look at the speaker. It was a lone woman, wrapped in gray robes. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. She had a long ponytail of jet black hair hanging down her back. On her forehead she wore a strange circlet. A green gem hung on a fine metal chain across her brow. The gem was ever moving, as though alive. The light in the jewel changed as it moved, giving it an eerie, unreal look.

The woman was known as Karla. Even Beld knew little more, only that she was a witch of dreadful power and that she had agreed to help him. That was enough for him. His court mage, Wagnard, had warned him repeatedly that she was dangerous. Wagnard was not jealously protecting his own status, nor did he know of a concrete threat that she might pose. No, he was merely wary of the power and motives of an unfamiliar witch.

The magic that had ripped apart the once-solid ramparts of the castle of Shining Hill was hers.

Beld showed Karla his sword and let out a great laugh. He wielded the longsword easily in one hand.

"My sword desires blood. Human blood is its favorite meal, you know."

"True. But you're the same, it seems to me. They say that swords merely reflect the desires of their wielders."

"Indeed." Beld laughed loudly. As the sound was swallowed by the wind, they could hear the noises of the battle. "But magic is the same. Those flames are your own urge for destruction, are they not?"

Beld pointed to the red flames of Shining Hill with his sword.

"That may be true," answered Karla in a soft voice. "My work here is done. I have no other plans in Kanon. I indeed to make for Valis as soon as possible. My bed is made, so I might as well lie in it."

"You're a busy one, aren't you? Take care. Things should be fine in Alania."

"Of course. You're almost done here. We'll crown you king of Lodoss yet."

"I'm looking forward to it."

Beld turned his horse and gave it a kick to the sides. It sped up, galloping like a flash of lightning up the hill towards the burning castle.

Once he got going, it never occurred to Beld that he might not succeed.

Chapter 2

The city of Alan was about ten days' travel to the south of the village of Zaxon. As the name implied, Alan was the capital of Alania and home to the royal palace known as Stone Web, home of the king, Cadmus VII, and his family.

Capital of a four-hundred-year-old kingdom, the city of Alan was known as the most cultured city in all of Lodoss. Every building in the city was made of stone, as were the smooth, clean roads.

The dwarf-built city had needed no repairs in hundreds of years and still looked the same as the day it was built.

Parn's party had planned to cross Norbis to the west and head for Valis, but rumors of a sandstorm in the western desert had convinced them to change their plans and visit Alan instead.

When they arrived, Alan was all a-bustle with festivities. Two days earlier, Cadmus VII's first son had been born, and everyone was celebrating. The normally quiet streets were full of carts, and the air was filled with a hitherto unimaginable ruckus. The air was sweltering under the early summer sun. Parn and his companions amused themselves watching the festivities while walking through the streets.

"We came at a good time," Ghim grunted between mouthfuls of the drumstick he'd bought at a food stand.

"Definitely," Parn agreed with him.

"What good fortune that the prince was born. The royal family must be relieved." Eto was also looking at the festive city with a pleased expression.

"It's great that the city is so lively, but my legs are tired from our journey. Do you think we might seek lodgings and enjoy the festival afterward?"

Slayn always walked slowly at the back of their group. In spite of appearances, he was enjoying the celebration, but after walking all day without rest, his breathing was a bit ragged. It was difficult for him to keep up with the youthful Parn and Eto, as well as Ghim, who never seemed to tire.

"That's what you get for doing nothing but reading all day. You've got to train your body as well as your mind!"

Slayn made a noncommittal sound and picked up his pace a bit to keep up with Ghim.

"Be that as it may, I'm starving. No joke, if we don't find an inn soon and get a solid meal under our belts, I might keel over, not from fatigue, but from hunger." So saying, Ghim bit off another chunk of bird meat.

Isn't that his third drumstick? Eto was amazed by Ghim's bottomless stomach. Though he was half Parn's height, the dwarf could eat three times as much. *The rumor that dwarves had nothing in their massive abdomens but stomachs must be true,* thought

Eto, and not for the first time.

“Now, to the festival!” Having found an inn and eaten, Parn could wait no longer before urging Eto to join him. Eto laughed and stood up, and Ghim followed suit.

“What about you, Slayn?” wondered Ghim, looking at Slayn, who had not moved an inch.

“Don’t worry about me, just go enjoy the festival. I have someplace else to go. I’ll be back later tonight.”

“I don’t have enough free time to waste it worrying about a mage. You’re going to the famous academy, aren’t you?”

Slayn gave a quick nod.

“In that case, we’re off. But if you don’t have some fun once in a while, you’ll die of boredom someday.”

“Take care,” replied Slayn, standing as well.

Slayn had studied at the Academy of Sages in Alan since the age of twelve. Slayn’s mother, who was of noble birth, had specially requested Slayn’s admission from such a young age when she realized how much he enjoyed reading.

Ever since that day, Slayn had lived on his own in Alan. It was two years to the day since the incident that had claimed the life of his friend, after which Slayn had left the city in fear of reprisals from the thieves’ Guild. But the eternal capital, Alan, was exactly the same as the day he left.

Slayn looked on the city with nostalgia as he climbed the hill to the Academy of Sages.

The Academy was on a small hill on the edge of the city which overlooked the port. It was a majestic building completely composed of black marble. Since it was the size of a small castle, it was, along with the white tower of the palace of Stone Web, one of the two landmarks visible throughout the city.

Even from a distance, Slayn could tell that the black building in front of him had somehow changed. The walls were slightly dirty, as though it had been a while since they were last cleaned. But in his time, magically summoned servants would have been cleaning every nook and cranny of the building until it was spotless.

When at last he arrived at the gate, it too had changed. Normally, it was guarded by dragon fang warriors, but they were nowhere to be found.

Slayn’s heart raced. What did this mean? What could possibly have happened at the Academy?

“Samalgan!” Slayn’s voice shook under the weight of his worries. In response, the bar on the gate opened on its own. The gate swung open with a creaking noise. Behind it, there lay the Academy’s courtyard. It had visibly fallen into disrepair.

Slayn could not hide his shock. The Academy of Sages was famous throughout Lodoss for its great beauty. Overflowing with magic, it had even been referred to as the renaissance of the ancient kingdom of Kastul.

The academy had, over the course of two hundred years, trained many a great mage and rediscovered any number of lost magics, as well as creating a great many new spells.

But what a mess! There were weeds up to Slayn's neck, completely hiding the paths through the grounds. He wouldn't be able to get to the building without cutting them. Smelling the odor of animal droppings, Slayn grimaced.

"Why did this happen?" Slayn's quiet voice shook even more.

At that moment, Parn's group was walking quickly down the main street of the city. Ten days into the festival, troupes of street performers and poets telling love stories in sweet voices had come from across the land, and it felt like the festivities had reached their climax.

To put it simply, a country bumpkin like Parn was overwhelmed by the beauty of the city and the sight of so many gaudily clothed women walking its streets.

Ghim was, as always, taking advantage of the unusual culinary delights of the city, and Eto was watching the festival with a grin, continually remarking on the wonder of such and such a thing to Parn.

Eto was certainly enjoying the festival, but in a somewhat different fashion from Parn. Witnessing the joyous energy of the festival was the ultimate delight to a priest of Pharis such as Eto. Just seeing strangers greet each other as friends, belt out songs, and drink together was enough for him. It made him feel that creating a peaceful and righteous society was no mere dream.

"Looks like a fight," said Ghim suddenly.

"A fight?" Parn replied in a loud voice, turning his head to see what Ghim was looking at.

There was a brawl involving several people in an alley. There were four unsavory-looking men and a short person with dark green clothes and long blond hair.

"That's a woman!" cried Parn, taking off in the direction of the alley.

The woman in dark green appeared to be fighting against the four men. Eto too took off running, shouting in alarm.

"That, a woman?" Ghim alone seemed unenthusiastic as he followed at a distance.

"Some woman! That's an elf girl or my name isn't Ghim!"

"Ha! With those moves, there's no way you'll lay a finger on me!"

Deedlit easily evaded the reckless, clumsy attacks of the four men. As she dodged, she tripped one of the men, smashed him in the chest with her free hand, then kicked him in the back.

Deedlit laughed internally at the foolishness of these slow-moving humans starting a fight with an elf. Their anger spurred them on, but each attack just meant they'd spend more time abed with their injuries.

"Fools!"

Deedlit jumped up, avoiding the attack of a man who had charged her with his head down, and planted one elbow in his back.

Just then, two more humans joined the fray. Thinking them her enemies, Deedlit knew a moment of fear, before the power of her fighting spirit surged through her. She turned towards the bigger of the two, slipping towards him and aiming a low kick at his leg.

The man jumped, dodging her kick, and looked into Deedlit's surprised face.

"No, I'm on your side!" Parn had wondered for an instant why she would attack him, but spread his arms wide to show that he was friendly and yelled out to the woman.

53



Deedlit carefully inspected the man, watching for any suspicious movements. His guileless eyes met her gaze. *He doesn't seem like a bad person.* So thinking, Deedlit winked at the man in guise of a signal. As a result, she left an opening behind her for an instant.

One of the four men stood and tried to pin her arms from behind. Deedlit tried to sidestep it, but was unable to dodge her charging adversary, who rammed into her.

“What’s the meaning of four men fighting one woman?” Parn grabbed the hair of the one pinning Deedlit’s arms, lifting the man’s face, and punched him. The man went flying, landed on the pavement and stopped moving. Seeing that, the other three turned and ran.

Parn kept his guard up until all three had disappeared around the corner in the alley. Once they had vanished, he turned to look at the woman.

She was letting out little coughs. She’d had the breath knocked out of her when the man had rammed into her. The long hair hanging across her face moved with her coughs.

Eto tried to tap the girl on the back. But the girl reacted quickly, jumping up and away from him.

Eto shared a look of disappointment with Parn. Parn grinned broadly and made a show of brushing off Eto’s wounded pride.

Leaning back against the wall of the dimly-lit alley, Deedlit carefully observed the two men. One of them was a cheerful-looking young man. But he had easily dodged her swift kick. She hadn’t been going easy on him, either. To look at him, he seemed quite the skillful warrior. The other one had a kind face. He was wearing loose white clothing and had something hanging around his neck. It looked like a talisman of Pharis. Maybe he was a priest of Pharis, but he could also be merely a devout layman. She’d instinctively jumped away when he tried to touch her back, but it didn’t seem that he had any ulterior motives.

“It seems I owe you my thanks,” said Deedlit in a calm voice, pushing her hair back and away from her face.

“No need to thank us,” replied Parn, a bit flustered. He’d just gotten a good look at her face for the first time. She was so short, at first he had taken her for a child. Her green eyes had a slight slant to them. Her eyebrows were thin and followed the same angle as her eyes. Her nose was small but well-formed, and below it her small red-lipped mouth hung slightly open due to her ragged breathing, revealing her white teeth. And then there were her ears.

“She’s an elf,” murmured Eto and Parn in unison.

Her long, pointed ears twitched. No wonder she was small. Elves were of somewhat smaller stature than humans, to the point that mistaking an elven woman for a child was understandable. It was the first time in Parn’s life that he had seen a member of this sylvan people. He was overwhelmed by her beauty, even greater than he had imagined.

“No, you don’t need to thank us. We only did what was right.”

“What’s right, huh? No, you got us in a pickle.” Ghim had stayed out of the fight from the beginning.

“A dwarf!” Deedlit took a quick look at the rude little man who had inserted himself into the conversation. She immediately regretted it when the newcomer turned out to be a dwarf, a member of that ugly mountain people.

Her instant dislike of him was audible.

“That’s right, elf girl,” replied Ghim, unconcerned. “If you guys had just minded your own business, I’m sure this elf wouldn’t have let them touch her. Elves are like that. Clever and agile. Born thieves, the lot of them.”

Hearing Ghim’s words, Deedlit’s expression changed completely.

“How rude!” Deedlit bent over, her back arching like a cat about to pounce on its prey.

“And as you can see, they’re a proud people.” Ghim continued. “I bet you anything the elf started the fight herself.”

“How dare you!” Deedlit seemed as if she might fly at the dwarf’s throat. But before she could do so, Parn grabbed her left arm in his right hand, stopping her.

“You’ve gone too far, Ghim!” Parn was truly angry. Turning towards Ghim with a stern expression, he took one step in his direction.

“Hmm, I see how it is. I had no intention of angering you as well. Sorry.” With these words, Ghim suddenly turned his back to Parn. “I’ll leave the rest to you and head back to the inn, seeing as how I don’t get on well with elf girls.”

Ghim slowly walked back towards the main street.

Parn felt a moment of disappointment, watching Ghim walk away, then realized with a start that he was still holding the elf’s arm and let her go.

“You finally noticed.” Deedlit rubbed the place Parn had grabbed her with her right hand. The skin there had reddened. Did this oafish youth have no concept of restraint? Deedlit opened her mouth to yell at him, but somehow her yell changed into laughter.

“I am called Deedlit. Instead of thanking you, how about you youngsters let me treat you to a meal tonight?”

Looking at the elf’s impish expression, Parn became aware that he was blushing.

“Uh, um, okay.”

“Then it’s decided. Since today happens to be a day of celebration, we have our choice of eateries. I don’t want it said that elves have no sense of gratitude.”

As she spoke, Deedlit took Parn’s arm and started walking.

Chapter 3

As afternoon turned into evening, the noise of the taverns reached its peak. The festivities of the day were drawing to a close, but those who still felt the need to celebrate opened the doors of taverns, seeking alcohol. Separated from Eto, Parn joined them in seeking a free table throughout Alan. Finally, he arrived at a small tavern.

Parn couldn’t shake the thought that something strange had happened to him. When he’d left the inn, the ‘Crystal Forest,’ Eto and Ghim ought to have been with him. But

instead, it was the elf girl sitting across from him and filling his glass. Well, ‘young’ is relative when speaking of elves, and he had no idea of her exact age, but Parn had decided upon meeting her to think of her as the young elf.

Sipping the ale Deedlit had recommended, his cup filled to the rim, Parn was telling Deedlit about himself.

“Yes, we’re on a journey.”

Deedlit gave an exaggerated reaction, as though that was a very difficult thing to do. Opening her eyes very wide, she nodded a few times. Parn was so drunk that he had no idea her reactions were an act.

“And your companions are just that priest of Pharis and the dwarf who were with you this afternoon?”

“No, there’s also a mage. He’s an odd one, but he’s powerful. I hate to say it, but his magic is much stronger than my sword.”

“Slayn, that’s the mage, right?” Deedlit nodded, not forgetting to add, “I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.”

That wasn’t just an empty compliment - Deedlit really meant it. Parn had easily read her movements earlier that day, after all.

Watching Parn scratch his head in embarrassment at her compliment, Deedlit laughed a little deep in her throat. The tips of her ears lowered and her eyes narrowed.

Bored of her tedious life in the forest, Deedlit had recently left her village in the elven woods. Everything in the human world was new to her. Of course, humans seemed foolish and uncivilized to her. But she knew that it was useless to expect humans to have the same culture and beliefs as elves did.

Once she had come to that realization, she didn’t mind living among humans so much. From time to time she encountered unpleasant people like the men from that afternoon, but as long as she kept her wits together, she was sure of getting herself out of such situations.

Even if this youngster hadn’t barged in, Deedlit would not have made out poorly against the four men earlier that day. In fact, it was only because of him that any of the men had hit her at all. But the youngster had easily controlled her movements. The fact that he had shown her up left a painful wound in her pride as a skilled fighter. That reaction was the real reason Deedlit was manipulating Parn, though she had yet to realize it. But Parn was so unused to talking to women that his amusing reactions lead Deedlit to forgive his actions earlier in the day.

Parn had gone on talking so long that he had come to his own reasons for traveling — the fight with the goblins. Really getting into his subject, he slurred his words and stood up in his chair.

“Just then, I thought no one would save me. But I was wrong. My old man said that too, you know? What’d he say? I already forgot. Oh yeah, that’s why I’m here. What I saw, that’s what my dad saw, I thought. Tha- that’s why I’m going to Valis, to check on that. The hero, King Fahn, is there. Him and his hundreds of holy knights, yeah. My old man, he was one of them, once. That’s why I became a warrior. I’m still just an ordinary

mercenary though. But you know, even Kashue, the king of Flaim where I fought before, he started out as a wandering mercenary too. That, that's why. I'm gonna be a king... no, there's no way. But I want to do something worthy of a hero or a great man at least."

Deedlit had listened to Parn's latest speech with an expression of disbelief.

"What do you hope to find in Valis?" asked Deedlit in a quiet voice.

"What? I wonder what. Something I can't find yet, I guess." Parn let out a dry laugh.

"That's a riddle. You could be a great master of riddles."

"The one who should be solving riddles is Slayn. Seems he's searching for his own star. He even went as far as calling himself a weird name like 'Starseeker'. The name my parents gave me is enough. It's Parn. Any other name is something other people give me."

Parn rubbed his eyes sleepily and absently gazed at the beautiful creature before him.

"Why don't you come along? Traveling is fun, 'cuz you go with friends. Ghim can be rude, but beneath it all he's a good guy. Slayn is strange but he has power. More than my sword, you know. And Eto is kind. Plus he's smart. I bet he'll be the head priest of Pharis someday. And he'll see that I get knighted."

Deedlit decided it was time to get Parn back to the inn before he collapsed. His inn was called the 'Crystal Forest' or something. And she'd decided to rest there as well.

When Deedlit and Parn got to the Crystal Forest, Slayn had returned as well, and the three companions were seated around a table on the first floor. Since the inn also served alcohol, the place was full of thoroughly drunk partiers, shouting to the glory of Alania.

There were two drunks at Parn's companions' table as well, drinking and shouting 'Long live the king!'

Slayn sat up in his chair the moment the unlikely combination of a very drunk Parn and the young elf came through the door. Even after hearing Eto and Ghim's story, there was no way for him not to be surprised at the reality before him. Ghim sniffed disapprovingly and Eto's laugh could be described as strained.

Why would the elf...? Slayn asked himself while observing the elf girl sitting next to Parn, who was laughing impishly. The elf was still young. She was probably less than two hundred years old. But he thought he could see a suspicious light in those eyes. Slayn slowly reached for his staff with his right hand.

Deedlit saw his movement. According to Parn, one of his companions was a mage. It would seem this was the one. His name was Slayn, wasn't it? Deedlit's movements sharpened. She reached behind her back and touched the drawstring of the water sack hanging from her belt. In there, Deedlit always kept a single water spirit, Undine. She knew Undine's power, and it ought to be just enough to keep the mage at bay.

For a moment, a line of tension ran between the two of them. But the one who broke it was Slayn. There was no reason for this elf to lay a trap for Parn. He had little money, much less political influence. He'd wondered if she belonged to the thieves' Guild, but elves had no reason to cooperate with Guilds. He was just on edge after learning of the end of the Academy of Sages, he decided.

"Nice to meet you. We were just talking about you. Thank you very much for

bringing Parn back to us.” Slayn pulled his hand away from his staff and returned it to the table as before. He spoke to the elf girl in his usual slow manner. He looked down and placed one hand over his heart.

“I’m fine.” His words slurred, his feet unsteady, Parn waved at Slayn.

“What are you calling fine? You’d better go to bed. Eto, will you help him?”

Nodding to Slayn, Eto rushed to Parn’s side.

“How pathetic, getting drunk like that. Or did you give him some kind of elf poison?” Ghim asked Deedlit in a barely audible voice.

“It is pathetic, if you think humans are the same as dwarves. And elves don’t use poison. Unlike dwarves.” Deedlit grinned and waved gracefully at Ghim.

“Ha! You’re a feisty one. But let me apologize for my rudeness earlier today. It’s neither your fault nor mine that elves and dwarves don’t get along.” Ghim let out a throaty laugh and raised his mug of ale to Deedlit. “A toast to old enemies. Didn’t we learn to work together back when we fought against the demon?”

“I suppose.” With this noncommittal response, Deedlit turned to watch Eto half-carry Parn up the stairs.

“Come, please sit down.” Slayn pulled back an empty chair and gestured for Deedlit to sit in it. Deedlit hesitated a moment, given the situation, but feeling that it would be a mistake to leave so abruptly, she accepted the mage’s offer.

“We’d better have a little chat to avoid further misunderstandings,” Deedlit caught Slayn’s gaze with her green eyes. “My name is Deedlit.”

She began to talk about herself as openly as if bespelled by the mage.

Chapter 4

The morning after the festival, an empty feeling floated on the air. With few pedestrians out and about, it was even quieter than usual.

Woodchuck walked unsteadily through the city, avoiding the major streets. Not knowing their customs, he’d just run afoul of the local thieves.

He was wearing a light brown shirt and pants of the same color underneath a worn set of leather armor. He also wore black leather boots. The soles were made of thin leather, making them ideal for sneaking about. They also had good traction.

These clothes and armor, plus the short sword hanging from his waist, four daggers and a few coins in his pouch were all he had to his name.

“The Guild is too damn harsh,” grumbled Woodchuck while gazing at the city of Alan for the first time in a long while. He wasn’t returning from a journey, though. He’d lived in Alan for more than twenty long years. But the only thing he’d been able to see from the dungeon of Stone Web was the bars of the neighboring cell and the timeworn face of its elderly occupant. But Woodchuck, too, was no longer young.

All that, just for one little theft. Thinking of that rekindled his anger. Twenty-two years earlier, he had broken into a rich man’s mansion, but slipped up and gotten caught.

Woodchuck had had a trial at the royal palace, but in those days the king of Alania, Cadmus VII, was still young. He'd taken one glance at Wood's face and sentenced him to thirty years in the dungeon without listening to his pleas. Due to that sentence, Woodchuck had spent what ought to have been the best years of his life rotting in jail.

Even after being pardoned and leaving early, Woodchuck's resentment lingered. Listening to revelers toast to the new prince and the future of the kingdom during the festival had made Wood want to throw up. Instead, he made himself feel better by relieving them of the contents of their purses.

He'd succeeded, but he realized his skills were not what they used to be. Not only had he gotten out of practice between the gray walls of the dungeon, but the passing years had also stolen the reflexes of youth from him.

He had reluctantly set out for the thieves' Guild, asking about officer jobs. But in twenty-two years the head of the Guild had changed, and he told Wood that the new price was 10,000 gold pieces. Woodchuck bitterly reflected that if he had stayed out of prison this whole time, he probably would have become an officer, perhaps the head of a local division.

Wood was angry, but realizing that it was not worth starting a fight with the Guild, he had laughed weakly and left.

Perhaps out of pity, the Guild leader had given him a single piece of valuable information. Unfortunately, it would be hard to do the job on his own.

I need a partner. Not another thief, but a tough fighter. Wood had made up his mind. He saw no other way to move up in the world. *But first things first - I need food.*

Wood entered an inn in search of breakfast. On the sign, it said 'Crystal Forest'.

Due to the lingering effects of the previous night's bender, Parn didn't feel like eating. He'd managed to swallow only a small piece of bread and a little water. With a little fruit juice mixed in, the slightly sweet water seemed to settle his stomach.

Eto was meditating next to Parn, deep in his morning prayers. Left to his own devices, he might have kept on meditating forever.

Ghim was the only one who had yet to finish his meal. He was on his second loaf of corn bread and his third tankard of ale.

Deedlit was doing her level best not to watch Ghim eat. She had eaten some fruit and drunk some cider and was looking at Parn's miserable face with a bored expression.

While sipping a cup of milk, Slayn thought back on the previous night's conversation with the elf girl. She had claimed to have left the elven woods out of boredom with the monotonous life she had lead there. He'd found her deep frustration with the elves' lack of action against their people's slow decline a curious viewpoint for an elf. The very almost-heretical views that had set her apart from her fellow elves probably suited her to life among humans. Embarrassed by her outburst, Deedlit had immediately turned to the innkeeper to reserve a room and headed up to the second floor to sleep.

As Slayn was pondering her tale, the front door swung open with a clank. Slayn glanced in the direction of the door, and his expression changed completely when he saw the person who had entered. The man was dressed like a thief. If he was a thief he must

be a member of the thieves' Guild. His pulse pounding, Slayn watched the newcomer, not taking his eyes off him until he sat down at the counter.

"Give me something light," said the man sitting at the counter, his voice carrying across the room.

With that, the tension broke. Slayn bent over his old texts once more, and Parn rubbed at his aching head, ruffling his hair.

"You're a mess," laughed Deedlit.

"That's right. Slayn, how was it at the Academy? Was it worth missing the festival?" Having at last filled his stomach, Ghim turned to Slayn while making a pile of the empty plates.

"The Academy was in a pitiful state." With a sad face, Slayn lifted his eyes from his book. Closing his book, he put both elbows on the table and folded his hands before beginning to talk.

Entering the Academy of Sages, Slayn had realized that it was no longer in use. The grounds were in such disrepair that they were no longer fit for human habitation, though one person, Master Jagul, was still living in the building, watching over the place.

Master Jagul had told Slayn why the Academy had fallen to ruin. It was because of the death of the Academy's headmaster, Ralkas, who had been known as the greatest modern mage, and due to the disaster caused by a mage known as Wagnard three years earlier.

Slayn knew Wagnard by reputation. When he had enrolled in the Academy, he was a talented student who got top marks and achieved the rank of mage at an early age. But he had wanted to push his talents to their absolute limits. That ambition had pushed him to soil his hands with dark magics, drawing on the power of demons. That was against the Academy's strict rules. According to the Academy, magic was meant to be used for good causes, and so the study of evil magic was harshly punished.

Learning of Wagnard's forbidden studies, Ralkas had visited a severe punishment upon him. Ralkas had laid a strong magical taboo on him and expelled him from the Academy. If Wagnard ever used magic again, Ralkas' taboo would send waves of crushing agony throughout his body.

But a genius such as Wagnard was able to resist even the pain of the taboo. Though waves of pain coursed through his body, Wagnard was able to focus his mind and chant a single spell. He drew strength from his drive for revenge against Ralkas and the rest of the Academy. He used his magic to earn large sums of money in Kanon before leaving for Marmo. Once there, he joined forces with Beld, one of the Six Heroes of Lodoss, who had just finished conquering Marmo, declaring himself the Dark Emperor. Wagnard became Beld's court magician. In the end, Wagnard's revenge did not come during Ralkas' lifetime. However, as Ralkas drew his last breath, Wagnard's evil schemes slowly closed in on the Academy. There were more and more cases of murders of young Academy students throughout Alan. The Academy took any number of measures to halt this massacre, but without success.

As if to add insult to injury, monks who officiated ceremonies at the Academy were

murdered as well, and the library was ransacked. Priceless books and ancient relics were stolen, while one-of-a-kind artifacts were burned to cinders.

This proud, historic Academy had lost its *raison d'être*. The surviving monks and mages left one by one, disappearing to the four corners of Lodoss. And so the oldest of the monks, Master Jagul, had become the only remaining resident of the Academy.

“What an awful story.” Eto said, his white-knuckled fists showing his anger.

“It is an awful story.” Slayn separated his hands and laid them in his lap. “I may only have survived because I was lucky enough to be away from Alan at the time. As a result, Wagnard didn’t target me.”

“Didn’t the king do something about the incidents?” Eto asked Slayn.

“What do you think a king could do against such ancient powers? Even hundreds of soldiers would surely have been unable to prevent the Academy’s destruction. That’s the horror of Wagnard’s power.”

“Are you in any danger now?” asked Deedlit in a weak voice.

“I should be fine,” said Slayn with certainty. “Wagnard doubtless considers his vengeance complete. Though it is possible he may plot further destruction. The Dark Emperor would be at the root of any new plan, and he may even have set the wheels in motion already.”

Slayn said it lightly, but upon seizing the meaning of his words, Parn choked with the gravity of it.

“I can’t forgive that Wagnard guy,” said Parn suddenly. As everyone stared at him in surprise, Parn stood, kicking his chair away, and raised his fist.

“I can’t forgive him. If it was clear what Wagnard was up to, why didn’t the mages fight back? Just running when they have so much power, that’s the depths of cowardice.”

“Mages aren’t like you,” said Slayn by way of calming Parn down. “Magic is completely different from the sword of a warrior. Yes, it can be used to kill, but mages don’t study magic in order to learn how to fight.”

“Then what about Wort? The Great Sage of Moss went down into the Deep Labyrinth to fight against the demon, didn’t he?”

Parn was referring to one of the Six Heroes of Lodoss who were spoken of in legends. Wort was the mage of the six heroes who had survived the fight with the demon. Slayn silently gazed at Parn’s angry face.

“Why didn’t the mages fight back. It’s a mystery to me.” Parn continued. “If it was me...”

“If it was me, I’d stand up and knock down that Wagnard, right?” The voice came from behind Parn. Startled, Parn turned. His right hand reached for the hilt of his sword, and he settled into a fighting stance.

“Who’re you?!?” yelled Parn.

“Oh, sorry I surprised you.” The man leapt back, waving his hands in the air in front of him. It was the thief who should have been sitting at the counter. Somehow he’d snuck up behind Parn without anyone noticing.

Woodchuck had only listened to Parn out of habit. Thieves listened to everyone’s

talk, trying to get a cut of any scam. Even if there was no profit to be made directly, there might be value in any gossip. In any case, it wasn't as though he'd had to work at eavesdropping on Parn - his voice was so loud it was hard not to hear.

"It's just, listening to you, I thought that maybe you were the kind of hero who could beat Wagnard. If that's the case, I know a place where your anger could find its mark."

A polite smile plastered across his face, Wood looked Parn up and down. The surprise disappeared from Parn's face, replaced by an intrigued expression.

"It's risky, listening to thieves' tales." Slayn's voice was unusually sharp.

"I would think you too would welcome my news, ô mage of the Academy." Knowing that this was the moment of truth, Woodchuck turned to face Slayn without letting his insincere smile slip for one instant. "Rumor has it that the treasures stolen from your Academy are hidden there. If that's true, might it not be possible to pick up the pieces and reopen the Academy? You could occupy an important post there, once it's restored."

Though he'd advised Parn not to listen, even Slayn was starting to be interested in the thief's information. He knew it was impossible to rebuild the Academy, but returning the lost books and relics might be of some use. Master Jagul would surely welcome them. If, that is, the thief's story was true.

"Ô holy ear that knows truth," Slayn chanted words in the ancient tongue under his breath. He felt the magic enter his body and slowly concentrate itself in his ears. The spell had worked. Even if the thief lied, Slayn would recognize his lies for what they were.

"Why don't you tell us all the details," Slayn turned to Woodchuck again. He pointed to an empty chair, inviting Wood to sit.

"Well, it seems you've finally decided to listen," said Wood, sitting in the chair with a big grin. *Looks like my luck hasn't run out after all.*

"Talk is fine. But please don't just listen and take your leave. I want more from this than just a chat." The elf and dwarf shared a meaningful glance, Woodchuck noticed. *Elves and dwarves are always fighting, but they make a good team.*

"Is that the price for your information?" asked Parn, puffing himself up. "My sword only fights in a just cause."

"Of course, my young swordsman friend. I will guarantee that nothing I propose will sully your reputation."

He's not lying. The words came clearly to Slayn's ears. *Though he was lying about Parn's reputation.*

Feeling that he was safe around such a man, Woodchuck made up his mind to tell them the whole story. *It's not like I have any other way to make money.*

Chapter 5

The thief was called Woodchuck. It would seem that was not his given name, but rather a working nickname.

