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Linderiun Tesarien Racem

# The Invasion of The Sombbers

Jordi Villalobos



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**The Invasion Of The Sombers**

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

## **Villalobos J.**

The Invasion Of The Sombers / J. Villalobos — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

A spell which can change everything, an unexpected romance, an unavoidable war, two intertwined stories... The Sombers lurk! They want to conquer the whole Frienia. Orcs and humans must ally after many years at war to face the new in common enemy. A human prince and an orc princess will be the hallmark of this alliance. Will they be able to unite the two races in order to fight the dark ones? The shadows and the new alliance will compete to get dragons to give them the advantage in the upcoming war. Who will get more and better dragons? For two thousand years a perverse magician had been planning to dominate all of Frienia's races. He is aware of the worst black magic spell that can exist: Linderium tesarien racem. Will anyone succeed in thwarting his plans? Two stories that weave together, in the midst of wars, betrayals, romances, intrigues and adventures, concluding in a surprising ending.

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**Jordi Villalobos**



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Cover design: Sarima ([envuelorasante.com](http://envuelorasante.com))  
Map illustration: David Puertas  
Layout: Sara García ([tucubierta.es](http://tucubierta.es))  
Translator: ZionXVI



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## Author's note:

At the end, appendices have been added with general information about Frienia, a description of the races and a catalogue of characters so that it can be of help to those readers who would like to complement the information provided in the narration of the novel.



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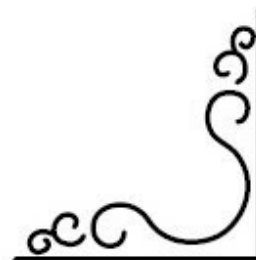
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[jordi@jordivillalobos.es](mailto:jordi@jordivillalobos.es)



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## Synopsis

After a century-old war between humans and orcs, both sides are forced to form an alliance to defend themselves from the sombers, a race descended from the predominantly evil elves who struggle to invade and subdue their territories. To seal this alliance, the two heirs of the kingdoms, the brave human prince Syriel and the beautiful orc princess Lirieth promise each other marriage and, against all odds begin a romance of sincere love.

The dark ones undertake an expedition to lands full of dangerous creatures to capture dragons and thus to gain a clear advantage. The alliance does the same to avoid it or also find dragons to match forces. Syriel and Lirieth command this mission, in the course of which they must overcome a mutiny of their dwarf vassals, the attack of a gigantic snake, ambushes of the dark elves and assaults of strange and dangerous creatures.

Syriel must also face the painful suspicion of a perverse betrayal of his fiancée, who seems to have made a pact with the invaders several years ago.

In addition, they meet the White Magician, one of Mazorik's seven disciples, who informs Syriel that he owns two of the objects in the Dragon Armor, and hands him another one that belonged to his grandfather. The White Magician urges the prince to collect the seven magical objects which constitute the powerful armor, as he suspects that someone with not very good intentions also wants to do it.

Both the shadow elf and the alliance's troops gain control of a group of dragons. War is already inevitable: the sombers will initiate an imminent invasion of the orcs' and humans' kingdoms.



About two thousand years ago, a perverse magician named Mazorik sets in motion one of the worst black magic spells that ever existed. With the seven hearts of each of the dragon's races, he creates the seven jewels of light, which have the property of absorbing the essences of the beings who possess them for seven years. To do so, the magician takes a disciple from each of the civilized species that populate Frienia: elves, humans, orcs, sombers, dwarfs, médium and giants, whom he deceives with the false promise of putting an end to all wars.

With the seven jewels already impregnated with the essences of the seven species, he intends to set them in seven objects that will make up the Dragon Armor, which will grant him unlimited power, obtaining the immanence of each race, as well as its total submission, which will establish him as the supreme emperor of all the known earth. But one of his disciples discovers him and manages to thwart his abject plans.

The two threads of argument are intertwined in this novel, leading to a surprising ending.

## **Frienia**

<https://jordivillalobos.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ltr1-frienia-ingles.jpg>

## **Prelude: The blood and death covenant**

*Frienia, year 1808 of the second era.*

Between Barvian, the somber's fief and the orc kingdom of Teberion was the forest of Eternal Night. Its trees with large, leafy branches barely allowed the rays of light to pass through, and so a faint, perennial darkness took hold of its immense extension. It was an ideal place for different creatures to meet clandestinely without fear of being discovered.

Snaking through the forest was the Aquos River, the largest river in all of Frienia, which marked the border between the two kingdoms. Its flow was so voluminous that during a good part of the year it could only be crossed by the Rasen fords, at the south of the forest.

In one of its darkest areas, a small médium rogue breed wandered in search of the prized monarch mushrooms, good sized milk caps that, cooked skillfully, became one of the tastiest dishes in all of Frienia, especially for the médium ones.

Bellamir, the mushroom collector was not used to coming alone to this forest, as it was one of the most dangerous, both for the beings and vermin that inhabited it and for the kind of individuals that used to frequent it. He was usually accompanied by his inseparable friend Frodin; however, that day he was indisposed due to an indigestion provoked by cakes and decided to venture on his own.

Just when Bellamir had found a considerable colony of appreciated mushrooms, after having smelled its aroma that he perceived delicious, he heard a nearby click that made him hide from sight to observe and veil his mind as very few ones knew how to do.

A woman of haughty beauty and from the somber race waited impatiently and with evident signs of nervousness. She had the slight impression that she was being watched and not by the other sorceress she was waiting to meet with, precisely. The somber retained the characteristic features of the ancient elves, but with the typical more haggard tonality in the skin of the sombers. Her long black hair, which reached down to her waist, and her grey and luminous eyes stood out on a face that was not lacking in beauty, although with marked features that suggested a pronounced evil.

She did an exhaustive mental search around and found nothing but numerous insects and small vermin. Nor did her sense of smell alert her to anything threatening or out of the ordinary, and she endeavored to appear calmer.

Suddenly, an almost imperceptible burst preceded the appearance of a slender and regal figure. The female Orcus' features of the new appeared, although of a singular beauty natural, denoted a remarkable security and poise. Without saying anything, she looked defiantly into the eyes of the other magician who was waiting for her.

"You are late, Lirieth, daughter of Gulrath." said the somber one pretending as much calm as possible.

"I've come when I've made up my mind, Elenir, daughter of Nigriel." replied the female Orcus with a certain aggressiveness adding shortly afterwards: "I see you very nervous, you won't want to back out of our deal, will you?"

"Not at all! I don't regret our pact. Come on! Let's get this over with as soon as possible," defended herself the dark one.

They approached each other and, discovering daggers which competed in their luxurious ornamentation, both exchanged a deep cut on the palms of their hands, and when they joined them together, they pronounced in unison:

"These cuts symbolize the sacred pact of blood and death between sorceresses that binds us with our own life to the fulfillment of what was agreed. Only the commitment will be broken by mutual agreement or by the death of one of us. If the scar were to bleed before disappearing, it would indicate that one part had lost its life, freeing the other one from any obligation. In turn, the sign

of betrayal will be revealed through intense pain in the hand for the betrayed and fulminant death for the betrayer."

A blinding light emerged from the united hands of the magicians and the pact of blood and death was irremediably sealed.

Both women were stunned for a few seconds, staggering and making a great effort not to fall vanished. Surely the two would have collapsed to the ground if they had not held their hands.

Little by little, they regained their regal composure. Elenir was the first to show herself restored.

"Well, it's done, Your Highness. It has been a real pleasure to see you again." she said to Lirieth in a sneering tone. "I will count the seconds until our paths cross again." she said accompanying her gesture with an ironic bow.

"I will wait impatiently, my dear, too." concluded Lirieth, not worrying about the disdain she showed.

The miracle workers separated and disappeared with clicks, leaving the forest submerged in a sepulchral silence and in a darkness that, together with the cold of the night, they would freeze the bones of any creature that roamed there.

The little rascal watched the scene in terror, even though he knew they could not have detected him with his ability to camouflage himself physically and mentally, including for the most powerful sorcerers.

Although he could only hear fragments of the conversation that coupled with the similarity of the voices made it difficult for him to understand what they were saying, he captured enough to intuit that his death would have been inevitable if he would had been discovered.

He waited a long time before daring to leave his hiding place to get away as quickly as possible from that location and return to his quiet and safe village, so that he forgot the succulent colony of mushrooms he had discovered, as well as those he had already collected, which were also abandoned in the undergrowth.

## Prologue

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

The war between humans and orcs, which had lasted several centuries, was about to end. The dwarves had helped humans more by obligation to the vassal oath than by direct involvement in the conflict. So Ankar, the current dwarf king, despite his declared aversion to the orcs had kept the minimum contribution of soldiers to which he was strictly bound.

After the last great battle in the vicinity of Belquecia, capital of the human kingdom of Delfia, where the orcs came out victorious, King Orc Gulrath, instead of forcibly subduing the defeated, surprised the human king Jorion by offering him an alliance sealed by the marriage of their two first-borns : Princess Lirieth, heiress of Teberion, and Prince Syriel, heir of Delfia.

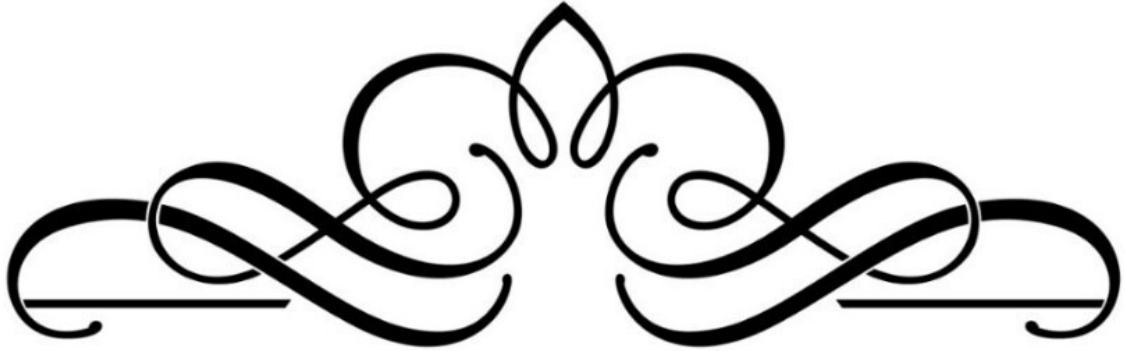
This agreement became increasingly necessary for men and orcs, due to the thriving and devastating civilization of the sombers, who longed for total control of Frienia and for the enslavement of all races on earth. So, the human king had no choice but to accept the conditions of the orc king, and Syriel had no choice but to accept the will of his father.

Gulrath went so far as to reject on several occasions the offer of an alliance made to him by the dark ones in order to crush the humans, convinced that, once achieved, they would break their pact in order to subdue them as well.

The Orc king had long desired to ally himself with humans and the end of a war that favored more the of the sombers' interests, by weakening the two enemy races, at the same time and in good measure. He also longed to reign in a time of peace where men and orcs lived and prospered in harmony, and this would only be possible if they united and achieved to defeat the sombers together.

Nigriel, king of the sombers, waited for the moment when men and orcs would wear each other away, so that he could finally strike the final blow that would leave them to their mercy. That moment, after the end of the war, seemed to be approaching, despite the fact that the dark sovereign would have liked the contest to have lasted even longer, since the forces of men and orcs, though weakened, in alliance would still be as powerful as their own hosts, but perhaps not for much longer...

## **Part 1: The Dragons' Mountain**



### **The secret covenant**

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

The majestic fortified city of Belquecia towered over a hill that dominated an area of several kilometers around.

It was not possible to attempt a surprise attack against it, since its high situation and the few natural features of all the surrounding lands made any army visible from all points of the horizon. At the east and on very clear days, one could see the Hope River, natural border with Teberion, kingdom of the orcs. Far to the west, too far even for the extraordinary eyesight of the elves to reach, was the Belquio Sea, to the north and south were valleys and flat lands where numerous villages and farms were settled, dominated by many noble fortresses of the high aristocracy.

The formidable outer walls of Belquecia would have the most powerful armies desist from attempting a siege against such a fortification, since the vast lands encircled by its walls included wells, orchards, and estates that guaranteed the city's self-sufficiency, practically indefinitely.

Right in the heart of the city stood the royal palace of Lorimar, the habitual residence of the Delfia royal family since immemorial times. The palace had four sturdy towers that rose to great heights, one in each of its corners, surrounded by beautiful gardens also enclosed by a solid wall that was interrupted, in the center of each side of the square that formed, by entrances strongly guarded by the brave royal guard.

The central palace consisted of five extensive floors with numerous rooms. From one of the most luxurious of them, Syriel, heir prince to the throne of Delfia looked through the window, heartbroken.

His mother, Clariel, descended from an ancient elf lineage, one of the few remaining, according to the wise historians. One of them was Baldrich, his mentor, who was also one of the few real elves still living in Delfia.

Syriel had cried only once in his twenty-three years of life, on the day of his mother's sad death after a long and painful illness that consumed her little by little, when he was only six years old.

Today, Syriel's eyes let tears escape again; tears of sorrow for seeing the decadence of the kingdom that his lineage had been reigning for so many centuries; tears of longing for an era of splendor where humans and elves lived in harmony and usually in peace, which he had only known

through books and stories by his master Baldrich; And tears of resignation because he was forced to marry Lirieth, the heiress of the Orc's King, whom he imagined as horrible as stinking.

Syriel repressed the last tear as he saw the long retinue escorting the luxurious carriage carrying his future hated political family approach his palace. He had dressed in his most elegant clothes at his father's request to receive them, and he did not know what oppressed him more, whether the majestic, though uncomfortable clothes, or the uneasiness produced by the unnatural union that awaited him and which anguished him deeply.

Syriel girded himself at the waist with his elfic sword, Almafiel, which had shed so much orc blood, to surrender to the submission of the Orc king. He knew that soon he would raise it against the dark ones and he began to wish that the magic protection with which the elves had endowed it would cease to function in the next battle so that he would end its sad life once and for all.

The sword, which was one of the few material inheritances he had preserved from his ancestors, possessed unparalleled beauty. The brightness of its steel had not diminished with the passage of time nor its light weight, which together with its extraordinary hardness, turned it into a manageable and deadly weapon. Its edge was ornamented with some engravings in a strange writing, which formed magical words in an ancient language that no one could ever tell Syriel what they meant, but which endowed the sword with certain magical powers that on more than one occasion had saved the life of its owner.

But the most striking thing about the sword was its grip, which ended in a dragon head masterfully sculpted and ornamented with a gold-colored precious stone that stood out from the rest of the elements of the weapon. It consisted of an elongated gem of considerable size that a human hand could barely cover when wielding it. Syriel was told that once the jewel shone with its own light, but now it did so only by reflecting the rays of the sun.

