



The
Maledict
Knights
Book I

Arifani James Moyo

“The Maledict Knights, Book I”

~ by Arifani James Moyo

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Episode I

Many centuries ago, in the old European country of Gothos, lived the greatest heroes the world has ever seen. They were true demigods, knights of glory, slayers of demons, and it is only because of them that the world did not end.

They lived in a secret fortress, deep in the black forests of Gothos, and nobody had ever seen it. Not even the emissaries of the king could find it, for there was no path to it from the snowy mountains, from the deep valleys, from the wide grasslands or even from the barren wastelands. Only the forest sorceress, Liisani, the Moor woman with many gifts, could find the fortress. She was, after all, the keeper of the secrets of the forest, but nobody would dare speak to her, if they had found her.

The people of Gothos suffered greatly from the scourge that had besieged humankind everywhere on earth. Every day, red smoke rose from the villages, the towns and the castles, and rarely from the city of the king. Every day the watchmen of Gothos would sound their horns and light their torches to raise pillars of red smoke. This was for summoning the wondrous knights of Gothos, defenders of the people.

What the people of all nations saw in those dark ages, no man, woman or child should ever see again. The abominations were somewhat like monstrous scorpions, taller than a chapel, and unnatural, as

hideous as they were ferocious. They hissed and screeched like voices of hell, tormenting the ear. No ordinary army could defeat their claws, or pierce their shells, or even escape their ravenous mouths. They destroyed all the works of humanity and all the works of nature, for there was no end to the wrath of evil.

Soaring across the sky, with wings like eagles, were four flying horses, each carrying a rider in glistening armour and shield. The people of Gothos always rejoiced, even before the battle had begun. There was Muku, whose skin was black as coal, a descendent of slaves from the Dark Continent, wielding his thunderous hammer. There was Juni, the fair princess with golden hair, and she wielded her shimmering sword. There was Kerenike, the ruddy damsel with auburn hair, and hers was the crossbow of lightning arrows. There was her equally beautiful twin brother, Zaku, with his dreadful pike.

The abominations always knew their enemy at once, and hastened to threaten with their claws and teeth and stings, but to no avail. Their spines shattered when the hammer of Muku shook the earth. Their bodies burst into fire when they but touched the lightning arrows of Kerenike. The sword of Juni cut the monsters into pieces, while the pike of Zaku pierced their entrails and brains. The armour of the knights was impervious to every strike and every blow from the creatures. The knights were strong as bears, but fast as hares, and agile as grasshoppers, leaping

higher than the tallest trees, as if their armour was no burden.

The battles were dreadful but not long, for the grace and strength of these wondrous knights of Gothos prevailed quickly. They then rescued the folk from under debris, carried any who could not walk, and showed mercy to the grieving. When the place was calm, the knights departed quickly, for there was always red smoke rising elsewhere in the distance.

One day the knights, on their heavenly horses, landed upon a thawing, grey mountainside, where they had seen red smoke, and then walked. Behold, there was nothing there but a shadowy figure behind the fire where the smoke had risen. The knights looked at each other in bewilderment, and Muku signalled the squad forward, weapons at the ready. He led the others slowly, walking carefully toward the stranger, and then called: “Who are you?”

The stranger strode heavily out of the smoke and fire, his armour black with soot, his face a mystery behind the visor of his helm. When he showed the fierce poleaxe in his hand, the knights showed their vigilance. Muku commanded, “Sir, drop your weapon! We are enforcers of the law!” The stranger stood quietly, resolute, and when he stepped once forward, Muku commanded again, “Sir, I said...” A baritone laugh sounded from the helm of the stranger. Muku spoke again, “Do not be disobedient, stranger! It will be to your peril!”

The stranger called, “Muku!” The knights stopped. The stranger again spoke, “Have you forgotten me, son of Gothos?” Muku became weak and muttered, “...impossible ...impossible...” Zaku, the beautiful one, came forward in authority, pointing his pike, and said, “You! Stranger! Did you not hear what the commander said?” The stranger launched before the eye could see, and a terrible clash threw Zaku against a rock, which cracked into pieces. The other three knights plunged into battle as the mountainside erupted into a terror of thunder, fire and dust.