Parn and the others had moved the conversation up into their room, bringing a bit of food and drink, which they spread out on the small wooden table. Ghim immediately set to eating it. The room was fairly large, but with six occupants it still felt a bit cramped.

“Three days’ travel to the east, in the woods, there’s an old house. The owner kicked the bucket some twenty-five years ago, so it ought to be abandoned. But a few years back, a pretty shifty lot moved in. Conveniently, that was right around the time the Academy’s treasures were stolen.” Wood proudly laid out the facts and savored a sip of wine. “Whether you believe me or not is your business. But those bastards aren’t Guild thieves. If they’re stealing things behind the Guild’s back, it’ll put a black mark on the Guild’s reputation. So a Guild member went there to investigate, and he saw something interesting. It seems that the sentries in front of the building were a dark elf and an ogre. And some guy wearing fancy armor came out of the building. That guy had the emblem of Marmo engraved on his armor.”

“Why would someone from Marmo, the dark island,” groaned Eto, “come to Alania?”

Even in Lodoss, Marmo was famous as a land of many demons. It was said that many dark elves, ogres, and trolls lived there. Its emperor, Beld, had once been one of the Six Heroes, but rumor had it that he had unified the island by force, showing not the slightest sliver of mercy.

“Do you think they’re plotting something?” Eto asked Slayn.

“I don’t know.” Slayn spread his hands and shrugged. “But if the rumors about Beld are true, I can hazard a guess.”

“You mean he’s planning to conquer Alania?” asked Parn with a gulp.

“It’s just a guess, but maybe...”

Parn muttered “hmm,” and pondered this. Slayn’s guess was the most logical one. If Marmo had already sent in soldiers, it was possible that they really were planning to take over Alania. It was even possible that Wagnard’s destruction of the Academy was not merely out of his personal grudge, but also in order to prevent the mages from posing a threat to Marmo.

“It might really be worth taking a look.” Parn crossed his arms and spoke as though thinking aloud.

“Why do we have to put our necks on the line for something like this?” asked Ghim, discouraged. “Wouldn’t it be better to leave it to the king’s soldiers?”

“I’d have a problem with that. This is valuable information. There’s the Academy’s treasure, not to mention the reward for stopping any conspiracy... how much do you think I spent to get this information from the Guild?”

The bit about spending money was a lie, thought Slayn, but he kept quiet about it.

“Dark elves and ogres? Those are dangerous opponents. Especially dark elves, because they use magic.”

“Yes, because they’re elves.”

Deedlit’s face colored at Ghim’s words. “Dark elves are an unsavory lot who sold their souls to demons. Don’t compare them to us.”

Elves like Deedlit had reasons to hate dark elves. The color of their skin had changed to black as proof of their service to the dark god. Elven elders taught the children of the cruelty of the dark elves. They killed elven men and women without mercy. It was even said that dark elves used elves as sacrifices to their dark god.

As for ogres, they ate elves as a snack. Along with dark elves, they were the elves' oldest enemies. They had spilled each other's blood many times over the years.

In the last fight against the demon, the dark elves and ogres had become the demon's vanguard, sowing death and destruction before him. Deedlit herself had not fought, but countless elves from her village had given their lives. The memory was still fresh for her, as though it had happened yesterday.

"I'll show you how different we are from dark elves!" raged Deedlit.

"Me too," Parn was telling Slayn while gauging his reaction. "I too want to settle this myself. I can understand the thief's perspective. And it's not certain that Alania's army would believe us even if we told them. Besides, dark elves and ogres shouldn't even exist."

"That's true," interjected Wood.

"Oh dear, looks like I have no choice," said Slayn with a long sigh. "Let's go along with Parn on this matter. If there truly are treasures from the Academy, we have much to gain. And as a human, I can't just let the dark elves do as they please."

"Hmm, if you want to go, I won't stop you. I'll let my axe taste dark elf blood. We dwarves have reason to hate them as well."

Showing off his thick, sturdy arms to Deedlit, Ghim let out a laugh that shook his beard.

Deedlit gave the dwarf a sharp look, but when she realized he was gently teasing her, her expression changed into a sweet smile.

"That's the spirit! It should be short work for you lot. I'll help out too, of course. Despite how I look, I'm a fair hand with a dagger."

Slayn knew that well. Thieves' daggers were most to be feared under the cover of night or from behind. His old friend, who had probably been a better swordsman than Parn, had died to just such a dagger.

"We'll give you half the reward. Do we have an agreement?" asked Parn in a solemn tone.

"I'm counting on it." Wood nodded to Parn and let out a thin laugh.

Slayn thought it a strange laugh. It wouldn't do to underestimate this thief. Making up his mind to walk at the very back of the group, Slayn stood to begin preparing for the trip.

Though it was too late to strike while the iron was hot, the party set out that afternoon from the Crystal Forest with Woodchuck in tow, leaving the city of Alan.

The road to the east was less traveled than the north-south highway. To the east, there was only the fishing village of Margus, where the road ended. Seeing no one but the occasional cart full of fresh fish, the party walked at a relaxed pace. Parn and Deedlit walked in front. They were followed by Ghim, and for some reason Wood and Eto were

walking together. In the back trudged Slayn, his eyes alert, watching Woodchuck.

It's gotten really hot. Slayn suddenly looked up at the sun, dazzled by its summer brightness. To shield his eyes, he put up his hood and pulled his head deep inside it.

That was the second day, and on the third they crossed a bridge into the woods.

“Here we are!” said Wood triumphantly, pointing out a small forest road. “The house we’re looking for isn’t far.”

“How long do you think it will take us to get there?” asked Parn.

“About an hour, I think.”

“What an odd place to build a house,” murmured Deedlit, looking at the trees with nostalgia.

“Well, I didn’t build it,” said Wood with a straight face.

“We’ll have to keep our guard up from now on,” came Slayn’s muffled voice from deep inside his hood. Since the sun was at its peak, Slayn’s face was completely lost in the shadows.

“True,” said Parn, and he chewed on his lip, worry showing on his face. “Shall we go into the forest?”

Deedlit agreed happily.

The party went along with Parn’s decision and entered the woods. They could feel the vitality of the early summer forest, and the smell of the leaves was pleasant. Parn was still in front, making a path so that Eto and the others could easily follow him.

Slayn was irritated to find that the dew on the plants was dampening his clothing. His robe kept snagging on tree branches, too. Little rips and tears opened in the fabric, making Slayn realize he would need to buy a new robe soon. But there probably wasn’t a single store left in all of Alania that still sold the right sort of robe.

As they neared the house, the party slowed its pace and was careful not to make too much noise. Even so, Parn and Eto’s metal armor clanked as they moved.

“My chainmail is made of truesilver, so it doesn’t make a sound,” Ghim told Parn with pride.

Deedlit, too, had put purple armor on over her green clothing. At first glance it looked like metal, but it was actually leather that had been treated to stiffen it. The chest piece had been dyed with the seeds of mountain grapes. A simple design was scratched into it, and it was edged with red-tinted steel. Not merely decorative, the steel also served to strengthen the armor.

The house suddenly came into view in front of the party. They ducked down into some low bushes and spied on the entryway.

The huge ogre guarding the entrance immediately caught the adventurers’ eyes. Next to him, the other guard, a dark elf, was barely half the ogre’s height, but a sly light shone in his eyes as he diligently kept watch. The ogre carried a huge club, while the dark elf held a spear.

“Okay, what next?” whispered Parn. They needed to keep going in order to find out the truth, but that carried a risk of discovery by the sentinels. He turned to Eto as if to say ‘I’m counting on you,’ and asked “Should we try shooting them?”

“We failed the last time. Now our opponents are an armor-clad dark elf and a strong ogre. One or two arrows won’t stop them,” said Eto, recalling their fight against the goblins in Zaxon.

“Then what do we do?” Tired of hiding, Parn raised a petulant voice.

“It would be good if my magic would work,” Slayn inserted himself tactfully into the conversation, “but dark elves are highly resistant to magic.”

“That’s what they gained by selling their souls to demons,” said Deedlit with disdain. She had drawn her rapier and was checking the tiny dagger attached to her shoulder guard. A specially made throwing dagger like the three Woodchuck carried, she’d covered it with a paralyzing drug. Normally, it would have been used for hunting animals, but in this case she had prepared it to increase their chances in battle.

Ghim pulled his battleaxe from his back as well, and held it, ready to attack at any moment.

“There is one way,” said Slayn without confidence.

“Tell us, Slayn,” said Parn by way of encouragement.

“Well, magic that acts directly on a person won’t work on the dark elf. Therefore, we should use magic to lure our enemies away from their post.”

“Illusions, huh?” said Deedlit.

“Exactly. But auditory illusions only. If we can get even one of them to go off to investigate, not only will we no longer have to fight two of them, but we’ll prevent them from alerting the others.”

“What if both of them go?”

Hearing Parn’s words, Slayn shrugged. “In that case we’ll sneak inside.”

“Just so.” Ghim held in his laughter, but it showed on his face. His beard shook happily.

Slayn sent his consciousness towards the other side of the house. He began to chant in a low voice and drew a small symbol in the air with one hand. When he had finished, he began rustling the grass underfoot.

“Slayn!” Parn cried out without thinking.

But neither the sound of Parn’s voice nor the rustle of the grass carried. Instead, from a tuft of grass Slayn was staring at came a rustling noise and the sound of a voice calling “Slayn!”

The sound was barely audible to the party’s ears, but to the two sentries standing nearby, it must have been much clearer. The dark elf gave a start and uttered a few orders in a strange language to the ogre. The ogre readied his club and let out a little howl. The dark elf checked his spear and headed in the direction of the sound.

“Huh, magic is pretty useful. Teach me some later!” said Woodchuck with admiration, thinking how useful that trick would be for burglaries.

“Now!” Not waiting for Slayn’s signal, Deedlit sprang into action. Turning and winking at Parn, she ran towards the house with all the grace of a cat.

Stunned, Parn froze for a moment.

“Ô kind dryad of the woods. Make of that ogre my friend.” Deedlit’s spell was

mysterious, not using the ancient language of Slayn's spells. It was only a whisper, but it worked.

The ogre had tried to let out a big yell, but when Deedlit's spell took effect, he stopped moving with a shocked expression. His little brain probably hadn't even registered that he was being affected by magic. Instead of seeing Deedlit as a suspicious intruder, she appeared to be a close friend, doubtless someone closer to his heart than the dark elf who was always bossing him around.

Deedlit ran full tilt at the ogre. He was easily twice her size. His whole body was covered with rippling muscles, and his red-brown skin was bare save for a loincloth. His sharp tusks and crooked nose disgusted Deedlit.

"*Beurk!*"* muttered Deedlit, an Elvish word meaning ugly, as she ran up to the ogre that was staring at her in shock and aimed the sharp point of her rapier at his heart. Her sword sunk deep into his chest, so that the tip came out the other side.

The ogre finally realized what was going on. The elf girl in front of him was definitely an enemy. Not even realizing that he was dying, the ogre wanted only to eat her.

With all her strength, Deedlit pulled her rapier from the ogre's body. Blood spurted from the wound as the ogre fell forward. Backing away so as not to be covered in it, Deedlit turned her attention towards the direction the dark elf had gone.

"Look out, Deed!" Parn's voice cut the air.

Startled, Deedlit instinctively jumped high in the air. The thick, club-like arm of the ogre, still lying on his stomach, passed right below her.

Had she taken that hit square on, Deedlit's little body would surely have gone flying. Her spine might even have been broken. With a shiver, the elf remembered the monstrous life force that ogres possessed. When she turned to look at him, the ogre was flailing around, struggling to stand up.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Deedlit couldn't even work up the courage to deal the finishing blow. Her body shook like a leaf in a storm.

*translator's note: Deedlit says "パーク" (baaku), which is closer to bark, but I opted for beurk due to its meaning in French ('yuck') and lack of resemblance to any English word

Chapter 6

The dark elf who had gone to investigate the clump of grass soon realized that he had been tricked. The sound of unfamiliar armor came from the direction of the door. Perhaps the ogre had been defeated, though he heard no sounds of battle.

The dark elf knew that it would be risky to return to his post.

"Ô tiny spirits, ô formless beings, make my form like unto your own," chanted the dark elf in the language of the spirits. After a moment his body faded, becoming

completely invisible. He then ran back to the entrance of the house, his footsteps nearly silent.

“That dark elf has been gone a long time!” yelled Parn, keeping a firm grip on his bastard sword.

Having at last recovered from her terror, Deedlit had retreated behind Parn, acting almost as his shadow. Even the ogre’s powerful life-force was not enough to keep it moving once Ghim had beheaded it with his battle-axe. His body was still twitching, though, as the last embers of that terrifying life-force burned themselves out.

Eto and Woodchuck had joined the others in the entryway.

“Ghim and Deedlit, go inside, quick! The people inside may have noticed us. I’ll take care of the dark elf,” exclaimed Parn as they were waiting for the dark elf’s return.

“You dolt, what do you think you can do against the dark elf’s magic? You should leave him to Slayn and I and go inside yourself.” Urging Parn inside, Deedlit swiftly unfastened the water skin from her back. “Ô spirit of water, you who see the unseen. Where is the dark elf? He must have hidden himself.” Deedlit addressed these words in the language of spirits to a blueish mass inside her water skin. In response, the water spirit, Undine, surged forth. Then it spread out, forming a thin membrane of water, almost like a piece of cloth, and danced through the air.

Ah, is that him? Slayn tried sending a canceling spell to where Undine was floating. Cancelling spells served to nullify other magic. Slayn chanted in the ancient tongue and waved his staff around.

As Slayn chanted, a white light came forth from his staff. Glancing off of Undine, the light expanded over the ground.

“Augh!” with a groan, the dark elf appeared.

The dark elf couldn’t help cursing his luck at finding himself facing not only an elf but a rune master as well. They had quite a bit of power between the two of them. The mage’s cancelling spell had completely destroyed the dark elf’s sprite charm. But he still had his spear in his right hand. The elf was a slip of a girl and the mage was frail. He might have a chance if it came to a battle of strength.

But that thought was crushed by a blow from behind. “Ahh!” The dark elf screamed in pain in spite of himself. Three stabs of pain coursed through his back. Gritting his teeth, the dark elf turned around.

Behind him stood the thief in black armor, holding a short sword in an underhand grip.

“Huh, looks like I haven’t lost my touch,” said Wood with a satisfied smile.

All three daggers he had thrown had hit the dark elf in the back. None of them were fatal wounds, but at least they had all hit the mark.

Just then, Deedlit charged in like a flash. The dark elf sensed it and turned, meeting her attack with his own. Deedlit sidestepped it and extended her right arm and upper body, aiming her rapier at his flank.

If he hadn’t been injured, the dark elf would have been able to dodge. But when he

tried to move, the daggers in his back dug in and slowed his movement for just a moment.

91



His death scream rang out through the forest. With Deedlit's rapier in his side and

Wood's daggers in his back, he fell to the ground in a motionless black mass.

At that moment, Ghim, Parn, and Eto were all locked in combat inside the house. Their opponents were four humans. Taken by surprise, none of them wore armor, and they fought with just weapons and shields.

Nonetheless, all four were skillful fighters, and Ghim and Parn were having a rough time of it.

“Ô holy light!”

Watching them fight, Eto lifted his hands above his head and chanted a prayer. There was a sudden burst of light. It was only a moment, but the enemies facing Eto automatically averted their eyes, creating an opening. Neither Ghim nor Parn let the moment slip. Both were facing away from Eto, so they were unaffected by the light.

In unison, both of them attacked their opponents. Both enemies stumbled under their attacks. At the same time, having beaten the dark elf, Deedlit and the others came into the house.

The party made short work of their dispirited enemies.

No one else was in the house. After verifying that the corpses carried nothing of interest, the group searched the house. There were four rooms on the ground floor, but all they found were some rations and a number of bottles of liquor.

“Oho, what a find!” Ghim was stuffing as much food as he could into his bags.

“I’ll search the second story,” said Parn as he climbed the stairs. The house was well-maintained, complete with new furniture. Judging by the effort they had put into making themselves comfortable in such a dilapidated house, the occupants must have planned to stay a long time. The stairs, too, were covered with new carpet. Tromping over said carpet, Parn climbed the stairs and emerged into the second-floor hallway, with Deedlit close behind.

“So?”

“I still can’t see anything. Be careful.”

“You too.” Bending over, Deedlit snuck a look down the corridor. The light of the setting sun illuminated two doorways. The door of the closest one was wide open.

“Shall we?”

“Of course.”

The two adventurers stood in front of the open door and looked around. There were signs that the room had recently been occupied. It was quite a large room. There was a long table in the middle, surrounded by eight chairs. Several of those chairs had fallen over, and it seemed likely that the men they had fought earlier had knocked them down in their haste to ready themselves.

“What’s that?” Deedlit had noticed what looked like some kind of official documents in the center of the table. She rushed over to gather up the documents. There were four sheets of fine parchment.

“There’s something written on them,” said Parn, who had moved next to Deedlit and was looking over her shoulder at the pieces of parchment. Then, realizing he was almost touching her narrow shoulders, he tensed and shook his head.

“What’s wrong?” asked Deedlit, all innocence.

On the parchment, frightening things were written concerning the actions of the king of Alania, Cadmus VII. Cadmus VII was famous for his love of hunting, and one of his favorite hunting spots was near this house. Furthermore, according to the document, when hunting he only brought along a few companions. By bribing one of those companions, the conspirators had gotten their hands on the names and descriptions of the king’s usual guards, which painted a clear picture of their opposition.

“What is this?” Parn’s hands were shaking.

“An assassination plot? Of the king of Alania?” Deedlit was only slightly calmer.

“Could be. No, it has to be. We’ve stumbled on something awful.”

Deedlit, too, was thinking that they’d seen something incredible. And that the plan was likely to succeed, if put into action.

Watching Parn fret, Deedlit slowly folded the parchment and put it in her pocket.

“We’d better search the next room.” Deedlit urged Parn, who hadn’t recovered from his alarm, out of the room.

From the layout of the house, one would expect the next room to be smaller. Parn carefully laid his hand on the doorknob and pushed.

The door did not open. Then he pulled, a bit harder. The door still did not open.

“That’s no good.”

Hearing Slayn’s voice, Parn rushed back to the staircase.

“Slayn! Woodchuck! Come here! The door is locked.”

Deedlit had tried the door many times, but it still would not open. So she patiently waited for Slayn and Woodchuck.

“Calling not just for the thief but also the mage. That’s pretty smart,” said Deedlit as she crouched down to look through the keyhole.

Parn smiled.

“Don’t look into the keyhole without thinking,” Wood’s dry voice echoed through the hallway along with the sound of three footsteps. “There might just be a poisoned needle on the other side.” He had arrived with Slayn and Ghim in tow. Surprised, Deedlit quickly pulled away from the keyhole.

“Is Eto fine by himself down there?” asked Parn, worried.

“No one’s coming from outside. He’ll be fine,” said Ghim carefully searching around the door. “Doesn’t seem like there’s any kind of weird device.”

He switched places with Woodchuck, who began to inspect the door in turn. He inserted what looked like a small wire into the lock and twisted it around, moving it up and down. Careful to avoid the doorknob, he tapped the door with his fist, listening to the sound.

Behind him, Slayn chanted a few words of a spell and muttered, “Hmm.”

“Did you find something?” asked Ghim.

Slayn replied simply, “There is magic on that door.”

“Looks like it. It isn’t locked, and there’s no traps. Seems like it’s your turn.” Wood stepped back, making room for Slayn.

Slowly drawing a symbol, Slayn chanted an unlocking spell. Then he knocked on the door with his staff.

The door shook a few times, then slowly opened. As the door opened, the lights came on in the room. Parn gave a start, and his hand moved to the hilt of his sword.

“There’s nothing to worry about. It’s a simple trick,” declared Slayn, stepping into the room. There was no one inside. Bookcases stood on either side of an old, worn desk.

“I wonder if those are from the Academy.” Slayn had walked over to them. There was also a cabinet near the door, full of glass bottles and tightly rolled scrolls.

But Slayn’s hopes were soon dashed. *No, they aren’t.* But his disappointment did not show on his face. He hadn’t been very hopeful to begin with. In Wagnard’s place, he would have had any magical items brought to him right away.

“Huh, looks like I was right. Oh, and there’s also a treasure chest. Ha, I’ve been looking for this.” Speaking in a strange voice, Woodchuck fiddled with the wooden chest that had been sitting on the desk.

Slayn walked over to the desk and carefully opened it. Inside, he found a beautifully decorated dagger and what looked to be a letter. Slayn opened it and skimmed the contents. The letter was short.

Everything is fine here.

How are things on your end?

Send news from time to time via the usual method.

Karla

“Not very clear, is it?” said Slayn in a monotone, putting the letter in his bag.

It was then that Slayn noticed. Ghim was staring at something near Slayn with a serious expression on his face. Whatever it was, it was above Slayn’s head.

Following Ghim’s gaze, Slayn looked at the wall, near the ceiling.

There was a single portrait hanging on the wall. It was a picture of a beautiful woman. She was wearing a low-cut violet gown and behind her were bright red curtains. Even the scenery outdoors was painted in painstaking detail. The woman’s skin was the same color as Deedlit’s, but her hair was as dark as the night sky. Her eyes seemed to stare at Slayn as though interrogating him.

I wonder if that woman is Karla. Slayn’s mind seemed to be stuck on that name. He tried to remember where he had heard it, but couldn’t.

“Well, it’ll come to me eventually,” muttered Slayn with a curious glance at Ghim, who was still staring intently at the portrait.

“It looks like her...” Ghim muttered this almost too quietly for Slayn to hear.

Chapter 7

Three days later, Parn’s party had returned to the Crystal Forest Inn. They had turned over the conspirators’ documents to the castle guard and gotten a reward of one thousand

gold pieces.

Parn was in a good mood. His finances were good, and his actions had been judged righteous. The corrupt soldier would be judged, and the plot on the king's life had been averted. The judge, Duke Balshea, had even thanked him personally. Parn was drinking ale and singing, though not at all skillfully.

"But rather," Woodchuck was saying to Parn, "how's about you let me join your group? I've shown I can be useful, and I've come to like you lot. Plus it seems like if I join you, I might see some interesting things."

"I don't see any reason why not." Parn's response was sincere. They never would have succeeded without Wood, and a thief might often come in handy on the road. "But please don't break the law while you're with us."

The group had been drinking for a good while, and most of them were well into their cups. Slayn and Deedlit were the two exceptions.

"Only six hundred good pieces for that jewel. I think maybe we got ripped off." Wood's voice rang out as he critiqued the merchant who had bought the jewel from him.

"No, it was a fair price," said Ghim who had had to keep Wood's haggling in check while negotiating the sale. Wood seemed dissatisfied, but not wanting to argue jewels and craftsmanship with a dwarf anymore, he laid off.

In any case, the price he'd gotten from a mage for the scrolls and books recovered from the house was higher than expected, so Wood was not completely disappointed.

Slayn and Eto both seemed in high spirits. Ghim was the only one drinking in relative silence.

Just as the feast to celebrate the group's success was reaching its peak, the outside door swung open and a man ran inside. Faced with this unexpected sight, even the partiers quieted down and waited for the man to catch his breath.

"It's awful," he announced. "Kanon has been razed. Beld... the emperor of Marmo, Beld did it!"

"What did you say?!?" Parn felt as though the floor had been yanked out from under him. He stood, kicking his chair away, and blanked out as though he had forgotten what he meant to say.

"He made his move, did he? This is going to be a major war," murmured Slayn as though repeating a prophecy.

The group felt as though they had fallen into an icy sea, driving away their drunkenness.

"Kanon destroyed!" The news had of course made it to King Cadmus VII in the palace of Stone Web. The king called together an emergency meeting of the nation's important nobles. For a long time, a loose alliance had bound Kanon and Alania together. Kanon was the second oldest kingdom in Lodoss, after Alania, and had existed for over two hundred years. There had been many marriages between the royal families of the two nations, and Cadmus VII's own mother was directly descended from the royal line of Kanon. Thus, Marmo's attack on Kanon constituted an offense against Alania as well, and many influential nobles called loudly for an attack on Marmo. There were also those

who argued that Alania should call for talks with Valis and join forces to wage an all-out war against Marmo. If so, Alania would be the first of hopefully many nations to do so.

But Cadmus VII sent off an expedition to Kanon. For the moment, he decided simply to blockade the highway to the south, prepare his military forces against an invasion by Marmo, and wait to see whether Marmo would move against any other country. He even gave orders not to recruit mercenaries nor to muster the troops. In this way, he half-heartedly acknowledged the Marmo's attack and its continued occupation of Kanon.

The next day, signs were posted proclaiming the king's decision. Reading one, Parn felt like grinding his teeth.

"Why!?!?" Parn yelled, forgetting that he was surrounded by people going about their business.

"What should we do now?" wondered Slayn, placing one hand on Parn's drooping shoulder as though to console him.

"How can he do this, the spineless fool?" Tears welled up in Parn's eyes. "Let's get to Valis somehow." Parn's voice was resolute as he straightened himself up and rubbed his reddened eyes. "Valis will fight back for sure."

"But the road to the south is closed, and we can't go west until the sandstorm abates. If the king of the spirits has been released as rumor says, the western route will be impassible for a good long while. I hate to say it, but we can't go to Valis now."

"We've got to get there, whatever it takes. Even if it means entering the Forest of No Return," said Parn implacably, glaring at nothing in particular.

"Are you mad, Parn? You should know as well as I how dangerous that place is. As the name implies, no one has ever come back from the Forest of No Return."

"Then I'll be the first!" Parn snapped at Eto.

"I've even heard that there's ancient elven curse on the place," added Ghim with a glance at Deedlit.

"Parn..." Slayne tried to calm Parn in his turn.

"That's a good idea." Deedlit, who had been silently listening to this exchange, suddenly spoke up. "Let's go through the forest. It's the best shortcut." Her voice was calm.

"Do you know the way?"

"Of course." Deedlit glanced at Ghim, then continued confidently. "I'm a elf. To an elf, there's no difference between modern and ancient times."

Chapter 8

Parn and the others left the city of Alan three days after news of the downfall of Kanon had reached the city. Trusting Deedlit, they had decided to go through the forest to Valis.

At first, of course, Slayn had opposed the plan. He was scared of the Forest of No Return. That frightening name was not merely the result of legends and old wives' tales.

In truth, for hundreds of years, no one who had entered the forest had ever been seen again. Any number of heroes and adventurers had tried their luck in the forest in that time. But all of them had shared the same fate. The Forest of No Return never changed — year after year, it was the same black, forbidding presence, seeming to hold the many lives it had swallowed up as a menace. As Ghim had said, rumor had it that the forest drew its power from an ancient elven curse.

No one knew if that was true, except perhaps for the victims who had disappeared into the Forest.

That dark forest loomed to the right of the party. On their third day out from Alan, it had come into view. But Deedlit kept on walking along the highway, showing no signs of leading them into the Forest.

“Here it is!” Deedlit’s cheery voice rang out when they had been following the highway south for two days. Hearing the glum responses of her companions, she made an annoyed face and set off on a path branching out from the right side of the highway.

A narrow path stretched from the highway to the woods. Slayn couldn’t believe his eyes, wondering who in the world would ever use such a path.

“The path I told you about lies ahead. But remember this: once we’re in the forest, we can’t afford to stop. And try not to get too surprised. Strong emotions have a bad influence on the trees.”

“As long as we keep that in mind, we’ll be fine?” Parn was unable to hide his worry.

“Just keep that in mind and follow me, and we’ll get to Valis safe and sound,” said Deedlit, looking straight into Parn’s eyes. “We need to hurry.”

As they drew closer to the Forest of No Return, the little group’s fear grew stronger. But it was too late to turn back.

They must have walked the little path towards the woods for about an hour. Finally, they entered the Forest of No Return. Close up, it didn’t seem such a strange place - just an ordinary forest. But they couldn’t help feeling that the place had an increasingly evil aura to it.

At the end of the little trail grew two tall conifers. They looked like twins — their height, the thickness of their trunks, even the shape of their branches was the same. The space between them somehow seemed to form a gateway.

“Here it is. We go through here.” Deedlit’s voice was filled with an irrepressible joy. “Follow the instructions I gave you. And under no circumstances should you leave my side. If you do, you might get caught in the ancient elven magic.”

Having said her piece, Deedlit turned toward the forest and cried out loudly in the elven tongue, “*Fome alanis katulu!*”

Something strange seemed to happen between the twin trees. The scenery between the two changed, and a golden light shone out.

“Follow me, before the gate closes.” With these words, Deedlit slipped into the golden light.

Steeling himself, Parn followed in her footsteps. Next, Eto, Ghim, and Woodchuck ran after him. Slayn was last. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and ran into the

golden light after them.

“Ahh!” Bumping into something, Slayn almost dropped his staff. When he opened his eyes, he was staring at Woodchuck’s black-clad back.

“Don’t startle me. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.” Woodchuck turned to complain.

“Where are we?” Slayn was so fascinated by his surroundings that he completely ignored Woodchuck’s words.

They were in a shining gold forest. The short evergreen trees shone gold in the sunlight. The thorny bushes and fern thickets they had seen from the outside seemed to have vanished without a trace. The thick cushion of leaves on the forest floor eased their tired feet.

“*This* is the Forest of No Return?” Parn gulped down his saliva and spoke in a shaking voice. “It looks like another world.”

Another world! Slayn finally realized what Parn was saying.

“I see. This is really another world. Right, Deedlit?”

Slayn was shouting in his excitement. He poked the ground repeatedly with his staff, as if to make sure it was really there, then stared up at the sky.

There was no sun in the sky. Instead, the whole sky shone.

“What do you mean?” Parn looked at Slayn.

Watching Deedlit, who was in front of the group, Slayn slowly pieced a sentence together.

“This isn’t common knowledge, but the world is made up of three different planes. One of them is the world where we humans live. We mages call it the material world. The second one is the world where the spirits live. It is broken up in turn into several different planes, but collectively, we refer to it as the spirit world. And finally, there’s a world which forms the link between the physical world and the spirit world. This is the so-called fairy world. That is where we are right now.”

“If you know that, I could have explained it. I was wondering whether humans would understand,” said Deedlit, seeming a bit ashamed. “It’s as you say. This is the world of fairies.”

“So tell me, Deedlit. Is it not true that elves lost their homeland? I had heard that they had tied themselves to the material world and were no longer at home in the fairy world. If that’s true, why were you able to bring us here?”

Deedlit lept into the air like an arrow taking flight. She went incredibly high before landing as softly as a feather. “Slayn, I have no memory of losing my homeland. Here... or rather this plane, is the world I really live in.”

“Huh.” Slayn felt like the most useful part of his body - his brain - was not working. He called out to Deedlit. “You’re a high elf. I had no idea. I thought you had gone extinct.”

High elves were a people of legends. Not just their culture but also the people themselves were held in high esteem by the people of the Old Kingdom, and it was said they were the upper class of elves in ancient times. They were known as both Ancient

Elves and High Elves.

“We’ll probably disappear one day. But that is long in the future - once even the souls of the gods begin to fade, and the corpses of dragons rot.