He walked down the stairs to the entrance courtyard, standing next to his father. His slender figure of almost six feet high contrasted with his father's medium height and rather chubby workmanship, and his mane, as blonde as it was long contradicted the king's scarcity of black hair as well. The only attribute that reflected Jorion's fatherhood in his first-born was the lively blue eyes they both had, the rest of the prince's features, undoubtedly semi-elfic had been inherited from the beautiful features of Clariel, his kind mother.

The royal chariot of the orcs stood in front of the reception retinue. The first to come down was Gulrath, who greeted his hosts politely. Shortly afterwards, Syriel saw, with dissimulated exasperation, how Gulrath was helping an orc woman of undetermined age, of considerable robustness and a rather unpleasant physiognomy to come down from the carriage, who gave him the most frightful smile Syriel had ever thought he could receive.

To the great relief of the royal suitor, Gulrath presented her as his wife Baldia. Suddenly, everyone looked at the prince as if expecting something from him, and Syriel remembered that the rules of courtesy bestowed upon him the great honor of helping the princess to descend from her chariot. However, he did not move until he felt a painful nudge from his own father, more with despair than with dissimulation.

He approached the door resignedly and extended his arm, they said almost inaudibly:

"Welcome, Your Highness."

A thin hand, with a pale, slightly greenish skin rested on his arm shyly, but firmly, and a warm beautiful voice mused:

"I thank you, Prince Syriel."

A silky white dress encircled a slender figure that dazzled everyone as she stepped out of the carriage. Her movements were firm, though not without grace.

Suddenly, the prince was surprised to see a face framed by lush black hair full of spirals, and a pretty smile adorning a prominent jaw with undeniable orc features, but not devoid of beauty in the

eyes of a human. Not even the slight greenish tone of the skin of the young orc, similar in age to that of Syriel, prevented the prince from being amazed at the exotic appeal of the princess.

But what really plunged Syriel into the most unexpected of surprises were luminous green eyes, almost at his own height, in which he read a lively intelligence and an exceptional purity of heart.

The prince had inherited from his elfic ancestors the ability to read the souls of creatures of any kind through their eyes. This quality had never failed him and had always helped him to surround himself with collaborators and lieutenants of remarkable courage, intelligence, and insurmountable loyalty. It had also helped him to reject countless candidates to become his wife, in whom he had read the ambition and lack of good feelings that, unfortunately, increasingly characterized the human race.

Instead, in Lirieth's eyes he read the most beautiful that he had ever observed in any creature, except for the little that he already remembered from the magical and kind gaze of his mother.

Syriel took a while to recover from his surprise and when he kissed the hand of the princess which seemed soft and warm to the touch, he also noticed a pleasant fragrance of fresh flowers and wild, but not as if some perfume had been applied, but as if the aroma came from her own essence. Finally, Syriel invited her to show her the gardens of the palace, to which she gladly agreed with ill-concealed shyness.

King Jorion welcomed his royal guests and invited them into his palace, bidding them farewell to the young fiancés.

It was the custom of the princes to give a white mare of the purest race to their future wife on the day of the announcement of the engagement. Therefore, Syriel took Lirieth to the knights to give her the most perfect white mare he had ever seen. He feared that the equine would get angry with her, for only the wildest horse breeds were able to withstand the presence of the orcs. However, when he showed her the animal, he immediately noticed that not only would it be able to withstand Lirieth, but that it could also make a good connection with her, perhaps even as it had itself initiated with its loyal Night, a beautiful thoroughbred, black as the jet.

"Lirieth, I give you this mare called Luna Llena, which comes from the purest and most regal races, as you can see from the commitment we are about to make. I hope you will accept it and that it will be to your liking," said Syriel, more with resigned formality than with enthusiasm.

But the princess's response once again filled the human being with astonishment.

"Prince Syriel, let us leave traditions and speak clearly. I know that you feel obliged to sacrifice the rest of your life for the good of your people and I respect and admire you for it. However, I would like you to know that the idea of the wedding came from me, I proposed this union to my father and not because he wants to marry me with a beautiful human prince with blonde mane and eyes like the celestial sky, but because if our peoples do not unite against the sombers, we will all end up dead or enslaved by them. My father intended to make a covenant with your king that would not be like a surrender, but would not cease to be one after all. Nevertheless, to fight effectively against the dark requires much more, at least some minimal ties of complicity and even true friendship. Something like this can only be obtained from our peoples by giving a good example and that can only be done by the two of us."

Leaving a few seconds for his interlocutor to assimilate her words, Lirieth continued:

"So, I propose a deal, an irrevocable pact, because the life of our peoples depends desperately on it. Let us solemnly agree to pretend that our union is the fruit of sincere love, only in this way will we be able to sow and propagate the seed of friendship and harmony between orcs and humans." proposed the daring princess, with passion and firm conviction.

After smiling almost imperceptibly, at the sight of the profoundly astonished countenance drawn on the prince's face, she added:

"I am aware of the aversion that orcs produce to humans, and I understand how difficult it may be for you to do your part. But I also know that you are a brave, kind and exemplary prince to your people, and I am convinced that you will be able to do so, at least in a minimally convincing way. I

cannot give you much time to think about it, this pact is only between us, no one else should know it. I only gave my father the idea, but he doesn't know anything about this deal and neither does my mother. To them, even more than to anyone else, we have to convince them that our love is sincere and real, so that they will be able to transmit with greater force to their peoples good feelings between the two races. We have to start playing our role as soon as possible, so you have to decide at this point whether you accept the agreement or whether you are going to continue your traditions with that face of slaughtered lamb. If you have a better idea to be able to face the dark ones with well-founded guarantees, I will listen to you with attention, if it is not so, either you accept my proposal or we will end up succumbing irremediably before our enemies." concluded the princess, with a sincere regret.

Syriel took a few seconds to recover from so much surprise at once. However, after meditating and weighing up the unique purpose of the impetuous princess, he finally managed to respond:

"This morning I almost wished to lose my life rather than to see my people subjected to the orcs, and at the same time to see myself forcibly united with an orc woman. But your noble and sincere words (and he thought that also what I had read in his beautiful eyes) make reborn a new hope in me. I accept your pact, Lirieth, and I swear to lay down my life before I betray this agreement. And don't worry, since I will know how to interpret my role with complete conviction for all who contemplates it."

And after admiring the beautiful smile that was drawn on the pleased face of the princess, he added:

"Therefore, I assume that you accept this saddle... "

"It's the most beautiful mare I've ever seen. I accept it with enchantment, Prince Syriel." replied Lirieth as he gave the animal an affectionate caress and a luminous smile to his fiancée. "I also have a gift for you..." said Lirieth to the prince.

And she stretched out her hand to him, where suddenly a golden chain appeared with a pendant similar in size to that of a human fist, carrying a very beautiful and perfect flat ruby.

"It is a precious amulet that will protect you from the black magic of the sombers." she said. "Besides, it gives you renewed strength when you think that all is lost. It's an ancient necklace, but I've enchanted it myself. I am a powerful sorceress, you had better know that as soon as possible if we are going to share our lives," confessed the princess without being able to avoid a tone of slight pride.

"Are you also a sorceress? Will you ever stop surprising me?" asked Syriel something more animated.

"Probably not. I'll always have something in store to keep surprising you," Lirieth joked.

Syriel took the amulet and hung it around his neck. He seemed to see that both the ruby and the stone of his sword shone in unison for an imperceptible moment. And almost without realizing it, he took the princess' hand and kissed her palm delicately, thanking her for the valuable gift.

"And this scar?" The prince wanted to know pointing to the palm of his fiancée's hand.

"I made it a long time ago, sharpening my sword," Lirieth lied.

The lie went unnoticed to the sixth sense of the prince, because the princess took care that her eyes were not within reach of his as she said it.

Syriel looked the princess in the eyes again.

"At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if you even wielded a better sword than I did," said Syriel in a clear tone of defiance.

"Don't doubt it, whenever you want, we can check it," laughed the princess.

Syriel took Lirieth by the waist and concluded:

"It is also our tradition that after the exchange of gifts between the new fiancés, they kiss each other."

And then he put his lips together with those of the princess, and this time was she who was surprised, thinking that the prince was beginning to play his part much better than she expected.

## The great Alliance

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

The two royal entourages sat at the majestic table in King Jorion's meeting room.

The human entourage was dejected and defeated and no one decided to open the conversation, not even King Khorion dared to do so.

It was King Gulrath who finally broke the silence:

"King Jorion, gentlemen, I am not here to demand unconditional submission from humans, even though I would be in a position to do so after the outcome of the last battle. We have already shed a lot of blood, no doubt uselessly, in a centuries-long struggle that no one can remember why it was started. Perhaps it was us, the orcs who started it, but now it was the human kind who did not want to conclude it and forced us to continue with it, disregarding our many proposals to make peace. It has taken a new, excessive and unnecessary bloodshed at the gates of this city to make you understand the meaninglessness of this useless war."

After a brief pause to reinforce the attention of the present, the orc king continued:

"A humiliating submission to the human kingdom would only stir up hatred and turn the open struggle into a conflict of guerrillas and resistance. And I, as king of the orcs, do not wish nor do I long to wipe off the face of the earth every vestige of human life, as many here present maintain. What I do long for is a solid and lasting peace to begin a coexistence with humans, such as elves and humans once shared together. What I do intend is to initiate an alliance between our kingdoms capable of making the sombers see that they either keep at bay in their kingdom or they will be crushed by an army united by trust and even by the friendship of men and orcs, of orcs and men. That is why I offer the hand of my beloved daughter to the brave prince of Delfia, as a symbol and example of a prosperous coalition of equals among our peoples. This union will be the seal of the alliance that we have to make without quarrels, without victorious ones, without defeated ones, without looking to the horrible past and looking to the hopeful future."

After these words and after meditating on them briefly, King Jorion stood up and said:

"King Gulrath, Queen Baldia, knights. If the words we have just heard came from another king, whether orc or human, I would not believe them, but coming from the king who has always amply demonstrated his honor, nobility and sincerity with facts by all acquaintances, I can only embrace a renewed hope and thank King Gulrath for the generosity and truth expressed in his words. And we gladly accept the alliance offered to us, and we are honored to welcome into our family the adorable Princess Lirieth, with the conviction that my son Syriel will also gladly accept her," approved the monarch, with more desire than conviction.

The concurrence exploded in a long and sonorous ovation of applause predominantly, although a silent one, but not negligible minority, above all of orcs and also of humans applauded more with reluctance and commitment than with enthusiasm. In any case, the war that seemed never-ending, between orcs and humans could finally be brought to an end.

King Jorion addressed his most trusted general.

"Hans, your majesties of Teberion and I will meet alone with the princes, let them know that we await them in this room."

The three kings now hoped to face a downcast and resigned prince and a princess who would face her fate with forced solemnity.

After a few minutes of waiting, they were very surprised to see Syriel and Lirieth coming in, holding hands with an air of complicity and with a glow in their eyes that reflected a strange, but sincere and loving happiness.

Lirieth hugged her parents.

"Syriel has given me a marvelous white mare of thoroughbred. It is beautiful!" she announced cheerful and excited.

And Syriel addressed his father.

"And Lirieth has given me this beautiful necklace. I beg you, father, to give me the ring," asked Syriel firmly.

"Are you sure?" asked his perplexed father.

"Completely. The kindness that I have seen in her heart makes her its creditor," said the prince.

King Jorion always carried the ring of his beloved wife and promised his son that when he found a sincere love like the one, he had with Clariel, he would give him the ring so that with it he would promise his future wife. When Jorion told Syriel the sacrifice he should make to facilitate the pact with the orcs, he did not think that the princess would receive the precious ring. However, he could not refuse to fulfill his promise after the conviction that denoted the words of his firstborn.

Jorion took out of his pocket a small box of luxurious appearance and gave it to his heir. Syriel took the box and went to the orc king:

"Your Majesty, I ask for your blessing to ask for the hand of your daughter Lirieth, whom I swear to love, to respect, to protect and to be faithful to her until death," declared the prince with both solemnity and enthusiasm.

"Prince Syriel, I am very pleased with your honorable request, and I bless you by agreeing to opt for the hand of my daughter Lirieth, if she so wishes," replied the pleased king, corresponding to the traditional terms initiated by the prince.

Uncovering the box, Syriel addressed the princess and, kneeling before her, he said while her the jewel:

"Princess Lirieth, this ring belonged to my beloved mother until the day of her sad death, it would be a great honor for you to accept it as a symbol and seal of our next union, in solemn marriage," he declared looking into the eyes of the princess which was surprised by the sincere and loving gaze of the young prince.

"Prince Syriel, I give you my hand and accept this jewel gladly. I hope to be worthy of it and to become your worthy wife," replied the princess with emotion, surprised, also surprised by the strange happiness that invaded her.

"You will be the worthiest of the princesses," concluded the prince joyfully.

"Well, if no one has a problem, we will celebrate the happy event at Gargaran, our palace of Teberion, at the next flower season," said King Gulrath.

"There's no problem for me," said Jorion.

"There are still three months before the flower season, I think it's so much time, but I will wait impatiently," said Lirieth as she enthusiastically admired the ring around the finger of her left hand.

"Lunch must be ready now, and perhaps we can improvise a dance to celebrate the engagement," proposed King Jorion seeing that everything was unfolding with greater joy than expected.

Kings and princes left the room in search of the palace's dining room.



The banquet went by without major setbacks, albeit with the logical misgivings between man and orcs, but without any significant altercation.

While Syriel and Lirieth began the improvised dance, after the sumptuous lunch, she addressed her fiancé:

"Syriel, you've been great," the princess addressed him informally, "I think we've convinced them; the detail of the ring has been very moving and it's really beautiful. If someday you want it back, tell me and I'll give it back to you," she proposed.

"Thank you, Lirieth, I told you I could do it without any problems. As for the ring, I'm grateful, but as long as we're together I'll have it too, so don't worry about it. It also has magical power," replied the prince corresponding to the name of his fiancée.

"Really? I detect nothing magical in it. What is that power?" asked the princess.

"It's linked to this one," said Syriel showing her a similar ring on his finger. "As long as we wear them, each of us will know where and how the other is when we are separated."

"How?" Lirieth asked.

"You have to concentrate on the ring, both of them will shine and heat up slightly and we will both perceive where the carrier of the other ring is and his state of mind," said the prince.

"It is curious, I do not perceive any magic..." replied Lirieth concentrated on them.

"My mother gave me mine before she got sick so I could never get lost. I have never had to enlarge the ring; it has grown along with my finger. She also told me that the powers they had come from an ancient elf magic of great power. Perhaps that's why you won't be able to detect it," Syriel clarified.

The entrance into the palace of a high hooded and a médium rogue interrupted the princely conversation.

The hooded man, nearly six feet tall, uncovered a head with unmistakable elf features: pointy, hairless ears in the human area of the beard, and a long black hair that fell straight no further than the shoulders. In his hand he carried an ebony staff, adorned with strange but beautiful filigrees sculpted from the wood itself.