Soon the battle was over, knights laying in agony, the stranger standing over them as he spoke to Muku. The stranger said, “Do not let me show you again that I am better than a demigod. You will find the child, and bring it to me, or I will kill all of you, and Gothos will fall under my hand. The world shall know of no atrocity more dreadful than the one I will bring to your cities and lands.” The stranger walked away saying, “Give my regards to the king.” Muku struggled to speak, “What child?”, but the stranger was gone.

The knights on horseback landed outside the fortress, and when the watchman saw them, he ordered for the gates to open. The knights rode sombrely into the courtyard while the squires and maids saluted. The knights left their beasts to the stable keeper and went down to the chamber of assembly. They put their helmets and weapons aside, sat at the table together and held hands for prayer. Muku said, “I give thanks

to the Radiance of the Dawn, for giving light to my life another day.” Each of the others repeated the prayer, and then there was silence.

Muku said, “Go and eat, and rest well tonight, for tomorrow we will visit the king”. Zaku replied, “Will you not tell us who our enemy was, and why he knew your name?” Muku answered, “I will, but you will not believe it. He is Omneferus.” The table was silent, but Zaku spoke again, “How do you know?” Kerenike rebuked, “Do not question the commander”, but Zaku persisted, “How do you know?” Muku said, “It was him”. “You killed Omneferus”, said Zaku, “or did you not?” Kerenike rebuked again, “The commander speaks the truth.” Zaku continued, “How do you explain it?” Muku thought and said, “I do not.”

Episode II

No place on earth was closer to heaven than the radiant city of the king, capital of Gothos. The city first grew from an old citadel on the mountainside, but it became a vast and marvellous place.

Its pride and joy was the great dog of Gothos, a giant golden sculpture at the lowest altitude of the mountainside. Dogs are lucky in the mythology of Gothos, so the idol stood for prosperity and peace. It towered mightily over all the houses and centres of trade, but not over the highest altitude of the city. Travellers could see the golden dog from afar, and that is why they called it the valley of the dog.

The royal citadel was at the highest altitude of the city, a citadel still as grand, as strong and as perfect as it was in the olden days. The palace of the king was newer, safe behind the high walls and brightening the centre of the citadel. Its windows and rooftops were truly glorious in daylight, reminding all within of the benevolence of the Radiance of the Dawn.

The bony hand of K'Cheechik, the palace jester, slowly opened the door to a royal bedchamber, and he entered quietly. He was a tall, thin man with a face that was withering from the meanness of his soul. He removed the key from the chamber door, closed it behind him, hid the key in his sleeve, and began to look around. He saw a pile of garments on the bed and searched through it, ruffling the dresses of the little

girl. K'Cheechik found a little purse, opened it, and seeing that it was full of pebbles, he smiled.

The voice of the girl spoke from somewhere in the chamber, "Put them down, now." K'Cheechik, looking for her, said, "Princess, I did not know you were here; where are you?" Princess Maj'Lini came out of her hiding, a most luminous and healthy child, with blonde hair and clear blue eyes. She would surely grow into a beautiful noblewoman one day, for she was naturally regal. "Put them down, I say" she commanded, but K'Cheechik approached her, questioning, "What are these for, little girl? Do you have a secret? Tell me, little girl – or shall I tell your father?"

"What will you tell him – his daughter plays with childish pebbles?" asked Maj'Lini. K'Cheechik took one out of the purse and said, "No. I will show him this..." as he threw it to the ceiling. The pebble did not fall but remained in the air, and K'Cheechik threw the others too, "and this... and this... and this..." which all remained in the air. He said, "What is this witchcraft you are doing, little girl? I will expose you, unless..." "Unless what?" joined Maj'Lini. "Unless you tell me where you go in the night – I have seen you, princess. What are you hiding?" K'Cheechik leaned over the girl and whispered to her, "I will tell no one if you share your secret with me."

Maj'Lini screamed, and K'Cheechik grabbed her to cover her mouth, commanding, "Be quiet you little..."

Ah!!” K’Cheechik yelped in pain and fell on his knees as the girl twisted his hand. Maj’Lini said, “If you ever touch me again, I will break your arm.” She released him, and he breathed his relief, then snarled, “You little brat... I will expose you... Whatever you are, I will expose you!” Maj’Lini raised her arm, and K’Cheechik winced, but the girl stood still while the pebbles in the air returned into their purse and came to her hand. She said, “What will a jester say, that anyone will believe without proof?”