Slayn was deeply moved. Parn didn’t really understand, but to judge from Slayn’s words, even among elves Deedlit came from an elite clan.

“I’ve heard us dwarves used to live in this world as well. But we left it long ago. They say it was in order to find real gold, not this fake stuff. Anyway, it seems like there aren’t any riches beneath the earth here.” Ghim gazed at the head of the battle-axe he held as he spoke. “Fairies hate iron, so it must not exist in this world.”

The axe’s blade had vanished. Seeing that, Parn hurriedly checked the armor he was wearing. It too had disappeared. He wore only a linen shirt and a short loincloth.

“But... I can still feel the weight of my armor.”

That was why he hadn’t realized. His armor still weighed on him, though he couldn’t see it.

“It’s fine. You just can’t see it because iron cannot exist in this world. It’s the same reason you can’t see the true form of the gods or the bodies of certain fairies in the material world. But hurry up. I told you not to waste time, if you haven’t forgotten.”

Deedlit was getting annoyed. Parn picked up his pace and loped after her.

“What does she mean?” Parn couldn’t help asking Slayn, who he had caught up with.

“That’s simple. In the fairy realm, time moves more slowly than in our world. If we waste time, hundreds of years might pass in the material world.”

“Uh-oh.” Parn blanched. “Deedlit, we’ve got to get out of here, quick!”

“I don’t want to get any older!” yelled Wood. It would seem he misunderstood Slayn’s words.

That’s why I’ve been telling you to hurry up this whole time! Deedlit was annoyed, but as she sped up she caught sight of Parn’s desperate expression and burst out laughing before she could stop herself.

When they had advanced through the golden forest for another ten minutes, Deedlit chanted some more strange words. As she did so, another pair of twin trees just like the spot where they had entered appeared. The party ran out through the gate and left the realm of the fairies.

Outside, it was night.

“It’s true. It was the middle of the day when we went in.” As he spoke in a voice filled with surprise and admiration, Parn checked in the darkness that his armor had reappeared. Having assuaged his worries, the young warrior seemed to realize he was still running. He sat down on the ground, breathing deeply to catch his breath.

With a flash of magical light, Slayn’s blue-robed form shone next to him.

“But how many nights has it been, I wonder?” Slayn looked out from his hood onto the scenery around him. In the magical light, he could see that they were surrounded by hills. Behind them, of course, was the Forest of No Return. In the darkness it seemed, as in tales, to be squirming with magic which might — even now — stretch out a tentacle to grab Slayn.

“Judging by the distance we’ve come, I’d say it’s been three days. If you lot hadn’t wasted so much time we could have been here sooner, though.”

“There’s no way we could have been calm, seeing that place. But it was a good experience. Many humans have gone into fairyland, but few are those who have returned to the material world afterwards.” Replying to the energetic elf, Slayn finally stood, brushing the dirt from his robe.

“Where exactly are we, though?” asked Eto, looking anxiously in the direction of the forest.

“About three days east of Valis. If we cross this hill country, we ought to be near the northern highway that links Kanon and Valis. But it would be better to cross the mountains to the west. Otherwise we might get caught in the middle of the war between Valis and Marmo.” As she said this, Deedlit pointed up the steep slopes, looking up at the stars to be sure that it was really due west.

“Let’s get a move on, whatever we do.” With a nervous glance back at the forest, Woodchuck picked up his bags and slung them across his back again.

“I agree. Even though it’s night, I don’t feel sleepy. We should walk through the night and get as far away from this forest as possible. We can decide when we reach the mountains.”

True to Parn’s words, the party made their preparations and set out.

“This time difference is a pain,” said Eto to Woodchuck, who was walking beside him, as he looked up at the sky. *How many days of morning prayers have I missed?*

“Yup. It must be late at night, but I don’t feel like sleeping. But I’m a bit hungry.”

“Truly, I feel as though I haven’t eaten in three days!”

Ghim’s words finally brought smiles back to the party’s faces.

Part III: The Rescue

Chapter 1

The party reached the road from Kanon to Valis two days later in the middle of the day. The highway was so steep that they had no choice but to take the mountain road.

At last, the party had reached the pass and was climbing down the other side. The road was rough, making walking difficult. It was so hot Slayn had lost even the energy to speak. The merciless summer sun beat down on them. From all around them, they could hear the high-pitched singing of cicadas.

“It’s going to get even hotter from here on out,” Slayn sighed, his face lost somewhere under his hood. He could barely summon the determination to keep walking in this heat.

“Yep, that’s what happens in the summer,” Wood grinned, glancing at Slayn from the corner of his eye.

“Wow, I had no idea,” said Slayn with annoyance.

“Ah,” said Deedlit, stopping all of a sudden. “I wonder if these are hoofprints. The road seems pretty broken up.” She knelt, checking the holes with one finger.

Parn stopped as well and watched her.

“Just as I thought, they’re hoofprints. It looks like quite a few horses rode through here. They came from Valis, so it’s possible that they’re part of Valis’ army.”

“Valis decided to stand and fight after all.” Eto nodded. “Not that I expected any differently, what with the enemy being the dark armies of Marmo.”

“Obviously. There’s no way King Fawn would let Beld’s atrocities go unpunished, not with the invincible Holy Knights at his back! Looks like Beld’s plans will fall to ruin,” said Parn happily.

Parn spoke as though it was already decided, but Slayn doubted that it would go that smoothly.

Slayn acknowledged the strength of Valis’ knights, but Marmo’s army counted many monsters of evil power. He especially feared the dark elves’ magic knights, whose power

he had once had the displeasure to face. If Deedlit and Woodchuck had not been with him, Slayn would surely have been defeated. At that thought, a shiver ran down his spine, and in spite of the summer heat, he broke out in a cold sweat. His cotton underclothes clung unpleasantly to his skin.

This will be a long war, thought Slayn. He kept his thoughts to himself so as not to dampen the mood, but he was almost certain of his prediction.

The next day, their journey continued in much the same fashion. They left the hill road as the land flattened out, making walking easier. But they baked under the cloudless sky. Their order had not changed - Parn and Deedlit in front, followed by Ghim, then Wood and Eto, with Slayn in the rear. His breathing ragged, he was walking as fast as he could, in order not to hold the group back. As always, he carried his staff, and his face was hidden in his hood.

Before they realized it, they were surrounded by farmland. Perhaps they had even entered the realm of Valis. They even saw the occasional small house or large mansion, probably the residences of the local farmers and lords. But they stood empty. It seemed likely they had been evacuated in preparation for war.

“Yes, it looks like Valis is standing up to fight Marmo. Judging by the lack of soldiers, the front is probably farther to the east.”

“Would that mean Valis is winning?” Wood asked Eto.

“Yes, most likely,” Eto replied.

“Valis is winning for sure,” said Parn without bothering to turn his head.

That’s when they realized something was coming from ahead of them. The first to notice was Woodchuck.

“Something’s coming. Over there!” said Wood, narrowing his eyes and gazing into the distance.

The tension in the group instantly went up.

“Let’s just go on as if it’s nothing. If we do anything suspicious, they’ll notice.” Slayn’s voice came from behind them.

“True,” said Parn, narrowing his eyes to try to see the approaching group. They were kicking a lot of dust in the air. It looked like in addition to the horses, they had a wagon. It was hard to tell with the sunlight glaring in his eyes, but it looked like a merchant caravan. Or perhaps part of Valis’ supply train. The party moved forward at an even pace, trying to seem as calm as possible. But they found themselves walking silently. Anxious not to overlook anything, they were concentrated on observing the other group.

“Madame Karla, I see people ahead.” The nervous voice interrupted Karla’s concentration. She slowly pulled aside the shade covering the carriage’s window.

“What is it?”

One of the warriors guarding the carriage pulled his horse up alongside her.

“Yes, there is a group of several people approaching us on foot. They seemed to be armed, but one of them looks like a child.”

“A child? That’s odd. They must not be soldiers of Valis, then.”

“Probably not...”

“I see. Well, as long as they don’t make any false moves, let them be. But stay on your guard!”

As soon as she had given that order, Karla sat back in her seat. *Only a little farther.* With a sigh of relief, Karla turned to look at the young woman sitting next to her. The girl’s empty eyes stared blankly ahead. It was a soulless gaze. With a nod of satisfaction, Karla closed her eyes and thought of what she must do next.

“What do you think?” murmured Parn in Deedlit’s ear.

“I don’t know either, but they’re a strange lot. You could say the same thing about us, though.”

The little group of six really did seem like an odd combination. Parn smiled, but his smile soon vanished as he turned his attention to the oncoming group once again.

As the groups drew closer, both of them tensed more and more. Both of them were determined to figure the other group out. Both were prepared to strike at any moment, but the walkers stepped off the road to allow the other group to pass.

“It’s getting really hot out,” said Wood in greeting to the man at the head of the other group as he passed. Parn thought it might be too familiar of a greeting, but the other group seemed to relax.

“Must be hard traveling on foot, then,” replied the mountain man in a relaxed tone, a smile on his face.

“You got that right.” Wood replied once more, and then turned his gaze from the man. *Please pass by quickly,* he thought to himself.

The carriage passed by in a clatter of hooves.

Slayn nonchalantly glanced at the carriage. It was a very fine carriage, and he was dying of curiosity as to who might be riding in it. Squinting, he saw that there were two occupants, both women. Perhaps noticing what Slayn was doing, one of the horsemen pulled in front of the carriage, blocking Slayn’s view. Keeping an eye on Slayn, the man slowed down in order to stay between Slayn and a carriage until they were out of sight.

Looks like they don’t want us to know who’s in there. Thinking that strange, Slayn stopped and watched as the carriage pulled away.

“They scared me half to death!” Wood spit on the ground as the carriage pulled out of sight.

“What a weird bunch. Heading out towards the battlefield like that!” Parn seemed taken aback as he stepped back onto the road.

“It looked like there were two women in the carriage, but I couldn’t be sure.” Slayn was still looking in the direction of the carriage.

“Women? I should have looked too.” Joking, Wood seemed to be recovering from his fright. Deedlit, too, started walking again.

I wonder about the one who tried to stop me from seeing inside, though. Slayn cocked his head as he walked.

“Not again.” Just then, before they could say knife, Wood’s rough voice rang out.

“What happened?” Slayn had pulled as far back in his hood as he could, unable to

hide from the sun, but he looked up reluctantly at the sound of Wood's voice. He had meant to ask Wood a question, but as he looked up, he saw what Wood had meant.

Woodchuck was silently pointing down the road, where another cloud of dust filled the air. It was another mounted group, but to judge by the size of the cloud and the sound of the horses' hooves, this one was moving at high speeds.

"Looks like knights of Valis this time," said sharp-eyed Wood. "No one besides the knights of Valis would wear white armor and ride white horses like that."

"Knights of Valis?!" Parn, who was walking in front, yelled this. He squinted and followed them with his eyes, trying to make them out through the dust.

Holy knights... conflicted feelings warred within him. The white horses caught his eye as they approached. They were beautiful. The knights rode like a white wind.

As Parn hurriedly stepped out of the way, he couldn't decide how he felt about them. Some of it might be anger, perhaps, but beneath it ran a foundation of pure admiration.

With what dreams did my father don this white armor? Parn looked down at the old, beat-up armor he wore. It was no longer white — gray would have been closer. The shining silver part of the chest was the proof of his father's dishonor. He remembered the words of Mort, who ran the general store in Zaxon, and the anger and shame he had felt when he heard them again.

How am I any different from those knights? Parn felt a mix of sadness and jealousy at the thought that he wore the same kind of armor as they did. Parn was lost in his emotions, which grew stronger as the knights drew closer.

"What's wrong?" Deedlit's worried voice whispered in his left ear. Parn felt for a moment that her beautiful voice had saved him.

"It's nothing, Deed." Parn looked at Deedlit with affection and pulled himself straight. With this resolute posture, he turned to face the approaching knights.

The knights slowed down and pulled their horses to a stop just in front of Parn. Slayn and Eto respectfully lowered their heads before the knights, but Parn did not.

"Where did you lot come from?"

One of the knights stepped forward to interrogate them.

"We're travelers who came here through Alania. We fled the war in Kanon to seek refuge here." Slayn spoke with his head still bowed.

"Yes, that's right," Wood immediately seconded him.

"Hmm, you say you came running here from Kanon?" said the knight, unconvinced, and scrutinized the group. "I understand, but we can't afford to trust you so easily. Pardon me."

With these words, the knight started chanting in a low voice. Slayn recognized it as a prayer to Pharis.

As expected from a holy knight! thought Slayn with admiration. These knights were skilled not only with swords, but with the magic of Pharis. Deciding that no matter what kind of spell it was, the magic of Pharis was harmless, Slayn made no move to stop him. But next to him Eto gave a cry of surprise and lifted his head, giving the knight an affronted glare.

“How very rude of you, using magic. My name is Eto. I have been formally ordained as a priest in the temple of Pharis in Alan. I don’t care what your mission is, you have no sense, using holy magic because of baseless suspicion!”

“Ah, I apologize for my rudeness. I had no idea you were a priest of Pharis. But because we must hurry in these times of danger, we have turned to Pharis’ power. We have no further questions for you, and you are free to go on your way. Please forgive our impoliteness. Farewell.”

The knight kicked his horse to start moving again.

“Would the reason for your hurry be a group guarding a carriage, by any chance?” Lifting his head, Slayn called out to the knight.

“What!” The knight reined in his horse. The horse reared up, neighing in protest.

“Oh, we just passed a strange group with a carriage, and we thought it suspicious. Who were they?”

“Don’t ask too many questions. It’s a matter of state, so I ask that you not speak of it to others.”

This time the rider took off, not listening to Slayn’s pleas to wait. The other riders took off after him like white lightning, and the dust raised by their passage floated in the summer breeze.

“What in the world was that about?” Parn had watched the riders off, but as they vanished in the distance, he turned to Slayn, who had pulled up his dark blue hood again.

“I’m curious too. Both about those knights’ actions and the strange appearance of the group with the carriage.”

“I wonder if we should go have a look.”

“I can’t decide that on my own, but if you want my advice, we’d do best to stay out of it.” Slayn said vehemently. Not that he felt like his words would make a difference. Knowing Parn, he would reject them.

“I wonder. That knight said it was an affair of state. If that has something to do with the carriage, then...” Parn was lost in thought, his arms crossed.

“Well, if Parn’s thinking, that means it’s decided. We’re going to have to retrace our steps under this blazing sun.” Hoisting his luggage onto his back, Ghim turned and slowly started walking.

“Ugh, what a mess.” Woodchuck followed him, before looking back at Parn. “What are you doing? You know you’ll go even if we try to stop you. Don’t waste your time on thinking.”

“They’re right, you know,” said Deedlit, breaking into a half jog and stretching her hand out to Parn. “Let’s go. It’s not like you to worry.”

“Stop teasing,” Parn complained with a straight face, but his body automatically started moving. “I think and worry just as much as the next guy!”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it!” Wood laughed loudly.

“We’d better hurry if we don’t want to lose sight of them,” said Slayn, his expression strained. It was beginning to look like a forced march.

“If only we had horses too.” Deedlit, at the head of the group, looked back as she said

this. Her hair caught the sunlight, glowing with a rainbow of colors as it drifted gently through the air.

“What’s that sound?” Deedlit suddenly stopped and put both hands to her pointed ears.

“What’s wrong, Deed?” Parn looked around and checked that nothing had changed before asking.

“Shh! Quiet. I can hear a noise coming from over there. So don’t let your armor make any sound.”

Parn quickly came to a stop. He even held his breath, trying to make no sound whatsoever. The other four, walking behind them, stopped walking as soon as they noticed what was going on, doing their best not to distract Deedlit.

Elves were famous for their sharp ears. It was said that they could even hear the sounds tiny creatures made as they scurried over the leaves in the forest.

“Looks like I was right. They’re fighting. I can hear people screaming and metal hitting metal.”

“Those knights are fighting! We’ve got to hurry!” Hearing Deedlit’s words, Parn broke into a panicked run. “They must be fighting the group with the carriage. Even if they’re outnumbered, I doubt they would lose against mercenaries.”

“You can’t say that for sure. We’re still going to rush to their aid, right?”

“Of course.”

“Let’s hope we don’t get in their way.” Deedlit let out a sarcastic laugh and easily ran on ahead of Parn. Not only was she naturally quick on her feet, she was wearing lighter armor than Parn’s, so she could more than keep up with him.

Even though Parn was encumbered by his heavy armor, there was no way Wood or Slayn could overtake him. Even more so for Ghim, whose short legs gave him a serious handicap.

“Don’t just take off running like that!” cried Eto, out of breath.

“The Holy Knights are fighting!”

“I think we should go find out what’s going on,” said Slayn, panting.

Deedlit felt like she could run for hours, but the lead she had on the others had grown, so she waited for them to catch up, stretching her legs. She had run quite a distance, and she could hear the sounds of the fight much more clearly than before. If she squinted, she could just barely see several shadows moving along the highway.

“That must be it.” Deedlit stared at the shadows.

Just then, a red light flared up with a boom. The sound was as loud as an avalanche. Deedlit shrieked and covered her ears, her acute sense of hearing rendering the noise all the more painful.

“What’s this noise? And I saw a red light over there!” yelled Parn. He had caught up at last. He put his hand on Deedlit’s shoulder as she cowered and covered her ears. All the while, he gazed down the road, as though not wanting to miss anything.

“I heard it too.” Slayn approached at last. “And I saw the light. Though it would be more accurate to call it a fire - make no mistake, those were magical flames.”

“Magic? But who cast it? The fighters escorting that carriage, or the knights of Valis?” asked Deedlit in Slayn’s direction, casually covering Parn’s hand on her shoulder with her own.

“There’s no way to know. All we know is that we didn’t cast it ourselves. That fire magic we just saw is considered taboo by the Academy of Sages. The masters only teach it to those they judge ready. I didn’t see any faces I knew from the Academy in either group, though it’s possible they were using a disguise. And mages dislike carrying swords as a rule. Though I don’t know whether that goes for Wagnard of Marmo as well.”

“Was it him? Was he riding in the carriage?” said Parn, excited.

“There were just two women in that carriage. Is Wagnard a woman?” Wood spread his hands and shrugged.

“Wait, it seems like the battle is over. I can’t hear fighting anymore.” Deedlit stood, still holding Parn’s hand.

“What? Then who won?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions. There’s no way to know just from the sound. But if you hold on a second, I’ll ask the wind.”

“Wind? Sylph, you mean? In that case, I’ll use my far-seeing spell. That’s the surest method.”

“If you know that kind of useful magic, you should have used it from the beginning, instead of trying to make yourself look good now,” said Wood with annoyance.

“You said it,” Ghim voiced his agreement with Wood’s complaints.

“I can’t afford to use magic in minor matters,” said Slayn. He slowed his breathing and began to chant in the ancient tongue.

Chapter 2

Slayn softly chanted his spell. Far-seeing spells magnified the user’s vision several times beyond what would normally be possible for a human. The only problem was that such magics were tricky, requiring many adjustments to see the right place. Slayn looked up in the air, repeatedly opening and closing his eyes as he adjusted his vision to see down the road.

“It’s awful!” blurted out Slayn when at last he could clearly make out the desired location.

The scene Slayn looked upon was something out of hell. The ground was stained black, and in that blackness lay many, many burnt corpses. A white smoke rose from the charred remains, and the unpleasant odor of burning flesh filled the air.

Slayn turned his gaze, looking towards the carriage. On the carriage stood a woman in a purple dress. It seemed she was giving orders to the nearby men, hurriedly turning in one direction and the other, and rapidly gesturing with her hands.

That woman may have cast the spell, thought Slayn. She wore an old kingdom

artifact, a circlet, across her brow, and bore a number of roughly-made rings on her fingers — surely not for decoration. Of course, the staff in her right hand was not a sage's staff, but it was made of fine oak, and there were ancient runes carved into its surface, though Slayn could not tell which.

“Well, how it is?” asked Parn.

Thinking that if he looked away, it would be difficult to find the spot again, Slayn kept his eyes on the woman as he answered.

“It was magic. Looks like all of the knights of Valis have been defeated. I can see four of the carriage's guards, and one woman. She has a pretty face, but she is definitely a mage. But what terrible power, to destroy the knights of Valis with a single fire spell.”

Parn could not believe Slayn's words. “There's no way,” said Parn in a strangled voice.

“But it's the truth,” was Slayn's cold reply.

Once he had surveyed the situation around the carriage, Slayn focused his attention on the woman giving orders. She looked a little younger than Slayn. Of course, any mage, and especially a sorceress, might disguise her appearance, but her movements betrayed a youthful energy. Even with an illusion, disguising ones' movements was difficult, so it was just possible she might be as young as she appeared. In any case, she was a mage of great and terrible power. But Slayn had never heard of such a powerful witch. Yet... he had seen her before, and recently.

Slayn stared at the sorceress, probing his memory.

“I've got it!” yelled Slayn when at last he remembered. “The woman I'm looking at right now is the one from the portrait in the old house in Alan. Between her purple clothing and that circlet, there's no mistaking it. Her name was Karla, if I recall correctly. Ghim, you remember, right? You were fascinated by that painting.”

“...no idea. I don't recall such a picture. And I can't very well confirm it, because I can't see what you see. Let's just get moving. She's our enemy, right? We should capture her before she can get away.” Ghim moved a bit ahead and unslung his battle axe from his back.

“That's right! They're working for Marmo, and snuck into Valis for some reason. If the holy knights were chasing them, that surely means they were up to no good.”

Blurting this out, Parn broke into a run.

“What's the idea, just rushing in carelessly like that? Do you plan to fight them? Drop it! We're no match for them. Don't forget that they wiped out five holy knights.”

“But...” Parn turned his head, preparing a retort. But seeing Slayn's unusually stern expression, he was unable to continue.

“If you want to throw your lives away I won't stop you. But dying needlessly is not courage. What's important now is surviving and pursuing our goals. I advise you to hold out for now and wait for your chance.”

“And if we can't find that chance, we'll just watch them run away?” The reply came not from Parn, but from Ghim. He slowly approached Slayn, and his quiet but powerful words made the mage tremble.

“Of course not. I’m just saying that now is not the time. But why are you, of all people, so worked up about this? I find that strange, though not if it was coming from Parn.” Slayn wavered at this counterargument coming from such an unexpected source.

“I... I have my reasons,” said Ghim in a subdued voice, then he turned and ran down the road. Parn gave Slayn an apologetic glance and ran after him, Deedlit and Eto following in his wake.

“Seems you’re unpopular, mage. But you’re right. Let’s follow them slowly, from a distance,” whispered Woodchuck, who had quietly approached from behind, shadow-like. His voice sounded to Slayn like the murmurs of his own inner demons.

“That- that’s no good!” Slayn took off running without turning back. He felt like if he turned, he’d be caught by his own shadow.

“I won’t make the same mistake twice!” Pressing his lips together so tightly that they turned white, Slayn gripped his staff. He threw back the hood that limited his vision, exposing his face to the summer sun. The sun, sinking towards the horizon, burned into his eyes, and the heat soaked into his skin. Narrowing his eyes against the light, Slayn ignored the heat and ran hard after Parn and the others, trying to catch up.

What a bunch of happy fools, thought Wood, starting into a slow run some distance behind them.

Whether by good fortune or ill luck, Slayn’s fears were not realized. By the time the group reached the scene, the carriage had vanished.

Ghim pleaded for them to continue the chase, but Parn was unable to ignore the wreckage without doing something. Besides, following the carriage on foot would be quite difficult.

When Slayn argued that their enemies would probably camp once it grew dark, Ghim at last gave in.

Seems they’re set on fighting that group whatever happens, thought Slayn with resignation. He decided then to use magic for destructive purposes. He, too, knew how to cast fire spells.

Parn was speechless as he gazed upon the horrors that remained after the battle. Deedlit cowered behind Parn as though hiding from the sight, only her face visible. The hands that rested on Parn’s epaulet trembled slightly. Frowning, she muttered a prayer in the elven tongue.

The earth had been blackened by fire. On that blackened earth lay seven bodies. Five of them wore the armor of knights of Valis.



Eto had bent down and was checking each of the bodies for signs of life. His normally pleasant face wavered between anger and pity.

All the knights of Valis had been burned by the intense flames and had stopped

breathing. It must have been a terrible heat. Their skin had puffed up, and on touch, bits of blackened skin would pull away, revealing the livid flesh underneath. Of course such a sight would plant the seed of anger in Eto's heart. *We must rain the judgment of Pharis on those monsters' heads!* Eto screamed in his heart of hearts.

When he touched the body of the last knight and realized it was still warm, Eto's anger cooled for a moment. When he looked closer, he could see that the man's chest still rose and fell. "This man is still alive!"

At Eto's yell, the other five adventurers ran to him, surrounding him.

"If he's still breathing, I may be able to do something for him with my power." As he said this, Eto met Parn's eyes with worry, sending him a sign.

Parn nodded. "Give them some room. This is Eto's job."

Deedlit seemed displeased, but she agreed to pull back when Slayn explained, "Eto uses the magic of Pharis."

"Let's bury the bodies of the dead knights. We can't very well leave them like this."

Ghim nodded silently at Parn's words and pulled down his battleaxe. One side bore a blade, but the other was sharp as well, like a pick. He raised the axe in the air, aiming the pick at the ground, and brought it down. He buried the pick in the ground, breaking the earth into smaller chunks. Parn picked up a piece of wood and used it to clear the loose dirt out of the way. In this manner, they dug a small hole and slowly enlarged it.

Slayn sat down on the ground, facing away from the road so as not to look at the aftermath of the battle, and stared blankly at the peaceful fields that stretched out before him. A few questions swirled in his mind. The first concerned the identity of the sorceress, the second, Ghim's behavior. Ghim had definitely stared at the portrait in the old house in Alania. Forgetting something he had stared at so intently seemed quite improbable. And Ghim, who was usually so unconcerned with everything was now acting as though this was his personal mission and putting himself in the vanguard. But what reason had he to follow the servants of Marmo? Slayn had no idea. And when he thought about it, it was also strange that a subterranean dwarf, who delighted only in the works of his own hands, would leave on a journey in the first place. *When he first came to my house, he was searching for something. It was either the clue to some riddle, or perhaps a map of all of Lodoss.*

Ghim set out on on this journey with some purpose in mind. And now, might it be that he's scented the trail?

His face frozen in a severe expression, Slayn quietly observed Ghim swinging his axe.

The melodic chant of Eto's spell seemed to stretch on forever. Meanwhile, Ghim and Parn dug a grave for each of the fallen knights, with Deedlit's assistance. They placed one corpse in each grave, covered them with dirt, and thrust each knight's sword point-first into the ground, to serve as grave-markers. A short distance away, they did the same for the fighters who had guarded the carriage. As they carried out this grim task, the sun dipped slowly beneath the horizon, and the blue faded from the sky.

"Looks like that mage didn't care if her spell killed her own men," said Parn with

disgust.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I checked the bodies too, and it would seem these fighters died from sword wounds, so I would guess that she worked her magic after her men had been cut down by the knights of Valis. Plus, the side of their bodies that was facing the ground isn’t burnt.”

“Even if they were already dead, I can’t forgive her using magic on her allies.”

“Above all else, magic is not meant to be used in service of destruction. But what do we do next?” Slayn asked Parn.

“We keep going, of course.” Parn said this as though it was a foregone conclusion. Next to him, Ghim grunted his assent.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” asked Slayn in a low voice. “You’ve witnessed the power of our enemies, who can defeat this many knights with a single spell. I hate to ask this, but do you really think we can win?”

“I do not,” moaned Parn, seeming pained. “But we can’t afford to let them do as they please!”

“Even if we beat them, who’s going to give us a reward?” Wood asked Parn in a bored tone. “I don’t like working for free.”

“The reward comes from your own heart!”

From behind them, they heard Eto’s reply. Wood turned to look at Eto. He seemed exhausted, the drain of using his magic showing. But his efforts had not been in vain. Behind him, the knight stood under his own power, though with visible difficulty. Parn’s face shone with joy.

“And there will also be a reward from the King of Valis,” said the knight quietly.

“Will you tell us the reason?” Parn asked the knight.

The knight nodded silently, then began to speak.

“I am a member of Valis’ royal guard, and I was assigned to Princess Fianna’s escort.”

“Princess Fianna! You mean the Crown Princess of Valis?” shouted Parn in surprise. Deedlit kept her mouth closed, but seemed very intrigued.

“The very same. As the only daughter of King Fahn, her highness Princess Fianna is Crown Princess of Valis. After the start of the current conflict, the princess desired to visit the front lines and encourage the troops. Of course, the king, as well as everyone else in the castle, was opposed from the start. But somehow, the princess managed to slip out of the castle.”

“And so you and your companions were sent out as a search party?” asked Deedlit once the knight had stopped for breath.

“Exactly. It would seem that the princess was aided by a merchant. The merchant in question was a shady character, so we followed her. We finally caught up with the merchant’s caravan and tried to get the princess back, but the result was the pitiful sight you see before you. We defeated some of the guards and thought to pull the princess from the carriage, but a woman came out of it instead. The woman chanted some strange words and an inferno exploded around us, knocking us from our horses. It felt like my

whole body was burning, and in that moment of defeat I passed out.”

“You were serious about the reward, I hope?” asked Wood, peering at the knight’s face.

“Of course. If you’re able to recover the princess safe and sound, I can promise there will be a reward. You will probably be able to name your price.”

“I’ll just have to trust that,” said Wood, and turned to pick up his luggage. *Looks like I’ve become a fool as well.*

“I’m in your debt,” said the knight, thanking the whole group. Then he looked up, and with pursed lips, stared down the darkened road in the direction the caravan had taken. His eyes blazed with anger, as though he could see the woman who had taken the lives of his companions.

The anger that caught flame in Parn’s heart at that unattainable enemy was the same.

Deedlit watched them, confused. Why did Parn share this anger, which was not his own? Why would he risk his life in such a cause?

Thinking that though she herself would be fine, Parn and the others would have trouble walking in the dark, Deedlit started chanting the words to summon the spirits of light, will-o’-wisp.

“Ô shining spirits who dwell in the light, gather and reveal your form to me!” In response to Deedlit’s spell, a small, bouncing light appeared letting off a dim light as it floated in the air. The light gradually grew brighter.

Next to her, Slayn created a magic light at the end of his staff. Lit by these twin glows, the party finally left the smell of charred meat behind, setting off down the road towards Kanon with apprehension.

Chapter 3

Parn’s group followed the caravan, taking the road towards the east. But it was some time before they caught sight of their enemies.

The carriage had stopped in front of an old house. It was a well-built two-story building, surrounded by a wall. According to the knight, most of the people of Valis had fled the area due to the war. Their enemies had doubtless known this when selecting their base of operations.

The horses had been untied from the carriage and were resting on a bed of hay.

“It would seem we are not expected. How convenient.” After saying that, Slayn muttered something and waved his staff, putting out its light. Deedlit, too, released the spirits of light, will-o’-wisp, from their magical shackles. The little spirits of light flickered two or three times as if giving a bow, then lost their form and fell into the darkness. They sizzled as they vanished.

“So, what next, Sir Knight?” With a sidelong glance at the knight, Parn smoothly unsheathed his sword.