The rogue, on the other hand, was about five feet tall, his ears were also pointed, but in a less pronounced way than in elves. As was customary among those of his race, he had a tangled and curly hair tending to blond and beady brown eyes of vivacious intelligence to which not a single detail escaped.

"Baldrich," shouted the prince enthusiastically. "He's my teacher, I haven't seen him in almost a year. Come and meet him," he invited his fiancée.

After a warm embrace, the prince took Lirieth by the hand and said:

"Baldrich, this is my fiancée, Princess Lirieth."

Baldrich kissed the princess's hand with forced courtesy and said, while staring at the young woman:

"At your service, Your Highness. Please, excuse my apparition by surprise, but I never thought I would see my prince promised with an orc woman, nor that an orc woman could be so beautiful." Baldrich introduced himself with a certain coldness disguised as bad concealed kindness.

"It is a pleasure for me to meet the master who has undoubtedly taught my future husband so well," replied the princess courteously but with some audacity. As an invitation to an initial truce, she offered no resistance to the elf's mental exploration, although she did not have a specific area of her mind.

"I also present to you my loyal médium helper, Bellamir," Baldrich exposed.

Bellamir bowed and the princes greeted him back. The mediam had the sensation of having seen the princess before, but did not remember where or in which circumstances.

After a few minutes of greetings and inconsequential comments, Baldrich announced with concern and denoting a serious urgency:

"Syriel, I'm afraid I'm the bearer of bad news, I must immediately notify your parents of a worrying information. Princess, would you be so kind as to assemble the kings? Syriel and I will go immediately.

Lirieth agreed at once, with a semblance of deep concern.

As Baldrich and Syriel watched her walk away, Syriel asked his master:

"What do you think of her?"

"I have never seen such a pure soul in an orc... Nor in most men and even some elves," replied the elf sincerely.

"Yes, neither do I. She's an admirable woman, and incredibly beautiful being an orc, too," replied the prince.

"Syriel! You're really in love with her, I notice; and she may be worthy of the ring I've seen shining on her finger. But be careful, I've also seen an area on her finger that I haven't been able to access and that worries me, only someone with great power can do something like that. I would not want to attend your funeral instead of your wedding," replied Baldrich, afflicted.

"Baldrich! You've always hated orcs without measure, and that can cloud your judgment. I will be alert, although I cannot doubt the purity of Lirieth, I have not seen any dark area," complained the prince.

"My mental sight is much sharper than yours, young man, and I have not spoken of any dark area, but of one that I have not been able to explore because your precious princess has not allowed me access and that can only be done by someone with an important mastery of magic and who wants to hide something. I warn you for your own good," Baldrich scolded him fondly.

"Sorry, Baldrich. I'll be careful... I promise. Lirieth has already confessed to me that she is an excellent sorceress and has given me this amulet enchanted by her. She told me that she would protect me from the magic of the sombers and give me new strength when I needed it," said Syriel, trying to repress his enthusiasm to hide him from the elf, albeit without success.

"If I have been given/she has given (me) something like this, it can't be bad, can it?" said the prince in a reproachful tone.

"I'm telling you again, I didn't say she was bad, just be careful because she might hide something. However, I admit, I recognize that I gave you this gift, it shows at least that the orc princess doesn't wish you any harm," Baldrich conceded.

And among many hesitations and shyness, Syriel finally dared to ask:

"Have you seen if she... is... in love...as well?"

"Even if I had seen it, my dear prince," the elf interrupted his pupil amusedly, "I would never reveal such information about a lady. You'll have to find out for yourself, maybe it's in that hidden area."



Once kings and princes had been reunited with Baldrich, Baldrich communicated to them:

"Majesties, Highnesses, excuse my rude irruption on this day of celebration, but when I explain the reasons you will understand that the seriousness of the information, I carry justifies my boldness excessively". He looked at all the attendants, taking a fresh breath, to capture the full attention of his regal listeners. "By means of informants of my absolute confidence, it has come to my ears that the dark ones are preparing a very well-armed army. This army would still not represent much of a threat to the Alliance that has been agreed upon today. But I have also been informed that the sombers intend to undertake an expedition to the Badlands to recruit dragons or other creatures into their troops. If only they could recruit a few dragons, the dark ones would be a serious threat to all of Frienia. And while it is very difficult to control them, Nigriel and her daughter Elenir who has become a powerful sorceress and perhaps more perverse than her own father, might well be able to do so."

After a significant silence, Gulrath gestured:

"Well, we'll have to stop them and even take the lead in trying to recruit any ally that could help us."

And while it is very difficult to master them, Nigriel and her daughter Elenir, who has become a powerful sorceress and perhaps more perverse than her own father, might well be able to do so.

After a significant silence, Gulrath gestured:

"Well, we'll have to stop them and even take the lead in trying to recruit any ally that might be useful to us," proposed the Orc king with deep concern.

"A group of men should go along with a group of orcs to begin to show our alliance, I will command the group of humans," proposed Syriel with determination.

"And I will command the group of orcs," Lirieth said with enthusiasm and fierce assurance.

"You have no experience in battle, it will be very dangerous for you," denied Gulrath forcefully.

"I will rely on Syriel's experience. I may be necessary when it comes to mastering dragons, I think I know how to do it, but I hope to have Baldrich's teachings along the way, if he accepts me as a pupil..." proposed Lirieth.

"It would be an honor for me to exchange my humble knowledge with those of Her Highness regarding the domination of dragons," Baldrich pleased conceded. "But I'm afraid I won't be able to teach much, though I know a magician who could help us with that."

"Well, let's get going. If no one has a better plan, we will leave in three days, we will prepare an expedition of men and orcs and we will go to the Slanted Mountains of the dwarves to help us access the Badlands through the Peaks Pass," proposed Syriel. "Baldrich, where is this magician?"

"The White Magician calls himself, the last time I heard of him he was in Belvichu, almost halfway to the Slanted Mountains," replied the elf.

The plan to intercept the somber's expedition was outlined in a few minutes and accepted by all. In addition to recruiting creatures from the Badlands who might be useful for the upcoming battle against the dark ones more and more imminently, friendly relations between humans and orcs would also begin to develop.



Turgarok hated humans with an energy and a force he could hardly control. His father, King Gulrath's greatest general and best friend, with whom he had always encouraged the end of the war and the alliance with humans, had died at the hands of men. Some said that the arrow that killed him was thrown by the hand of Prince Syriel, and also in a treacherous and cowardly way: from behind and without any honor. Turgarok most wished to end the life of the human prince, in the event that he confessed to him that, in effect, he has been the one who ended the life of his father.

From a good height, he gazed at the tiny castle of Lorimar, which increased in size as the enormous hawk on which he was riding approached his destination, practically in a dive. The falcon, in spite of its colossal size, which would allow it to carry two enormous orcs on its back without any problems was capable of boarding a castle without anyone detecting it, since it could fly in absolute silence and avoid, with its extraordinary sense of smell, all the sentinels or any creature that could discover it.

Quick Beak, the lord of the hawks and mount of Turgarok, the lord of the birds came as close as possible to the castle to allow the rider to jump over a balcony while it followed the flight to hide until its master needed it again.

The orc wizard snuck into the balcony room unseen and advanced stealthily, his hand resting on the grip of his dagger, towards the bed.

But a voice behind him said:

"I've been smelling you for a while."

"For some reason you are the king of the orcs, my lord," answered the troubled Turgarok as he turned and melted in an effusive embrace with his sovereign.

Gulrath promised his best friend, Turgarok's father, that he would look after the boy as if he were his own son if he were ever missing, and so he did: he looked after and loved Turgarok as if it were his own blood.

Initially, Gulrath had desired his protégé to continue his father's military career by one day becoming his most valued general. But as a child he showed an innate ability for sorcery, especially when it came to the domination of beasts.

But now, turned Turgarok into the greatest orc sorcerer, as well as lord and dominator of all birds, he felt very proud and fortunate to have at his disposal his countless and fabulous powers, which made him commission extremely useful missions that no other orc would have been able to carry out even with the largest army.

"Turgarok, my son," Gulrath said to his adopted son, "we have crystallized an alliance with humans that will be sealed with the marriage of your sister Lirieth to Prince Syriel. I know you will not approve of this alliance; however, I hope that at my request and in memory of Gariath, your father, you will abide by it and defend it with the same honor that you have always shown. And believe me son, this alliance is convenient for us, since now the enemy is not the humans, but the dark ones, who threaten us all and what they want most would be to see us continue weakening in the useless war that we have just concluded with this agreement."

"My Lord, I will not deny my reluctance to this alliance, but if this is your will, you can be sure that I will give my life if necessary, to abide by and defend it," replied the wizard.

"I know that it will be so and that you will fulfill with honor the mission that I am going to entrust to you, making both me and the memory of your father proud of your actions," added the king.

"Your Majesty, before you entrust me with the mission, I wish to inform you that the sombers have sent a detachment commanded by Princess Elenir to recruit dragons from the Badlands to their cause," warned Turgarok.

"I know, my son, that's what it's all about. The new alliance has agreed to send an orc and human detachment commanded jointly by Prince Syriel and your sister for the same purpose. Your mission will be to follow them, protect them and help them in the sombers so that nothing happens to them and they achieve their purpose," requested Gulrath.

"Ungrateful and difficult mission you entrust to me, father, but if that is your will, as long as I have some life left, I will do everything necessary to enforce it," promised the orc wizard.

"Believe me, son, the day will come when you will understand the why of this covenant and of your sister's union with the human prince. I am convinced that he is a man of honor and is not worthy of being accused of ending your father's life behind his back and in a cowardly manner. Besides, everyone has been surprised by your sister and the prince showing an early and sincere affection for each other. And you know that your sister is as powerful a sorceress as you are and that she would have no affection for anyone mean and dishonorable. I am going to ask just one more thing of you: do not judge Syriel by the gossip, but by his actions, and if in the end the rumor is true that he murdered your father with dishonor, I will not be the one to oppose a deserved punishment for it," said the king.

"You know the affection that I profess to my sister and if she considers to Syriel worthy of her, so will I also consider until proven otherwise. If necessary, I will help and defend her with my own life if necessary, as you ask me," said the wizard.

"Son, I know you will. Go with my blessing and my best wishes that you may accomplish your task without setbacks and with complete success. Tomorrow we will return to Teberion. Send me messenger birds to keep me informed," concluded the monarch.

After dedicating a sincere bow to his adoptive father, Turgarok jumped off the balcony and fell on the back of his hawk's saddle. They walked away as quietly as they had come, cutting the wind at great speed.

## **Towards the Badlands**

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

Three days after the signing of the alliance between men and orcs, a small army left Belquecia. The troop was formed by one hundred human warriors and as many orcs on foot, fifty human lancers and the same number of orcs on horseback, Baldrich and Bellamir, the orc generals Smolion and Gungaroth, Syriel and his first lieutenant Hans and Princess Lirieth as captain of the expedition.

During the first days of the march, although there were no serious altercations between men and orcs, both groups continued to look at each other with remarkable suspicion. To encourage a little harmony and companionship, on the third night of camping it occurred to Princess Lirieth that her two generals, Smolion and Gungaroth could play against Hans and Syriel in a dice game very popular among soldiers. Despite the fact that the two orc generals were not very good at living with humans, they obeyed their princess and were friendly with the two human leaders, even when they ended up losing.

Several initiatives of this nature, together with the continuous walks and shows of affection that the prince and the princess strived to constantly demonstrate, as well as the kindness that one and the other yielded, both to men and to orcs, caused the suspicions, and warriors of the two races began to interact with each other and establish frail links of friendship, or at least camaraderie.

The night before the arrival in Belvichu, men and orcs already interacted, played, drank, laughed and fought almost without distinction of race. Curiously, it was the orc generals who still showed the greatest hostility towards humans, although they were very careful not to transgress the princess's indications.

The next day they arrived safely in Belvichu, one of the oldest walled cities in Delfia and the most important in the kingdom after Belquecia.

In Belquecia the elves had always predominated, until the great elfic exodus that occurred several hundred years ago, after which it was the humans and some semielfhied lineages that remained in the capital.

On the other hand, Belvichu had always been a fief of clear human predominance, but in continuous position of alliance and vassalage with Belquecia.

Lainos, the present Lord of Belvichu, received the princes and their entourage with respect and correctness, forcing himself to be friendly with the new allies and wishing the engaged couple happiness and long life. while entertaining everyone with a succulent feast.

During the two days that the princes stayed in Belvichu, they asked about the White Magician and the only thing they could make clear was that he had been gone to the Badlands for several months and who was never seen again.

The people of Belvichu shuddered and fled from the orcs when they saw them; on the contrary, the young couple of princes caused much expectation. In addition, in order to promote the coexistence with the new allies, they went out for a walk through the city, being followed with curiosity by the inhabitants and, especially by the children. The beauty of the orc princess and the happy relationship she manifested with the prince made the fearful citizens see them with eyes more favorable to the feared orcs.

As the princes passed through one of the poorest neighborhoods, they heard cries in a house accompanied by some heartbroken cries. Princess Lirieth became interested in what was going on and they told her that there was a very sick child, barely a year old, with high fevers and great coughs, who seemed about to die.

The princes entered the house of the wretched family and, faced with the fear and apprehension of the child's parents and relatives, saw how the princess approached to examine the baby. Then she placed her hand on the child's pale and almost meager face and uttered some strange words.

A few seconds later, it began to turn the child's face a healthy color while recovering an almost normal breathing rhythm. After the mother approached him and noticed that the fever had disappeared, that the child's slow and noisy breathing had become healthy and that, in addition, a shy smile was appearing on the child's countenance, she threw herself to the princess's knees crying with joy and thanking her for her miraculous intervention.

The princess lifted the mother and consoled her with a loving embrace, saying goodbye to the child with an affectionate kiss on the forehead.

Relatives and neighbors cheered the princess goodbye and the news of the miraculous healing spread through the city at enormous speed, getting humans to begin to feel sympathy and a sincere affection for the princess orc.



At the same time, several weeks' drive from Belvichu was Argoth Castle, the royal residence of the sombers, nestled in the walled city of Angorian, the main capital of the kingdom of Barvian. The city was located almost in the center of the kingdom, protected to the west by the Black Mountain Range, to the east by the wild Kabal Sea, to the south by the Arien Lake and to the north by the vast, almost desert Ardennes Valley.

Argoth Castle was built by the ancient Elves with white moeth rocks, considered the heaviest and most resistant material ever known. However, with the passage of time, it was not known whether by the mere age of the mineral or by the darkness of those who had already been working within its walls for many centuries, the rocks had blackened to such an extent that they had turned Argoth Castle into the most intense black construction known in all of Frienia.