K’Cheechik stood up, hurried to the door and opened it quietly, panting, “You have not seen the last of me.” He exited the chamber, closed the door quietly and hurried along the corridor, but the palace guards arrived, blocking his way. “Where were you?” K’Cheechik scolded them as he turned back and led them to the chamber door. He knocked and called, “Princess, are you there? We heard a scream. Fear not, Princess. The palace guards are here.” He scolded the guards again, “What are you waiting for – a tragedy?” The guards entered the chamber while K’Cheechik walked away.

Maj’Lini stood sobbing inside the chamber, and one guard said, “Princess, please come with me”. He took her into the corridor while the other guards scanned the chamber. Mohantuu ran into the corridor, a voluptuous young nursemaid with skin like caramel, and soft, curly black hair, for her parents were of two races. Her mother was a peasant of Gothos, but the father had been a descendant of slaves from the Dark

Continent. Mohantuu ran past K'Cheechik while Maj'Lini ran toward Mohantuu. Maj'Lini embraced Mohantuu, who said, "Princess, what happened?" Maj'Lini sobbed, "There was a creepy, crawling thing near my bed".

Mohantuu looked behind herself and saw the back of K'Cheechik as he went out of sight. Mohantuu turned back to Maj'Lini, whose face looked down to her feet, and Mohantuu kneeled before the child. Mohantuu inquired, "Are you sure?", and Maj'Lini nodded, then Mohantuu rose up to speak to the guard. Mohantuu said, "It was only a spider", and the guard replied, "We will finish the inspection, and then the princess may return to her chamber." Mohantuu kneeled again to speak to Maj'Lini, who embraced her around the head like a little scarf. Mohantuu whispered, "Since when are you afraid of such things?"

Guards opened the throne room doors for Sir Dindik, the famous historian of Gothos and chief advisor to the king. Dindik, a small, chubby nobleman with a short and clean beard, marched toward the throne, bowed and spoke: "My king, forgive the intrusion, but we have a guest". King Nokut dismissed the bookkeepers around him and stood up from his seat, a tall and beautiful mature man with a long, white beard. He said, "I trust this is more important than the economy of Gothos?" Dindik replied, "The Oracle is here." "...and you kept her waiting?" said Nokut as he hurried toward the doors, Dindik following.

“Son of Gothos!” chanted the hoarse voice of an elderly woman at the throne room doors, and Nokut replied, “My lady!” The Oracle, M’Shee, was an ancient brown woman of both Gothic and Moor descent, fragile but radiant and enchanting. She was but a few steps inside the throne room when Nokut kowtowed before her. “Rise, you sovereign” commanded M’Shee, and after Nokut rose, M’Shee said, “I have much to tell you, later, and you will need courage to hear it”. She smiled warmly, and touched his face, tenderly.

Episode III

The palace gardens were the most beautiful and colourful place within the great citadel of the king. The loveliest flowers and plants decorated all the walls, and perfect hedges winded over the land like a labyrinth. The paving of each walkway was of old stone, and carpets of level green lawns softened the earth. Different birds sang in the shady trees, and swans and ducks caught little fish in the ponds. The fountains, sundials and wooden benches were of the finest sculpture by the legendary artisans of Gothos.

King Nokut strolled with the Oracle M'Shee holding his arm, a few palace guards keeping watch from a distance. M'Shee said, "I am glad you finally did something about the foxes. I never understood your fascination about them." Nokut laughed, "I had no fascination" "Then what was it – compassion?" "Are they not creatures of nature?" "Not when they eat my birds" "Thieves took the birds, not foxes" "Be careful, king, I am an Oracle. I know when you are lying" "I am not lying", Nokut laughed, "We tried the men" "...and then the foxes just disappeared of their own accord?" "Strangely..." "Very strangely..."

Maj'Lini shouted from the hedges, "Grandmother!" and ran in front of them to leap into the embrace of M'Shee. They laughed together, and Nokut said, "Be gentle with the elderly, little lass". M'Shee said to him, "Huh! Speak for yourself." Nokut asked, "Where were you hiding, my girl?" Maj'Lini said, "You did not tell

me grandmother was here.” “No one told me either. You know what she is like” said Nokut. M’Shee smiled, “oh my little one”, brushing Maj’Lini’s hair.