“We shouldn’t need any tricks. If we charge in and catch the enemy while they’re

sleeping, the odds will be in our favor.” He held a greatsword with both hands, and was taking measured breaths while gazing at the entrance to the house.

They could hear no sound save for the soft clanking of their armor; it was eerily quiet. They could see a little light behind the front door. It seemed the sentries were awake.

The knight slowly moved forward. Parn, Ghim, and Deedlit followed. The other three started walking some distance behind them.

“Be careful,” said Slayn in a small voice. As he spoke, Slayn could feel the sweat dampen his palms. There was no helping it — after all, he was taking on a much stronger mage.

When he felt they had covered enough distance, the knight raised his sword over his head and charged forward. The horses, roused by his noise, let out high-pitched neighs. Without slowing in the least, he kicked the door in and quickly took stock of the situation inside. Parn and Deedlit charged in on his heels and Ghim followed a moment later. The two sentries stared at the four intruders’ faces in shock before quickly grabbing their swords and standing to fight.

“Deedlit and I will take care of these guards. You and Ghim, go up the stairs.”

Readying his shield, Parn glared at the sentries as he yelled his order. Picking the one on the left as his opponent, he lightly swung his sword to provoke him. Deedlit ran around the one on the right, and stabbed at his belly with her rapier.

By the time they started fighting, Ghim and the knight had already rushed up the stairs. The second floor opened up onto a corridor, extending past the wall of the room on the first floor. There were five doors on the right side of the corridor.

One of those doors opened with a thud, and a woman, still in her nightclothes, walked out, stumbling. She had intended to check on the first floor, but now she turned cautiously towards the charging dwarf and knight.

Karla had awoken to the sound of neighing horses. Thanks to her usual discipline, she quickly became alert.

Intruders? Soldiers of Valis? Karla pushed aside the blanket and pulled on the first thing she found — an ivory gown — over her pale silk nightclothes. Before she could even tie the cord, she heard the stomping noise of feet climbing the stairs.

Karla gave up on the cord and burst into the hallway.

A survivor of the afternoon’s battle, as well as a dwarf wielding a battle-axe, were headed towards her. Karla realized she had no choice but to calmly face this situation. Of the two, the knight was likely the more powerful. She could have sworn she had defeated him earlier that day. Anyone able to survive her fire magic was an opponent to treat with respect.

In that case, I’ll just have to destroy him with the strongest magic I possess. Karla suddenly spread her arms wide and did a strange dance, then spoke some words in the ancient tongue.

“Ô origin of all creation, remember your true form! Take unto yourself the power of mana, and undo the ties that bind!”

And she held her arms straight in front of her.

A line of light flew straight from her outstretched arms and hit the knight head on.

Hit squarely by Karla's light, the knight's body glowed for a moment. Then, just as quickly, he vanished as though he had been erased from existence.

Seeing the knight next to him glow and then disappear, Ghim shuddered from head to toe. But he did not retreat. She would have no time to prepare a second spell. In which case he ought to be able to take down an unarmored opponent such as her with a single blow from his battleaxe. When he had drawn close enough, Ghim aimed his axe at her head. But she seemed to expect it. She jumped back lightly, dodging his blow, found a more advantageous position, and prepared her next spell.

"Ley..." Ghim, who had been wildly charging after her, suddenly stopped, his mouth hanging open. By then, her magic was ready.

A white cloud rose quickly from the ground. Caught in the middle of it, Ghim fell to the ground with a crash.

"Ghim!" Slayn had been watching. Though he knew it was useless, he tried to cast the cloud of sleep spell.

The woman saw that the robed man downstairs was trying to cast a spell on her. It was a simple sleeping spell. The two sentries had been defeated. Two unarmed fighters were trying to run up the stairs. The others were some kind of priest and a powerless thief who was desperately seeking a hiding place.

She didn't even need to kill them.

Karla's next spell was the same one she had used to defeat the dwarf. The white cloud boiled up, then slowly spread from the staircase to the first floor. As the smoke reached them, Parn and Deedlit, then Slayn, collapsed. Even Wood lost consciousness, curled up in a ball, all the while praying that his hiding place would not be found.

Eto, too, felt that his body had grown heavy and turned to lead, and slowly fell to his knees. Remaining in that position, he mustered all his forces to fight the darkness that assailed him. He couldn't allow himself to pass out and leave himself to fate. Even if he had to rot away here, he wanted to do it with full knowledge of what was happening to him.

Reciting prayers to Pharis in his mind, he stared at his fingertips. He gathered holy power inside of himself and tried to fight the magic. He couldn't even feel his fingertips. It was as though every nerve in his body had been cut. There was no pain - he wouldn't even have been able to feel it. To prevent the numbness from affecting his mind, he remembered the words of the prayers to Pharis.

And then Eto won his battle. He'd outlasted the magic without losing consciousness. But he pretended to be unable to move. As long as no one tried to finish him off, that seemed the wisest plan.

Looking down on the fallen intruders, Karla slowly descended the staircase. Finally having finished their preparations, her two remaining men appeared from the door at the back of the first floor, weapons in hand. The sight before them took their breath away.

"Madame Karla... this is...?"

“Exactly as it seems. Any mercenary worth their salt ought to be ready at a moment’s notice. If I hadn’t awoken so quickly, that would have been your fate as well.”

Karla spoke in a cold voice, pointing at the two dead warriors and shaking her head.

“In any case, we cannot afford to leave things like this. The magic won’t last forever. Lock these intruders in an empty room on the second floor. Take their weapons from them and put them in another room. And make sure not to use the room next to the girl.”

With this, the problem posed by the intruders was solved. She could kill them, but she could also afford to let them live. As long as she locked them away with magic, they wouldn’t meddle until she could move to a safer location. In fact, they probably wouldn’t even have the willpower to cause trouble.

More importantly, what next? Her mercenary guards had suddenly been reduced to two. It would be difficult to break through Valis’ front lines with the girl in tow, given the situation. She’d used mercenaries in order to avoid the loss of her own men, but she could no longer depend on them. A better plan would be to return to Kanon and bring her own subordinates. If the intruders wanted, she could even let them join up. They had made a good showing of themselves earlier, and they even had an elf and a mage with them. In these times when rune masters had become scarce, every mage was needed.

If they’re ordinary adventurers... Karla thought of words to persuade them. Fame and fortune... those words would bring them over to her side. If they were wise, they might even understand the true motives behind her quest. They could surely become powerful allies. She already had a number of underlings, but they were scattered across the land, busy with different missions. In Alania, the mage Akim had failed to assassinate the king, but it seemed that this time he would succeed in his task. With the capture of Princess Fianna, the war against Valis should take a favorable turn. King Fahn was not the sort of person to hesitate just because his daughter had been kidnapped. If it was in the name of justice, he was capable of throwing away even his daughter’s life. But it was not so simple for the holy knights. Even making them waver a little was enough. They would no longer fight to their usual standard.

More importantly, for the moment, she needed to call on her followers. Having made her decision, she climbed the stairs to join the mercenaries. They had just carried up the last intruder — the tall thief — and were exiting the room.

“It’s done, Madame Karla. What next?” The man had a rough, uncultured voice. But the mercenaries were fairly strong, and as long as they got their pay, they would not abandon their posts. She had chosen them for that.

“It would be dangerous to try to cross the front lines now. There are many soldiers of Valis there, and they may have received messages about us by now. We should bring more men with us, just in case. That’s why I intend to return to Kanon and gather as many of my followers as I can.”

“Understood. But what do we do in the mean time?”

“Don’t worry. I will return quickly. Just guard the girl and the intruders until my return. I will leave immediately, so I can return as soon as possible. Oh, and I will teach you how to open the door to the intruders’ room, just in case. In the worst-case scenario,

make sure not to leave any evidence that they were here. Just say ‘lasuta’ to open the door. If you don’t, you won’t be able to open it, no matter how hard you pull, not even if you try to break down the door. I’ll make the door harder than steel with a spell, and hold it shut with magic as well.”

Karla went up to the second floor, to the room where the intruders were held, and cast two spells. The first spell slowly shut the door. For the second, she pulled a dragon’s tooth from her hair and let it fall to the floor. The tooth burst open and disappeared, leaving a white mass which slowly stood. It was a skeleton holding a sword loosely in its bony hand. Letting the sword hang, it froze in place.

“What’s that?!?” The terrified mercenaries were ready to run away.

Karla spoke a few words in an unknown language to the skeleton.

“Don’t worry. This skeleton warrior will not harm you. Dragon fang warriors only understand simple commands, but their skill with a sword is superior to yours. Plus, they know no fear.”

The two mercenaries looked at the creepy skeleton warrior and felt they had been slighted. Their eyes met, and they silently swore not to approach the room.

“Well, I’ll be off. Do take care.”

With those words, Karla returned to her room and finished her preparations. When she left, she wore a purple dress and carried a staff in her right hand. Once she had reached the blood-soaked entryway, she made a brusque gesture and chanted a spell. When she had finished, she disappeared.

With deep sighs, the two mercenaries began clearing away the bodies of their fallen comrades.

Chapter 4

Once their voices had faded, Eto stood up and looked around him. His body was still numb from the aftereffects of the magic. Between that and the amount of magic he had cast, he was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

But he had no time to worry about such things. They had to escape as soon as possible. He had heard the entire conversation between Karla and her two underlings. Now was their chance to get away.

But he couldn’t do anything on his own. He waited for the others to awaken. Without even checking, he knew they were all alive. He could hear the sound of their breathing, and their chests rose and fell. It seemed best to allow them to awaken naturally. Eto sat, wrapping his arms around his knees, and sunk into his own thoughts.

It would seem that the woman called Karla was working for Marmo and was plotting in secret to help Beld here in Valis. But Slayn claimed never to have heard of such a powerful spellcaster. Eto had heard that another powerful mage, called Wagnard, worked for Marmo, but it was possible that he had used a transformation spell to disguise himself as a woman.

Whether or not that was true, it was surprising that they had managed to get mixed up in not one, but two of Karla's plots. Eto settled on the most logical explanation for a priest — a test from his god. The thought that Pharis was on his side buoyed his tired heart more than anything else ever could.

It took two full hours for Ghim to awaken. Deedlit was the next to wake up, and eventually Parn, Slayn, and Woodchuck regained consciousness one after the other.

Once they were all awake, Eto explained what he had heard. Once he had finished, he turned to Parn. "What shall we do next?"

Parn's mind was still fuzzy, so he shook his head, trying to clear it.

"Well, if we want to move, we'd better do so quickly. The remaining mercenaries must be asleep by now. At most, one might be awake." Checking that her dagger was still concealed under her shoulder guard, Deedlit drew it and stared at the blade.

"With only one weapon, don't you think it'll be difficult?" Looking at Deedlit's dagger, Wood made a big gesture. "That skeleton must be tough."

"The dragon fang warrior? Much stronger than an average fighter."

That was why they served as guards at the Academy of Sages. Slayn quietly approached the door and peeked through the gap. As expected, the skeleton stood armed and ready, watching the door with its empty sockets.

"It's a real dragon fang warrior," said Slayn, turning around.

"But we have no choice but to try." Parn stood, making a fist.

"This looks like it could serve as a weapon." With a cracking sound, Ghim broke one of the legs off of the table that had been left in the room. "Doesn't seem very solid, but we can use it as a club. Anyway, it's better than nothing."

Parn accepted two of them, and Eto took another. Deedlit refused, saying that she preferred her dagger, which she switched to her right hand.

"I doubt it will work on the skeleton," said Deedlit, moving smoothly to the door and standing with her back pressed to the wall, ready to jump out at any moment.

"Leave this to me and Ghim," said Parn, readying his two table legs. He looked pretty silly, but it was no time to worry about appearances.

Eto stood a bit away from the door, behind Parn and Ghim. Then he pronounced Karla's spell syllable by syllable, enunciating clearly.

"La-su-ta."

The door slowly swung open, revealing the skeleton behind it. Parn and Ghim immediately leapt forward, ready to engage the skeleton warrior.

The skeleton knew it was time to execute its mission. It slowly lifted its dangling scimitar in the direction of the doorway and brought the round shield attached to its left arm up across its chest. Parn aimed his first blow at its unprotected skull, but it quickly brought up its shield, easily blocking his attack. Showing a quickness of movement completely unlike its previous behavior, the skeleton swung its sword.

Parn easily deflected the blow with the weapon in his left hand, and aimed for its chest with his right. The round shield came down again, blocking Parn's attack. Parn couldn't help but wonder at the skeleton's skill. He was somehow holding off the

skeleton's blows, but as he did, its powerful strikes chipped pieces off of the table leg in his right hand.

It won't hold long. Sweat rolled down Parn's brow.

Next to him, Ghim held a table leg in both hands, not moving a muscle. He was waiting for his chance. Finishing things with a single blow was the dwarven way of fighting. He just hoped Parn would hold out long enough.

"What are you doing, Ghim. Parn's in danger!" Deedlit's voice from behind them was almost a scream.

"Shut up! We dwarves have our own way of fighting." As he yelled back, Ghim focused all his senses on the skeleton. Deedlit and Eto stood just behind him, ready to fight if necessary, though they prayed they would not need to.

Parn's left-hand table leg at last took a solid blow and snapped in two, sending a piece flying. The scimitar hit Parn, but his armor absorbed the blow. Behind him, Deedlit shrieked and covered her eyes.

"I can't hold out any longer!" Parn glanced at the broken table leg and cried out in despair. He knew he couldn't win just by blocking, but he had no other choice.

But that was the moment Ghim had been waiting for. Because the blow had struck Parn's body, it opened up a big gap in the skeleton's defenses. Matching the skeleton's movements as it tried to bring its guard back up, Ghim carefully timed his attack.

BOOM! Ghim's underhanded swing was aimed at the skeleton's sword arm. Hitting his target — its upper arm — square on, Ghim broke the skeleton's right arm with an unpleasant smashing noise. The sword fell, hitting the floor and bouncing with a metallic clatter. Ghim's weapon was smashed as well, but he no longer cared about that.

"Ooooooh!"

Not a moment later, Ghim leaned forward and let out a guttural yell. He stuck out his right shoulder and charged at the skeleton.

The skeleton took the charge with its shield. There was a dull thud, and Ghim grimaced horribly. But the skeleton couldn't stop his momentum and was knocked off its feet and onto the floor.

"Raaaaaah!"

The dwarf's harsh voice rang out once more. He lifted the skeleton high in the air. Its arms and feet clattered, but they moved uselessly through the air.

The skeleton went over the railing and fell with a dull clatter to the stone floor downstairs. It tried to stand a few times, but in the end it laid its shattered hands on the floor and stopped moving.

"You did it." Parn grinned at Ghim. Ghim's beard shook in answer, and he let out a strange yell as he looked downstairs.

"Looks like the sleepyheads are here."

Parn looked down as well. The two mercenaries had opened their door and stepped out into the first-floor parlor. They paled when they saw the smashed skeleton, but realizing that their enemies were unarmed, they immediately ran up the stairs. They were armed with a sword and a spear, and both carried shields. They clearly had the upper

hand.

“Leave this to me!”

Deedlit slipped out in front of Parn and Ghim. Holding her dagger in her right hand, she quickly chanted a spirit magic spell. The room grew dark, and the light spirit, will-o’-wisp, appeared. The little ball of light moved slowly towards the staircase, as though playing.

“Get the weapons!”

Yelling, Eto turned. The weapons should be in the next room.

Narrowing her green eyes, Deedlit adopted a dagger-throwing pose. The will-o’-wisp floated around the corridor, getting in the way of the mercenaries.

“What in the world is that?”

The mercenary with the sword climbed the stairs and stopped, waving the ball of light away with his sword. Suddenly he cried out in pain, holding his right hand, and fell down the stairs. The will-o’-wisp had disappeared when he cut it, but it sent a powerful shock through the blade into the man’s hand.

The man with the spear was distracted by that for only a moment, but that moment was fatal. Having aimed carefully, Deedlit stabbed her dagger into his throat.

By the time Eto came back, huffing and puffing as he carried the weapons, victory was theirs. Deedlit had taken down the swordsman, whose hand had gone numb after hitting the will-o’-wisp, with the spear she had taken from his dead comrade.

“Deed, your weapon.”

Eto admired her handiwork as he handed her her rapier.

“All right, now what, Parn?” Deedlit sheathed her rapier at her waist, then fixed her wild hair with both hands.

“We save the princess, of course,” declared Parn before climbing back up the stairs.

They soon found the princess’ room. The door was locked, and it was quiet and dark.

After a glance from Parn, Wood took something like a wire from his pocket and inserted it in the lock.

“Doesn’t seem like there’re any traps,” said Wood, moving the wire around a few times. The lock opened with a click.

It was Parn who opened the door. The entrance was illuminated by the lights of the hallway, but the rest of the room was completely dark. Parn would have kept walking, but Deedlit stopped him.

“This is the room of a noble lady. You should all stay back.”

Whispering to Parn, Deedlit took one step forward. Then she took in the situation with her night vision. She could clearly see a trembling form trying to hide in the bed. The girl was clearly frightened. *Of course she is.* Deedlit sighed and spread her arms in a friendly gesture.

“You’re safe, your highness. My name is Deedlit. We’re here to rescue you. Please, come with me and don’t worry.”

Deedlit waited a while for a response, but the girl did not speak, nor did she move even an inch. All Deedlit could hear was the faint sound of the girl’s breathing.

“Lauma adonia moil Pharis,” said Eto in a clear voice as he stood in the doorway. Deedlit turned to look at Eto’s face for a moment.

“Moilos laum.” A small voice came from the room. It was the girl’s voice. “Is a priest of Pharis there?”

“Yes, though I do not yet have a parish,” said Eto with a deep bow in the direction of the darkness.

“We came here to save you. Please, don’t worry and come with us,” said Deedlit once again, seizing her opportunity.

The covers moved, and a small silhouette walked towards the door. The figure’s steps were hesitant, but before long she had stepped into the light. She stood before the party in her white nightgown. No doubt she could see them better as well — especially Eto’s priestly robes bearing the symbol of Pharis.

Slipping past Deedlit, the girl ran up to Eto and tackled him, wrapping her arms around his white priest robes.

Then she burst into tears, sobbing in a high-pitched voice.

Eto staggered under the girl’s weight and nearly fell, but at the last minute Parn shot out his arm and managed to steady him. With a start, Parn averted his eyes from the girl. Parn blushed. Glaring at Parn, Deedlit pulled off her travelling cloak and draped it over the girl’s shoulders.

Chapter 5

A short while later, the girl released Eto from her grip. His face was red, but his determination had not faltered.

“Princess, please prepare for departure. We have no way of knowing when that sorceress might return. Let’s leave with the greatest haste.”

Hearing Eto’s words, Slayn left to fetch their bags. Ghim and Woodchuck followed him.

“Ugh, what a pain. We have to travel by night again.” Wood murmured his complaint. After walking all day and suffering the effects of magic, his body seemed to move more sluggishly than usual.

“If you’re itching to get hit by a few more spells, you’re free to sleep here.” Ghim glared at Wood. “We’re all tired. Stop flapping your lips.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Wood lightly.

“It would be nice to use the carriage, but...” Muttering to herself, Deedlit started down the stairs. Hearing Parn telling her to be careful, she turned and waved in response. She ran lightly down the steps.

“Um... is there anything I can...” said Fianna. She wanted to ask if there was some way she could help. Eto shook his head, refusing her offer.

“We’ll handle our preparations. Please prepare your own things, your highness.”

Eto went downstairs as well to lend a hand to Deedlit. Parn left his bags to Slayn and

went to help outside. Fianna obediently returned to the room that had been given to her.

Returning to her room, Fianna noticed that she was wearing a thin nightgown. She felt embarrassed, and her face went hot. She had hugged that young priest, dressed like this! If Grand Chamberlain Elmore found out, what a scolding she would get!

She was still more worried not to see any familiar faces than relieved to have been saved. Her heart was racing. The only person she could relax around was the priest called Eto, who spoke the holy language of Pharis. The rest of them were completely unlike the members of the imperial guard.

I want to go back to the castle in Loyd as soon as possible, Fianna couldn't help but think. She had been captured when, wanting to visit the troops on the front, she had been tricked by that merchant woman. Her heart had been bespelled, and she had had no freedom during the day. At night she had been kept under watch and had no chance to run away. She had partly given in to being taken to Marmo. *But the almighty Pharis did not abandon me. He sent his disciple to save me.* Fianna drew the symbol of Pharis and intoned a prayer before taking off her nightgown and reaching for the dress on a nearby table.

I have no choice but to depend on them. Even after making that decision, Fianna's face was clouded by the weight of her worries.

When Eto stepped outside, Deedlit was calming the panicked horses with strange words. One horse was already harnessed to the carriage.

As she attached another horse to the carriage, Deedlit got a good look at Eto's face and gave him some advice.

"Eto, get in the carriage and get some sleep. You're asleep on your feet, and you're looking a bit green."

"But..."

Eto tried to protest, but the elf fixed her sparkling green eyes on him and shook her little head. Deedlit had realized Eto was exhausted from the start. Even now he was trying to help out of a sense of duty, but to Deedlit's eyes, even in the dark of the night he looked like he was deathly ill.

"The most helpful thing you can do right now is hide yourself in the carriage, wrap yourself in a blanket, and sleep."

Deedlit's tone was gentle, but it carried a strength that would tolerate no objections. Eto gave up on arguing with her, opened the gaily decorated carriage door, and stepped inside. He felt around until he found the seat and laid down on it. As though Karla's magic were finally taking effect, he immediately sunk into a deep sleep.

Everyone was exhausted, not just Eto. But thinking of the sorceress, Karla, froze even their exhaustion. If she were to come back now, she would surely kill them mercilessly. Her magic was such that it would be child's play for her. She might realize at any moment that they had escaped.

Morning was still far away, and their destination farther still.

It seemed like their nighttime march would go on forever, but in truth, time continued to pass just as it always did. Before they realized it, the darkness began to fade, and at

length the rays of the morning sun lit their way. The fear that had gripped the party faded bit by bit along with the darkness, but their nervous energy faded with it. Parn started to nod off on his horse, and Wood, who had taken over driving the carriage from Slayn, fell fast asleep. Slayn trusted that his horse would keep to the road and nearly let go of the reins. Fields stretched off to either side, and the edges of the road were bordered by trees whose bounteous crop of leaves testified to the blessings of the heavens which they received. They could hear some kind of bird as well, perhaps a chicken, left behind by a fleeing farmer.

“It’ll be another half day before we reach the city.” Parn spoke gloomily to Slayn, looking up at the rising sun. Slayn matched his horse’s pace to Parn’s and to the speed of the carriage, and nodded several times.

“Will we reach it before noon? It looks like another hot day.”

“It might be better to take a break along the way.”

“Probably. We’re tired, and so are the horses. It would be nice to rest somewhere in the shade during the day, and get a fresh start in the evening.”

But they didn’t have that luxury. The sorceress could come back at any time. They had to get Fianna to the safety of a Valis garrison as soon as possible.

Parn decided to take a break when it was nearly noon. At that time, Eto, Ghim, and Woodchuck woke up. Deedlit and Princess Fianna woke as well and stepped out of the carriage. They all settled down beneath a large tree to rest.

When the whole troupe had settled down, cushioned by the soft grass, Parn quickly fell asleep. Deedlit calmly gazed at Parn’s sleeping form. Slayn, sitting next to Ghim, dozed off without lying down.

“Even though we’ve come this far, we can’t be sure we’ve escaped from Karla. We won’t be completely safe until we’ve met the army of Valis.”

Eto still seemed a bit sluggish, but he sat in the center of the group, looking at each of his companions in turn as though checking their faces.

“In that case, I should ride a horse. Slayn and Parn can rest in the carriage, and Eto and Wood can drive it. Ghim, do you think you can ride?”

“With my stature there’s no way.”

“Then Ghim can ride behind me. There’s a handle on the back of the saddle, so hold onto that. If you hang onto my body, I won’t hesitate to throw you off the horse.”

“Right, I’ll be careful,” replied Ghim with a serious expression.

“After a short rest, let’s get going. The city shouldn’t be far.”

The sunlight had gotten stronger. *The afternoon’s march will be rough*, thought Eto.

Chapter 6

They set out once more a bit after the sun had passed its zenith. It was as hot as ever, but the sunlight had weakened a little, and it was easier to walk.

Deedlit’s horse, with Ghim riding in back, was in the vanguard, followed by the

carriage driven by Eto. The sun was bright, and there was nowhere the witch might hide, but the party was constantly on the lookout for anyone that might approach. Even the slumbering Slayn and Parn were probably aware of this. As Fianna watched, with each movement of the carriage, they groaned as if in a nightmare.

“Just a bit more,” murmured Eto, staring up at the sky. Far away, there floated many tall, tower-like clouds. Aside from those white masses, the summer sky was blue, and he found himself thinking that if they hadn’t been fleeing an enemy, this would have been a nice day.

When Eto was turning his eyes back to the road, a dark shape seemed to appear in the sky. With a start, Eto looked back at the sky, focusing his mind on the dark spot. A cold fear coursed through his boy.

“Wood! What do you think that is?” Eto elbowed the thief next to him. Woodchuck had been staring at the unchanging scenery, deep in his own thoughts. One important thought was on the subject of the reward he would receive from the king of Valis. It would doubtless be a substantial sum. How should he use it? Save it up and buy the leadership of some thieves’ guild? Wood was lost in happy thoughts.

But he pushed that mediocre dream aside. He ought to be able to accomplish something greater. That small satisfaction could not erase the twenty years he had lost. There should be something bigger. Much bigger.

As he made that decision, Eto elbowed him, and he returned to reality. As Eto jostled him, he turned his gaze to the sky. He narrowed his already narrow eyes, and looked in the direction Eto was pointing.

“Oh, that black spot. It’s pretty far so I can’t be sure, but it’s probably a bird.” As if to show his boredom, Wood sniffed.

“Is it really a bird?” Eto felt that his heart was thundering.

“Wood! Wake Slayn and Parn. That’s no ordinary bird. It’s far away, but it must be huge. And it’s flying straight for us. Its position never changes, but it’s getting bigger.”

At those words, Wood looked to the sky once more. It was true, as Eto said, that was not the size of an ordinary bird.

“It can’t be a dragon, right?” With a shaking voice, Wood turned back to the carriage. “Slayn! Parn! Wake up! We might have a job for you!”

Yelling, he drew his daggers and braced himself. Eto yelled and stopped the horses in the middle of the road. Making a dubious face, Deedlit approached on her horse.

“What’s the matter?” Slayn’s voice sounded sleepy. Perhaps the thin mage sensed that something out of the ordinary had happened to Eto and Wood, because he pulled his head back inside, opened the door with a thunk, and stepped outside. He rearranged his robe and pulled up his hood in order not to be overwhelmed by the heat of the sun.

“Look at that!”

Slayn squinted in the direction Eto was pointing. He muttered, “I don’t really know,” then muttered the words of a spell.

Under the magifying effects of his farseeing spell, Slayn stared at the black shape once more.

He blinked many times, and then his mouth opened in an O of surprise. “That’s a roc. It’s a legendary bird which appears on rare occasions in the eastern desert of Flaim. It’s said to be a servant of the gods, but I never would have expected to see one flying here, of all places!”

Slayn’s voice shook a bit in his shock. But Eto’s voice could not help but tremble in unmistakable terror.

“No, it can’t be that. That bird must be that witch in disguise. Look! It’s so close already!”

Eto’s voice came out almost in a scream. His normal calm was overcome by the sight of that huge bird, which blotted out a section of the sky. No, more than that, he remembered the terror of the witch, Karla’s immense power.

“Must be.” Slayn had no choice but to admit that Eto was right. He gripped his sage’s staff all the tighter and prepared himself to cast a spell.

Just as Parn and Fianna climbed out of the carriage, the roc soared over their heads, flapped its wings a few times, and settled down in the middle of the road as if to block the party’s path. The whirlwind caused by its passage picked up quite a bit of dust from the dry earth. The dust got in the party’s eyes, making them water as they crouched against the winds. As it settled, they rubbed their eyes repeatedly to clear them.

By the time the party was able to open their eyes, the giant bird had disappeared. A woman in a light purple dress stood in its place, surrounded by light. The woman walked towards them, smiling as though she was about to say something amusing.

“Long time no see. Or is it too soon to say that?”

When they could clearly see the strangely glowing emerald green circlet she wore on her forehead, Karla spoke in a calm voice.

Parn drew his sword from its scabbard, taking one step forward as though to protect the others, then stood on guard, ready to strike at any moment. His sun-browned hands wrapped firmly around the hilt, he was as unmoving as a bronze statue. Slayn, too, held his staff straight in front of him. Reciting spells in his mind, he slowly focused his will, tapping his feet.

“What brings you here?” asked Eto in a hoarse voice. He couldn’t hold back his terror. But he could beat it. He could see no hope for them, but he did not give in. Eto stared at the witch’s beautiful white face and her jet black hair, which seemed to devour the light. He could feel the immense power she held. Slayn seemed to glimpse a mysterious sadness in the witch. But in the next instant her blue eyes seemed to sparkle with a cold intelligence. Soon Karla’s blood-red lips began move in what seemed an enthralling dance. Hearing a whispering sound that resembled a lute, Parn tensed. He walked to the front of the group and took up a wide stance with his sword and shield. He seemed to challenge the witch, saying that he would take all of her spells. Karla’s voice worked its way through his anger. Parn gave a start and blinked.

In front of him, Karla was once again smiling. In the seductive presence before him, the coldness he had felt before was completely absent. Her benevolent smile seemed that of a goddess of compassion. As the strange harmony between her white skin and dark

hair infiltrated his heart, intoxicating as a drug, he heard Slayn's words of warning.

"Get a hold of yourself. She's casting a spell."

Shaken by Slayn's words, Parn quickly shook himself free, anchoring himself in reality.

"Enough of your tricks, you be-damned witch!" yelled Parn, his face clouded with anger, as he moved at last, spinning his sword around him as though cutting the strands of a spider's web. Eto thought for a moment that Parn might charge right then, but the young fighter adopted his previous position, sword and shield at the ready. His eyes blazing his anger at the sorceress, he once again looked like a sculpture in bronze.

"You had the skill to snatch the girl from under my nose, and the strength of mind to break my spell. I'm impressed, adventurers."

Karla looked down, as though in true admiration. But when she looked up again, her cold eyes fixed on the adventurers.

"It would be a pity to have to kill you. What do you say? Will you join forces with me? I can give you anything you want. Fame, fortune, knowledge. Or perhaps you would prefer beautiful women? I want to clear up your misunderstanding — everything I do, I do for Lodoss."

"Don't take me for a fool!" Parn's harsh voice rang out once again.

"If you don't want anything, that's fine. Hand over the girl and leave this place. If you refuse, I will show no mercy. If you want to die a meaningless death, so be it!"

Karla waved her arms violently, singing the words to a flowing song. As her spell poured out, many masses of red light formed over her head. They turned around and around in the air as though alive.

"Incredible. Each of those lights is a fire spell. Even one of those would be enough to kill us all." Slayn's voice shook with despair.

"Can't we do anything?" asked Parn.

"No. For me to create just one or two of those, it would take all of my strength."