Through one of the many long corridors of the castle, a haughty princess, drawing a malicious smile, moved forward with haste and determination.

Elenir came impetuously and triumphantly into the throne room presided over by her father and, after directing a theatrical bow to him informed with an air of sufficiency and satisfaction:

"Father, the fish has taken the bait. Just today, two hundred warriors, one hundred lancers, two orc generals, the prince, his lieutenant and our beloved princess, accompanied by the magician Baldrich, half of them are men and the other one half are orcs. They go to the Slanted Mountains to cross the Peaks Pass. Our reception committee is already on its way to give them the best of welcomes."

"Great, wonderful, now you can go and recruit dragons. And make sure the princes and Baldrich are captured alive. You are allowed to kill the rest of them," ordered Nigriel.

"As you command, father, so shall it be," accepted the dark princess, grinning pleased.

In the morning, a small army of about six hundred sombers, including warriors, settlers and necromancers, departed from Angorian for the massive Dragons' Mountain.



Leaving Belvichu, faced with the impossibility of finding the White Magician, Lirieth asked Baldrich to teach him everything he knew about dragons and how to dominate them. That's why every day they moved away from the expedition, prudently, to carry out the lessons.

Lirieth had reached an unusual level of sorcery in almost every facet, except in the domination of creatures, a path she had rarely explored, some of them out of mere curiosity with her brother Turgarok, who was a master of such an art.

When Baldrich noticed the princess's level of beast domination, he reproached her with propriety and respect:

"Excuse me, Your Highness, but I remember hearing you say that you thought you knew how to perform dragon domination and, from what I see, that's a long way from reality."

"You are right, Master Baldrich, it was a white lie to reassure my parents and not to oppose my accompanying my fiancé. I was hoping you could teach me all about it," the princess defended herself, smiling faintly.

"Unfortunately, my knowledge of creature domination reaches only médium species, at most, and of little intelligence. To subdue dragons, one must have an extraordinary knowledge and experience in this ability. I would not be a good teacher for such a task, yet I will begin your instruction with the little that I know, so that I will advance and make my way to the White Magician, if we ever come across him," replied the elf.

"I thank you. If it's all right with you, we'll start the classes right now," asked Lirieth.

In these classes Baldrich had the opportunity to get to know the impressive power of the princess as a sorceress and tried, unsuccessfully and repeatedly, to explore her mental area which he could not access, so insistently that one day the princess faced him.

"Master Baldrich, I thank you very much for the teachings that you offer me, although not to the point of allowing you to enter the area of my deepest secrets, which I do not allow to invade anyone," warned the princess correctly, but also firmly.

"Forgive my audacity, but I must carry out all the explorations I consider necessary to ensure the protection of my prince and an inaccessible area of his future wife does not guarantee me too much security," explained the elf, with a certain boldness.

"Would it be enough if, under a magic oath, I was to declare to you that my fiancé has nothing to fear from me?" the princess asked him.

"That would not allay all my concerns, for I have seen skillful sorcerers mock the truth with magical oaths, and as far as I have been able to observe Your Highness has attained a degree of mastery with magic capable of dealing with such arts," Baldrich declared.

"You don't approve of me, do you? You don't think me worthy of your prince? Because I'm from the orc race," said the princess in a reproachful tone.

"I admire and approve of you, and I consider you to be the worthiest of the suitors who have been shuffled to the present day. However, I also believe that you hide something, I don't know if good or bad, but you hide it and that worries me," replied the magician.

"Believe me or not, I give you my word that, in what is hidden, nothing bad awaits Syriel, my word will have to suffice for you," confessed Lirieth.

"Your words seem sincere, but I don't know whether because they are or because you make them look like," answered the magician.

"Then you will have to accept the shadow of that doubt as your companion," concluded the princess, aching and harshly.

Neither of the two said anything to Syriel about their differences, and despite them Lirieth and Baldrich continued with their lessons for the next few days, in which the princess succeeded in dominating several lizards and even a snake of respectable size, just on the day they began to glimpse the Slanted Mountains far away on the horizon.



A short distance away, but just at that very moment, Syriel scanned the surroundings with concern, as though he had a strange presence watching them from a distance, but he only saw a crow flying from a distant mound and, although he had no certainty, the prince sensed that the bird had something to do with the restlessness that gripped it. He watched the black bird until it was lost in the celestial immensity of the sky.

Looking towards the Slanted Mountains, he also felt a clear unease, as if he sensed that in Karbandur, the real city of dwarves in the Slanted Mountains, some unexpected surprise awaited them, and not exactly pleasant.



Turgarok glimpsed the sky, hoping to find a black spot that was growing little by little. His little friend would have to be back by now, it had left several hours ago and should not be long gone.

At last, he saw a tiny dot on the celestial horizon approaching at great speed.

Turgarok raised his arm, accepting into it a black raven from Karbandur. He received with clear signs of concern the information given to him by his feathery spy, which augured serious problems for princes in the dwarf kingdom.

A few minutes later, the raven moved away carrying a missive in the direction of Urkaroth.



During the following three days, the march of the alliance took place at a good pace and without major incidents. They left the White Mountains behind and began the last stretch of the journey to the dwarfs' main city: Karbandur.

Karbandur was the largest and most majestic of the numerous fortresses, carved under the rocks of the Slanted Mountains, which stretched for about two thousand kilometers. Dwarves carved the rock into the mountains and at various levels both up and down. Karbandur had more than twenty

underground levels and as many above the surface, with thousands of ranches in each level that turned it into a real labyrinth for those who did not know it thoroughly. Torches were held by all the walls and from the very high ceilings hung large and numerous oil lamps that more than illuminated the ample stances gained from the rock. The walls were not only smooth, but also, along with the floor, the countless columns and even the ceilings were adorned with figures, statues, motifs of the dwarf culture and phrases and quotations in their complex, but at the same time beautiful writing, all sculpted on the rock of the mountain itself, although in the right measure, without being overloaded.

Karbandur was, undoubtedly, one of the wonders of all Frienia in terms of constructions. Anyone who contemplated it was amazed by the size, the labors and the architectural beauty that the singular city gave off on all sides.

Leaving the White Mountains behind, all that remained was to cross the Forge River Bridge, the end of which, on the other side would leave the small army almost at the very gates of the majestic dwarf city.

## The dwarves' hospitality

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

At dusk on the tenth day of the procession, when the squadron of men and orcs was approaching the gates of Karbandur, Ankar, the very king and lord of the dwarves, came out to meet them, with a substantial escort of armed warriors who tripled the number of new arrivals.

When Syriel and Lirieth stood right in front of Ankar, the King of the dwarves told them:

"Welcome to Prince Syriel and all humans, but not to the unclean beasts that accompany them."

Before any dwarf could react, Syriel unsheathed his sword with superhuman speed and held it threateningly to the dwarf monarch's neck. It was a moment of extreme tension, the dwarves targeted orcs and humans with their crossbows and axes and, in response, humans and orcs drew their swords and weapons.

Ankar, with a furtive drop of sweat slipping down his cheek, raised his hand slowly, giving orders to lower the weapons. While the dwarves obeyed, Syriel faced the dwarf king.

"Your prince comes to ask for shelter, food and escort through the Peaks Pass and does not come with filthy beasts but with allies, friends and a future wife. If you do not willingly offer us what we need, it will be taken by force, and if you do not immediately retract your infamous words, do not welcome all my companions, and do not appropriately pay homage to my fiancée, your head will roll at your feet before you take the next breath. I never wield my sword without staining it with blood, but being you, I will accept your apologies if you are diligent," threatened Syriel without hesitation and with a determination that brought the daring sovereign to his knees and left him almost breathless.

Ankar swallowed saliva loudly and, in the midst of copious sweat, apologized.

"Forgive my haste and be welcome, especially the lady and fiancée of our prince," he hastened to say, repressing the rage.

Syriel accepted the apology, sheathing the sword with slowness.

"Another precipitation like that will cost you your life," he said. "Take care that it does not happen again in the future. Now, the enemy are the sombers and the orcs are our brothers," warned the prince with less hostility, but with the same firmness.

"Welcome, all of you," repeated the dwarf, lowering his head.

"We'll have dinner, we'll make night and early tomorrow we'll leave for Peaks Pass. Fifty dwarves will escort us to the exit to the Badlands," ordered the prince coldly.

"This is how it will be done, my prince. We have prepared a reception bench for you," masked Ankar, with a forced kindness.

Orcs and men entered Karbandur. Meanwhile, Baldrich passed by Syriel.

"Let us watch our backs, a proud dwarf like Ankar neither forgives nor forgives such a humiliation," warned the elf in a whisper, with worried conviction.

Smolion and Gungaroth walked beside Ankar looking at him with manifest hostility and, although they found it difficult to recognize him, they began to feel sympathy and admiration for Syriel.

In the main hall of the fortress was prepared a sumptuous banquet with all sorts of delicacies, as well as wines and beers brought from the most famous origins. Dwarves, men and orcs sat around the tables in an atmosphere of palpable tension. Syriel and Lirieth were placed right next to Ankar and only when the dwarf began to eat and drink, Syriel also began to do so, though taking care that they were from the same sources of food and the same pitchers of drink. But, little by little, the food and especially the wines and beers gave way to laughter, chants and talks to replace the initial tension.

Syriel found Garin, Ankar's son, with whom he had got on very well, and asked his father about him.

"I don't see your son. Isn't he in Karbandur?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say no. He is far from here; I saw his uncle and his cousins in Kandar. He will be very sorry not to have been here to see you," apologized Ankar.

"I'm sorry too," added the prince.

Ankar avoided putting his eyes within Syriel's reach as he replied, but he couldn't avoid Baldrich's, who stared at him for a while with a semblance of deep concern.

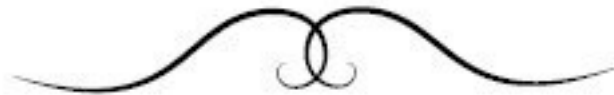
After a moment, when the copious food and drink was beginning to run out, Syriel looked at his host.

"I would appreciate it if you could indicate our rooms to rest, we have been travelling for many days and tomorrow we'll have to continue it," asked the prince with courtesy, although without ceasing to show an imperative tone.

"We have prepared comfortable beds for everyone, I will send them to accompany you," replied the dwarf without too much enthusiasm.

They accompanied them to a spacious room, very well-conditioned, with enough beds for all the warriors, as well as several individual rooms for the highest rank entourage. The princess' room was arranged in detail.

However, Syriel ordered guard duty, as he had not just trusted Ankar and sensed that something was not right, as did Baldrich, who was convinced that something would happen during the night.



Bellamir left the room where her companions were accommodated in their beds. Baldrich had asked him to take a look around and, if possible, to search the dungeons for a certain Garin, release him and bring him before him without being discovered by the dwarves.

The médium man dredged the path made shortly before, supposing that the dungeons would be at the underground levels. He soon found a ladder and descended. Luckily, no one came across him, as there was no possibility of hiding or going unnoticed on the staircase.

The mediam man continued descending until he reached a level where he began to hear voices.

"I don't like it at all: Garin rebels against his father, Ankar confronts the humans, the prince stopping over here while his host's son is locked up for being loyal to him, before his own father... This won't end up well....

He peered out stealthily and saw several corridors with dungeon doors and two dwarves turning their backs on some of those runners as they played a game in which they rolled something similar to dice.

The rogue snuck down the first corridor and looked for Garin, calling him with just a whisper, until he heard a voice.

"I'm Garin. Who's going?" the voice whispered, hopeful.

"Your Highness, I have come with Prince Syriel, I am going to free you and bring you before him," replied the mediam fellow with relief.

"Hurry, there's no time to lose..." said the captive prince.

In just a few seconds, using his set of picklocks, the skillful rascal opened the door with barely an imperceptible click.

"I beg you to follow me quietly, Your Highness," Bellamir asked to the dwarf prince.

Shortly afterwards, two silent sombers climbed up the narrow and gloomy staircases.



Baldrich woke up the prince.

“Wake up Syriel! We have a visitor. It's only three hours till dawn and we need a plan.”

When the prince opened his eyes, besides seeing Baldrich and Bellamir, he also recognized his friend Garin.

“Garin! Weren't you in Kandar?” Syriel burst with joy.

“No, he was locked in the dungeons with those who are still loyal to you. My father has prepared an enclosure for you with the dark ones in the Peaks Pass. Bellamir has rescued me, but all my dwarves are missing,” said Garin regretfully.

“I suspected something strange and I sent Bellamir to take a look. He found Garin locked up, freed him and brought him here,” Baldrich explained.

“The situation is very delicate, let's wake up the princess and her generals,” ordered Syriel.

Once all gathered and after bringing up to date to the newcomers, Syriel asked:

“Garin, how many dwarfs are locked up?”

“One thousand and five hundred,” replied Garin.

“How many dwarfs does your father have in Karbandur?” asked the human prince.

“More than ten thousand, but a thousand really faithful. The rest will follow my father or me, depending on who holds the power,” blessed Garin.

“How many dark men are preparing the ambush?” asked Syriel.

“About five hundred, but they're not a problem. I know where they are and we can catch them by surprise. I'm more worried about my father,” he declared with sincere bitterness.

“We can overcome him before he wakes up. Bellamir, will you be able to free Garin's companions?” the prince wanted to know.

“Of course,” answered the rogue.

“Well then, let's go, we'll free the dwarves, provide them with weapons, and subdue Ankar and his henchmen while they sleep,” concluded Syriel.

But when he left his room, he found a panorama quite different from what he had expected: he found that all the men and orcs had been bound and gagged by numerous dwarves who wielded their threatening axes. A smiling Ankar sneered at him:

“Did you sleep well, my prince? And you, dirty orc princess?”

“You are going to pay this very dearly, Ankar, don't doubt it,” threatened Syriel.

“Really? Well, I don't think so. Arrest them and return my treacherous son to his dungeon!” ordered Ankar.

As the dwarves tied Syriel and his companions, only Baldrich noticed that Bellamir was no longer with them just a second before they put an antimagic hood on him, just like Lirieth, and he smiled inwardly. With these hoods, of which the sombers were masters at making them, not even the most powerful sorcerer could make the slightest magic, since they completely annulled all the magical skills of the one who wore it.

“Why, Ankar? My father has always treated you with respect and benevolence,” Syriel asked.

“Haven't you guessed it yet? I hate orcs, I cannot bear their repugnant pestilence. I could not believe that you were allied with them and, above all, that you were promising one of their beasts,” replied Ankar with restrained rage.

“You will not get away with it, my father and Gulrath will ask you for explanations,” said the prince.

"I've got it all figured out, my prince. I will say that the Peaks Pass was taken by the dark ones and that you all fell fighting bravely. Now, be so kind as to accompany me to the gates of the pass," Ankar grinned.