M’Shee suddenly looked out in front of her, and there was Mohantuu, the nursemaid, approaching them. Mohantuu kneeled and said “My lady...” “Rise, you woman”, said M’Shee. Mohantuu stood up and curtsied gracefully. M’Shee said, “Come closer.” Mohantuu hesitated, and Nokut spoke formally, “Obey the Oracle, young maiden.” Mohantuu approached M’Shee, who also approached her, and when they met, M’Shee touched the face of Mohantuu. M’Shee said, “Do not be afraid, daughter. The Radiance of the Dawn will be the light to your life, all your days.” Mohantuu said, “My lady, I have no words...”

Nokut said, “Mohantuu, take Maj’Lini with you and give her some fresh goat’s milk”; “Father...” said Maj’Lini, and Nokut replied, “We will join you soon, my girl”. “Come...” said Mohantuu, taking Maj’Lini’s hand and Maj’Lini commanded, “Do not spend all day talking all that royal talk”. M’Shee smiled, “I will be with you soon, my little one.” Maj’Lini skipped away, pulling Mohantuu, who was running to keep up.

M’Shee sighed, “That child is more you than her mother, and that worries me”. “What does that mean?” laughed Nokut. “You will marry again” said M’Shee. Nokut became sombre and said, “Are you speaking as an Oracle?” M’Shee touched his face and said, “Of course not.” M’Shee walked away from

Nokut, and he said, “Forgive me, my lady...” “I know”, M’Shee replied, “I know, my boy. May the queen live forever – we all still mourn her – but I did not come to talk about her. I came to tell you what I heard from the clouds, and I know you have not slept well, for your soul too was restless. This is why.”

The eyes of M’Shee became like glowing pearls, and she breathed in a low voice, “The days that the ancients foretold are now. The judgment is at hand. The Radiance of the Dawn is upon the birthplace of the child, but woe to that land, for though her deliverance is sure, so is her mourning”. Nokut kneeled down and said, “Who is the child?” M’Shee replied, “The child is of noble birth. The child is the one who will end all wars.” Nokut said, “How can this be?” M’Shee replied, “...because the cradle is an altar, and the child is a sacrifice.”

M’Shee closed her eyes, and as she swooned, Nokut stood up quickly to catch her, and then M’Shee slightly opened her eyes. She muttered “I am getting too old for this...” as palace guards ran to assist the king. He added, “Me too”. M’Shee said, “You know nothing yet of old age. You will remember these days fondly.” “Really...? These days?” remarked Nokut.

One guard carried M’Shee like a bride, and she said, “I could get comfortable with this...” Nokut blushed, “My lady!”, and he told the guard, “Take her to her bedchamber.” “Yes, do”, flirted M’Shee with the soldier. “My lady, please...” said Nokut, suppressing

his embarrassment. Nokut stayed with two guards while watching the other guards take M'Shee back inside the palace. Nokut heard two feet behind him, and when he turned, there was Dindik approaching quickly. "More guests, Dindik?" smiled Nokut, and Dindik panted "I jest you not, my king."

The marvelous palace antechamber was in its brightest hour as Muku, Juni, Kerenike and Zaku waited. Their armours glistened gloriously in all the sunlight and reflection of the antechamber windows. Nokut, Dindik and the bodyguards entered, and the knights kneeled at once. Muku alone spoke, "Live long, o radiant king, Nokut, son of Nokyne!" "Rise, you warriors" replied Nokut, and the knights stood up.

"How is my daughter?" asked Nokut, and Muku said, "Princess Juni, your father speaks". Juni approached the king, embraced him with a kiss and said, "It is so good to see you, father." She returned to stand with the other knights.

Looking at Muku, Nokut said, "How is my friend?" Muku replied, "I am strong. Everyone is strong. We give thanks for life." Nokut said to them, "The Radiance of the Dawn will be the light to your life." Muku replied, "...as to yours, dearest king", and the knights bowed together before the king.

Nokut continued, "I will order a banquet and the sweetest beds. I forbid you to leave this palace before

you are fat”. Muku nodded, “You are generous, good king.”