"Got it." Parn had already made up his mind. Rather than disgrace himself, he would engage in a heroic battle, just like his father. Controlling his breath, he raised his sword to the height of his shoulder and aimed the point straight ahead, towards the woman's chest. And then he readied himself to run. Realizing what he was doing, Deedlit gasped, then took a breath to speak.

"Wait!" A girl's voice shot out, just a moment before either Parn could move or Deedlit could speak. "Wait. If I go with you, you will forgive these people, won't you?"

It was Princess Fianna. Her eyes were filled with courage and a cold determination. Eto could see a dignity befitting a princess in her profile. He could also see her beauty and her true feelings. The princess was shaking, though only a little. Eto stepped softly to the princess' side.

"Your highness, we have to stall for time. Karla would surely not dare to cast a spell that might hurt you. If we all charge her at once, we might buy you enough time to escape. You can ride on horseback, right? Gallop across the fields and head for the forest. Later, you can head for the city. Believe in Pharis' protection and go!"



Eto lifted his arms, calling forth the glow of holy magic. It was only for an instant, but a light that outshone even the sun exploded above his head. Karla averted her eyes, blinded by the priest's unexpected counterattack. No longer sure what to do, Fianna

looked up at Eto's face.

"Hurry!" was Eto's order to the girl. She burst into movement, running back along the road. Slayn chanted a spell of darkness, creating a wall of shadow between Fianna and Karla, hiding Fianna from Karla. Then, moving forward, he began chanting his next spell in the ancient runic tongue.

"Ô free spirit of the wind, sylph. Stop the vibrations of the air and erase all sound." Deedlit cast the spell of silence on the witch's location and drew her rapier. Parn and Ghim were already charging.

Karla threw the balls of light hanging in the air at those two, then drew a complex sign in the air and tried to cast a spell. But her words were inaudible, and her mouth flapped uselessly. It was the silence spell the elf girl had cast. Sylph was stopping the vibration of the air, as ordered.

"Enough of your clever tricks!" Lightly swinging the ring on her left ring finger, Karla erected an invisible magic barrier before her. Then she stepped back, fleeing from the area affected by the elven silence charm. Parn charged up in front of her, nimbly wielding his sword, but the barrier Karla had made stopped him cold. His muscles going numb, Parn had to support his sword with his shield arm to keep from dropping it.

"Seems like you want to die!" yelled Karla. Then, concentrating, she expanded a field of power around her. Hit by the expanding magical shell, Parn, Ghim and Deedlit went flying. She pushed them back far enough to give herself time to cast her next spell, and kept expanding the sphere.

Parn fought uselessly against the spell, furious at his own powerlessness.

It was then. In the distance, the despairing party could see a rising cloud of dust. Slayn, still under the effect of his farseeing spell, could clearly make out what it was.

Pulling off his hood, Slayn turned an ecstatic face to Eto, standing next to him, and Wood, who hid under the carriage, and spoke.

"That's a company of knights of Valis! There are twenty of them. And leading them is a man in a robe. He's someone from the Academy of sages. It must be Elm, the court magician of Valis."

Eto thanked his god from the bottom of his heart. Then he loudly told Parn and the others of the arrival of reinforcements.

"Thank the heavens!" Parn's face shone with joy, making him look like a different person than the despairing one of a moment earlier.

Karla, too, had heard Eto's yell. In fact, he had said it so that she might hear it, that impudent priest. Anger filled her being, but it soon vanished.

There is no way that fate would destine me to die here, I who lead a charmed life.

Karla changed the spell she was casting and turned around. As the priest had said, a large group of horsemen was riding to meet her. She could hear some voices shouting "Princess!". Karla gave up, smiled, and took a deep breath.

"Thank your lucky stars. But don't depend on them. If you ever cross my path again, I'll teach you that miracles will not save you every time."

Karla removed the barrier and immediately launched into her next spell. It sounded a bit different from the ancient runic tongue. Instead, it was similar to that of Eto's prayers.

"That is the magic of Marfa," said Slayn to Eto in amazement.

Eto thought it odd that Slayn was more knowledgeable about holy magic than him. He had heard that Slayn worshipped the god of knowledge, Rahda. But he had never heard that Slayn was a priest.

As the group watched, Karla suddenly vanished, her smile still fixed on her face.

"That witch is also a priestess of Marfa, it seems. That spell is called the spell of return or something, and only the priests of Marfa know its use."

"You said that was magic such as a priestess of Marfa might use." For some reason, his eyes gleamed with interest as he approached Slayn. Overpowered by that intensity, Slayn nodded in the affirmative.

"Only the higher ranking priests of Marfa should know that spell. In any case, that's what I've heard."

"Exactly, just as I thought!" shouted Ghim.

"And what did you think?" asked Slayn. "You seem to know something. Something you've been hiding from us."

"I'm not hiding anything!" Ghim turned and yelled.

I didn't want to believe it, but... anger and joy swirled around in Ghim's heart. But why would she use those runic spells? And why would she ally herself with Marmo?

Chapter 7

Letting out a sigh of relief, Slayn walked towards Parn. Several years earlier, Elm had been Slayn's classmate at the Academy of Sages. Elm was over ten years older than Slayn, but they were peers because Slayn had been admitted to the Academy at the age of twelve. Elm was a prodigy — Wagnard's equal — but unlike him was a zealous follower of Pharis.

When King Fahn had been crowned ten years earlier, he had chosen Elm as his court magician, and Elm had left Alan.

"It's been a long time, Lord Elm. Do you remember me? It's me, Slayn Starseeker."

Slayn gave a respectful bow to the middle-aged mage riding at the head of the knights.

The knights rode cautiously around the group but the mage wearing the same blue robes as Slayn took in his robe and staff and inspected his thin face.

"Thank your luck that you have such a distinctive face and voice. I do remember you. You've grown up, boy."

"I am grateful."

"I have to ask, why are you here? Rumor has it that the Academy of Sages has been destroyed. Is that why you set out?"

"Something like that," was Slayn's noncommittal response. It was no time to talk

about his own projects. “More importantly, are you here looking for Princess Fianna, Lord Elm?”

“Yes, that is correct. Why do you know that? We came here following a merchant’s caravan. We saw you fighting with magic in front of us, so we hurried over, but is the princess here?”

Slayn nodded. “It’s a long story, but Princess Fianna is in fact with us. We helped her escape from the mage we were fighting with just now.”

The knights’ voices rose in joy. Slayn turned around. With excellent timing, Fianna stepped through the wall of darkness Slayn had created. In the end, she had not chosen to run away all on her own. Many of the knights ran to meet her.

“Looks like you tell the truth. In that case, I should be the one to bow to you. Slayn, let me thank you. You’ve grown into a fine mage while I was away. Have you found your star yet?”

“No, not yet.” Slayn hung his head. “More to the point, it was the efforts of the young man behind me which enabled us to save the princess. Without his quick wits, we would have been unable to bring the princess with us.”

“Is that so?” said Elm, jumping lightly from his horse. “Then I must thank the young warrior as well. Young warrior, what is your name?”

“I am called Parn, Lord Elm.” Parn gave Elm a knightly bow. But he felt no affection for Elm. Because of the white-clad holy knights around him, the same mix of feelings swirled around his head as the day before. “I am the son of Teseus, who lost his life as a holy knight.” Parn himself was surprised by the words that so easily slipped out. But once he had said them, he wanted to know what a shock those words might cause. The knights of Valis, at least, might know the truth of his father’s death.

“Holy Knight Teseus, you say?” Elm had a surprisingly strong reaction to those words. Parn’s heart pounded in his chest. “Is that true? Are you really Teseus’ son?”

“Yes, and the armor I wear is the best proof of that. It is dirty, but it is none other than the armor of a holy knight of Valis.”

“Mm, now that you mention it I see the resemblance,” said Elm.

“It’s true, Lord Elm. This man’s armor is the same as ours.”

“If you say so it must be true. And no one would claim to be Teseus’ son without knowing what that signified.”

“Please hear me out. Why did my father die? My mother would not tell me the reason. Just that I must believe in my father’s courage. But rumor has it his death was dishonorable. ‘Teseus the Coward’ and so forth.”

Elm approached Parn and laid his hand heavily across Parn’s shoulder.

“It is true that your father transgressed against the code of knighthood. But his death was not dishonorable. At the time, your father was assigned to protect the northern border, along with another young knight. There had been invasions of desert nomads, you see. His mission was simple — keep to his post, and if there was an invasion, report it. While he was there, a man from a nearby village ran up. He told Teseus that his village was under attack by bandits. The knights’ code is strict. Knights must follow

orders, regardless of the circumstances. But the villagers' lives would then be forfeit. There were many bandits. So many that he could probably not have defeated them on his own. Knowing those two facts, Teseus got on his horse to save the villagers. His partner offered to go with him, but because of his orders, Teseus refused the offer. If he had not, perhaps he would not have died. But no matter what his reasons, he would be punished for disobeying orders. That is why he chose to go alone to the village. Thanks to his efforts, the village escaped total destruction. But he did not come back from that fight."

"Is that the truth?" Parn's voice cracked.

"It is. By rights, we ought to have glorified his deeds. But the code of knighthood is sacred. There can be no exceptions. That is why the holy knights had to revoke Teseus' title. But those who know the truth know the true value of his courage."

"To us knights, the name of Teseus is one of honor. Because we were unable to spread the truth, twisted rumors have spread in its place. But those are just bad rumors, and there is no other knight whose story is told as much as his." One of the knights spoke to Parn.

"That's great!" Deedlit gently took Parn's arm.

"And now the name of Teseus has bestowed a new honor upon us. For none other than Teseus' orphan to save our missing princess, this must be a sign from Pharis."

"What a relief. My father's death wasn't dishonorable after all."

For the first time, Parn was proud to wear his father's armor. His father's choice had not been wrong. He had done the same as his father. It was the proof that he carried his father's blood.

Pharis, I thank thee that made me my father's son. Parn took a deep breath and looked up at the bright sky.

Part IV: The Great Sage

Chapter 1

Their peaceful journey to the capital of Valis, Loyd, took another eight days. As one might expect of the nation's capital, Loyd was a large city, no less bustling than Alan. The city was built on a delta, and aside from the castle and the temple of Pharis, no other tall buildings stood out. Relative to the royal palace of Alania, or to the famous castle of Shining Hill in Kanon, the castle in Loyd was visibly lower to the ground. Instead, it was quite large, holding the majority of the inner city within its walls.

"This is Loyd? The city is smaller than I expected." Deedlit spoke freely, forgetting that Elm was nearby.

Parn, too, nodded discreetly in agreement with Deedlit's assessment.

"I would prefer that you refrain from comparing it with the 'Millennium Kingdom' of Alania. As you are aware, Valis was founded little more than one hundred years ago. We're still a young country. However, our people's loyalty to the kingdom is as strong as any other's." Boasting, Elm greeted the townsfolk who bowed to him as he passed.

The streets of Loyd were numerous and mazelike, rendering it difficult for a newcomer to reach the castle gates. That, of course, was a precaution to prevent invaders from galloping straight across the flat earth to the castle.

Unlike Alan, there were no strangely shaped buildings, and the architecture of the city was quite ordinary, buildings neatly lined up on either side of wide streets built to allow carriages to pass. Of course, in this national capital, lively voices carrying out their business came from a wide variety of shops. Even if the nation was at war, to these people it must have seemed like a far-away event, of no concern to their daily lives.

The party had covered a significant distance since entering the city. They reached the palace gates at last, crossed the drawbridge, and entered the sizable castle grounds.

When the castle guards noticed Fianna in the middle of the group, they called out her name, welcoming her return. Everyone in the castle seemed to love the tomboyish princess. Smiling with some embarrassment, Fianna waved back.

When they had gone some distance into the courtyard, Parn and the others were asked to get off their horses. Obeying the knights' instructions to proceed on foot, they were shown into the building. Parn felt a bit dissatisfied at being left behind as Elm and his men led Fianna deeper into the palace, but he did not dare protest, so he followed a knight into another room.

The room he led them to appeared to be a parlor, and it was filled with lovely furniture. About the size of Slayn's house, the room was furnished with sofas covered with cushions and a large, lacquered table of foxglove wood that had been made on the continent. In the glass-fronted cabinets there were many bottles of expensive wine and brandy, with colorful wineglasses. One wall was decorated with a masterful painting of the legendary fight with the demon, while the other, not to be outdone, bore a collection of luxurious decorations. Seeing the stained glass window in another wall, Slayn muttered, "Just as expected in this devout Pharis-worshipping country."

"I don't suppose they'd let us drink those," Deedlit said as Parn's eyes glittered at the assortment of bottles on the shelves. Ghim bore little interest in fancy booze, but he chuckled to himself as he crossed the room, finding various items of dwarven craftsmanship.

"Somehow, I can't relax." Slayn's tone was the same as ever, in spite of his words. Nothing in the room interested him, and he found himself thinking that if there was nothing else to do, he might as well pull a book from one of his bags.

"I swear, this fancy room isn't meant for the likes of me. I feel like I'm stuck in some kind of glorified jail. I don't even feel like drinking booze here. I'd like to ask them to get a move on." Wood grumbled as he, too, sat down on the sofa.

Just then, there came a knock on the door, and a person who appeared to be a servant came in. Wood was so startled he stood back up, making everyone laugh.

"His Majesty the king awaits you. Right this way, please." The man bowed and made a signal that they should follow him. Realizing that only a servant of the royal family would be entrusted with such a message, Parn nervously bowed without thinking and sheathed his sword. He worried about his dirty armor but there was nothing to be done. He wiped the most obviously filthy parts with a small towel and carelessly threw it into his bag.

It was a long walk from the room they had been shown into to the audience chamber. Admiring the size of the grounds, Parn took in everything around him, trying to commit it to memory.

Along the way, as they passed a group of knights in unfamiliar armor, Slayn stared with an odd expression. The knights bowed once to the other group, and Slayn looked them up and down as he returned the courtesy.

"Did you see those knights we just passed?" whispered Slayn to Eto.

"Yes, why do you ask?"

"They were knights of Flaim. I wonder if Flaim is joining the fight against Marmo."

"If so, that's good news," said Slayn. It was said that the sword techniques of the knights of Flaim, and especially those of the Mercenary King, Kashue, were unmatched

by anyone in Lodoss. Eto agreed with Slayn's assessment — if Flaim joined the war against Marmo, they would be a strong ally.

The audience room was simple room, reflecting the simplicity of character of the king, unlike the extravagance of the parlor. In the center of the stone floor was a red carpet, and around it stood the white-armored knights and their ladies, as well as a row of uniformed palace servants. Parn was overwhelmed. A wave of dizziness washed over him, but he remembered his knightly pride, pulled himself together, and stepped forward onto the carpet.

The carpet continued up a flight of stairs, and a few steps up was the throne. On the wall behind it was a giant portrait of the king, along with the silver cross of Valis and the symbol of Pharis.

Then the legendary king sat on his throne.

He wore a loose gown, and his beard was worthy even of a dwarf. The wrinkles on his face were a testament to his great deeds. Though he was more than sixty years old, his gaze was alert, not dulled by his age, and filled with a kindness as great as the ocean as he looked down on the six adventurers. As his gaze fell on Parn, Parn was overcome with a pressure that took his breath away, and he fell to his knees as though unable to stand. The other five followed his lead.

Next to King Fahn stood the court magician, Elm, who had changed into a handsome white robe, as well as an old man on whose gown was embroidered the symbol of Pharis. That must be Genah, the high priest of the temple of Pharis. Eto bowed his head, his breath taken away by his first glimpse of the man.

Another man bearing a crown on his head sat on a second, temporary throne.

Slayn immediately noticed the heraldic falcon embroidered on the man's clothing. That man must be the famous Mercenary King, Kashue. That would mean that Flaim had indeed decided to join the war on Marmo.

"You must be the ones who saved my daughter. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I ask your forgiveness that our daughter is unable to join us, as she must pray and repent her mistakes at the temple of Pharis."

The king's voice was calm but majestic, filling every corner of the room.

"But no matter how foolish her acts, I am her father. I am still grateful that you saved my daughter. Please excuse my forwardness and accept this heartfelt token of my gratitude."

At the king's words, a palace attendant carrying a heavy-looking bag stepped up to Parn.

Kneeling the man said, "Please accept this," and presented the bag to Parn.

"Thank you. I accept this with gratitude." Thinking that refusing would seem impolite, Parn bowed and took the bag. As he took on its substantial weight, he realized that the 'token' was a substantial monetary reward.

Wood will be glad, no doubt. Parn handed the bag to the thief behind him, then faced forward, once again kneeling.

"Please be at ease. I am the king, but I am also here as a father welcoming those who

saved his daughter's life. I ought to be the one kneeling before you. But please listen. Not as a father, but as king, we must punish Princess Fianna. For having left the castle without permission, she will not be permitted to leave for two months. Know that she will remain in her own room as punishment.

Moving on to the subject of my daughter's kidnapper, Elm gave us his report. In accordance with my daughter's testimony, it would seem that the kidnapper was a mage in the service of Marmo, but we would like to hear your opinion as well. You are, after all, the only people here present who have fought against the witch and lived."

Parn turned around and gave a sign to Slayn. Slayn nodded and stepped forward, looking over the assembly before bowing silently.

"I will begin. My name is Slayn. I was a student of the same Sage's Academy as Lord Elm, and studied under the great Master Ralkas. I am a country bumpkin, so I may overstep the bounds of manners, but I ask that you forgive any such trespass.

In my opinion, the mage in question is incredibly powerful. She uses both runic magic and the power of Marfa, and has enough power to use it carelessly, such that one might compare her power even to that of the late Master Ralkas. I hate to say this, but I don't imagine Lord Elm possesses the power to defeat six holy knights with a single spell."

"True, I cannot. Fire magic is potent, but I don't believe any mage could defeat the holy knights with a single fireball."

"However, that woman did so."

There was a commotion in the room, everyone seeming to speak at once.

"Silence." Raising his right hand, King Fahn brought a halt to the commotion. "It is your assessment that this witch's power is greater than Elm's?"

"That is correct." Slayn knelt once more.

"Hum. I would not have expected to encounter a mage more powerful than Elm, said to be Ralkas' best student. This witch's power truly deserves to be called frightening. Elm, do you know anything of this? The witch was called Karla, or something of the sort."

"I too had difficulty believing Slayn's story, so I searched my memory for anything about a witch named Karla. At length, I recalled a legend about her."

"Ah, if anyone would know, it would be you. What was the legend?"

"According to legend, once upon a time, the ancient kingdom held sway over these lands. We know that the power of mages in those days was much greater than it is today. We have preserved merely a smattering of phrases in the ancient tongue. Well, it is said that when the kingdom fell, many mages shared its fate. Amidst the destruction, only one sorceress survived with her power intact. Her name was Karla, and the tribesmen she fought remembered her as a powerful magic user who brought suffering upon a great many of their people."

As Fahn listened to Elm's story, he tilted his head a little to one side. He lifted his bejeweled left hand from the armrest of his throne, and pointed one finger at Elm.

"So you believe that legendary mage to be the same damn witch who kidnapped my

daughter? It is true that mages can change their form without difficulty. But if your theory is true, that would make her an elderly woman of five hundred years of age!”

“I cannot, therefore, confirm the truth of this theory. I am but a novice, compared to the great sage, Wort.”

Hearing Wort’s name, Fahn laughed.

“Haha, he’s a strange one. It is true that he has the knowlege befitting a sage. I respect the former king, who convinced him to serve for a short while.”

“However, if anyone knows the witch’s true identity, it must be Wort.”

“That may be true. No, you are right. But who would go to the far end of the mountains of Moss to ask him? The fight against Marmo is only going to get worse. We cannot spare even a single soldier.”

“Karla’s presence is worrisome. If she truly is a survivor of the Old Kingdom, we may yet have to face the power of their magics. The fall of the royal palace of Kanon, Shining Hill, was because giant meteorites fell from the sky. I hate to say it, but the necromancer, Wagnard, does not possess such power.”

“I understand. That means we must uncover the witch’s identity at all costs.”

Grimacing at Elm’s harsh way of speaking, Fahn nodded. “Well, we cannot entrust such an important task to just anyone. That eccentric hates being around people so much that he never leaves the mountains of Moss, and there are the southern dwarven ruins called the ‘Caves of Evil’ along the way to the tower. It is said that a dragon sleeps in those caves, and ogres make it their home. Leonas, this is an important mission. Choose the best men for the job from among the knights.”

Fahn spoke to the man holding a heavily decorated helmet who stood to his left.

“Might I suggest that we take up that mission?” Parn had greatly hesitated before saying those words. But once he had said them, he relaxed, feeling in his heart that he was worthy of the task. “We are wandering fighters. In a war, we are only good as mercenaries. No matter who you choose, if you take anyone from among your knights, it will have consequences on their strength in battle. In that case, it is in the best interests of Valis to send us, since we are not part of the army.”

Looking at the serious young man kneeling before him, Fahn felt young for the first time in years.

“Is that him? The one who calls himself the son of Teseus?” Fahn asked Elm.

Elm nodded. “It is.”

Now that you mention it, Parn’s face and voice somewhat resemble those of Teseus, thought Fahn. His actions, too. Rather than an honorable battle, he chooses a simple investigation.

Fahn thought, *this youngster will definitely say he wants to be a knight of Valis.* He had heard from Elm that Parn had such intentions. Elm had even praised his character, saying that he was a fine young man. Elm had added that Parn still had much to learn, of course. He had the necessary bravery, as proven by his rescue of Fianna, and he was the son of Teseus. But making him a knight on those grounds alone would sow the seeds of discontent among young knights who had not heard of Teseus. They had only been

honored with the title of holy knight after a harsh examination. If a wandering fighter was suddenly knighted, even the holy knights were human enough to get angry. But if he passed the test, Fahn would have to acknowledge the young adventurer. Even if they had not heard of Teseus, all the knights knew of the dwarven ruins.

“Parn, I regret what was done to Teseus. He did not receive a knight’s burial, and even your mother was sent from Valis in fear. Therefore, I would like to ask you to fight by my side as a knight. However, to join our knights, a trial is required. Therefore, I thank you for your suggestion. I will write a letter to Wort. Please carry out this mission without fail. Then, in reward for your efforts, we will take you into our service.”

“I will serve you even if it costs me my life, sire,” said Parn, ecstatic.

“Just remember, the voyage to Wort’s tower will be difficult. As you know, you will have to cross the goblin-infested ruins, and the witch might go after you again. Are you still determined to go?”

“Of course.” Parn had begun to think of himself as a hero. Even if he was only a minor hero, he felt that it suited him.

“Wonderful. I feel cheered, for the first time in ages.” The heroic king let out a great laugh, stood from his throne, and clapped.

“Today has been a great day. Meeting the righteous desert king and Teseus’ brave son has erased all our doubts that we will beat Marmo. Everyone, prepare a banquet! Today we will party to our hearts’ content!”

As Fahn made that declaration, a loud cheer rose from all present. The doors swung open, and many servants entered to begin the preparations. King Fahn himself left the room, accompanied by Elm and Genah.

Music began to play, and the party began.

Rather than a celebration in honor of the adventurers’ deeds, the party was a welcome for the mercenary king of the desert, Kashue.

King Kashue of Flaim had not yet reached the age of thirty. However, known for his bravery since his early years, he was the hero who had driven the savage tribes from Flaim and created the current nation of Flaim in his early twenties. Though he had earned his title of Mercenary King from his former career, he was more than just a good fighter. The young king had been in power less than ten years, but his reign was marked by his political acumen and kind heart.

Since the savage desert tribes knew the use of dark magic and had fought against Valis many times, the creation of this just new kingdom was heartily welcomed by Fahn and by Valis. Then too, Kashue had immediately sought an alliance with Valis and had ridden over himself on the occasion of Fahn’s sixtieth birthday, showing the strength of Flaim’s ties with Valis.

After that, Fahn had declared himself a friend to Kashue, forgetting their difference of years.

The mercenary king was popular even within the royal court of Valis.

The ladies of the court followed the king, who was still a bachelor, wherever he went, as did the young knights, anxious to hear tales of his heroic deeds.

Parn, too, was surrounded by knights. They treated Teseus' son like an old friend, and extolled his bravery. Deedlit and Ghim drew crowds as well. It was exceedingly rare to see an elf or a dwarf at the royal court. Deedlit could not hide her embarrassment as the crowd pelted her with questions. Looking at the ladies' dresses, she could not help but think that it must be tiring to wear such restricting garments, and replied half-heartedly to the questions.

Eto, too, was surrounded by young ladies who sang the praises of the bravery of the traveling priest of Pharis.

Woodchuck was the only one who escaped the notice of the showy members of the court. Though the others (even Ghim and Slayn) received thanks for their efforts and offers of drinks, no one spoke to him, as though he was being shunned.

As if there were any difference between what I did and what Parn did. In Wood's hear burned the flames of envy.

Night had fallen, and the ball began. Of course, the adventurers had no way of knowing the customs of the imperial court. They fled into a corner as though a magic barrier protected it from the rest of the room, and passed the time eating, drinking, and talking among themselves.

"Looks like we have to cross Moss next, thanks to a whim of Parn's." In spite of her words, Deedlit was not opposed to the idea. In fact, in her heart of hearts she welcomed the idea of a leisurely journey at Parn's side.

"I know it's a burden. I want you all to come, but I know you must have other things to do. Perhaps, now that you've received this generous reward, you feel no need to risk your lives again. If you leave me on my own, I'll just have to deal with that."

Deedlit was surprised by Parn's unusual response. She had expected him to look confused and hold his tongue. But he seemed pretty sure of himself.

"You've gotten bold, sir fighter. I concede my loss and will accompany you."

"I'm going too. No need to thank me. This quest is mine as well." Ghim's words were enthusiastic, if a bit blurred by alcohol.

"I will go as well. Given that we intend to visit the great sage, Wort, was there ever any doubt that I would go?" asked Slayn.

"Do I really need to say it, my oldest friend?" Eto's expression was cheerful. Then he glanced at Wood.

"I get it. Might as well see it to the end. I'll go with you. You can't do without me, anyway." Hiding his dark thoughts, Wood spoke in a cheerful voice. *Even so, you lot are the only ones who'll be praised for it. The only ones who'll get thanked for your troubles.*

In the center of the room, the main guest, Kashue, was dancing beautifully with one of the ladies of the court.

Kashue was still new to kingship, and before that had been a mere warrior. The question of how he had learned court etiquette was planting the seeds of rumor among the gossiping ladies of the court. One rumor had it that he was none other than the second prince of Kanon, who had run away, while another claimed that he was descended for some continental royal house.

He never revealed the truth of it. He replied to such questions by saying that only the present mattered.

King Fahn had yet to show his face at the ball. Before long, the early evening party had taken on a relaxed atmosphere. Woodchuck, Ghim, and Slayn left the party early and retired to their bedroom.

Parn and Deedlit were left behind at the party, while Eto walked around unsteadily, getting himself caught by the young ladies and made to tell tales of his adventures.

“Wow, he’s popular.” As he watched, Parn made a dissatisfied face.

“Of course he is. He’s more handsome than you, and his priestly honesty goes over well in a Pharis-worshipping country like this.” Deedlit gave low, throaty laugh as she leaned up against the wall, absently watching Eto and the ladies around him.

“Do you mind if I interrupt?”

The voice startled Parn, and Deedlit got mad at this interruption to this rare relaxed moment.

“What do you want?” She glared sharply at the approaching man.

“What a strong-willed elf,” the man said with a laugh. It was King Kashue.

“Forgive her rudeness.” Sobered, Parn bowed quickly.

“Don’t worry. No need to watch your manners around me. I was a wandering fighter once, just as you are. I traveled the world, relying only on my blade.”

“Can we help you with anything?” Parn had not yet relaxed, but he was growing to like Kashue’s good-natured demeanor. Next to him, Deedlit did not bother to hide her displeasure, remaining steadfastly silent.

“No, nothing really. But I would enjoy speaking with young adventurers and hearing tales of their deeds once more.”

“It would be our honor.”

Inspecting the young king to see what difference he had from himself, Parn slowly began his tale. He did not envy Kashue’s position. He merely wished to emulate him and be a better person.



When he had finished the first part of his tale, a bard began his performance somewhere nearby. His words, accompanied by music on his lute, were the saga of the legendary last fight against the demon.

Once upon a time, the people's folly drew forth the goblins from the darkness they called home.

Their darkness spread across the earth, bringing doom to kingdoms and death to the people.

To fight the darkness, many lights gathered.

Humans stood, sword in hand.

Elves stood, bringing forth their bows from the shining wood.

Dwarves stood, replacing their tools with axes.

Together, their lights became a star of hope.

The star cut through the darkness and was victorious,

In the forest, in the mountains, in the fields, on the sea and in the sky.

The goblins fled, back from whence they came,

Into their sacred land, the Deep Labyrinth.

In those depths there was a door to the spirit world, and with a single gesture, the demon on his dark throne laid a curse on the whole world.

One hundred chosen heroes challenged that dark labyrinth of death.

Many heroes stood against the darkness, and there met their end.

Even so, the lights shone even in the depths of the labyrinth.

Seven heroes fought the demon, and six survived, saving the world.

One was a knight. Wearing white armor and wielding a holy sword, he was the king of Valis, Fahn.

One was a warrior. In killing the demon, he lost his heart. He was the dark emperor, Beld.

One was a dwarf. He was the last king of the lost kingdom of stone, Flevé.

One was a mage. He was the man who knows the secrets of the world, the great sage Wort.

One was a priestess. She was the pure priestess of Marfa, protector of nature, Neese.

And the last one was the silent magic warrior. This disciple of light died nameless.

Thus did the light return, pushing back the dark.

Parn had heard tales of that fight before. Now, Lodoss was once again fanned by the flames of war, but ironically, two allies from that last battle, Fahn and Beld, were now enemies.

Destiny is a funny thing, Parn couldn't help but think. Why had Beld thrown away his heroic name and become the emperor of Marmo? Why had he destroyed Kanon? Parn could not understand. Something must have changed Beld.

The ball showed no signs of ending as the night wore on. Parn's conversation with the young desert king, too, seemed it might go on forever.

The gaudiness of the ball reminded Deedlit of her first meeting with Parn. Then she began to think of her hometown in the forest. She realized that she would need more time to gather the seeds of truth hidden in their seemingly meaningless day-to-day existence. Watching Parn lost in discussion with Kashue, she thought that she wouldn't mind if it took her the rest of Parn's life to do so.

Chapter 2

Ugly goblins scurried back and forth through the castle gate, their backs stooped. Watching this disgusting sight, Beld wondered foolishly which was worse: his minions' awful nature or his own twisted heart.

The demon sword that hung at his left hip rattled in its sheath, seeming to laugh scornfully. Beld forcefully gripped the hilt as though strangling a despised enemy to death.

"Did something happen? You've been lost in thought all day."

A voice spoke behind him. It was Wagnard. He was a dependable adviser — though he was rarely able to use his magic, even without it he was a formidable strategist.

The fact that Beld had managed to conquer the so-called dark island, Marmo, with only a few soldiers at his command owed much to Wagnard. Ever since then, Wagnard had officially been his court magician. Whatever his real feelings were, he filled that role admirably.

"Oh, I've been admiring the goblin gatekeeper's ugly mug. Wondering if Shining Hill, said to be the grandest castle in Lodoss, could have a worse master."