They were forced to climb a wide staircase for almost three hours. Although they tied them up in front, the climb was expensive for the prisoners, who stumbled and fell with some assiduity. There was another access from below without stairs for wagons and caravans, which they did not use to better control the prisoners.

Eventually, they reached the high and sturdy doors that Ankar ordered to open. With great din, they began to open and an incredible landscape appeared before their eyes. There was a solid path made of rock and wood that stretched to the end of the horizon, flanked by various mountain peaks of different sizes and sometimes tunneled through the larger mountains that hindered it. Shreds of thick clouds adorned the path and the peaks of the mountains, although without covering too much the panoramic view. To the first and main road of the Peaks Pass were joined more stretches that linked the main cities and dwarf settlements throughout the Slanted Mountains. But by express order of Ankar, that day all the derivations remained with their closed doors that rose big and solid, so that one could only pass through the main pass that united Karbandur with the Badlands.

Syriel thought that it was a pity to contemplate this marvelous spectacle being tied, betrayed and defeated; and he also lamented that Lirieth was not able to see the landscape next to him, since the antimagic hood prevented him from doing so. With rage, but without losing his composure, he went to Ankar.

"What do you have in mind for us, you fucking traitor?" asked Syriel bravely.

"Well, nothing less than what his highness requested me: The Peaks Pass," replied Ankar with derision and haughtiness. "Later on, you will find a somber retinue that will take care of you, but so that you don't waste time going to meet them, I will introduce you to Kasariviel, who will follow you slowly but relentlessly. If I were you, I would not stop to try to free from the bonds," added Ankar amusedly.

"Kasariviel?" Syriel interrogated.

"It is a giant serpent that came from the Badlands. Since we feed him well, he stays with us and watches over this door. It is a precious creature which is more than three hundred feet high and its smallest tusk surpasses your height. It's adorable, you'll see," replied the dwarf, with a good dose of mockery. "Throw them all out," ordered Ankar.

The dwarves, aided by their axes and spears, pushed and drove the whole group of men and orcs into the pass. Only Bellamir was missing, although only Baldrich was aware of his absence.

As the doors closed, the last thing they saw was Ankar laughing out loud, but they didn't have much time to lament or curse him, since above the doors, a huge forked tongue appeared followed by a menacing serpent's head showing long, very sharp fangs. They all ran along the solid path by which the serpent would undoubtedly chase them.

Syriel searched for Lirieth and took as best he could a piece of his robe, instructing it to follow him with care not to fall. He also searched for Baldrich, but he had overtaken him.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be able to follow your steps," said the magician.

Running handcuffed, some of the orc and human warriors fell to the ground and were hit by the hungry ophidian. This gave the others time to gain some distance from the snake. Syriel tried to find something that would help him break his ties, but the rocks on the road were very well carved with rounded-shape and he had no choice but to keep running.

The snake wasn't going too fast, but it didn't allow to stop those who escaped from it, catching the ones who fell and didn't have time to get up again.

The persecution lasted for a while for which the pursued ones became eternal. Perhaps it was four or five hours, although it gave them the impression that they had been harassed for more than a day by the long monster.

Syriel saw in the distance as the squadron of the sombers that awaited them began to emerge and he desperately searched for something that could help him to free himself from the bonds. They couldn't stop and go on either. Lirieth guessed their restlessness.

"What's the matter," he asked. "Shall we approach the sombers? Try to find something to free yourself, you have to take off my hood. Do it, do it whatever it takes, but do it," the princess begged afflicted.

Syriel explored around him, though he saw nothing that could help. Suddenly he watched from the sky as a small but fast falcon descended straight towards him. As it approached, he saw that he was carrying an object in his beak and was surprised to see that it was dropping a dagger at his feet, taking flight again.

Syriel did not hesitate for a moment to pounce on the dagger and begin to rub its ties with its sharp steel.

Men and orcs ran in front of them, Baldrich had also stayed with the princes, they hoped to be able to do something once the time had come.

There was not much time left and in a few seconds the snake would reach them. Syriel rubbed his frenzied ligatures against the dagger, although the rope was very hard and difficult to tear apart.

Finally, he managed to get rid of the ties when the proud snake was only a few yards away. With desperation, the prince ran towards Lirieth to remove the hood, which was attached to her neck with a strap. With his fingers still half numb from the ties, it took Syriel more than a little while to remove the hood from the princess's head, just in time to be able to dodge the first serrated of the enormous reptile's frightening jaws.

With the sudden movement, Syriel had the ruby necklace detached from the chest and the snake stood still for a few instants, watching the red stone as if fascinated by it, as if the ophidian had seen it before.

Syriel and Lirieth took advantage of the small truce without wasting time.

"The rope, take the rope off me," Lirieth implored while putting the hands as far apart as possible in front of the prince.

Syriel grabbed the dagger and, with a precise stroke, cut the ropes with little harm to the discouraged princess, and just as the snake showed that it had lost interest in the stone and was about to attack them again, Lirieth moved her arms slowly and rhythmically from side to side as she spoke strange words with sweetness, but with determination.

Kasariviel stood surprisingly still staring at the princess and as Syriel released Baldrich, Lirieth asked nervously:

"Baldrich, what the hell do I do now?"

"First of all, keep calm. Don't let the snake see you fearful, speak to it with authority and self-confidence. Then, do as we do in our practices: inculcate in it what it must do. At this moment perhaps it would be good for us if it attacked the dark ones on the other side of the tunnel," replied the elf.

Lirieth concentrated on a mental struggle with the snake to force it against the sombers. She pointed at them, as if ordering the reptile to obey her. Then she pointed more insistently and ended with an imperative and thunderous "NOW!" that made the snake wince and carry out the order quickly and even with a palpable air of fear.

The princess dismissed Kasariviel shouting in restrained rage:

"That's it! Go get 'em! Go get 'em! Stupid fucking beast!"

A pleased Baldrich whispered to a perplexed prince with a furtive, underhanded smile:

"If I were you, I would never contradict her."

The serpent passed through the tunnel with determination, flanked by the exhausted, frightened and still handcuffed men and orcs, who were surprised to see the monstrous serpent almost grazing them, but ignoring them, as if they didn't exist.

As the reptile emerged from the tunnel it lunged with unusually strong fury at the astonished sombers, which hurled arrows and spears at their attacker, though they did not seem to affect it much.

Already almost all the men and orcs were free from their ties and the serpent continued its fierce battle against the dark ones. Syriel, Lirieth, Baldrich, Hans and the two orc generals tried to analyze the situation.

"The serpent will not be able against all the dark and we're disarmed to confront those who remain," said Syriel.

"Perhaps we could go back to Karbandur and get weapons," Lirieth proposed.

But a murmur of footsteps interrupted them and they saw their exit towards Karbandur cut by a squadron of about two-hundred somber ones that approached them very well armed and with two antimagic hoods prepared.

They went backwards until they realized that Kasariviel must have fallen, because lots of sombers began to appear at the other tunnel's entrance.

Everything seemed to be lost: some two hundred sombers on one side and another one hundred and eighty on the other, and in the middle, inside a tunnel with no other exits, some two hundred and twenty men and orcs vulnerable. Only Syriel wielded a dagger which he was already gripping, threateningly holding it tight against the dark ones.

But suddenly there was a buzzing sound, and about sixty sombers of those with Karbandur on their backs fell inert or badly wounded. Behind the providential dwarf crossbow arose Garin and Bellamir accompanied by about four hundred dwarfs who grabbed axe in one hand and a sword in the other, which were given to both men and orcs.

Just as Syriel was about to receive a sword thrown at him by Garin, a somber suddenly appeared attacking him from the side. An instant before the somber wounded Syriel to death, Smolion's sword stopped the blow. A tenth of a second later, Syriel pierced the shadow's chest as he gave an expressive look of gratitude to the orc general.

In a short time, things changed a lot. With the newly arrived reinforcements armed with the swords received, they soon defeated the sombers, of which some two-hundred fell lifeless, badly wounded or captured and the rest managed to flee to the Badlands.

When the battle was over, Syriel went to meet Garin and embraced him warmly in thanksgiving.

"Garin, we are indebted to you. You have saved our lives and we will never forget it. What happened to your father?" asked Syriel with clear signs of relief.

"I'll start from the beginning. After I was locked up again, after a while, I heard a rumor spreading to the other side of the door and, as the door opened, Bellamir appeared again with all my dwarves released. All together we went to arm ourselves and went to the gates of the pass. At every level we captured the rebels we encountered and recruited those who declared themselves loyal, until we gathered considerable strength and filled the dungeons with rebels. When we arrived at the gates, you had already been expelled a while before and, after a dwarf versus dwarf battle, we managed to reduce the rebels and my father, who preferred to take his own life in order not to be captured. We opened the doors and came here as fast as we could, trying to bring weapons for you. So, you are indebted to Bellamir, because without him we would not be here," said the new dwarf lord.

"We are indebted to both of them. And I'm very sorry about your father, he was always a distinguished and loyal dwarf, but in the end, he was driven by hatred. Now, you will be the new lord of the dwarfs, I am sure you will know how to lead your people with greatness, wisdom and benevolence," said the grateful prince with conviction.

"Thank you very much, my prince. I will be worthy of the honor you bestow on me, and I will never disappoint you. But my command must wait," Garin announced.

"Wait? Wait for what?" asked Syriel.

"I must guide a stubborn prince in the Badlands who will end up in the jaws of some beast or in the hands of the dark ones if I don't accompany him," Garin proposed with conviction and a certain tone of derision.

"And why do you think that stubborn prince is going to let you go with him?" asked Syriel, continuing the joke.

"Because I am the one who knows these lands best, because I have their weapons and horses in my fortress, and because I am even more stubborn than that prince," challenged the dwarf, with a bitter smile.

"If the dark ones are going to recruit dragons, do you know where they will go?" asked the prince.

"To the Dragons' Mountain, no doubt. The biggest mountain in the news and the only place in all of Frienia where there are still dragons," said a convinced Garin.

"Would you know how to take that obstinate prince there?" asked Syriel, already determined to take Garin with him.

"With eyes closed," concluded the dwarf, with sincere determination.

Syriel looked at Lirieth, who nodded thanking the dwarves for their help.

"All right, it will be a pleasure to enjoy your company in the country which we are going to," accepted the prince, "but try to keep your throne well-guarded, I wouldn't want to have to fight again to get it back when we return," asked Syriel with a half-smile.

In a good mood for the outcome, though saddened by the sad end of King Ankar, they began the return to Karbandur to prepare the journey to the Badlands.



From one of the many peaks that populated the pass, Turgarok gazed with satisfaction at the end of the contest. He then took a fine papyrus and wrote down the latest events. When he finished, he rolled up the parchment as much as he could and tied it to the small but fast hawk's paw as he whispered some strange words from which most beings would only have distinguished two: Teberion and Gulrath.

A few seconds after the little-sized falcon departed for its destination, in complete silence, but at full speed, a large hawk took flight, carrying on its back an orc sorcerer, and took the opposite direction as its smaller predecessor.



In the hall of the throne room of Argoth Castle, with an almost imperceptible click, a frightened Elenir appeared. She took courage and swallowed saliva, crossed the royal door and advanced until she stood in front of her father, with a face of circumstances and a submissive attitude.

"You don't seem to be carrying good news," asked the king, with extreme harshness.

“Garin, the son of Ankar, has rebelled against his father, who has died, and has remained faithful to humans. Together they defeated our squadron, about one hundred and eighty were able to flee, and the princes escaped,” the dark princess masked with contained rage.

“I DO WANT THOSE DAMNED PRINCES HERE, PROSTRATE AT MY FEET!!! AND I DO WANT THEM NOW! DON'T EVER PRESENT YOURSELF TO ME AGAIN WITHOUT THEM! AND I WANT THEM ALIVE! IF THEY DIE, YOU'LL SUFFER THE SAME FATE!” Nigriel exploded in all his fury.

Elenir let a few seconds go by to dilute the anger of her progenitor.

“You'll have them, Father. Even if it's the last thing I do, I'll bring them to you alive,” said the princess. “I will not disappoint you again,” she concluded with determination.

“I hope so, my daughter, I have high expectations for you, and we've got a lot at stake. Don't fail me again,” replied the somber monarch a little more calmly, but keeping the tone of harshness in his words.

A dismissive gesture from Nigriel's hand brought the interview to an end. Elenir lowered her head and turned around and left the room, hurt, angry and already making plans for her next steps.



Urkaroth was almost halfway between the border with Delfia and the border with Barvian, and was almost bathed by the Kalidor River to the west, which flowed into a lake of the same name. It was also very well protected to the north by The Rock, an enormous mountain mass of several hundred kilometers where there were no fissures of several mountains, but rather, it was like a unique and huge rock emerging from the depths of the earth.

Urkaroth occupied a vast expanse almost in the central part of Teberion. At first glance, two main parts of the extensive city differed: a very dark one, built with black stones and adorned with threatening gargoyles and awful beasts that had contemplated the sinister first era of the violent and bellicose orcs; and another more luminous part, built with grey and white marbles, full of statues and beautiful motifs, less aggressive than their brothers in the dark zone, and who saw the rebirth of the new orc era culminating during the reign of their present king Gulrath, proud to endow his city with new buildings closer to the culture of the elves and humans than to that of the ancient orcs.

In the heart of the most luminous area of Urkaroth was the palace of Gargaran, the residence of the kings of Teberion. Seven watchtowers stood out, rising majestically towards the sky. Six of them were built with beautiful greyish marble, but the great central tower, the residence of the kings, highlighted for the whiteness provided by the snowy marble with which they had built it. The rest were used for military purposes, for surveillance, training of new recruits and for dungeons. A high solid wall, also of greyish marble, surrounded the entire main citadel.

Gulrath and Baldia returned to Urkaroth without setbacks. The king smiled broadly as he entered his private quarters and saw a small hawk and a crow waiting for him, each with a note tied to its leg.

He darkened his face as he read the missives, but at the conclusion, his countenance became more satisfied, though also worried.

Before the king's gesture, which indicated that there would be no answer, the birds disappeared through the window at full speed to starve with the numerous doves flying over the enormous palace. No wonder they did, after several days waiting for the arrival of the king without even going out to eat.

On the other side of the palace wing, at that very moment, Queen Baldia looked attentively at a silver mirror, which reflected a face much younger than hers.

"Daughter," she said, "our plans are going just as we planned," said the pleased queen.

"Yes, although my father is a stumbling block in them and we'll have to finish him off," replied the mirror image.

"Patience, my dear, all in good time. Your father can still be useful to us, don't be hasty. Now you take care of those dragons, who can help us a lot in our mission."

"All right Mother, I will," said the young woman.

Baldia saw the image of the young princess disappear, to appear her own, while she drew a horrible smile.



Syriel entered Lirieth's room as she brushed her hair in front of a mirror.

"Haven't you been taught to knock before entering a lady's bedroom, prince?" asked the princess, pretending to feel offended.