Maj’Lini was brushing her pony at the stable when she heard a neighing voice behind the corner. She looked to her side, but there was nothing there, so she continued brushing the pony. When the voice neighed again, Maj’Lini looked around, walked to the corner to look, but there was nothing. She pointed at the pony, “Did you do that?” The voice said, behind her, “Neigh, me lass! It was me!”

She turned around to see Juni in an elegant gown, and Maj’Lini leapt into her arms. Juni lifted Maj’Lini up and twirled her around and around in their shrieks of mirth. Juni placed Maj’Lini back on her feet, and they embraced tightly until Juni began to snivel. “Look what you made me do”, said Juni, wiping her cheek, and Maj’Lini touched her face, and they embraced again.

Episode IV

The great dining hall dazzled the eye with Gothic chandeliers and sculpture in soothing candlelight. Fiddles and tambourines tickled the ear, the fragrant smoke of herbs sweetening the nostrils. Dozens of noble guests made a hubbub at long tables with flowers, silverwares and tray covers over the banquet. Servants and guards waited at the thick curtains surrounding the room while carpets guided the way between the tables. The doors were open, since the largest table, at the centre of the hall, still had ten empty chairs – eight at the sides and two at the head.

Drums and cymbals resounded near the doors, quietening the music as well as the crowd, and a herald standing at the entrance raised his voice: “My lords and ladies, the final dignitaries have arrived, and will now take their seats!”

He stepped away from the entrance and called: “The Palace Jester, K’Cheechik!” Musicians played a zany sound as K’Cheechik, in his colours, entered, and some of the guests snickered. K’Cheechik frowned, turned to the herald and whispered, “I am the son of a nobleman. If you call me a jester again, I will find a way for you to hang.” K’Cheechik walked briskly toward a table servant pulling out the chair at one wing of the empty ten. K’Cheechik sat, ignoring the guests near him.

The herald raised his hand, stopping the music, and then called: “His Honour the Lawmaker Zorkan!” Musicians played a slow, ceremonial melody as Zorkan entered, a balding, mature man with a thin, black beard, cold eyes and a stern face. He wore the most sombre robes and moved slowly to his seat, next to K’Cheechik. The table servant pulled out the chair and Zorkan sat, nodding to K’Cheechik and a few of the nearby guests.

The herald stopped the music, and called: “The Honourable Historian, Sir Dindik, Chief Advisor to the King!” Dindik entered and moved most naturally to his seat, next to Zorkan. The table servant pulled out the chair and Dindik sat, exchanging dispassionate greetings with Zorkan and K’Cheechik.

The herald stopped the music again and waited for a complete silence in the crowd. The herald raised his voice: “The Wondrous Knight, Dame Kerenike!” Music resumed and in came Kerenike, wearing the elegant robe of a lady, flowers beautifying her hair, a handsome squire at her side. The noble crowd stood and applauded while the squire offered his elbow to Kerenike. She held onto him as he led her, both walking gracefully, toward her seat, opposite to K’Cheechik. Kerenike freed the squire as he pulled out her chair and she sat, greeting those close to her.

The herald stopped the music and applause, and then called: “The Wondrous Knight, Sir Zaku!” The applause and music resumed while a little boy walked

ahead of Zaku, who marched confidently in courtly apparel. Zaku looked around the hall in amazement, and his eye caught a group of young servant women huddling at a curtain. They whispered to each other and pointed blushing at him. Zaku smiled at them and they giggled amongst themselves. The little boy led Zaku to the seat next to Kerenike, and the table servant pulled out the chair. Zaku sat, and did not greet anyone but Kerenike.

The herald stopped the music and applause before calling: “The Wondrous Knight and Commander, Sir Muku!” The music resumed and applause resumed, with even louder cheers, while the little boy led Muku, in courtly apparel, toward Zaku and Kerenike. Muku held his composure, paying no attention to the excitement around him.

“I could get comfortable with this” said Zaku to Kerenike. She replied plainly, “Nobility is by birth, my dear brother.” Zaku replied, “ah, but not popularity.” Kerenike said, “Where would you be popular – in a tavern?” Zaku said, “Can you not see how the women here adore me?” Kerenike said, “Flattery does not mean they adore you.” Zaku relaxed into his chair, “Flattery will do then.” The table servant pulled out the chair next to Zaku, and Muku sat, greeting all those close to him.