Beld wore red armor and a black cloak that flapped in the wind.

His demon sword clattered in its sheath, as though laughing.

"More importantly, it seems that witch Karla failed to kidnap Fahn's daughter."

"Yes, so it seems. But I'll destroy Fahn even without that haphazard scheme."

Beld gazed confidently at Wagnard's black robes. He had dyed his robes from the Academy of Sages with the blood of dark elves. Like them, he could call upon the dark magics of Falaris.

Solidly built for a mage, Wagnard was quite formidable with a sword. From the beginning, that had been enough to give him a reputation for eccentricity among mages, who scorned swordplay.

Wagnard did not use magic unless it was absolutely necessary. Or rather, he was unable to do so. Such was the effect of the magical taboo laid upon him by his master, Ralkas. Casting even the simplest spell wracked his body with almost unbearable pain. But he endured the pain, though it might have caused a lesser man to faint. He could carry out dark rituals lasting several hours without losing his concentration.

The reason Beld placed utmost confidence in the necromancer was the strength of his evil will.

"Even in Alania, that witch failed us. Perhaps rumor speaks too highly of her."

"I wonder. That woman is quite stubborn, laying traps within traps. She claims she'll cause the other countries, besides Valis, to destroy themselves."

"If that's true, it'll save us a lot of trouble."

"By the way, Wagnard, wasn't there some sort of report? I heard a horse galloping up just a little while ago."

Wagnard laughed his dry laugh. “Can’t put anything past you, your imperial majesty. There’s been a report from our spies in Valis. The king of Flaim is in Loyd with about a hundred horsemen. Seems like Fahn may make his move on us in the near future.”

“Is that so, he’s finally on his way?” Beld gazed at the sky, a thin smile on his lips. “Hide the sun on the day of battle. Goblins hate sunlight, you know.”

“Your will be done. And by the way, where is that Karla now?”

“Karla? She should be in Moss by now. She said she was meeting an old friend who could help with her tricks.”

“That’s right. That woman seems quite busy. I wonder what her goal is in helping us.”

“I have no idea,” replied Beld, unconcerned. “The world is full of things it’s more interesting not to know.” With a swirl of his cloak, Beld tromped across the stone pavement and entered the gate. Like a shadow, Wagnard followed noiselessly on his master’s heels.

Meanwhile, Parn and his group were high in the mountains of Moss. Roughly a fortnight had passed since they had left Loyd. Along the way, they had crossed the dwarven ruins known as the Kingdom of Stone and defeated many goblins.

Somehow they had all survived this trial and were headed for Wort’s castle. But now they were hiking over a rough mountain road, panting and drenched with sweat. Paying great attention to their unstable footing, their progress was painstakingly slow.

“He picked an awful place to live.” Using a piece of wood she had found along the way as a walking stick, Deedlit sighed.

Woodchuck nodded his agreement. “Ain’t that the truth. That Wort is an old geezer, right? Gotta hand it to him for managing to live all the way up here.”

All around them were rocky slopes, only broken by a few wildflowers. The party walked along the ridge. At one point Slayn lost his balance in the wind and slipped over the edge, only to be pulled up at the end of a rope by Woodchuck. Eto’s magic healed his wounds, but he seemed to give up, no longer speaking and concentrating all his energy on his feet.

“Is that it?” Woodchuck, walking in the lead, straightened up and looked into the distance, shielding his eyes with one hand.

Deedlit, too, had seen what looked like the top of a tower. But it might have been the summit of a mountain instead. Slayne started to cast his farseeing spell, and the party rested while waiting for his report.

“There’s no mistaking it. That is definitely a stone tower,” said Slayn cheerfully. Wanting to investigate further, he cast a flight spell and drifted up to about twice the height of Wood, the tallest in the group. “We’ll be there in a few hours.”

Slayn repeated himself, but no one answered, dismayed as they were at the idea of having to walk even a few more hours.

“Let’s rest here a little longer, then make a final push.” With this declaration, Parn sat down on a nearby rock. He pulled out a small towel and mopped the sweat from his brow. With no place to hide from the sunlight that beat down so relentlessly, he had

begun to detest his armor.

There was no way the party could have noticed the figures watching them. From a small room at the top of a tower not far from their location, two mages spied on them.

“Is that them, the youngsters who so cunningly gave you the slip?” slyly asked the man clad in all gray before giggling.

“Don’t mock me, Wort. Even I am as a mere babe before the power of fate.”

The answer came from a sorceress clad in a purple gown. Not even seeming angered, she gazed at Parn’s image in the crystal ball.

They were the only ones in the dark room. The round room contained only a table and four chairs. There were two doors. One was glass, and lead onto the balcony, from which the mountains of Moss and the Lake Above the Sky.

Only the eerily glowing crystal ball on the table could see farther. In fact, it could show any location in Lodoss.

“So, what shall we do about them. Go out and crush them?”

Wort’s white hair hung down his back. His hair had once been as black as the feathers of his familiar, a crow, but even he could not stop the passing of time. He was beardless, leaving his wrinkled face entirely visible. His eyes were wide, like those of a child, and his mouth was pinched, as though he had just eaten something bitter.

The woman gave a strange laugh. Her voluptuous red lips parted, revealing her white teeth, and the jewel on her forehead shone briefly. She was Karla, of course. As soon as she had finished her business in Moss she had come to the tower, and had been awaiting the party’s arrival for two days. She had uncovered their plans to travel to the tower by using the Mirror of Truth.

At last, they had come.

“Crush them? You say that lightly, but they’re quite persistent. The mage, in particular, is very competent for such a young man. You’d do best to be wary of them. After all, they outwitted me twice.”

“Yes, even after your hundreds of years of experience. What splendid adventurers! We had better meet them at least once before killing them.”

“Once you’ve met them, you won’t mind if I kill them, I trust?”

“As long as you do it someplace I cannot see.” Wort’s gray eyes narrowed. His snakelike pupils gazed at Karla’s white form.

“I wonder where in Lodoss that would be! As far as I know, there are no limits on the sight of this crystal ball.”

Karla put her hand to her mouth and laughed loudly. The laugh still on her lips, she turned her cold gaze on the elderly mage.

“Fine, Wort. I have no intention of killing them out of personal vengeance. That would be pointless and against my principles. My business with them is done, so as long as they do not seek me out, I will not go after them. However...” Karla cut off her words and gazed into the crystal ball. “I wonder if they will forgive me. But if they challenge me, Wort, I ought to have the right to defeat them.”

“I can hardly stop you.”

“Don’t worry. I have no wish to kill them. They’re grown on me, to the point that I would like to recruit them. But I expect them to come after me. Those young fighters hate me from the bottoms of their hearts.”

“What are you thinking, Karla?” asked Wort in a severe tone.

“What, you don’t see it? Those youngsters are just like you and Fahn once were. As if guided by fate, they overcome challenges and accomplish all that they set their minds to. Someday they will surely stand in my way, as my deadly enemies, though at their current strength I could easily defeat them.”

“I see.”

“They must be coming here to ask you about my whereabouts. If they do, feel free to tell them. You must know where I live.”

“That I do,” said Wort, surprised. “I will keep my bargain with you. I will not help Fahn, and in return you will no longer help Beld. If we get involved, the casualties will be much too great. But our bargain does not include the youngsters.”

“Great Sage Wort, do you mean to fight me? I would have thought it against your principles. What need have you to brave danger for their sakes? You of all people must know the futility of fighting me.”

“Indeed I do.” In magical combat, Wort knew he could not lose. But nor could he allow himself to kill Karla, as that would cause his own doom. And he knew no way of neutralizing her without killing her.

“What a pity to lose those youths.” Standing from her chair, Karla looked at Parn once again in the crystal ball. She stroked it lovingly with one hand, and the sphere went dark, no longer showing any image.

“Well, it’s high time we prepared for the heroes’ arrival. We should provide something to drink, and light snacks. But there’s no need to call on your silent servants. They’re my guests, so it’s only natural that I show off my cooking skills. So please excuse me if I borrow the kitchen. Oh, and Wort? If you have any requests, don’t hesitate to ask. I can cook almost anything, you know.”

“Not so much you, as that girl you’re controlling, I wager.” Wort couldn’t hide the disgust in his voice.

“True. But this body is mine. It no longer belongs to Leylia the priestess of Marfa, but instead to Karla the mage... no, the witch.”

Avoiding the witch’s gaze, Wort invoked the crystal ball once again. The image that appeared was a close-up of Beld. His youthful face had scarcely changed since the time when they had gone together into the Deep Labyrinth to defeat the demon king. The power of his demon sword kept him young, though he was just a bit younger than Wort, over sixty years old.

As though cursed, he was frozen in youth, and trapped, as well by the curse that drove him to rule over Lodoss.

In the last battle against the demon king, a priestess of Pharis had died to save him. The last words she spoke to Beld were, “Lodoss needs a king, one strong king, before it can know peace. You know what I think, Beld? I think you’re the only man who can

become that king.”

The priestess was named Flaus. In her youth, she had traveled across Lodoss with Beld and one other companion. Before hearing her words, Beld had not had any desire to be a king.

But that arrow had long since flown. Beld’s soul died in that labyrinth along with Flaus, and wandered for eternity in a sort of hell. His body, left behind, moved only in order to fulfill the girl’s last wish.

There was no difference between Fahn and Beld’s ultimate goals — eternal peace on Lodoss, impossible though it might be.

“What foolishness! And what a sad fate.”

Wort was beginning to feel an endless rage at the gray witch who had entered his castle as though it was nothing. That woman — no, the strongest mage of the Old Kingdom, was treating their earnest desires as no more than pieces on a chess board, using them to balance the scales of power.

Neither white nor black, but gray to win? Wort could see the outcome of this war. *Karla came to avoid a fight with me because she knew that the outcome of the war was already decided.*

Throughout history, Karla had secretly treated heroes as chess pieces, playing endlessly with the world. Her existence was the reason that unified kingdoms had seldom formed on Lodoss since the fall of the Old Kingdom, and those that had, hadn’t lasted.

Wort gazed at Beld in his crystal ball, without tiring of the sight.

Chapter 3

“Finally! We’re here.” Parn bent over, hands on his knees, panting. He was exhausted to the core. After their rest, they had walked four more hours. The mountain path was more curved than expected. Struck by the thought that the bends in the road were a plan of Wort’s, Parn had grown to resent the great sage.

“Some sage — he’s just an eccentric old man!” He had complain to Deedlit many times.

Deedlit had at first agreed, but in the end she got angry, shouting, “If you really don’t want to meet him, go on back to Loyd already!”

Since then, the two had stopped speaking to each other. As time went on, that had been happening more and more frequently. Parn had grown less willing to give way, and their fights had grown more and more frequent. But that, too, was a proof that Parn was growing up. Not only had his fighting prowess grown, but he had grown as a person. The influence of King Fahn and King Kashue doubtless had much to do with that.

The leadership he had shown since leaving Loyd was astonishing. Slayn no longer need to do more than advise him. Slayn thought that after this journey, he might help in Ghim’s search.

Though it was called a castle, Wort’s castle was nothing more than a stone tower.

From the outside, it was completely unadorned, and looked like some kingdom's watchtower.

As soon as they had caught their breath, they advanced cautiously towards the tower's double doors. Built on the top of the mountain, there was nothing around the tower, and it seemed a wondrous thing that someone could live here.

There was a knocker in the shape of a dragon on the door, and Parn stretched out his hand to knock.

Creak! With a strange, rusty noise, the door opened on its own before Parn's hand could reach the knocker.

"Aaah!" Parn yelled and pulled back his hand. "Ugh, what a weird old geezer. That startled me."

Inside, it was so dark the party could not see in. But when Parn stuck his head in to take a look, the lights came on in a flash.

"Of all the nerve!" Parn made a fist, half in anger, half in shock.

"It's a simple magic. Just as I would expect from the Great Sage, he's keeping us on our toes."

"He's overdoing it!" yelled Parn at Slayn.

"Let's go inside. We won't learn anything by shouting here." With those words, Deedlit stepped inside. "Excuse me! I'm a traveling elf called Deedlit. We're here on a mission from King Fahn of Valis. Great Sage Wort, are you there?"

Her voice resonated in the empty tower, echoing off of the back wall. It was some time before the echoes faded. On further inspection, there was a staircase leading to the basement, as well as a spiral staircase that lead up into the tower. After the staircase had circled twice around the tower, it reached a door and stopped. Deedlit waited a while, but there was no reply.

"What now?" Deedlit turned and asked a nervous-looking Parn.

"We can't have missed him, right?" asked Parn, shivering at the thought. If they had come all this way in search of answers, only for the sage to be away, they were a laughingstock.

"I think there's someone up there. I can hear voices."

Slayn pushed back his hood and stepped over the threshold into the tower.

"I sense considerable magic power here. A wide variety of magics too, worthy of the Great Sage."

Slayn walked towards the spiral staircase, and experimentally set his foot on the first step. The stairs began to emit a pallid light, and with a grumble, started moving upwards.

"How convenient! Imagine how nice it would be if all the staircases in a large castle were like this. I know how much trouble I had with stairs in the royal palace of Valis."

As he rose, Slayn laughed loudly, turning to towards Parn.

After the ball, they had spent only three days in the royal palace. For Parn and Slayn, those had been three productive days. Slayn had spent them studying ancient runes and runic magic at Elm's side, and Parn had, as promised, been permitted to join Kashue in his sword training.

Eto, for his part, had been formally recognized as a priest by the high priest, Genaht, and had been asked to stay on as a palace priest and help would with state affairs as soon as he returned from this mission.

Ghim had received some ten gold coins from Wood, and headed over to the palace smithies to make something. No one was surprised, knowing that he had worked as a smith before. Only Wood and Deedlit were bored, with nothing more to do than gaze on the colorful ornaments that decorated the castle.

Slayn was gradually rising on the moving staircase.

“Don’t leave us behind!”

Driven by curiosity, Parn ran for the stairs.

“Well, it won’t eat us, I suppose.” Wood, too stepped onto the stairs, carefully timing his movements.

The others stepped onto the stairs as well, but the landing was small, too small for six people to stand on it.

“Excuse us. My name is Parn and I am a traveling fighter. Here I come.” Parn addressed this greeting to the closed door, then put his hand on the doorknob and pushed the door open. This door opened normally, revealing a spiraling passageway. The passage sloped gently upwards. Perhaps to prevent slipping, the stone underfoot was somewhat rough.

Parn kept moving forward. Following the wall, he felt he was going in circles. Then he ran into another door. In fact, there were doors on either side of him. Straining his ears, he heard a conversation behind the rightmost door. Seems the sage had a prior visitor.

“Excuse us! We heard no response, so we took the liberty of coming up. I am Parn, the wandering fighter.”

“Come in quickly!” The reply sounded irritated. The voice was that of an old man. Parn calmed himself, thinking he was glad to find the sage at home, and slowly opened the door.

Entering the room, Parn bowed. When he raised his head, he saw something that he could not believe — that he wanted more than anything not to believe.

“Ka, Karla!” It came out as a groan, and Parn could speak no more.

“What are you doing here?” Deedlit paled. Her left hand flew up to cover her mouth, while her other hand fumbled for her rapier.

“I won’t allow the use of blades in here!” It was the elderly man who had let out this sharp yell. Her muscles tensing at the sound, Deedlit stopped moving. No- she was forced to stop moving.

“Worry not. I have no intention of fighting you here. Come in, relax. I desire only to speak with you.”

They saw that on the table, there were enough glasses for everyone, and many bottles of wine. White steam rose from a leg of venison or some other meat, and there were fresh fruits and vegetables. Clearly, they were expected.

“Understood. We’ll hear you out.” Parn had yet to recover from this latest shock, but

he took Karla's words as a challenge and entered the room. Ready to draw his blade at any time, he sat in one of the chairs next to the table and glared at Karla's face with hatred.

Ghin stood in the remaining chair, and the other four adventurers stood behind him. Woodchuck stood the furthest from Karla, bending his tall frame and hunching his shoulders to make himself less visible.

Silence reigned in the room for some time.

Karla served wine to the party, then, as if testing for poison, poured some in her own glass and elegantly took a sip.

"Both the glasses and the wine are mine, so relax." The elderly man spoke — this must be him, the Great Sage Wort.

"No, let's talk first. Karla, why are you here? And how did you know we were coming?"

Parn moved closer to Karla. Brushing off the young fighter's threatening manner with a smile, she noticed the fixed gaze the dwarf sitting next to him had turned on her.

After a glance at this little bearded man, Karla returned her attention to the worked-up fighter.

"I have no reason to tell you. But fine. Let me explain. The first reason I came is my long friendship with Wort. Long ago, we traveled together. And the other main reason was, of course, that I wanted to see you once again. As to how I knew... that's so simple I have no need to tell you."

Karla put her elbows on the table and crossed her arms. Only the little finger of her left hand was visible. Her white fingers were covered with many rings of varying sizes and shapes. In their last fight with her, the party had learned that they were not merely for decoration. With a stroke of only one finger, this witch could cast powerful magics.

"You said you wanted to speak to us."

"Yes, I do. I have a proposal for you. I recognize your abilities. I asked you before, but I will ask once again. Will you, all of you, join me? I'll forgive the troubles you caused me before."

Parn's brows drew together in anger. He was about to open his mouth to yell at her, but remembering Wort's presence, he restrained himself.

"I've heard you out. Did you honestly expect us to agree to such a proposal? We would never serve Marmo."

His voice shook a bit in his anger, but otherwise he sounded surprisingly calm. Seeing her condescension, his anger was boundless. He would never be so rotten as to sell his soul to evil.

"It seems you misunderstand me." Karla let out a relieved sigh and looked down for a moment. The red liquid that half filled her glass shoot a little, reflecting the lights in the room. "I am no servant of Beld. I did help him, but it was to a greater end. I imagine you know of the Old Kingdom. I speak of the magical civilization that flourished in Lodoss-no, in all of Forcelia. Do you know why that great kingdom fell? Do you know the truth of it?"

“According to legend, the failure of a great magical working lead to its fall. But that was long before my time, so I have no way of knowing if that is the truth.” Slayn spoke from the back of the group. He glanced at Deedlit, but she shook her head, signaling that she could not elaborate beyond what legend told.

“We elves concern ourselves little with the events of the human world,” explained Deedlit.

“Well, the mage more or less has the right of it. True, one might say that the Old Kingdom fell due to the failure of a great magic. A long time ago, in order to gain access to an unlimited source of magical power, the mages of the late Old Kingdom created a sacred place in which their powers were sealed. Implanting small crystal balls linked to that sacred place in their foreheads, they tried to obtain limitless magic. And they succeeded. In the last fifty-some years of the Old Kingdom’s existence, magic flourished, and the mages were able to cast great spells. They made cities float in the air, dominated the spirit realm, and made fully grown dragons their servants. However, at last they lost their sacred place, and with it all their powers. They could no longer cast spells.

Therefore, when a ritual requiring hundreds of people failed, and the holy land was lost, there were no more powerful mages. At the same time, the savages mounted a serious attack. Unable to resist their attack, the powerless mages were killed to a man. The fall of such a great kingdom took only fifty years.”

Parn had folded his arms and listened to Karla’s story. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from her white face and blue eyes. He stared at her face, forgetting even to blink.

“So?” murmured Parn, since Karla seemed to be waiting for his reaction. He had no idea what her plots might have to do with this story of the Old Kingdom.

“Perhaps you didn’t understand, warrior, why the Old Kingdom fell.” Karla closed her eyes for a moment, remembering the events of long ago. She could remember her once-powerful comrades falling one by one to the blades of savage as if it were yesterday.

“Simply put, it is dangerous for the world to rely on the power of any one nation. In the end, no matter what kind of nation it is, it will drive itself recklessly down the road to ruin, just as the Old Kingdom, which refined magic to the utmost, was destroyed. Therefore, both Fahn’s ideals and Beld’s dream are dangerous. If they expend their strength fighting each other, the world will swing neither to the side of light, nor to that of darkness. If nothing is done to maintain the balance of the world, all will end in irreversible destruction. Once the scales have been balanced, they will not remain that way. But if you shake them up from time to time, you’ll see that they swing one way or another. However, in the long view, that’s the same as if they remained perfectly balanced the whole time.

The reason I have been shaking the scales throughout history is because I believe it to be in Lodoss’ best interests. If either Fahn’s lawful power of light or Beld’s destruction that leads to darkness should conquer Lodoss, Lodoss will be unified and know peace. But it will be a false peace. Before long, a horrendous disaster, perhaps even equal to that of the last war of the gods, would destroy civilization. We have yet to achieve the power

of the Old Kingdom, but we must not forget that we cannot afford to hold such power again.

If you understand what I have told you, you must see the truth of that. I will ask once more. Join me, in order to save the world from destruction.”

“Is that all you have to say?” asked Parn in a low voice.

Karla nodded and waited for him to speak.

“Then listen to my response. I refuse. Who would join you? There may be truth in what you say. But whatever your reasons, they do not justify playing with people’s hearts, with their lives. How many people do you think have died as a result of conflicts you caused?”

Parn stood and slammed his fist down on the table. One of the empty glasses fell over with a soft sound and rolled a bit before stopping against a wine bottle.

“And even if you’re right, you have no right to decide whether humanity, whether even one person, should die! Leave that kind of thing to the gods!”

Karla remained silent for a while, but at last she nodded. “I understand.”

She stood quickly. The party tensed, but Karla walked past them and headed straight to the door.

“Fine. I understand your response. I won’t say any more. If you won’t forgive me, that’s fine. I’ll accept your challenge any time.”

“In that case, let’s settle it now!” yelled Parn, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. Wort gave a discontented mutter and grabbed his staff.

“I believe I told you I don’t allow fighting here!”

Karla waved her right hand as though to stop Parn. But before she could call on her magic, Ghim grabbed Parn from behind, stopping him.

“Wait, Parn! Not now!”

“Why did you stop me, Ghim? You want to let her run away?”

“Ghim means we shouldn’t fight here.” Deedlit broke through as well, trying to stop Parn.

“Excuse their rudeness, Great Sage.” Slayn bowed to Wort.

“That fighter should mind his manners.” Karla gave a mocking laugh and turned around. Then she walked towards the door.

“Can I ask something?” Slayn stopped Karla as she was trying to leave and stepped in front of her. “Have you really lived for five hundred years? I know no magic of eternal youth, but does such a thing exist?”

“Why do you want to know? If such power exists, will you seek it?”

“I do not know. I am merely surprised that you claim to have lived for five hundred years. Eternal youth magic does not appear even once in the records of the Old Kingdom. But if we knew that such a magic existed, it would surely stoke researchers’ ambitions.”

“You have an interesting way of thinking.”

“Do I? But not as much as you do, perhaps. With your power, surely it ought to be possible to find another way to save the world from destruction.

“You’re wrong. Because I work from behind the scenes, I am still alive, but were I to take a central role, surely I would not survive much longer. Oh, and Wort? I’ve imposed on your hospitality for some time, but I must leave now. Adventures, I wish the blessings of the goddess of the earth upon you.”

With those words, Karla opened the door and stepped through it.

Still holding onto Parn, Ghim gazed at that doorway until the sound of her footsteps had faded, lost in thought.

“Now, Great Sage Wort. We have many things to ask you as well. That is why we came here, after all.” Parn glared at the old man with shining eyes.

Chapter 4

When Karla had left, Deedlit moved slowly to the empty chair and sat in it. She picked up a glass and filled it halfway with wine. Behind her, Eto let out a sigh of relief.

With Karla’s departure, the atmosphere in the room lightened. The party had yet to completely relax after that shocking series of events, however. They couldn’t shake off their suspicions towards the so-called Great Sage so easily.

Parn’s suspicion was obvious. He turned the same gaze on the elderly mage as he had upon Karla.

The old man seemed unaffected by Parn’s glare. He too took a glass, then lifted a piece of meat from the plate and ate it with relish.

“You’re right to be suspicious of me, adventurers. I hate to disappoint you, but I am none other than the real Wort, and no ally of Karla’s.” His mouth full of meat, he spoke in a mumble, and he waved his glass in Parn’s face as though making fun of him.

Parn forgot himself in his anger at such disrespectful treatment, glaring even more harshly. But the old man who called himself Wort didn’t react at all.

“Of course, there is some truth in that woman’s words. True, at one time Karla and I traveled as companions, just as you are doing now. But that could be said of Fahn and Neese. All of us were Karla’s allies. Our voyage was the one that took us through the Deep Labyrinth. But of course, Karla did not, at that time, take the form of the beautiful lady you just saw. No, she was a rough warrior who wore armor.” As he said that, Wort looked around the party with an oddly smug grin.

“There’s no way!” Parn cried out in shock. “I’ve heard that saga as well. She was one of the Six Heroes? The nameless magic warrior. That was Karla? That means that witch took part in the fight against the demon as well.”

“Because the revival of the demon upset the balance of the world.” Slayn’s eyes were wide with surprise.

“What are you talking about?” asked Woodchuck.

“As the young fighter says, the Six Heroes’ magic warrior was none other than the Witch of Balance, Karla.” Wort gave a little laugh. “You didn’t believe that Karla could have lived five hundred years without her body being destroyed, did you? If so, you

were gravely mistaken. Such a great magic did not exist even in the time of the Old Kingdom. Karla's magic is formidable, that much is true. But even the greatest magic cannot extend their own life beyond about two hundred years. Anything more is impossible — even with magic, the spirit might survive, but the body will die. But Karla thought of a way to get around that limit.”

“And was that by controlling the bodies of others?” whispered Ghim as he sat in his chair.

“Ghim!” Slayn was surprised once again. He was also surprised to agree with Ghim's assessment. Ghim had, from the beginning, been the closest to figuring out Karla's true identity. “Please tell us what you know,” said Slayn quietly.

Ghim nodded. “Now is the time, after all.”

“Wow, I would not have expected the dwarf to realize the truth. Do you know much about magic?”

“Of course not. I have nothing to do with the stuff.”

“To notice it, even under those circumstances... what an impressive dwarf. As this smart little barrel says, Karla has sealed her mind in an object, and survived by taking over the bodies of others. Her magic was a success. You saw the shining jewel in the circlet she wore, right? That circlet is the source of Karla's power. But as to whether Karla still lives, that is a riddle. Her thought process has not changed these last five hundred years — that is, since she lost her body. I would not call such an existence a human life. Karla is now the same as a ghost.”

“That means that the body we just saw is that of a woman under Karla's control.” Finally seeming to trust the old man before him, Parn relaxed and reached for the meat before pouring himself a second cup of wine.

“Exactly. Karla uses magic to take over the one who destroyed her former body. That magic is powerful, such that surely no hero could escape. Therefore, Karla is impossible to defeat. Anyone who defeats her becomes her next shell.”

“I can't have anyone beat her. I've promised to take that girl home to a certain priestess,” whispered Ghim.

“What do you mean?” Slayn asked the dwarf.

“It means I know the girl's true identity. I guessed when I saw Karla's portrait, and again when I saw her myself. But when she used the magic of Marfa, all my doubts vanished. That woman is the daughter of a priestess of my acquaintance. And the mother's name is Neese. The same Neese who is the High Priestess of Marfa, as well as one of the Six Heroes. The girl is named Leylia, and she, too, has studied extensively as a priestess of Marfa. When I left my hometown of Tarba, I promised Neese that if I found out where her missing daughter was, I would surely bring her home. It also means I've solved Neese's riddle. She is alive, but does not exist. That is exactly what has happened to Leylia. Because the mage called Karla exists, but does not live.”

“That's what was going on!” said Slayn with admiration.

“Wait a moment. In that case, is there truly no way to defeat Karla? No matter what it takes, I have no intention to let that witch escape!” declared Parn bravely.

“You heard what the Great Sage said. There’s no way you can win. And even if you did, you’d just get taken over by that awful Karla,” said Deedlit with a disgusted expression.

“Does that mean there’s no way to save Leylia?” Ghim’s voice was almost a yell.

“No. I never said that.” Saying that, Wort gazed steadily at the party’s faces. “It will be very dangerous. But if you are courageous, it is not impossible.”

Oh, Karla. No one knows when destruction might claim them.

Wort stood, and walked over to the circular wall that surrounded them, tapping one stone in particular. The stone made a noise and pulled away on both sides, revealing a small room full of junk.

“Karla’s last magic activates when her body is destroyed. Therefore, if you can remove her circlet from her forehead while her body still lives, you will succeed.” Wort entered the small room by himself. They could hear him, but not see him.

“You make it sound easy, Great Sage, but you must know how difficult that would be. Karla masters all the magic of the Old Kingdom. Capturing her alive would be more difficult than killing her.” Eto spoke to Wort, hidden in the next room.

“No need to tell me things I already know.” Wort seemed to be searching for something. They could hear the sound of him pulling out one small object after another. “I found it!”

Following his voice, the old spellcaster’s body emerged as well. In his right hand, he held what looked to be a small rod. “As the priest says, if you fight Karla head-on you have no chance of winning. You are nowhere near as strong as Beld or Fahn. As for you, mage, you still have a long way to go before you can equal my power.” Wort casually dropped the rod he had found in the small room on the table. “That’s why I’m giving you this magic wand. This wand, too, is an artifact of the Old Kingdom and holds great power. If you wave it while casting the right spell, its power will be released.”

“Power? With what effect?” Slayn picked the wand up off of the table and inspected its black shape with great curiosity. He couldn’t tell if it was made of wood or metal, but it was covered with ancient runes. “Raura? Is that the correct incantation to use this wand?”

“That is correct. And the power it holds will surely help you. It nullifies all magic around it, removing the effects of all spells. Your magic will be affected as well, of course.”

“I see. We have only to strike while Karla’s magic remains ineffective.” Slayn grinned confidently. “In that case, it will indeed be possible to capture that witch alive.”

“It seems you’ll need my expertise. It should be easy for me to sneak up on her from behind and steal the circlet from her forehead.” That was Woodchuck. He had been listening to the discussion with a bored air, but when his turn came, he inserted himself into the conversation. “More importantly, what do we do with the circlet, once we have it? Should we break it, or sell it? It’s a fine piece of work and should be worth something for the craftsmanship alone.”

“The wisest course would be to break it while the effect of the wand is still active. If

we leave it intact, her mind control magic will someday find another victim.”

“Is there no way to resist that effect? Some way to take Karla’s power for oneself while retaining one’s will? If you do that, you could recover the secrets of the Old Kingdom. If you prepare yourself, knowing of the mind control spell, wouldn’t it be possible to overcome its power?”

“Thief, what are you suggesting?” Wort’s eyes narrowed. “You shouldn’t concern yourself with pointless things. True, if you could control Karla’s power, it would be of great value. But that is a risky gamble. If you fail to resist her control, your mind will be taken over by the circlet- no, by Karla. And Karla’s past hosts were doubtless all people of power. All of those powerful people fell under Karla’s control. It is best not to tempt fate.”

“Is that so?” was Wood’s absentminded reply.

“Okay, that wraps up what I wanted to tell you. Quickly, you must return to Fahn and tell him the truth of the matter, as well as my intention to remain neutral in this war. In exchange, Karla has ceased to help Beld. The conflict will continue without our interference.” Wort’s voice was quiet.