"I'm sorry, I haven't noticed. It won't happen again," replied the prince, embarrassed. "I was just coming to see how you were doing," Syriel added.

"I'm fine, a little tired, but fine. Thank you very much," thanked Lirieth with a bright smile.

"This mission is getting more complicated, and perhaps it will be much more dangerous than one might think at first. Perhaps it would be better if you returned to Teberion," said the prince with concern.

"I'm flattered that you care about me, Syriel, but you know we have to do this together. Maybe only I can dominate those dragons. Besides, I am not a delicate little princess who needs constant protection, not only am I able to defend myself, but I take pity on anyone who dares to stand in my way," roguish Lirieth joked.

"I know, I know, even though I would never forgive myself if I hid something from you," replied Syriel with a loving gaze.

"Nothing will happen to me. And now, let this lady get ready for bed," almost ordered the princess. "Alone," added Lirieth sharply, but also gratified at the prince's sly grin.

With a fleeting kiss on her lips, Syriel wished the princess good night, who watched with a semblance of deep concern as the prince disappeared through the door, as if she wanted to tell him something, something she would never not be able to reveal to anyone, not even him.

## A trapped giant

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

When the company which was enlarged by Garin and a hundred of dwarfs went through the fateful tunnel and the remains of Kasariviel again, they saw how a large group of dwarfs collaborated in collecting the meat of the reptile, which, undoubtedly would be an abundant food for the snowy season.

It took five long days of march to reach the exit from the Badlands, with hardly any incidents. The Peaks Pass extended westwards, without being possible to see its opposite end, as it lengthened almost to the end of the Slanted Mountains, with several hundred kilometers long, connecting all the dwarf cities carved into those mountains.

After an arduous descent that took almost a whole day, they finally set foot in the dangerous soil of the Badlands.

The first region they encountered was a vast plain with sparse vegetation that also did not appear to have too much fauna. They only came across some voracious mosquitoes, some of considerable size that would not stop biting producing some rather annoying urticaria. Garin informed them that in that region there were no living creatures entailing excessive danger, although during the following day they would arrive at a more rugged and forested area inhabited by harpies, which were like médium winged ones, with some knowledge of magic, astute, fast and above all evil, which turned them into dangerous enemies. However, they would not dare to attack such a large and well-armed group.

They also found on the way unmistakable signs of the passage of the sombers, who had managed to escape through the Peaks Pass about five days ago.

Syriel and Lirieth continued in their role of showing how well they got along, even when no one could see them, and it was becoming evident that a relationship was being born between them that began to go beyond the mere friendship agreed upon. Baldrich continued to look at the princess with a certain suspicion, but he did not argue with her again, nor did he say anything about his protégé. They also stopped giving magic classes, because with the mastery that Lirieth achieved before the snake, the princess demonstrated that she would be able to subdue any beast, since few should exist greater than Kasariviel.

The next day, as Garin had already told them, they entered a more rugged area with slight depressions, small mounds and numerous groups of trees which, although they did not manage to form forests, some of them had a considerable extension. And the environment was impregnated with a slight aroma of vegetation.

Garin also warned them that it was inhabited by a snake not very large, but very poisonous which petrified the whole body in a matter of seconds. And as if it had been a premonition, a few minutes later, one of the warring orcs complained of a bite in his hand. Garin ran toward him and, with incredible speed, cut off his hand with an axe just in time. The hand fell to the ground petrified and the deadly poison did not continue through the arm of the mutilated orc.

Lirieth thanked Garin for his quick reaction, squeezing a kiss on his cheek that caused the dwarf's blushing. This gesture and many others dispensed by the princess to dwarves as well as to men, and the own attitude of the orcs, meant that little by little they were not so frowned upon and were accepted as companions, even by the dwarves.

Even generals Smolion and Gungaroth began to be somewhat more friendly with the new allies.

After the incident and a light rest to heal the wounded orc, they continued the march more attentive to the small but deadly snakes and, although on more than one occasion some warriors had to dodge several attacks, the ophidians ended up splitting in two and failed to bite no one else.

After a few hours of marching, they heard some loudly and terrible screams, like someone very big who was suffering a lot from some kind of torture.

They decided to stop and find out what was going on. The screams came from the back of a mound on the right. Lirieth, Syriel, Baldrich, Garin and Bellamir stealthily climbed it. When they reached the highest part they stretched out behind some bushes and watched as some hideous harpies had in captivity a giant of about ten feet high tightly bound with sturdy chains that, nevertheless, seemed to be very young, because by the features of his face it did not look more than fifteen or sixteen years old extrapolating it to a human aspect.

The harpies had sadistic fun flying around him and throwing magical balls of fire or electric rays, which must have been very painful to judge by the cries and convulsions of the young but enormous being.

Other harpies prepared a great cauldron with all sorts of spices, which gave off a rather nauseating aroma and did not bode any good for the unfortunate and bulky prisoner.

"I don't like giants at all, but harpies are the worst creatures I've ever seen. If we don't do something, the young giant will be the dinner of these damn winged witches," Garin said, with a tone halfway between indignation and compassion.

"I have counted about ninety," said Syriel. "If we attack them, they will not be able to take us," blessed the prince.

"Surely more will come from the surrounding area," Garin said. "They live in communities, side by side, and help each other when they need it. I estimate that, in the event of battle, they will come in far greater numbers than we do," warned the dwarf.

"With the liberated giant we would have a great help," Bellamir bet.

"Could you free the giant without the harpies seeing you?" asked the prince to the audacious mediam.

"Yes, if you distract them with a little fuss," answered Bellamir with a mischievous smile.

Syriel looked at Baldrich, who assented convincingly, then he looked at Garin, who looked enthusiastically at the idea, and then he looked at Lirieth.

"What does our captain think?" the prince consulted, more with a loving gaze than with the proper composure of military submission.

"Well, all right," said the princess. "Let's free the poor boy. Besides, if we could get a few giants as allies, they would certainly be of inestimable support against the sombers," said Lirieth with some reservations about the plan.

"Go ahead, then," encouraged the prince, "but Bellamir's plan may serve as an emergency. A safer plan must be outlined and executed with the utmost secrecy, preventing the neighboring harpies from coming. We cannot afford casualties in case we have to face the dark ones again," warned Syriel receiving significant assent from his fiancée.



A few minutes later, when the harpies realized that an elf in a magician's tunic was heading toward them, they stood still cautiously, as if in expectation.

Baldrich addressed the harpies with determination and without the slightest hint of fear and, when he was close enough to the one who stood out as the leader of the group, he told them:

"Greetings, winged ladies, I am Baldrich, a mighty elf magician who will inflict no evil on you if you quickly release my friend the giant."

With a loudly broken voice, the supposed head of the harpies gave a loud laugh.

“Do you think we're stupid? Before you could lift a single finger, you would become part of our tonight's menu. How do you intend to inflict that evil on us, hey?” asked the unpleasant witch, with a marked disdain in a clear tone of threat.

As all the dwarves appeared pointing at the harpies with their crossbows, Baldrich answered with such calm and confidence in himself and his words that he made the shameless harpy pale.

“With a hundred accurate crossbow dwarfs, perhaps? Each one of you is the target of a different dwarf; and you in particular, being the main lady, have been given the honor of signing up ten dwarfs at a time. One false move or shout of warning and you will be the one who ends up cooked in that pestilent pot. And none of these dwarves I have ever seen fail a single arrow. If I were you, I would let my friend go without further ado,” exposed the elf forcefully.

After a few seconds of looking around and weighing the situation, with resignation and contained rage, the horrific creature finally gave way.

“Do what it says,” said the harpy, her eyes injected with blood and her face deformed with anger.

Two witches freed the giant, who seemed to fall to the ground with a crash when he was released, but, far from it, when he saw himself free, he grabbed his two captors by the neck, one with each hand, and smashed them head against head, knocking them out of combat.

The perverse fairies screamed furiously and began to attack, but more than half of them were hit by the dwarves' arrows. One of them was the ringleader, who received eight deadly hits, leaving the winged creatures bewildered and unorganized.

Another hundred witches appeared from behind another nearby mound and many more from a little further away. However, when they were greeted by the dwarfs' accurate crossbows and when they saw that they were falling like flies and that, in addition, they were threatened by a group of orcs and humans who were ferociously joining the attack, they decided to flee and give up the battle for lost, apart from the tasty dinner based on giant.

Of the few remaining harpies, the giant took revenge with such fury that, when there were no more, he almost faced his liberators as well. But he calmed down and, kneeling, not out of reverence but to equal heights, he gave some effusive thanks to Baldrich:

“Thank you very much, great magician Baldrich for freeing me from these repellent creatures. I am indebted to you.”

“It is not me you must thank for your liberation, but my princes,” said Baldrich, showing with his arm the approaching nobles.

“You must thank us all equally that you are free. My name is Lirieth, daughter of Gulrath, princess heir to the throne of Teberion.”

“And I am Syriel, son of Jorion, prince heir to the throne of Delfia, and you are not indebted to us: it has been a pleasure to free you from these vermin,” the prince declared.

“Lirieth and Syriel? The heirs of Teberion and Delfia! What are you doing together? Weren't you at war?” asked the giant in great surprise.

“That war is now a thing of the past. Now, orcs and men are allies and it is likely that we will soon enter into war against the sombers. Lirieth is now my fiancée. By the way, you haven't told us your name yet...” Syriel was interested.

“A thousand apologies, your highnesses. My name is Sergiker, son of Magellan, king of Granlesia, the giants' land,” the great prince introduced himself.

“Wow, a giant prince! Is your kingdom near here?” was Syriel surprised.

“No, it's quite a long way, about twenty days, before we cross the great desert, but it would take you twice as long or more,” replied Sergiker.

“And what are you doing here alone and so far from your kingdom?” asked Syriel.

“I have come to see a friend,” replied the giant, blushing.

“You ran away from home, didn't you?” Syriel suggested.

"Y-yes," said Sergiker, somewhat embarrassed.

"How old are you, young prince?" inquired the human.

"Fourteen years old," said the giant proudly, as if he were already a respectable adult.

This time it was Lirieth who asked.

"My father keeps yelling at me, reprimanding me and punishing me, he never lets me do anything I want to do," protested the big boy, as if he were the victim of the greatest injustice in the world.

"Well, perhaps your father would like to prepare you well so that tomorrow you will be a good king," said the princess sweetly.

"But... I don't know if I want to be a king," responded the young lad.

"And giant? Have you ever thought if you want to be a giant?" asked Syriel.

"Giant...? But... I can't help being a giant," replied Sergiker in surprise.

"Well, the son of a king can't help it either, and he has to help and obey his father so that, in the future, he can reign with justice and wisdom. If you renounce that, the greed of others who do want the throne can provoke wars and bloodshed and, in the end, there will be a king who will be neither just nor wise, as surely you would have been," concluded Syriel.

The young giant digested the prince's words and ended up looking embarrassed.

"You're right, I'll go back to my kingdom," answered the giant with a look of gratitude and admiration.

"Well, but first I'd appreciate it if you'd tell us what friend you've come to see," Syriel wanted to know.

"To the White Magician. He lives about two days from here. Well, I suppose four or five days in your steps," said Sergiker without being able to disguise a clearly condescending tone, though lacking in malice.

"Do your parents know this magician?" Lirieth asked with great affection.

"Yes, the White Magician regularly visits our kingdom and tells me many adventures, teaches me tricks and informs me of the future of your kingdoms," said the giant prince in a careless tone.

"Then, if it's all right with you, we'll go to that magician and find the best way to get you back to your parents in the safest way possible," proposed Syriel.

"All right," responded the boy, already with a big smile drawn on his huge face.

And they set out to continue on their way to the abode of the White Magician, already seeing in the background the colossal Dragons' Mountains.

This mountain had been an ancient volcano that had not erupted in more than three thousand years. It was, without a doubt, the most gigantic mountain known in all of Frienia. It was so colossal in height that, when perhaps it was not even halfway to its summit, the air ceased to be breathable for any being who attempted to surpass that point. Something that no one had ever achieved, not even the dragons that populated the mountain and also needed air to breathe. Only from a considerable distance and on very clear days, with no clouds in the sky, could one glimpse the towering peaks of the massive mountain.

The brawl with the harpies did not cause any casualties to the princes' company, only a few wounded and none serious, so they resumed the march as soon as possible in case those monsters came back with more reinforcements.

During the day, guided by the giant, they left that region behind to enter a more uneven region with hills and mountains.

## The White Magician

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

After a couple of days of tireless march, they reached Crystal Lake, not too large a lake but incredibly transparent and totally still that gave it a polished glass appearance, where they decided to stop over. Anyway, Garin advised everyone to stay away from the shore, as respectable-sized fish with strong jaws and fairly sharp teeth emerged from the water with large jumps, which could cause considerable injury to anyone who ventured into the waters.

However, Sergiker disregarded the advice of the dwarf and went into the water gathering a large number of these fishes, which he caught in flight, showing the giant an outstanding dexterity and thus offering his liberators a succulent dinner. The fish turned out to be very tasty once roasted.

The next day, very close to where they spent the night, they came across the remains of the camp of the somber group that preceded them and that little by little increased the distance between them.

Leaving the Crystal Lake behind, and entering a leafy forest, they continued the march under an heavy and annoying rain that did not stop afflicting them all day.

The downpour ceased at sunrise, but left the terrain too soft, where it was more uncomfortable and tough to advance.

At mid-morning they saw a column of smoke on the horizon, as if coming from a large bonfire, and decided to move cautiously in case it was the sombers.

At dusk the next day they could see that the bonfire was directly related to the sombers, but in a very different way from what they had originally thought. It was not a fire for cooking or heating, but a funeral pyre. The group of sombers, who had been able to avoid them for many days in the Peaks Pass were not as lucky with some effective enemy who, after defeating them, piled them up and set them on fire.

In analyzing the marks and footprints of the battle, Syriel pointed to the others:

“This has been done by a very powerful squadron, be alert at all times.”

“I know who did this,” said Sergiker with pride. “The footprints and marks are unequivocally my father’s; he must be around here looking for me. So, don't worry, you have saved me and you are my friends, you have nothing to fear from my people,” the giant tried to calm his new friends.

“Well, that reassures me and matches those huge footprints. But don't stop watching, just in case,” added the prince.

They left the funereal bonfire, expectant, and so on for the next two days, until they entered a gorge that made its way through a not so large mountain range.

“At the end of this gorge, in a huge camouflaged cave, lives my friend, the White Magician.”

But before anyone could answer, they were surrounded, from the irregular and not too high elevations flanking the gorge, by a hundred chunky giants measuring about thirteen feet height and brandishing their weapons in a threatening attitude.

Sergiker advanced to the giant with the most majestic bearing.