“Please tell us one more thing.” It was Parn.

“What?”

“Where is Karla’s hiding place?”

Part V: The Decisive Battle

Chapter 1

In the early afternoon, the bright sunlight weakened and thick clouds covered the sky. Large drops of rain fell constantly, illuminated by lightning. The guards at the castle gate in Loyd had no time to put on their coats, and were forced to flee to the gatehouse, where they continued to keep watch.

Just then, seeing black shadows emerge from the curtain of rain, a sentry ducked down.

“Who goes there?” Tense, the sentry called out to the shadows. There were six of them.

“It’s me, it’s Parn. Please open the gate.” Parn pulled back his cloak, allowing the rain to hit his face. The five people behind him were all drenched. “We’ve come back from Wort’s castle. We desire an audience with King Fahn.”

“Sir Parn, you say?”

One month had passed since Parn had left the castle in Loyd. Finally having completed his journey to Wort’s castle, Parn had returned to the royal palace in Loyd.

“Thank goodness you’re safe. I’ll open the gate right away,” said the gatekeeper in a cheerful tone. He emerged from the gatehouse, not caring if he got wet. Then he turned towards the castle and gave the signal to lower the drawbridge.

As soon as Parn was able, he needed to give his information to King Fahn. Since Fahn was engaged in a council of war with Elm and Kashue, the party was allowed to meet with Fahn in the council chamber. Once they were let into the castle, the party removed their old, sodden garments, wiped their bodies with towels soaked in hot water, and changed into fresh clothes.

“What’s this?” After putting on a clean linen shirt, Parn voiced his surprised at the new armor he had been given. The armor was white and embossed with a silver crest.

“Yes, these were Fahn’s orders.” The attendant who had brought the change of clothes bowed respectfully.

“Congratulations.” Deedlit had changed into a lightweight, dark green garment, and knotted a silk sash casually around her waist. Her hair was still damp, giving her a bit of a gloomy look, but that did not at all hide her charming good looks. Parn smiled at her and proudly put on the armor and hung his father’s sword at his waist. The sword matched the armor perfectly, as though they had been made for each other.

“All right, let’s go.” Parn spoke to the other five, who had finished changing. Slayn wore a white sage’s robe, while Eto wore garments marking him as a priest of Pharis and a gown. He had also received a ceremonial mace. Ghim had changed only his undergarments, and put his true mithril chainmail back on over them.

Woodchuck had also changed into fresh clothes, putting his beloved leather armor over them as well as his long black boots, which had dried next to the fireplace.

Then the party was led to the room where Fahn awaited them.

“Good work.”

The party bowed to Fahn as he thanked them.

The room where they had been lead was in one of the towers of the royal palace, very isolated from the rest of the building. There was not a single window, and they could not so much as hear the sounds of the violent storm outside. But a slight breeze blew in the room, and they could not feel the muggy summer heat.

Deedlit looked at nothing and thanked it. Parn’s brows drew together in confusion.

Slayn asked her, “Is that Sylph?”

Deedlit replied, “Yes,” and stretched out her hand in the air. The breeze stopped for a moment, then blew once again.

In the center of the room there was a round table, and around it stood Fahn, Kashue, and Elm. On the table there were glasses of wine from which they had been drinking, as well as bottles. There was also a map of the environs of Loyd with a number of colored lines drawn on it.

Greeting the six adventurers who had just entered, Kashue stepped away from his chair and stood in front of Parn.

“Oh, just as expected, the holy armor looks good on you. I have nothing left to teach you, I suppose.” Laughing, Kashue looked Parn up and down with apparent interest. Then he stuck out his hand and firmly gripped Parn’s arm. “I thought you would make it just fine, but it must have been a difficult journey.”

“Yes, your majesty.” Parn spoke his mind. “There are still a great many goblins in the ruins of the Kingdom of Stone. Someday, we should cooperate with Moss and clear the place out.”

“What a fine knight.” Kashue laughed loudly.

“Well then,” Fahn majestically called Parn over to the round table. “We still must officially knight Parn, but first we should get down to business. Parn, Slayn, and Father Eto, we ask that you stay here and participate in the council of war. The others should relax in another room, and receive your reward. You have all helped Parn and carried this mission to its completion. We give you our deepest thanks.”

“I did not participate in this mission in the hopes of a reward,” replied Deedlit softly.

“Me neither. I don’t need a reward.” Ghim spoke in a whisper. “Instead, give our part to this man.”

“Hey, thanks!” said Wood, not embarrassed in the least.

“Very well. I leave the distribution up to you.” With those words, Fahn turned and studied the map.

Woodchuck and the others were lead out, and the thick wooden door closed behind them.

“There is a meal waiting for you in another room,” said an attendant respectfully.

Well, that’s just the way it is. Wood looked at the closed door for a moment, then obediently followed the servant.

“Well, this is boring,” Deedlit crossed her arms behind her head and yawned.

“You’ve gotten rude,” said Ghim in a low voice.

“Traveling with you lot will do that to a person.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Grinning, Wood shot a sidelong glance at Ghim. “Maybe we’re lucky, getting a meal.”

“Probably. That council of war seems like it’ll run long.” Ghim’s heart was suddenly occupied with anticipation of the late lunch they would soon eat.

“Ah, so that is the true identity of the woman called Karla. I never suspected my former companion to be Karla.” Nodding, Fahn sank into thought. He would never have guessed that he himself had such a deep connection to Karla.

“Wort claims that she no longer has any intention of supporting Marmo, but I wonder if we can trust that.” Parn timidly voiced his opinion.

“If Karla is truly concerned with balance, she has no further need to support Marmo, I suppose.” Kashue weighed in.

“I’ve heard rumors, but is the fight really going that badly?”

“It is. It is going very badly indeed,” said Kashue calmly.

In fact, the fight was going in favor of Marmo. In the short month the adventurers had been traveling, the tides of battle had turned several times. The most recent turning point was the participation of Alania and Moss in the war on Marmo. The dragon lord of Moss, Prince Jester had rushed to their aid, accompanied by twelve dragon riders. They had not moved on the orders of Moss, but in the name of justice. The thirteen dragon knights, along with their dragons, had quickly arrived in the south of Kanon, broken the lines of the Marmo army, and forced them back to their own island, treating the villages there to a baptism of fire.

News of that success reached the people, who clamored more loudly than ever for the defeat of Marmo. At long last, Moss and Alania joined the fight, advancing on Kanon from the north and the south. Hoping for the imminent defeat of Marmo, the allied forces advanced towards Shining Hill.

But they were hit by one disaster after another. The first was the assassination of the king of Alania, Cadmus VII, by Prince Raster. The infant crown prince was killed as well, and the kingdom sank into civil war. At almost the same time, the archduke of

Moss's dukedom of Dragon Scale rebelled, attacking the royal palace in the capital of Dragon Breath. And in Flaim, the desert tribesmen mounted an invasion on the nation's capital, where the military was already understaffed.

Next, many dark elf magic warriors arrived from Marmo. Thus, the tide of battle quickly changed, with the forces of Alania and Moss retiring to their own countries, and the remaining allies fleeing from the evil spirits controlled by the dark elves. If it had not been for King Kashue's steely determination, Valis might have been destroyed. Even hearing the news about events in his kingdom did not send him scurrying home. Expecting such a turn of events, he had left his right-hand man, Shadom, in Flaim, giving him full authority to rule in Kashue's absence. Then too, the people of Flaim were all valiant warriors in their own right. Far from mere recklessness, Kashue's choice was born of a conviction that they would succeed.

Thanks to his efforts, the expeditionary force was able to retreat to Valis without heavy losses. Shortly thereafter, the forces of Marmo stealthily entered Valis. They ravaged the land, burning villages and stealing food from the fields.

The final battle was drawing near. Both armies had advanced on the fields to the east of Loyd and were slowly closing the gap.

"How awful." Upon hearing the news, Parn's face clouded over. In the end, all had gone according to Karla's plans. Karla had had a hand in every event, arranging things to her own satisfaction.

"Now, if Karla were to come against us, there is nothing we could do. I hate to say it, but we have no choice but to trust in Wort's word. So, Parn. Be careful. Your first assignment as a holy knight will be to fight in a great battle," said Fahn.

"I am ready," replied Parn, puffing out his chest.

"It's better to assume that you are not ready. Until you're used to it, rather than focusing on defeating the enemy, do your best to stay alive. That, too, is a victory. Empty deaths earn us nothing." Kashue spoke in a light voice, designed to get Parn to relax.

"Kashue is right. There's no need to seek glory."

"Thank you for your advice."

"King Fahn, will you entrust us with this knight? He has yet to fight alongside the other knights. His fighting style ought to be more similar to that of our desert warriors. I would ask that you loan him to us, to take command of our newly recruited mercenaries."

"Hmm, that might be a good idea. It will also serve him well in the future to learn from your sword techniques. Rumor has it that Parn once enlisted as a mercenary and fought for Flaim. He might very well do better among the mercenaries than among unfamiliar knights. Parn may resent it, but we ask that he go along with this plan nonetheless."

"As you wish," replied Parn.

"Now, Eto and Slayn, we have another task for you." Fahn turned towards Eto and Slayn.

"What is it?" Eto bowed.

“Hum. I am aware that you have been appointed as a court priest by Father Genah, Father Eto, but have you yet accepted that post?”

“Yes, I have humbly accepted it.”

“Good. In that case we will leave the court’s worship of Pharis in your capable hands, and wish you well. As for you, Slayn, what are your plans in the near future? King Kashue has in fact asked that you consider becoming his court mage.”

Slayn glanced at King Kashue’s face, then silently bowed.

“I offer my deepest apologies for the inconvenience this may cause you, your majesty, but I still have work to do. Until I have completed that task, I cannot enter into anyone’s service.”

“Oh, you mean Ghim’s mission.” Eto probed quietly.

“Yes.”

“How unfortunate. I have grown to like you. However, if ever you need help, Flaim’s gates are open to you.”

“Thank you very much.” Slayn bowed once again.

“I worry about Ghim as well, but I must fulfill my duties as a priest of Pharis,” said Eto sadly.

“Don’t worry. I am patient. Your duty must come first, of course.”

“But the enemy is that woman.”

“With Woodchuck to help us, I’m sure we’ll manage somehow.” Slayn answered.

“Please allow me to help as well. Given that we plan to defeat Karla, I imagine that King Fahn will allow it.”

“Defeat Karla? With only the six of you?” asked King Fahn with a severe expression. “That would be impossible. You know her power better than anyone.”

“The Great Sage, Wort, entrusted us with a tool for that exact purpose.” Slayn explained the magic wand to those assembled before him.

“Ah, in that case you might indeed be able to defeat her. We cannot permit her to continue to do as she pleases. When that time comes, you can count on the support of the king of Valis against her. If she appears in the coming battle, you may need to use the wand then.” But Fahn thought that Karla would most likely not participate in the next battle. Karla was not that foolish. She ought to know the danger of putting herself in the middle of a massed battle.

“If that accursed witch shows up, I will take her down with my own hands,” said Kashue, as if it were of no consequence. The young king’s words carried a sense of confidence that made the impossible seem possible. “If I do, perhaps Slayn might agree to join my court.” Kashue laughed loudly.

“That’s well and good, but at the moment our first concern is Beld. Marmo’s forces are split into three armies, and are coming towards Loyd across the fields to the east. We, too, must split into three forces and chase them off. We will take the central force along with Leonis, Elm will take the right, and Kashue will come from the left to take down our respective targets.”

“Head on?” asked Kashue.

“Yes, from the front. The enemy should have no time to set up an ambush or other tricks. We will assign as many mages as possible to Kashue’s left wing. The enemy’s left wing is composed of dark elf magic warriors, you see.”

“Please allow me to participate in that offense as well, your majesty,” suggested Slayn. “I, too, am a mage who bears the sage’s robe. I do not relish battle, but I cannot allow myself to hide away and wait out the danger. I would like to use my magic to support Parn, King Kashue, and their companions.”

“The warrior priests of Pharis will participate as well, I imagine,” guessed Eto.

“Of course.” Fahn replied. “Father Genahat has declared this a holy wars between Pharis and the dark god Falaris. Two hundred warrior priests are expected to fight.”

With this declaration, Fahn signaled the adjournment of the council of war.

“By the way, your majesty, when will the decisive battle take place?” Kashue inquired with a polite bow.

“Hum, we’ll fight the day after tomorrow, at noon. Send messengers to the front lines.”

Hearing that, Elm quickly opened the door and left.

Parn, Slayn, and Eto followed suit, the tension showing on their faces. The dice were thrown.

Chapter 2

At long last, the day of the final battle had come.

It was, of course, the first time Parn had fought in a battle of over one thousand combatants. Surrounded by the knights of Flaim, advancing on horseback alongside Kashue, Parn looked up at the roiling clouds in the sky.

“To think it was clear just a little while ago.” The clouds had covered the sky, completely hiding the sun. He was walking his horse, careful not to dig in his heels. Thinking of the upcoming battle was depressing. Slayn kept his own counsel, but thinking of Slayn’s feelings, Parn could understand why he was so close-mouthed. Behind Parn, Deedlit followed on horseback. When it came down to it, determined to fight at Parn’s side, she had hired herself as a mercenary and followed him.

Eto and Slayn both walked behind them. After them came a great many warrior priests of Pharis. From close up they looked a bit like a group of pilgrims.

“In big wars like this, unlike small skirmishes, you must constantly be aware of your surroundings. You must always pay attention — are you charging with your allies, or being dragged along by them?” Kashue spoke to the knights around him, as always. “Don’t forget that if you can’t keep your head, you’ll perish, no matter how skillfully you wield a blade. This is especially true in this battle, where we fight against evil beings who use dark magic and shamanic magic. We don’t know what they’re planning. Listen to the mages on our side. Don’t be fooled by the enemy’s illusions. If you greet someone with the password and they don’t answer, treat them as an enemy. You may find yourself

fighting an ally, but it's the only way to limit the risks. That's how I've survived."

Kashue turned and addressed those last words to Parn. Parn held those words in his heart as he waited for battle.

At noon, Fahn swung his sword downward, giving the signal. A thundering horn carried the signal to the rest of the troops. King Kashue heard the sound from afar. Then, he led his troops, giving orders to attack the approaching enemy force. Beld's forces did likewise, sending the cavalry into the fray.

The battle had begun.

The air filled with angry roars and the sound of blade striking blade. Dying screams could be heard as the plains turned into a battlefield.

"Deedlit, hurry up!" Parn yelled as he drew his sword.

"Charge!" Kashue's clear voice carried across the field.

The enemy cavalry charged. Against them, Deedlit unleashed the undine she carried at her waist. The undulating watery film clung to a knight's face, and the man tumbled from his horse, unable to save himself.

Then fire exploded in front of the knights. Slayn had cast a fire spell from the rear. Protected by Eto's company of warrior priests, he was revealing the dark elves' invisibility spell and nullifying it.

The mercenaries in Parn's company were all quite skillful. They beat back the dark elf warriors and continued their charge.

"Don't get too far ahead of the foot soldiers. Make the most of the mages' support." Kashue's voice flew across the field.

Hearing those words, Parn stopped his horse. There were no enemies near him. Drawing an arrow from his quiver, he aimed 45 degrees up and shot at a far-away enemy. Parn had meant it as a deterrent, but an unlucky enemy took it in the middle of his chest and fell flat on his back. A volley of arrows answered his shot. Raising his shield, Parn covered his face. He could hear the sound of arrows landing all around him.

Calling on the power of the sylphs of wind, Deedlit turned aside all the arrows that might have hit her. Joining the vanguard, she unleashed the sylphs' power.

"Be careful," said Parn, approaching her.

"Don't worry about me — the sylphs can handle a few arrows. Shouldn't you be looking for your next opponent?" Deedlit gestured at the enemy with her rapier.

In front of them, Kashue the mercenary king was cutting through the enemy front, sword in hand.

"Wow!" Parn stared in amazement. The king's skill with a sword was even better than he had expected. With each stroke of his longsword, an enemy fell. The knights who accompanied him, too, were all brave men who had fought the desert tribes any number of times.

"We can't afford to be left behind. Follow King Kashue! We've got the enemy at our mercy!" Yelling, Parn kicked his horse.

"Oh, you made it! How goes the battle?" Seeing Parn charge in, Kashue rode to meet

him. Several of Kashue's desert knights were injured, but none had died so far. Two of Parn's company had been killed by dark elves, but the remaining ten were all unscathed.

"Seems like there may be fewer dark elves here than expected. But the foot soldiers must be hard-pressed," said Kashue.

"In that case, we should clear out these enemies as quickly as possible and move to support the other troops," said a desert knight.

"Indeed. Now that we know that the enemy has few magic warriors, there's no reason to fear them. Let's cut through them and finish them off. Those of you on foot, follow us! Everyone, charge!"

At the same time as Kashue, Parn urged his horse forward. He wondered at his lack of fear, even charging like this. Perhaps Kashue possessed some magic power. He was certainly a heroic king and an excellent commander. Around him, his troops could attest to his abilities.

What a man. Parn was amazed.

The enemies shot many arrows at them, but the sylphs under Deedlit's control did their job, such that not a single arrow hit her allies.

Just then, in front of them several fiery shapes appeared. They began to take the shape of fire lizards — salamanders!

"Careful, those are salamanders! They breathe fire!" Deedlit's yell reached Parn's ears.

Raising his shield, Parn guided his horse towards one of them.

The sword in Parn's right hand cast a pale light. "Slayn?" Noticing it, Parn spoke in joy. Slayn had ensorcelled his blade. Parn slashed the passing lizard in two. The fiery form vanished all at once, leaving nothing behind.

"Keep going!" Thrusting his sword out in front of him, Parn galloped forward at full speed.

Many knights had fallen from their horses, burned by the salamanders' fire. But the remaining soldiers were attacking the enemy's center.

"Strike while the enemy is out of formation. Believe in the protection of Pharis!" From behind the cavalry, Eto had rallied the foot soldiers and was closing the distance with the enemy. When they reached the enemy, he used the magic of Pharis to protect those around him as much as possible, all the while wielding his mace.

"I'm worn out." Next to him, Slayn was breathing heavily. "If we keep running like this, on top of casting magic, my body will give out."

Looking at his face, Eto knew that Slayn was not speaking in jest. Calling over a healthy-looking warrior priest, he gave an order.

Gently touching Slayn's body, the man began a prayer to Pharis. Suddenly, Slayn's heartbeat slowed a little. His breathing grew easier as well.

"Well, Pharis' magic is very handy indeed," said Slayn gratefully. "Thank you. I feel better now. It seems like my power is still needed."

Waving his staff in the air, Slayn cast a spell once more. In time with the movements of his staff, many enemies collapsed.

“Is that your usual sleeping spell?” wondered Eto.

“Yes. I remembered that in a battle such as this, small magics may serve more than big ones. Seems like it’s turning into a melee battle.” Slayn spoke quietly to Eto while watching the battle unfold around them.

“You’re right.” Eto agreed.

Far away, they could see Parn and Deedlit together, laying about them with their swords. *He’s gotten stronger.* Eto watched his friend confidently.

“We’ve cleared out all the enemies here!” Kashue’s loud voice rang out. “Go to the south and assist King Fahn’s troops. Back into formation, quickly. Those of you on foot, save your strength. If you wear yourselves out running you’ll be no good in the fight.

Calvary, in front, followed by the warrior priests and mages. Heavy infantry in the rear. Don’t eat or drink anything except water yet. You’ll feel better if you’re hungry!”

At these orders, the army moved back into formation on top of the trampled crops and slowly set out.

Kashue’s troops had apparently faced a feint. The enemy’s main force was the one on the right wing which had faced Elm. The enemy’s elite troops had easily crushed Elm’s inferior force. Elm himself had taken the dagger of a dark elf assassin to the heart and would not recover. The victorious enemy force reached the evenly matched center of the battle ahead of Kashue’s reinforcements and gained the advantage there as well. Some thirty minutes later, Kashue’s force charged into the enemy. The situation changing once again, the battle was plunged into chaos.

Chapter 3

It was no longer a holy war.

The battlefield had turned into an endless massacre. Soldiers on both sides were cut down and breathed their last.

“This is awful.” Parn spoke without thinking as he gazed down at the corpses of two goblins he had killed with a few quick blows. Parn had come to understand, to some extent, the condition of the battle. No longer on horseback, Parn and Deedlit were both walking. Both of them were covered in mud and the blood of their enemies, and their shoulders moved as they breathed.

This battle could have no victor. Only death and destruction would smile on it in the end. As Parn and Deedlit faced their next opponents, Parn thought, *Deedlit and I might soon stain the earth red just like the kobolds we killed.* Thoughts of despair shook his body. Even so, his sword swung, seeking out fresh blood, as though detached from his will.

Just then, Parn’s eyes fell on Fahn for a moment. Along with many bodyguards, he faced hundreds of goblins. On the other side of him, a warrior in red armor emblazoned with the arms of Marmo caught Parn’s eye.

“King Kashue. King Fahn is over there.”

Kashue, too, had left his injured horse and was fighting with his sword in both hands. The knights following him had at some point been reduced to just a few. Many must have been killed. But there must also be those who had been separated from him.

At Parn's words, Kashue turned. His wide eyes wavered for a moment when he caught sight of Fahn, but he soon composed himself. He still looked a bit shocked, however.

"The man in the red armor! That must be Beld!" Kashue ran as fast as he could towards Fahn. Dragging up the strength remaining in his exhausted body, Parn followed the mercenary king.

"Your majesty!" Kicking the goblins out of the way, Parn reached his master's side. Kashue was already opening an escape route.

"Oh, Parn. It's good to see you in one piece. King Kashue, too."

"Likewise, it's a relief that you're alive, your majesty." As he spoke, Kashue cut down one disgusting goblin soldier after another.

"Beld is over there." After he killed the last goblin soldier, Kashue approached Fahn and spoke. Fahn, too was now on foot.

"Yes, I know. Many of our soldiers have challenged him but he defeated them all." Chewing his lip, Fahn eyed the slowly approaching red shadow. Beld smiled slightly. Even the black sword in his hand moved as though it, too, was smiling in satisfaction.

That's Beld, huh? Parn felt an overwhelming energy from the man, like a wind that might blow him away.

Beld was so close that if they charged, they would be in range immediately. For just a moment, it seemed as though Parn might do so, but Deedlit quickly stopped him, shaking her head.

"Don't die needlessly. We have no chance against him."

Seeming to share her opinion, Slayn prepared a defensive spell while urging everyone to stand down.

"We meet at last, Fahn. It's been a long time- since we fought the demon, probably." Beld's voice sounded calmer and more intelligent than they had expected. Stopping Kashue, who seemed about to step forward, sword in hand, Fahn took a step towards Beld.

"Sounds about right." Holding his sword, which let off a magical aura, and his shield emblazoned with a silver cross, Fahn slowly approached Beld.

"Ever since we fought side by side, I've wanted to test my strength against yours. Now that we are enemies, we can fight without remorse. Just as I wished." Beld, too, approached Fahn, holding his black-bladed longsword, the tip moving as though timing his movements. It was similar to the dances the tribesman performed before engaging in battle.

"It may be misfortune that leads us to cross blades. It might be a trick of fate. But I will surely win."

Fahn's sword rose up, and he lightly gave a salute.

"I will not forgive interference from anyone!" With those words, Fahn lunged

forward, stabbing with his sword. Beld barely dodged it and struck back, a sharp movement like lightning. Fahn blocked the attack easily with his shield, and riposted powerfully, his shield hiding the movements of his blade, aiming for Beld's torso.

265



Clatter! The sound rang out.

Sparks rose from Beld's red armor and Beld let out a little groan. But it had been a glancing blow, and it was not clear whether it had injured Beld.

"You've still got it, you old geezer!" Beld attacked, putting all his weight behind it. Fahn easily dodged his lightning-fast attack. Both armies, cheered as they watched.

After that, the two men's blades met several times, and the sound of metal striking metal rang in the air.

They were completely equal in fighting skill. Overwhelmed by the mere sight of it, Parn felt sweat drip down his forehead.

There was no hatred, no burning drive to defeat the enemy in that feeling. On each of their faces was a lighthearted expression, as though they were merely two good friends sparring.

"It is said that those two have been opposites in belief and action for a long time." Watching over their fight, Kashue whispered softly to Parn. "But even so, they were comrades in arms who trusted each other. Even those fate drove them apart and has now made enemies of them, it is possible that their feelings have not changed."

"Even I cannot see that man as a truly bad person," said Eto quietly. "I see a pure spirit in his eyes. The longer I look at him, the more I think everything was Karla's fault."

"Eternal peace on Lodoss. Those two chose opposite methods, but their goal was the same, according to Wort. Karla considered that a dangerous idea. If such goals are what led to this destruction, that seems tragic to me."

Slayn spoke as if to himself. Beld's fight continued, showing no signs of stopping. Around them, the surviving soldiers, too, started to fight again, and were no longer able to watch the kings' fight. In the end, only King Kashue, Parn's company, and two of Beld's bodyguards watched their masters' fight.

Fahn might have been more skillful in his swordplay. But he was an old man, and he had reached the end of his strength. Beld was still in the prime of his life, thanks to the power of the demon king's sword which he held. Fahn's attacks weakened, and a strike he was unable to block with his shield hit his armor with a dull clank.

"No!"

Yelling, Kashue stepped forward without thinking. As soon as he did, an enemy bodyguard ran up to him.

"This is a duel. How cowardly, to attempt to interfere!"

More from his concern for Fahn's honor than from his own knightly code, Kashue hesitated to step forward any further.

"Your majesty!" This time, Parn's despairing voice rang out.

With a start, Kashue turned back to Fahn.

It was a heroic sight. Fahn's blade was lodged in Beld's shoulder, and red blood dripped down his blade from the wound.

But Beld's blade had pierced King Fahn's chest, and the tip of the demon sword stuck out through Fahn's cloak.

Fahn's body collapsed forward and fell to the ground.

“Your majesty!” Yelling once again, Parn turned eyes full of hate on Beld’s red-armored form. Yelling in anger, he ran towards Beld.

If one of Beld’s guards had not stopped him, Parn would surely have been defeated by Beld.

While Beld’s guards were holding back Parn and his friends, Kashue was able to engage Beld in single combat. This fight, too, was a tense one that showed no signs of ending.

But the fight came to an unexpected finish. From seemingly nowhere, an arrow pierced Beld’s left shoulder.

At that moment, Kashue attacked. The pain of his wounded shoulder, slowed Beld’s movements for a moment. The dark emperor’s head sailed clean through the air, and his dark form fell to the earth.

“Coward!” Beld’s bodyguard insulted Kashue with all the spiteful words he could muster. “My name is Ashram. Remember it! I will never forgive you. I will inflict King Beld’s suffering on all of you someday!”

With those words, the warrior turned away. Parn thought of hitting him once from behind, but gave up, thinking that such an act would be against his code of honor.

“Your majesty, I’m glad you’re alright.” Parn bowed.

“I don’t know if it was luck, but I beat Beld dishonorably. Whether that was good or bad will depend on the outcome of my own fight.

This will doubtless be a painful task, but please take King Fahn’s body back to Loyd. Thinking about it, meeting all of you was the only positive outcome of this war. Visit Flaim whenever you want. We will welcome you warmly.” After he finished talking to Parn, Kashue paid his respects to the two great men and returned to war-torn Flaim.

Night was falling on the battlefield.

“Damn that Karla! We can’t let her continue.” Slayn’s yell of anger was the first time he had shown such emotion in front of Parn and the others.

His mind blank, Parn caught sight of Fahn and Beld’s corpses. Their two bodies seemed to mark the end of an era.

“Everything went according to that woman’s plan.” Eto’s voice was bitter. “It will take time before the power of Pharis can return to Lodoss. But I must see that it happens. Along with Father Genaht, I will help Lodoss get back in its feet.”

“You can do it.” Deedlit spoke in a kind voice. Then she silently walked over to Parn and wrapped her arms around him, embracing him with all the strength in her thin arms. Parn tapped her back and breathed deeply.

“KARLAAAAA!” Parn’s yell rang out endlessly over the plain.

The day faded, staining the ground red. The clouds, too, had disappeared. How many had survived the battle? Slayn couldn’t even guess. *I heard that Lord Elm had passed away. But I wonder if Wagnard is still alive?*

“Let’s go back to Loyd.” Half-crying, Deedlit hugged Parn once more. “Loyd must be fine. Let’s go there and put ourselves back together. There have been too many tragedies today. I don’t know why, but even the goblins’ corpses look sad now. I know

that even if they survived they would just come to fight us again, but I wish they were alive now. I think I wish they were still moving.”

“Let’s go back, Parn,” said Slayn quietly. “We are still alive. We can do much more good than the dead can. Don’t forget that. Let’s go home. Later, we can deal with the aftermath as best we can.”

Slayn thought that their plans would soon reach their conclusion. If so, perhaps his old friend would welcome it. He had been the kind of person who could only see the world in terms of absolute evil and pure righteousness. But today, there was no righteousness. No evil. Parn’s yell had matched Slayn’s feelings as well. *Karla*. Slayn’s body shook violently. *I will never forgive you. I will not permit you to stay alive.*

Thus the party returned to Loyd. Loyd, too, had been attacked by another enemy force, and much of the city had been destroyed. Even so, the royal palace was unscathed, and a tearful Fianna welcomed the party and her father’s broken body.

Only sadness remained. It seemed like with the death of this man, who had been a symbol of justice, only chaos and darkness ruled Lodoss.

Here, the temple of Pharis was very active. The head priest, Father Genah, had taken on the task of maintaining public order in Valis, and was spending the temple’s accumulated treasures in order to care for the wounded and those whose homes had burned. His efforts met with success, and the region of Loyd, at least, was out of danger.

Parn and his companions kept quite busy helping out. Warriors, mages, and priest were all needed. Deedlit, Ghim, and Parn captured some of the remaining soldiers of Marmo and killed monsters.

Before they knew it, a month had passed. When Valis had at last relaxed and smiles began to return to the people’s faces, Parn and his friends left the city of Loyd.

Part VI: The Daughter of Marfa

Chapter 1

It had been ten days since they left Loyd.

Parn's party had reached a small island in the silent lake, Lake Runoana, north of the large marsh northwest of Loyd. Their goal was simple. To face down Karla, the Old Kingdom mage who had set Lodoss on the path to destruction.

Slayn already held the magic wand he had received from Great Sage Wort in his hand. With the right words and gestures, it would seal away Karla's magic.

The six companions moved silently through the mist. Such weather was common around Lake Runoana. The sight of the sun from the shore of the lake was said to be rare in the winter. It was also said that the depths of the lake hid the ruins of a city of the Old Kingdom.

"How fitting, for Karla's hiding place," said Parn dryly to himself.

At last, the shape of an old house appeared in the mist. It was a two-story building, with gray walls. One could have said that the color of the house suited its owner.

Slayn thought it strange when Ghim furtively pulled something from his bag. Slayn softly approached him and looked at the object in Ghim's hand.

"Is it a new weapon?" Slayn asked the dwarf. Ghim looked a bit lost, but with a nod, he showed the object he held to the mage.

"This is a hair ornament, I see. Did you make it? It has the quality craftsmanship I would expect from a dwarf-made piece. But isn't it a bit plain?" Slayn spoke his mind. True, the hair ornament in Ghim's hand was unadorned. At the end of the golden rod, there was a jewel with a star engraved on it. That part was finely engraved, but the rest of it was completely plain.

"I made it at the castle in Loyd. You say it's plain, but it's my greatest masterpiece." Ghim spoke forcefully. "As you say, it may look plain. But no matter how fancy I made it, it would be a waste. Rather than considering the beauty of the thing itself, it must harmonize with its wearer. Without such a marriage of ornament and wearer, it's no

good.”

“I see.” Slayn felt real admiration for him.

“I hope to accomplish the goal of my voyage today. After that, I only need to take Leylia back to Neese in Tarba.”

“That is why you came here.” Slayn gazed at the gray house in front of him.

Parn thought it was odd that they had not yet been attacked by Karla’s underlings. It weighed on Eto’s mind as well as he looked around them to see where an ambush might await them. They didn’t know how many servants Karla might keep with her, but it couldn’t be less than twenty, could it?

“There will be no ambush.” Slayn had sent the eyes of his mind into the house, to see what was going on. “You would think there would be a powerful barrier on a mage’s house, though.” Slayn had expected his consciousness to be expelled from the premises as soon as it went through the door. But he had been able to see inside, and explore every nook and cranny of the place.

“There she is!” Slayn’s voice rose considerably. “It’s Karla. She’s in the room at the back of the second floor. She’s wearing armor and carrying a weapon... ah, she’s looking over here. She must have noticed me watching her. She’s smiling.”

Slayn stopped concentrating on the spell.

“She must be planning to vacate this house. No one else is there, and the building seems empty. There’s just Karla, wearing chainmail and carrying a short sword.”

“That means she knew we were coming.” As he spoke, Parn drew his sword from its sheath. “Then let’s go all out.”

“Remember that we’re not here to defeat Karla,” warned Ghim.

“Of course. But if it comes down to a sword fight, I have no intention of losing.” Turning, Parn looked at Wood, who was standing silently at the rear of the group. “And of course, this time Wood will play the main role.”

They had laid out an elaborate plan to fight Karla. First Slayn would seal Karla’s power with Wort’s magic wand. Then Parn, Deedlit, and Ghim would engage Karla in melee combat, forcing her to focus on them. Last of all came Wood, who they had charged with the most important task. He would sneak up on Karla from behind and snatch the circlet from her forehead. Wood had accepted this dangerous role without complaint.

Opening the front door of the house, Parn stepped inside. He had no trouble walking to the staircase and bounding up the stairs. He was not even particularly careful. He was convinced that nowhere in the house, not even between him and Karla, was there any trap or ambush.

If she wanted to use such tricks, she would probably have set up a barrier around the house and broken Slayn’s spell. The fact that she had not meant that she was not only aware of their presence, but also willing to accept their challenge.

That is why Parn confidently advanced, directly towards the room where Slayn had seen Karla. The fateful door of that room soon appeared before him. Parn took the knobs of the double doors in his hands and energetically flung them open.

The room was made to look like the audience hall of a castle. Both the walls and the floor were made of polished black marble. And in the back of the room stood Karla.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” Karla’s clear voice rang out in the large room, echoing against the bare walls. She took one step forward and looked at each of her enemies in turn. “Now, let’s settle this once and for all. Come at me however you want!”

With those words, Karla grew still as a statue.

“Karla. You witch, playing with people’s fates!” yelled Parn as he charged. “This is for my lord, King Fahn!”

Thinking that now was the time, Slayn waved the wand and intoned the word of the spell.

“Raura!”

Slayn could indeed feel magic pressing against him, in a field that spread throughout the room.

Extending her right hand, Karla performed the necessary gestures to cast her fire spell on the approaching fighter, dwarf, and elf. A pale thread of red light stretched out from her nimble fingers.

But at the moment when the light would have hit Parn, it went out like a candle in the wind.

What’s going on? A confused expression appeared on Karla’s face. This must be Wort’s doing.

Karla’s next spell would be a great magic, so she concentrated on preparing it. Ignoring her charging opponents, she focused on the movements of the spell.

“Ô almighty mana, ô source of magic that controls all, free you power! Disappear! Ô miraculous power!”

Bang! The sound of an explosion rang out.

With an expression of terror, Slayn looked at the broken wand in his hand.

“Careful! Karla broke the magical barrier!”

Meanwhile, Parn and the others had come close enough to Karla to cross swords with her. Eto spared a glance for the black shadow that ran along the wall.

We’re counting on you.

Parn had come around Karla’s right-hand side. He aimed a swift blow at her right arm — her sword arm. Fending off his blow with her shortsword, Karla chanted the words of a spell.

Deedlit, on Karla’s left, had stabbed at her feet, but Karla dodged it easily. It was clear that Karla had also made a thorough study of swordplay.

Hurry up, Wood. Holding nothing back, Parn aimed blow after blow at Karla. Deedlit, too, made thrust after thrust, as if to control Karla’s movements. Neither of them had forgotten Wort’s warning. But they could not risk abating their attack. If they did, they would be defeated immediately.

“Wake up, Leylia. Did you learn nothing from Neese?” Ghim’s loud voice suddenly rang out. Ghim hadn’t so much as taken up a fighting stance, merely looking at Karla.

Does that dwarf know this body’s owner? Using her shortsword as a shield to block

all of Parn and Deedlit's attacks, Karla uttered each word of her spell in turn. *Too bad for him. The girl's mind no longer exists. I took all of it. So she cannot remember you.*

Karla continued to recite the words of her long spell, without making a single error. She was absolutely determined to settle things with magic.

"Remember, Leylia! Remember the laws you stand by. Remember the laws of Marfa, who loves all living things and teaches them to live naturally!" Ghim kept going. "Why does she protect the vows of youths who marry for love? Is it to drag Lodoss into wars? Is it to steal the lives of those who love?"

Karla grew angry at the dwarf's words, which were delaying her spell more than the attacks of the elf and the warrior. Her heart was troubled.

It's not possible, thought Karla. *Why would it bother me? Don't I know nothing of the laws of Marfa? There should only remain fragments of Leylia's memories by now.*

But as Ghim spoke, Karla couldn't control the different emotions that rose in her. Pain shot through her head, as though the other her was trying to take back her body and push the invader out.

"Hey! Stop!" Karla's spell was complete. A light burst into existence in her left hand, and moved her hand straight at the dwarf.

Ghim should have been able to dodge it.

But he did not.

"Remember! Leylia!" A scream tore from the dwarf's mouth.

The light moved from Karla's hand into Ghim's body and faded into him.

The dwarf fell.

"Ghim!" Deedlit was the one who yelled. In Ghim's fallen body she could no longer feel the energy of life. Anger and sadness filled the elf's heart.

The same shock went through the spellcaster as well.

"Ghim?" A whisper that didn't sound like her voice came from Karla's mouth. Karla was confused. Her headache grew worse. Her determination to cast the next spell seemed to have been replaced by the confusion written on her face.

It was then that a black shadow snuck up on her from behind.

"Got it!" Wood's loud shout of triumph rang out. Slayn and Eto saw it all.

The thief's nimble right hand had plucked the circlet from Karla's forehead. Her black hair fell loose, and with a scream Karla fell awkwardly to the floor, like a doll whose strings had been cut.

"Ghim!" Yelling, Parn gathered the fallen Ghim in his arms. In his hands, the dwarf's body was rapidly cooling. Parn yelled the dwarf's name countless times. Eto ran up as well, and started to recite a long prayer, trying desperately to reignite the flames of the dwarf's life. Slayn laid his hand quietly across his chest. There were tears in Deedlit's eyes as well. Then, readying her rapier, she aimed it at the chest of the woman lying nearby on the floor.

Slayn grabbed her hand.

"Let me go!" Deedlit's voice echoed hollowly from the walls. "This woman killed Ghim. She must die!"



“Do you think Ghim would be grateful if you did that? Ghim threw his life away just to save her. I had begun to realize it. Ghim never really told us his reasons, you know? A long time ago, Ghim was badly injured in a mining accident. I heard that the one who

saved him then was this woman's mother. And that at the same time, this woman was attacked by someone. But in truth, rather than being kidnapped, her mind was taken over by Karla."

"It's no use." Eto's voice was bitter. Slayn lowered his eyes. Ghim's arms were crossed over his chest, and Eto was slowly preparing him for burial.

"Poor Ghim." Deedlit laid her face on Parn's chest, not hiding the tears that fell from her eyes. Slayn had never heard of an elf crying over a dwarf before.

"Let's finish Karla off. I have a new reason not to forgive that witch now." Slayn turned towards Woodchuck, speaking softly. "Now, Wood. Please. Throw that circlet to the ground. Then everything will be over. We will release her from the power of her ancient spell.

Up until that point, Woodchuck had stood still, in a daze. He wandered in some empty part of his heart. Returning to himself, Woodchuck took one step back. Noticing that something was off, Deedlit gave a start and raised her rapier.

"What are you thinking, Wood? You wouldn't..."

"Tha- that's right!" As he spoke, Woodchuck was still backing away from them. His black leather armor made no noise at all. Woodchuck distanced himself from the others with gliding steps.

"What are you doing? Quick, break the circlet!" Parn had yet to understand what Woodchuck was up to.

"You lot don't understand. How would you understand my feelings, after twenty years locked up in that prison? Yes, I'm a thief. But that was the only way I could survive. I didn't have Parn's strength, or smarts like Slayn's to learn ancient runes, or even money. The gods seemed to enjoy screwing me over. I couldn't believe in Pharis or Marfa or Rahda. Only the guys in the thieves' guild understood my feelings. If I want power, I need this circlet. I'm gonna take Karla's power for my own. Then I can look down on those bastards who didn't give me a chance and the ones who stole my youth away. The Great Woodchuck. I'll make them chant the name of Jay Lankard."

"Don't do anything stupid!" yelled Parn.

"Parn. You're a good man. I like your focus. But you've gotta learn not to trust people so quickly. If you don't, someday someone's gonna stab you in the back. And Deed. I don't half mind you, you annoying, beautiful, daughter of the forest. Eto, Slayn. And the dwarf that bought it. It was fun hanging out with you. Really. We were a good team, right? I'll meet you whenever, with open arms."

"Wood, you've got to be kidding. Stop your bad jokes."

"Bye, Parn. I'd like to be able to think like you."

Wood turned around and ran to the window. Opening the window with a clack, he looked back at the shocked faces of his four companions.

There was a sad smile on his face.

"WOOD!" Parn's yell bounced off of the walls, echoing endlessly, and rang in Wood's ears.

"Bye." Wood spoke again. Then he jumped down out of the window. Parn rushed to

the window in a panic. But Woodchuck had already disappeared into the forest.

“Wood, you idiot.” Parn moaned.

Turning, he slowly approached the dwarf’s corpse. Kneeling, he made the sign of Pharis and grasped Ghim’s cold hand.

“I will avenge you.” Standing, Parn gazed into the faces of his three remaining companions.

“I will follow Wood. I doubt he can control Karla, you see. I leave Ghim in your capable hands,” said Parn.

“I’ll accompany you. You need someone to watch your back, right? The enemy is Karla... but stealthier.”

“Thank you.” Parn smiled at the elf jogging over to him. “Please hear me out without laughing, Deed. I want to be a hero. But I’m not strong enough. What I ought to do right now is use my sword to help Lodoss get back on its feet. But instead, I will try to defeat the gray witch who has been controlling the course of Lodoss’ history from the shadows.”

Not strong enough? Deedlit wondered. True, your name may not be remembered in history books. You may not make your name as a king or hero. But your pure conviction will surely be spoken of across Lodoss. Your adventures will surely be passed on, and remain among the legends of Lodoss. Alongside the names of minor heroes. I can see that.

“Sorry, Parn. I have dedicated my life to Pharis. I still have much to do to rebuild Valis,” said Eto sadly.

Smiling, Parn held out his hand to Eto.

“I can’t come along either. Rather than chasing Karla, I plan to honor Ghim’s memory. In his place, I must take Leylia back to the town of Tarba.”

“Ah, that’s too bad.” Taking Deedlit’s hand, Parn spoke in a low voice. “In that case, see you later.”

The two of them disappeared through the doorway.

“Not only was I unable to save Ghim, I couldn’t even save Woodchuck.” Eto muttered as though cursing his own powerlessness. He stood, brushing the dust off of his white priest’s robes, and moved to Ghim’s side to pray. “This is all I can do for Ghim. I will leave the rest to you, Slayn. I have work waiting for me as a priest of Pharis. I must help Valis, and then Lodoss, back on their feet.”

“I see. In that case, this is goodbye.” Waving, Slayn bade Eto farewell.

Smiling a bit, Eto waved back.

“Slayn Starseeker the sage, I pray that your dreams come true. And that you will safely grant Ghim’s last wish as well. And for the salvation of the poor girl’s soul.”

Eto’s white form slowly vanished from sight.

Chapter 2

The only one still moving in Karla's house was Slayn. Sitting next to Ghim's corpse, he waited. There was a satisfied expression on the dwarf's face, as though proud of his life.

I will grant your wish, whispered Slayn in his heart, pulling the golden hair clip from Ghim's breast. It had become Ghim's last work.

Slayn thought he should give the ornament to the one it had been made for. Putting it inside his robe with that intention, all he had left to do was wait for Karla... no, the girl called Leylia to recover.

It wasn't long before she did. After a little while, her breathing evened out, and she started to moan.

"All you okay? How are you feeling?" Approaching the woman, Slayn peered into her face. Slayn thought fleetingly that Karla had not been able to make the most of this girl's beauty. He realized that her clear blue eyes were looking at him. How pitiful she looked, how sad.

As though waking up, Leylia looked around. Then her eyes fell on the dwarf's corpse.

"Ghim. The kind dwarven craftsman," she muttered hoarsely, deep in her throat. "I remember. You... I could hear your voice when I was trapped in the darkness. I thought it was a dream. But this is real, isn't it."

Standing unsteadily, she stumbled towards his corpse and took his hand. Realizing that his hand was cold, she clung wordlessly to him.

"I wish it was all a dream. I wish I was dreaming in my bed in Tarba. But this is real, isn't it?"

Slayn could hear her sobbing quietly. Her sobs grew louder, and mixed with the sounds of her cursing herself.

Slayn didn't move until Leylia had stopped crying. He thought she might cry forever, but at last her sobs faded and finally stopped.

"What should I do? I've done so many unforgivable things. I killed Ghim with my own hands, caused the deaths of so many people, and brought war to Lodoss. What amends could possibly bring forgiveness for those sins?" Leylia spoke to the robed man near her. It seemed that his calm face lightened the pain in her heart.

"You should live," declared Slayn plainly. "Don't think that those were your sins. That is difficult, I imagine. But it was not you, but rather Karla, who committed those acts. If you still wish to atone for those sins, you should survive and help Lodoss to recover. You have the strength to do so. But the first thing you must do is relieve your mother's worries. That was Ghim's strongest desire, you see."

Leylia was silent for a time. She bit her lips so hard they bled.

"I understand," said Leylia abruptly. "I will dedicate the rest of my life to Lodoss. And I will return to Tarba to see my mother."

Hanging her head, Leylia approached Slayn.

"I will accompany you, priestess of Marfa. My name is Slayn Starseeker. I am a mage who studied at the Academy of Sages. Allow me to lend you my strength."

“Please, don’t speak of magic for the moment. But I know of you, mage who looks on the bright side. I remember everything from the last seven years.”

That explains her pain, thought Slayn, feeling for her. She cannot smile now. But someday, her beautiful face will smile again. I will do what I can to ensure that. I can’t wield a sword like Parn, but my magic should be useful as well.

Taking Leylia’s arm, Slayn left Karla’s house. Casting a fire spell, he walked around the house, lighting different parts on fire. In the midst of the fire, Ghim’s soul must surely be ascending peacefully to heaven.

Karla’s house caught fire and slowly burned down. Slayn stayed until the last of the embers had died.

Following Leylia, Slayn started walking. The fog had lifted, and the early fall sunlight shone down on the two of them.

In the sunlight, Slayn once more observed Leylia, walking in front of him. From behind, her hair looked like the night sky, and her body resembled a marble statue.

Suddenly remembering, Slayn pulled the hair clip Ghim had made from the pocket of his robe.

“Pardon me.” Excusing himself, Slayn put the clip in her hair.

I see. Understanding, Slayn took a deep breath. Ghim was absolutely right.

Once attached to Leylia’s hair, the seemingly plain clip shone in a different light. As if it had found its rightful place, the clip shone with all the colors of the rainbow.

The beauty born of harmony, huh. Slayn was ashamed to only have seen Ghim’s strength as a warrior.

Then Slayn had another thought. Looking at the red-eyed woman as she covered her mouth with one hand, and at her hair, held back with Ghim’s clip, he thought, *I may at last have found my star.*

Ghim’s final masterpiece shone in Leylia’s hair like a true star in the vast expanse of space.

Afterword

Yasuda Hitoshi

The present volume took a strange form as it was written.

Firstly, as those of you who have read it will know, it is a work of fantasy.

This is an exciting story in which young adventurers fight fantastical creatures in the fictional world of Lodoss (there is an island of the same name in the Aegean Sea but that is a coincidence [t/n: Rhodes, written similarly to Lodoss in Japanese]). It's a feeling akin to heroic fantasy. But unlike ordinary books, it has another characteristic.

Basically, this volume is a "Game Novel".

Now, when I put it that way, you might be asking yourself "Ah, is this one of those computer game novels that have been popular lately?" True, there is a phenomenon where story-driven games and RPGs (role playing games) have started to be released, even for the Famicom, and their stories have been made into novels. Well, that is an interesting experiment, and computer games, limited though they are, tell many enjoyable stories (We recommend Laplace no ma [t/n: Laplace's demon], also from Kadokawa Shoten).

But the present work is a different sort of "Game Novel". The game it is based on does exist, but it has yet to be released to the public.

It's no good beating around the bush, so let me write this clearly. Actually, *Record of Lodoss War* is an RPG world created by SNE Group, of which the author of the present volume, Mizuno Ryo and myself were both members.

RPGs are interesting. They are, of course, games, but they also involve creating a story, and thus require imagination and creativity. More so than in the case of computer games, tabletop RPGs involve a game master, who creates the story and pushes the game forward, as well as players, who freely play their roles. In this way, there are many occasions to shape the game world, and this is the true pleasure of the game.

This kind of RPG began overseas with D&D (®), but ever since, games have been expanding and evolving, continually refining the genre. Lately, the focus has shifted

from an early emphasis on game systems (which rules are interesting?) to setting and scenario (which worlds, stories, and characters are interesting?). The players are honest. They try playing, and discard anything that isn't fun. No matter how perfectly strict the rules, anything that doesn't work or works poorly is not needed. Recently, rule-free setting sourcebooks (which can be used with any system) have become common, taking the form of generic RPGs.

I have gotten a bit off-topic, but Group SNE is no exception — a number of these kinds of original settings have existed for quite a while. Of these, the greatest is the Record of Lodoss War setting, of which Mizuno Ryo is the main creator. Once, we played a D&D campaign using this setting, and we also played long campaigns of Tunnels & Trolls and RuneQuest in it. Eventually, the players' fictional characters became more and more vivid, and we planned out an original game system, making it into a complete game world.

Therefore, this book is a game novel in the sense that it uses as its setting an as yet unpublished game world.

Because there may be, among the enthusiastic readers of this book, those who wonder what happened to the "Record of Lodoss Island" that was serialized in a magazine before this book came out, I will briefly touch on that subject.

About two years ago, in Group SNE, of which I was a member, there was a need to introduce tabletop role-playing games, which were, at the time, relatively unknown in Japan. Thus, to start with, we published replays (written versions of what was done in the game) of a game set in the "Record of Lodoss War" world in Comptiq (a monthly magazine published by Kadokawa Shoten). Just as a note, we did not invent the concept of replays, but even in the homeland of RPGs, America, I do not know of any other case in which enough enjoyable material was written to make a long-form novel out of it. Fortunately, this project was very popular among the readers of Comptiq, but since we used a particular game system for it, turning it into a book as-is posed a problem (of copyrights). Therefore, there will likely be no further serialization in the magazine.

Even so, from the beginning Lodoss has been a generic RPG setting, not tied to any specific ruleset. And from the beginning it has had a strong story.

Thus, it is not very surprising that it would now take the form of a novel.

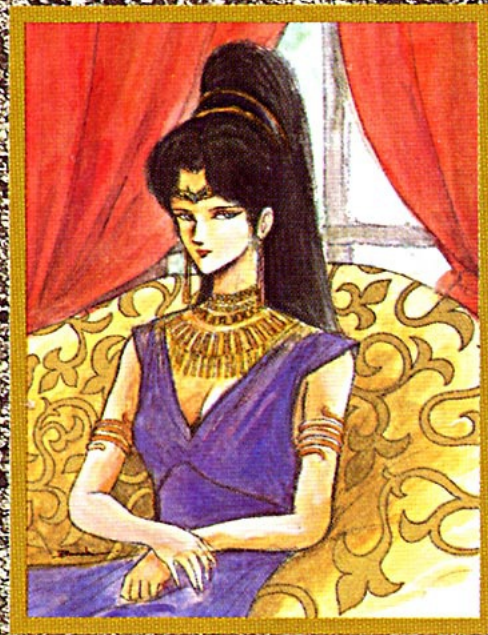
The author, Mizuno Ryo, was the center of the "Record of Lodoss War" setting (that is, the game master), and he also loves novels, among thing science fiction and fantasy, as well as being an experienced author. Though "Record of Lodoss War" began as a game, from the beginning he created the stories with a novel-like attention to detail. The popularity of the replays was no doubt thanks to this meaty story. I have no doubt that since it was he that transformed his prototype into a novel, it is a story more interesting than any before it. (I was credited with the original scenario, but in fact all I did was make some characters in the game and replay and make a few changes here and there. He was always in the middle of it all)

I imagine that "Record of Lodoss War" will be published as a game and take many forms from here on out, but first, I ask that you experience the charm of this world in the

form of this novel.

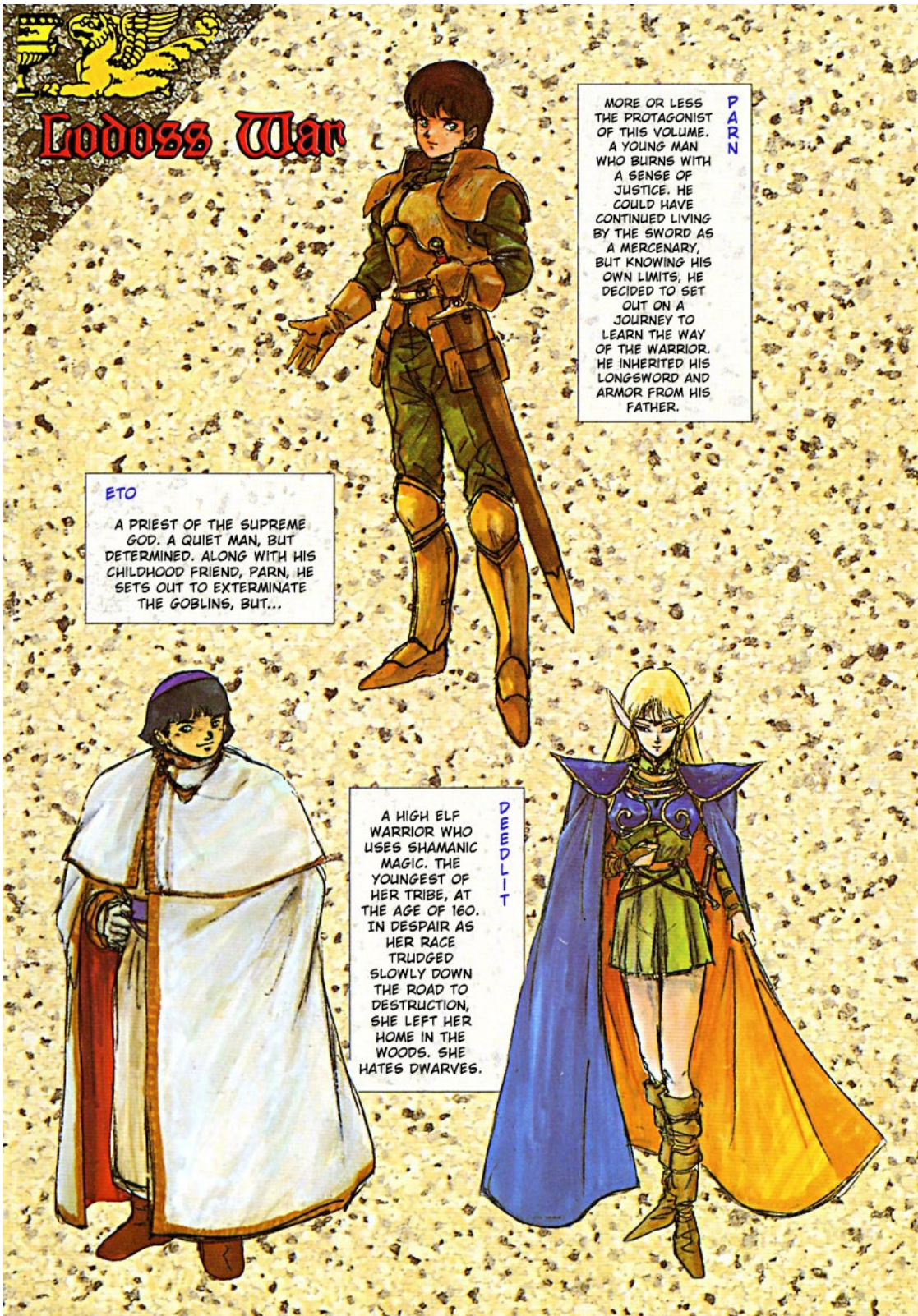
PS: By the time you get your hands on this book, a computer game adaptation of this novel, “Record of Lodoss War”, should be out from Hummingbird Soft. If you get the chance, please play it. And tabletop games are taking the form of ever wider worlds, so if you have the chance, you should take a look. Until next time!

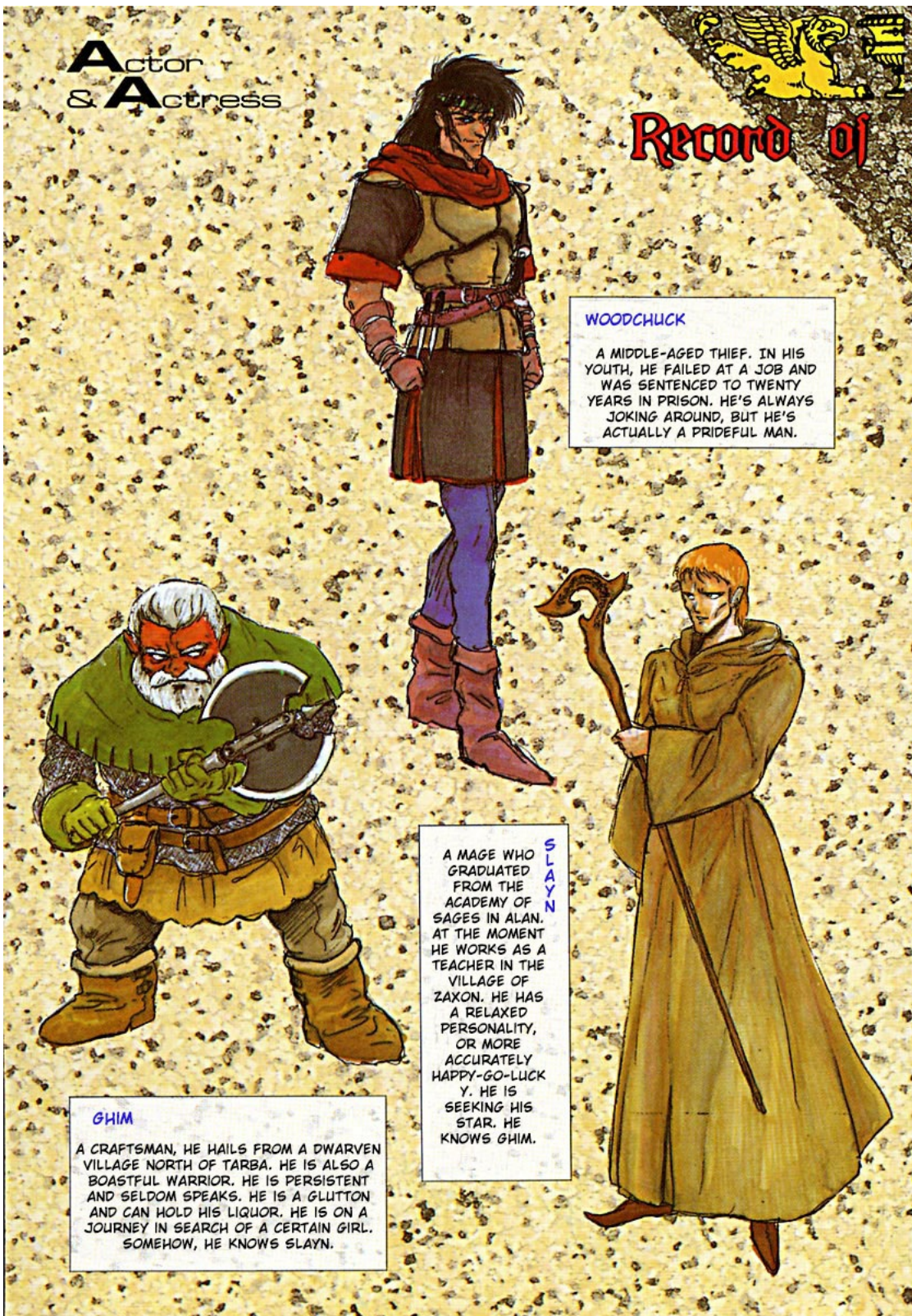
◆
**Record
of
Lodoss War**



◆
Sole and her admirer, he was challenged to a duel to the death and came to be a record holder. But the day he was in the hands of the Fabyrinth, he was still waiting the right 7 heroes. He challenged to Demon Lord and 6 heroes survived and brought the peace to the world.







Actor
& Actress

Record of

WOODCHUCK

A MIDDLE-AGED THIEF. IN HIS YOUTH, HE FAILED AT A JOB AND WAS SENTENCED TO TWENTY YEARS IN PRISON. HE'S ALWAYS JOKING AROUND, BUT HE'S ACTUALLY A PRIDEFUL MAN.

SLAYN

A MAGE WHO GRADUATED FROM THE ACADEMY OF SAGES IN ALAN. AT THE MOMENT HE WORKS AS A TEACHER IN THE VILLAGE OF ZAXON. HE HAS A RELAXED PERSONALITY, OR MORE ACCURATELY HAPPY-GO-LUCKY. HE IS SEEKING HIS STAR. HE KNOWS GHIM.

GHIM

A CRAFTSMAN, HE HAILS FROM A DWARVEN VILLAGE NORTH OF TARBA. HE IS ALSO A BOASTFUL WARRIOR. HE IS PERSISTENT AND SELDOM SPEAKS. HE IS A GLUTTON AND CAN HOLD HIS LIQUOR. HE IS ON A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF A CERTAIN GIRL. SOMEHOW, HE KNOWS SLAYN.