“Father, this is Syriel and Lirieth, princes of Delfia and Teberion. They and their men, orcs and dwarves, showing a distinguished bravery have saved me from the claws of the harpies I was held captive by and are escorting me to the White Magician’s abode to find the best way to bring me home,” announced the giant prince, with a marked affectionate tone and thanks to his liberators.

Then he added, turning to the princes, filled with pride:

“I present to you my father, Magellan, the king of Granlesia.”

“I am indebted to your highnesses for saving my son,” thanked the enormous king as he approached his heir and the rest of the giants relaxed, lowering their weapons.

Father and son fused in an embrace for a few seconds, then the giant king rebuked his offspring, affectionate but forceful.

“What am I going to do with you? How can you abandon your people and expose yourself to the dangers of these lands? When are you going to learn? When are you going to assume the role of prince that corresponds to you?” almost begged the giant king, with a certain harshness, although without ceasing to show a clear fatherly affection.

“Father,” replied Sergiker, solemnly and expressing deep repentance, “I am very sorry for all the affliction I have caused you with my acts of immature rebellion. I give you my prince's word that it will never happen again and that from now on I will submit with illusion and desire to the learning tasks proper to my condition of future king,” promised the boy, looking furtively at Lirieth and Syriel.

“What made you change so radically?” asked the pleased father.

“The princes have made me see that just as I can't help being a giant, I can't help being a prince and a future king, so I've decided to face my destiny as best I can,” said Sergiker enthusiastically.

After holding his son tightly, he looked with deep gratitude at Syriel and Lirieth.

“I will never forget your help. If you ever need anything that is in my hand, don't hesitate for a moment to ask me. I am doubly indebted to Your Graces,” the great king compromised himself, with tears of joy in his eyes.

“Forgive me for daring to speak to you so soon, but we have seen that the dark ones are not counted among your friends and it is possible that soon we may need help in the face of an attempt by them to invade our kingdoms,” said Syriel.

King Magellan ordered a wasteland to be brought to him. Instantly, one of its giants gave him a cage with a bird and the king offered it to the prince.

“Princes and future kings of Teberion and Delfia,” he said, “I give you this most precious and beautiful bird. It is a balardi, if you let it free, it will come to me to follow it to the place where you released it. Therefore, when you need me, release him and he will take me wherever you wait for me. The balardi is a very fast bird, the only one faster than the falcon, and it will not take long to warn me of your invitation. It is the first time that I have given one of these birds to someone who does not belong to my people,” confessed the monarch.

Syriel took the cage delicately and thanked the king for the valuable gift.

“We are very honored by your invaluable favor, although I hope I will never have to use it. If not, do not doubt that it will be because of a desperate situation in which we hope never to find ourselves,” the prince wished.

Sergiker, fed up with all the flattery, interrupted the regal conversation.

“And my friend, the White Magician?”

“Here,” replied a snow-white figure who appeared behind the giant prince, just at that moment.

Sergiker turned and embraced the snowy apparition, which reached beyond his waist, with touching affection.

The White Magician was really a being of dazzling whiteness, he had the typical point-shaped ears of elves and a pearly mane, straight and silky, that almost reached him halfway down his back. But surely, he was not known as White Magician because of the hair color which was already almost perfect white, but because of the marked albino tonality of his skin, as well as of the eyebrows, and even of his eyes, whose pearly shade could not even be distinguished the apple of his eye's cornea. In spite of having more than two thousand years of age, his appearance was like that of a healthy human halfway between the sixties and seventies, although without any beard, as was usual among beings of elfic race.

Once the effusive greeting between magician and giant was over, the White Magician addressed the princes.

"I also thank you for saving my little prince. Welcome to my abode," he invited as a magical breach opened in the middle of the rocky mountain. "Go ahead, there's room for everyone, even the giants if they bend down a little as they enter."

They entered caves of enormous dimensions, as much as the dwarfs, and even more so since only the White Magician lived there.

With a gesture of the magician towards one of the corners, some stables appeared with everything necessary for the rest and provisioning of the horses.

And to another gesture of the white-skinned wizard, some tables and stools of various sizes were materialized for the comfort of men, orcs, elves, mediam, dwarfs and giants, with everything necessary to initiate the most succulent and sumptuous of the banquets that could have been done for those lands.

That night the wine and beer of some small magical casks ran out and they could also eat until they got fed up with fountains full of the richest delicacies and bewitched in such a way that, when someone took the last piece of them, exquisite food would immediately come up again.

All night they rested placidly and comfortably until long after dawn.



At the foot of the colossal Dragons' Mountain was the somber squadron camped out. General Baldin informed his future queen, accommodated in her luxurious tent, of the encounter that the group that was able to escape with the giants from the Peaks Pass.

"Giants?" roared Elenir, angrily. "What was a group of giants doing there? Their lands are much further north! Why have they come through these lands just now?" complained the dark princess angrily.

Elenir received nothing but an uncomfortable silence from her general, who did not know what to answer.

"How many survivors?" asked the shadow princess, with marked harshness.

"Only two, my lady," replied the intimidated general.

"Two survivors of one hundred and eighty warriors, well-prepared and dark! And not a single scratch was made on any of the giants!" a disgusted Elenir lamented.

"There was also a very powerful elf magician. He was white as snow, even his eyes, but he didn't seem to be blind. There were almost a hundred giants plus the magician, some enemies terribly...

"SILENCE!!!!" I do not want any more excuses, General Baldin. You have already disappointed me too many times, I won't admit one more failure, General. From now on, I will take over personally. Let no more decisions be made without my approval. We will go to The Dragons' Mountain, dominate all we can give while a squadron at your command awaits the princes in a 'lovely' ambush. Prepare everything so that nothing fails, it is your last chance, general, and you know what that means. Do you consider yourselves qualified for this mission I commend to you, general?" asked the princess, not trying hard to disguise her insulting disdain.

"Nothing will fail this time, Your Highness, you can be sure," replied the general, forcibly sure and with a good lump in his throat.

"I hope so," replied the terrible sovereign, no longer looking at her interlocutor and dismissing him with a contemptuous gesture, indicating that he should withdraw.



The day after the opulent banquet, quite early, the giants, with their king and their prince departed back to their kingdom, but not before bidding a very cordial farewell to the White Magician and his new friends.

After the farewell, the princes, the orc generals, Hans, Garin and Baldrich met with the magician, who initiated the encounter.

"Well, my new friends, what brings you to these ungrateful lands? I suppose that the coincidence of your presence with that of the dark squadron must not be entirely coincidental, am I mistaken? I am also happy to deduce that the endless war between men and orcs has come to an end and, apparently, in quite a friendly way," said the magician, casting a significant complicit glance at the princes.

"Well, you're not wrong," said the princess. "Men and orcs, we began a new era with an alliance, with the main objective of defending ourselves with guarantees of the sombers and culminated with the marriage between the heirs of the two kingdoms. And as for the dark ones, we learned that they were going to the Dragons' Mountains to recruit some of them into their ranks, so we decided to go intercept them to avoid it or to do the same as them, in case they arrived late. But a welcoming committee waited for us in the Slanted Mountains that we managed to reject, and the unfortunates who burned yesterday were the ones who managed to escape our enemies," the princess said with some pride.

"And how are you supposed to dominate the dragons?" asked the White Magician.

"I am a good sorceress and the magician Baldrich taught me and trained me to dominate the beasts. And in the Slanted Mountains I was able to subjugate a giant snake," Lirieth proudly said.

"Did you dominate Kasariviel?" the snowy wizard wanted to know.

"Yes, that's what they called it, it was a huge snake," added the princess.

"Yes, and quite stupid if we compare it to a dragon," said the magician, who asked Baldrich: "Magician Baldrich, how many dragons have you dominated in order to have the honor of teaching a noble princess the difficult art of dragon domination?"

"No master, we looked for him in Belvichu to help us, but we couldn't find him," Baldrich said.

"Well, I don't want to discourage you, even though a snake, no matter how giant it may be, lacks an advanced intelligence like ours. On the other hand, a dragon's one is different. They have a shrewd intelligence, far superior to ours, and in order to master them you need years of training and a lot of experience or an unusual skill. And I deduce that you are not ready to do so. However, I do, so if you don't mind, I will join your cause. A few adventures will do me good, and even more so if it is to help defend you from the somber tyranny," offered the magician with incipient enthusiasm.

"For my part, I would be delighted if you would join us, and I would be honored if you would agree to teach me and train me in the ability to subdue dragons," Lirieth requested.

"I would be honored to receive that knowledge, too," Baldrich added.

"Then I will be happy to initiate you in such matters, although I cannot guarantee that I can remain with you until you really master this skill," warned the White Magician.

"We should not take too long to continue on our way," intervened Syriel.

"You are quite right, young prince, we should not delay in reaching The Dragons' Mountains, but, before we go, I beg you to accompany me: I have something that belonged to one of your elf ancestors and I think it is your responsibility to guard it," the magician invited the prince.

The White Magician led Syriel through the labyrinthine passageways of the cave until they reached a cavity of few mentions which was full of drawers and trunks arranged in an orderly fashion and filled with weapons, scrolls, and all sorts of objects and utensils.

The wizard rummaged through an old but well-preserved trunk until he extracted a beautiful dagger and raised it to the height of the expectant prince's eyes, vocalizing:

“Hide, Dagger of Justice.”

Then the weapon disappeared and the magician showed his hands with a certain theatricality to the surprised prince, who was even more astonished when the object reappeared when the sorcerer pronounced:

“Show yourself, Dagger of Justice.”

The dagger was seen again in the hand of the magician, who, handing it to Syriel, invited him to try it.

“Take it, try it, it's not my magic that makes it work, but the magic within the dagger.”

Syriel took it and pronounced the magic phrases linked to the weapon, making it appear and disappear from his hand several times.

The prince admired the beauty of the stiletto, especially a white gemstone that occupied almost the entire stab and that for only a sigh shone in unison with the red gem on his necklace and the golden jewel on the stab of his sword.

“What is this white jewel?” the prince wanted to know.

“It is the heart of a petrified white dragon. There are dark magical arts capable of obtaining such gems and confers incredible powers on the objects which they are attached to,” replied the White Magician.

“Are you capable of performing such arts?” asked Syriel.

“I would deceive you if I said no, although I have never wanted to use that kind of magic that leads those who practice it to dark paths and destinations,” said the snowy magician. “It belonged to your mother's grandfather, Ronel. Use it carefully and in cases of extreme necessity to defend yourselves, since if you use it to attack for no reason it will disappear from your hand before it hurts your victim. So, try to show it only when you need it, and hide it again when you are done,” added the elf.

“Thank you very much,” the prince thanked, bowing his head as a polite thank you. “Did it ever belong to my mother?”

“No, she never wanted it, she didn't like weapons, not even invisible ones,” exposed the elf.

“Who made it? the prince inquired.

“Alginel, one of the best elven blacksmiths known. The spell of invisibility was cast by an old and mad elf magician who now lives like a hermit in strange caves in the Badlands and who is about to go looking for dragons,” joked the magician.

“Well, I hope I'll never run into such a character,” Syriel continued. “Can we go now?”

“No, not yet. I must tell you more about the dagger and other magical objects. The story begins with an evil, albeit sublime magician, perhaps the wisest and most skillful ever, but, unfortunately, with a heart as dark as the clothes he used to wear. His name was Mazorik, although he has been better known by the name of Dark Magician. By the year 1600 of the last era, he created seven precious stones with the hearts of each of the seven dragon races. With seven disciples, he sent each one of these jewels to the seven races that populate Frienia. These gems had to be, during seven years, among the people of each race in order to capture their main essence. After that time, his disciples had to return in order to give the stones back to him. With them, he was going to create seven magical objects that would form the Dragon Armor, making the being who wore it acquire the seven essences of the seven races, giving it practically unlimited power that forced all races to submit to the will of the wearer of the armor. But one of the disciples discovered his plans and, not willing to be an accomplice to such evil, betrayed him and managed to avoid his purposes. There is no time to tell you

everything, but take this book, which contains everything explained. It works just like the dagger; it will appear when you want to read it and it will disappear when you stop reading it. Only you can see it. Read it, it is of paramount importance, as there are indications that someone wants to collect the Dragon Armor again, and not for very noble purposes. The Dagger of Justice is one such object, your sword and your necklace are two more; do not lose them. I knew that the sword was in your power, but not that you also had the necklace, how did you get it?" asked the magician after his long exposition.

"It was Lirieth's engagement gift," replied the surprised prince.

"There is no doubt that it is a great gift which, moreover, someone has reinforced with a very powerful protective spell," replied the wizard with admiration, examining the jewel.

"Yes," said Syriel, "Lirieth told me that she had enchanted him.

"There's something else," added the magician. "I hope you don't mind, because I detect the appreciation you feel for the princess. Although Lirieth apparently possesses a pure soul, she hides something dark, I don't know if it is evil or not, but it is something bitter that can affect you when you discover it. Take care of her, you can't trust her blindly, you know that, right?" advised the magician.

"I can't believe she's hiding something shady," the prince protested. Baldrich warned me too, though, so I suppose I'll have to take this warning seriously," Syriel resigned.

"Believe me, don't close your door to her, but don't open it all for her either. And you would do well to keep an eye on her and trust her with certain reservations," proposed the albino magician.

"All right, I'll do it," Syriel said.

"And don't stop reading my notes, you have to get the Dragon Armor back together before someone else does. When you complete it, we will look for the best way to destroy it," concluded the magician solemnly.



In the palace of Gargaran, Queen Baldia answered the call of her jeweled silver mirror.

"What's happening, daughter?"

"Our enemies have been joined by a very powerful white magician and a king of giants who might complicate our plans," a voice from the mirror said.

"A white magician? An elf with completely white eyes?" asked the queen.

"Yes, do you know him?" questioned the mirror.

"Yes, I do. And it is very powerful, but don't worry: neither that magician nor the giants will be a problem if we get dragons," answered Baldia. "Anyway, I'll think of something. You worry about those damn dragons," added the queen.

"All right, Mother. Now I must go," replied the mirror.

Queen Baldia was thoughtful with a worried countenance, looking at her image on the silver surface, where her daughter's face could be seen just before.



A somber detachment of about two hundred and eighty warriors and twenty magicians, led by Princess Elenir herself, began the ascent of the mountain in pursuit of the dragons.

The dragons that populated the enormous ancient volcano normally lived isolated from the beings of the flat terrain, at a considerable height, in large caves that crossed the entrails of the mountainous mass. They rarely ventured out of their elevated territory, since its extension, both in height and in vast valleys, plateaus and rivers at different levels in pursuit of the unreachable summits, meant that dragons, one of the numerous species of beings that inhabited the cliff, were not lacking in hunting.

Elenir and her dark ones advanced with extreme caution, since the scarce references of other previous explorers were not very encouraging, rather on the contrary. Aside from dragons, there were other dangerous species that could prove as deadly or more deadly than the mountain kings themselves.

General Baldin, along with three hundred others sombers, remained in the camp preparing an infallible ambush against the enemy princes, in the hope of regaining his lady's trust, and not out of appreciation for her person precisely, but rather out of fear of her terrible anger.



That same day, after making all the necessary preparations, men, orcs, dwarves, mediam and elves set out for the Dragons' Mountains.

They advanced smoothly until nightfall, when they all lay down to sleep. All except the chosen ones as sentries and Syriel who began the reading of the book entrusted to him by the albino wizard.

## The Dragon Armor

*Frienia, year 1600 of the first era (The White Magician's notes).*

Some parts of what is written in these notes are the result of suppositions or hypotheses, but which, in view of the events, of the inquiries made and the testimonies of protagonists and witnesses should not differ too much from what happened in reality.

**I imagine that everything must have started around the year 1600 of the first era, when a young and up-and-coming magician named Mazorik found black magic ancient writings on the gems of light describing the steps to create precious magical stones, using the dragon's heart which had countless properties. One of them was to absorb the essences or the characteristics of the beings that where in its presence for a period of time. As a result, these main aspects were passed on to the wearer of the jewelry.**

The desire of Mazorik, who was also called the Dark Magician, was to create the seven stones of power, each one with one of the hearts of the existing dragon races. It seems that gems of the same color nullify each other and lose their power, so they had to be seven jewels of different color and could only be made with the hearts of the different dragon races. Each one would serve to capture the essence of one of the seven races that populated Frienia. Everything hovered around the magical number seven.

His plan consisted of forging seven objects with each one of the seven jewels, once loaded with the essence of each race, forming with all of them the Dragon Armor, which would confer on him an unlimited power to subjugate all the beings of Frienia, erecting himself as the only emperor of all the known earth.

The list of objects he intended to forge was as follows:



Object	Dragon race	Target race	Essence
Helmet	Black	Somber	Cleverness
Breastplate	Green	Orc	Rage
Sword	Golden	Giant	Strength
Dagger	White	Elf	Immortality
Necklace	Red	Dwarf	Stamina
Shield	Gray	Human	Bravery
Ring	Blue	Medium	Intelligence

In those days, it was talked about a fierce giant warrior who was a master in the art of hunting dragons. Mazorik soon recruited him for his purposes. Garrak, who called himself the “dragon slayer” would have to kill one dragon of each variety and give him the hearts of all of them.

Mazorik also recruited seven disciples, one from each of the races, so that once the jewels were obtained, they returned to their places of origin and, for seven years, the jewels acquired the essence

of each one of them. After those seven years, all the disciples had to return with each gem filled with the corresponding nature. A single failure in any of the seven precious stones and their plans would be wrecked.

In my opinion, it all began the day Mazorik entered Belquecia, the city of the elves in which I lived. Mazorik was also an elf, although very dark, unlike me, who was so blond that he was almost white in both hair and skin color, which caused me to be known not only as Fariel, but also as the albino elf, although I was also called "the Magician Boy" or "White Magician", as I had begun to show certain skills for magic, which undoubtedly attracted Mazorik to turn me into his disciple, using false promises very attractive to an inexperienced young man like me.

At that time, I was nothing more than a curious boy, eager for knowledge and avid to discover the limits of my magical powers.

Mazorik approached me little by little, teaching me some things and dazzling me with his wisdom and apparent goodness.

One day, when I was beginning to have some confidence in him, he explained to me that he had a school of young magicians and that he wanted to recruit a magician from each of Frienia's races, who was only missing the elf.

He told me that his school was in the Badlands and that he would soon begin to obtain the stones for a special spell and that it would take him approximately three years to gather them. During this time, his disciples would learn various matters of magic such as mental exploration, telekinesis, domination of beings, transmutation of elements, healing, meteorological influence and many more.

When I was offered that vacancy, I hesitated at first. But when he explained to me his false plans for the stones, which each one of his disciples would have to expose each one for seven years to our race in order to fill it with our essence and, in this way, with the seven gems to perform a spell that would eradicate war forever, he ended up convincing me.

He visited my family and asked my father for permission to allow me to go with him as a pupil without having to pay anything, indicating that with our work, as we learned, we could already afford the classes.

My enthusiasm was such and my conviction so high that Mazorik's intentions did not harbor any evil that, finally, my father agreed to let me go after telling him that this was what I wanted and that I would return once my apprenticeship had been completed.

In the following days, some of Mazorik's students and my companions arrived in Belquecia: Burak the giant, Masarif the medium-sized, Jorin the dwarf and Marlen the human who was the only female of the group.

Several days later, we left Belquecia together for Urkaroth, where we picked up Maluak, the Orc student. From there, we would pass through Angorian, where we were joined by the somber Esporiel, the last one missing to complete the group.

During the long journey to Mazorik's lair in the Badlands, we already began intense and interesting magic lessons by mastering small beasts, turning sand into water when we needed it, and even causing small but timely rains.

Mazorik's wisdom was so great and his kindness and good disposition so high that soon we all began to feel admiration and affection for him.

In addition, among us the disciples began to weave bonds of friendship, some stronger than others, as well as manifest aversions such as that of Jorin, the dwarf, with Maluak, the orc, who took advantage of any excuse to enter into brawls and bragging that Mazorik, always with patience and total justice for both, tried to cut off at the root.

The disciple who aroused the greatest sympathy among all, even in Mazorik, was Masarif, the medium one. His constant good humor and sympathetic jokes distributed to everyone equally made him soon the most loved, even by Jorin, who, without a doubt, was the shiest and the most difficult in character.

One of the disciples with whom I began to make a good friendship was, curiously, Maluak, the orc, given the mutual aversion that elves and orcs normally profess to each other. But as we got to know each other, we discovered quite a few things in common which, little by little, made it easier for us to forge a strong friendship among ourselves.

Marlen, the human one, being the only lady in the group, was the one who had it bad when it came to establishing friendly ties, although she immediately established a good friendship with Masarif, and with the rest, being a woman with a strong and at the same time carefree character, she answered with audacity and sympathy to "masculine" jokes, achieving a good relationship of camaraderie. Anyway, although it was difficult for us to recognize it, from the first moment Marlen and I crossed furtive glances that, partly because of shyness and partly because of cowardice, neither of us did anything to make them go further.

At last we arrived at the Mazorik's refuge, composed mainly of intercommunicated caves and well adapted for group coexistence. Each had a small alcove equipped with a bed, a table, a chair and all the necessary tools for writing, as well as for small manual work. There was also a fireplace for use as a kitchen and a large table for eating together. One of the larger rooms was used as a classroom for classes and study and had shelves full of books and parchments, maps, alchemical laboratory materials, desks and smooth walls that could be used as slate, writing with charcoal, which only Mazorik was able to clean with a simple snap of the fingers.

A few days later a giant arrived that Mazorik presented us as Garrak, an expert warrior. He told us that the seven stones could only be obtained in the heart of seven magical mountains, far away and in very dangerous places, to which only a giant like Garrak could have access.

We all took his explanation for good and accepted Garrak as another one of ours, although his clumsiness in general and his lack of understanding in intellectual matters made him not get along too much with anyone except Burak, a giant like him.

Garrak disappeared from time to time some days, reappearing with numerous wounds that we healed among all with the teachings of the master, but satisfied, because Mazorik taught us every stone that Garrak provided him and this filled with joy to the enormous warrior.

This is how the months went by during which Mazorik became a great master, teaching us all with patience and pretending kindness when needed and an unbreakable rigidity when necessary to bring out the best in each one of us.

Even today, remembering that time, I do not understand how he could deceive us so well, showing us a false face of infinite goodness when, in reality, he was so evil.

And between Mazorik's classes and Garrak's comings and goings, time passed until only one of the stones was missing. So, I will continue my story on the night that the giant Garrak got the last stone that closed the circle of the seven jewels of magical light that Mazorik needed for his abhorrent plans.

## Beneath the Celestial River

*Frienia, year 1815 of the second era.*

Guided by the White Magician, after two days the princes and their troops arrived at an extensive and fast-flowing river which separated them from the huge mountain that was already about four days away.

"How may we cross this river? The other bank is very far away and the flow is very strong," Syriel addressed White Magician.

"This is the Celestial River, the widest one of these lands. It won't be long before nightfall, we'll rest here, and tomorrow we'll look for a safe passage. Don't worry, we'll find someone," replied the magician.

While the others were preparing the camp, the princess and Baldrich continued the hard training to which the White Magician had subjected them since they left their den.

Hours later, the group was ready to dine the appetizing fish which they had fished abundantly in the wild river, and which had been roasted and piled up waiting to be shared, but suddenly they all disappeared swallowed by the ground.

As they approached cautiously, they saw a tunnel gradually entering the earth's interior.

"Mole-men!" Garin said.

"Yes, they populate these lands and they're getting more and more extensive. With an extraordinary sense of smell and an insatiable appetite, they will have come to the smell of our supper," corroborated the White Magician.

"Are they dangerous?" Syriel wanted to know.

"They wouldn't be in an open-field-battle, because they are almost blind and very clumsy on the surface. But, well-coordinated, they could sink the ground that supports an entire army in a single instant and leave them trapped in a dead-end," said the magician.

"Then, as a precaution, we should move to those rocks," proposed the prince.

"It would be prudent, yes," accepted the magician. "Although I don't think they'd attack us, they're not violent if they're not disturbed. They are very frightened and slippery, but I will try to ask for their help," said the elf.

"Help?" Syriel was surprised.

"They could solve our problem of crossing the river," said the pearly sorcerer.

"A tunnel under the river! Magnificent!" exclaimed the prince enthusiastically. "I will accompany you," proposed Syriel.

"It is better that I go alone, I can guide myself well in the darkness. Carrying torches or any source of light would be taken as a sign of hostility for them. If someone were walking with me, I would only delay and frighten the mole men," concluded the elf magician.

A few moments later, the White Magician was lost in the darkness of the tunnel.



Elenir perceived as a large group of small minds lurking crouched where they were about to pass: a narrow passage between two elevations of steep rocks.

The princess made an energetic gesture of stop and all the retinue stopped at once, vigilant before an imminent danger.

The mental exploration of the powerful sorceress detected the restlessness of the creatures when they were uncovered, although she was unable to discern the type of enemy that was trying to ambush them, but she did know that they were not of great size and felt safe to defeat the victim who had discovered them, which worried Elenir even more.

After weighing several options, the princess threw two powerful rays of fire upward on each side of the road, causing two landslides and rocks that dragged most of the surprised vermin, killing and bad tempering much of them.

The dark ones saw that they were horrendous and small beast of the approximate size of an arm, with very powerful jaws of very sharp teeth which would have got them into trouble if they had it not been detected them before.

After finishing off the wounded creatures and making sure there was no more stalking, they proceeded on their way with as much caution as possible.



At dawn, the White Magician returned to the surface, and when he stood before the princes, he informed everyone.

"They will help us, but first we have to help them. In one of their galleries a beast has slipped in that terrifies them and does not allow them to pass. If we get rid of that beast, they will dig the tunnel under the river for us," said the snowy wizard.

"Do you know what kind of creature it is?" asked Syriel.

"Well, some people said that he was throwing heat. I've thought of a dragon, although it wouldn't fit in these galleries; maybe it's a baby or maybe some other kind of creature we don't know. In any case, I don't think it's very dangerous, because if it were, there wouldn't be any mole-man alive down there," replied the wise magician.

A few minutes later, a retinue formed by the princes, the White Magician, Baldrich, Bellamir, Garin, five human soldiers and five orcs entered the galleries.

"Who is going to lead us to the beast?" the prince asked.

"They have shown me where it is," replied the magician. "I think I will know how to take you there without losing us."

The white-skinned sorcerer brought out of his hands some luminous spheres that floated over the heads of the group and provided enough light for all of them.

After advancing a good while through a labyrinthine structure of tunnels and passageways, the White Magician said to them:

"It must be around here, be alert..."

After taking a few more steps cautiously, the albino magician made a stop sign.

"I have detected its mind: it is in that bend, on the right, and it is frightened; it's a dragon calf, but already of considerable size. Don't let your guard down. Stay here, if we all go, it would be more frightened," warned the magician in a whisper.

When he was going to continue in search of the young dragon, he heard as Lirieth demanded, hopefully and firmly:

"Master, please, let me try first. It's a good opportunity to learn and practice, perhaps the only one we can have."

The snowy magician turned and looked at the princess, who looked back at him expectantly, then at Syriel, who nodded cautiously, and finally at Baldrich, who shrugged.

Then he stepped aside and went to the princess.

"Go ahead, with gentleness, but with confidence and with much caution," the White Magician warned Lirieth, after a slow nod and a deep gratitude, advanced with maximum prudence until she disappeared behind the bend.

The princess continued down the narrow passageway with very smooth and slow movements, without wielding any weapons. Suddenly she heard a slight grunt a few yards further to the right, and suddenly she saw gleaming eyes, expressing more fear than curiosity, staring at her.

She stopped and muttered reassuring words as she approached with extreme caution. The young dragon recoiled nervously and roared menacingly. Lirieth did not give up and continued to move forward energetically, but with much softness and soothing messages from mind to calf. The dragon shook and, moving into the threat position, body stretched and wings open, it tried to blow a puff of fire, but only a jet of hot air came out almost harmless.

Lirieth replied with a calm smile and affectionate cuddle, noticing how the mind of the little one opened with certain doubts, which he took advantage of to infuse her dominion as the White Magician had been teaching her the last days, with sweetness, but without showing fear, and with security and confidence in herself. Suddenly, she noticed as if someone would have opened an invisible door between the dragon and her and felt her mind unite with his.

She sensed the anguish and fear that the young calf felt when it lost all contact with its mother. The princess approached and tenderly caressed the now calmer dragon and mentally told it not to fear anything, that they would help it find its mother. Once she noticed that the beast had calmed down and was beginning to trust her, Lirieth began to walk away, inviting it to follow her. After a few moments of doubt, it advanced towards the princess, with some reserve first, and then with greater confidence.

The White Magician, who detected everything that was happening, indicated to the others, being satisfied:

"She is doing very well, soon they will be here. Hide your weapons and try not to frighten the dragon, it has strayed from its mother."

At that very moment they saw the princess appearing, encouraging the dragon to follow her, and in a few minutes, they were all surrounding the young, leading it to the exit.

The dragon was golden-colored and walked on all fours, which ended in strong, sharp claws. Its height was about six feet and almost ten feet long, about half of what it would reach in adulthood. Its mouth was large and elongated with a powerful jaw full of teeth. Its eyes were pure black on a bright yellow background and its head ended in elongated protuberances that could be described as horns, although they did not seem such because they were more like an extension of the skull itself. The skin all over the body was incredibly hard, the length of its open wings was close to fourteen feet and its body ended in an extensive and agile, but very hard tail.

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