The herald stopped the music and applause, waited for complete silence, and called: “Her Royal Highness, Princess Juni, and Her Royal Highness, Princess

Maj'Lini!" The crowd cheered with music as the little boy walked ahead of the two princesses, who were hand in hand. They wore glorious courtly dresses, had prettified themselves with flowers, and each had a delicate little crown of precious stones. Mohantuu walked behind them, and she herself was the smartest of all servants.

The little boy led them to the seat next to Dindik, and the table servant pulled out the chair. Juni lifted Maj'Lini onto the chair and they smiled at each other while the little boy left and Mohantuu came to stand behind Maj'Lini. Juni followed the table servant to the opposite side of the table, to the seat next to Muku. The table servant pulled out the chair and Juni sat, greeting everyone she could see.

The herald stopped all commotion and waited for silence. He raised his voice: "His Majesty, King Nokut!" The commotion returned as Nokut walked ahead of a bodyguard, and the table servant pulled out the first chair at the head of the table, near Juni. Nokut acknowledged the whole crowd as well as those at the table, then sat down.

The herald stopped the commotion again, waited for silence and spoke: "The king has required the greatest reverence for his final guest. All will stand and remain silent for Her Radiance and Loveliness, the Oracle M'Shee." The crowd complied, and musicians played a sacred melody while M'Shee entered with two servant women at each side.

When M'Shee and the servants were approaching the table, M'Shee screamed hoarsely and swooned into the embrace of the servants. The music stopped, Nokut sprang from his seat and said, "Nobody moves!", before running to M'Shee. Maj'Lini began to move, but Mohantuu stopped her and said, "Let your father handle it." The crowd murmured and the knights exchanged glances of concern.

Nokut reached M'Shee as she lifted herself from the arms of the servants, her eyes glowing. M'Shee embraced Nokut, whispered in his ear, and rested in his arms until her eyes became normal. She continued toward her seat, the two servant women escorting her very closely, ready to support her. Nokut summoned the herald and instructed him, and then Nokut caught up with M'Shee.

The herald announced: "The Oracle has had an overwhelming journey, but she is fine! Let the banquet begin!" Music resumed as Nokut and M'Shee reached their seats. All the table servants approached and unveiled the trays, where every rare kind of meat, drink and fruit delighted appetites. There was much rejoicing, and all the people were glad.

Episode V

Muku had already dressed for courtly manners as he stood at the window of his bedchamber, enjoying the soft morning light. His room was simple but spacious and soothing, with a bed and two chairs. He heard a knock and said, “Enter” as he turned to see Kerenike in her ladylike daywear. “It is not proper for a woman to visit a man in his solitude” said Muku. “Are we men and women now?” said Kerenike, closing the door behind her. Muku replied, “Knights are those who respect the customs of the palace, unless there is a cause greater than custom.” Kerenike stood still and asked, “...is there?”

Muku gestured to the chairs and said, “Here you are not only my subordinate, but also a lady. No cause within the palace will ever be greater than our humanity”. Kerenike nodded and took her seat first, while Muku stood, then Muku went to his seat, asking “Where is Zaku?” Kerenike rolled her eyes and said, “He is being popular.” Muku said, “Why not you?” Kerenike said, “I do not have the luxury of youth.” Muku said, “He is your twin.” Kerenike said, “Yet we are not alike.” Muku said, “You mean you would rather not be alike.” Kerenike said, “I would rather live in the real world.”

Muku said, “I was once like you.” Kerenike said, “You sound like an old man.” Muku said, “I am not much older than you, but I am certainly no youth. Your loyalty is precious, Kerenike, but I hope you do not age

before your time, like I did.” “Why would that be bad?” asked Kerenike, and Muku replied, “Because you would end up like me.” “Why would that be bad?” Kerenike asked again, and they both smiled humbly. Muku was silent, and then he said, “It is my honour to serve the king, to serve my people, and to serve you.” They both saluted each other.

Muku said, “The world calls you a demigod, only because they do not know what they envy. None of us chose this crusade, or the price we must pay for it, yet we will pay it in full. My work is not to console you, Kerenike, but to warn you. I could not have foreseen all that my calling required of me. My forefathers were captives when they came to this land. They were cargo, in merchant ships, and then they were slaves, lower than peasants. Who ever dreamed that a simple black boy would become a saviour of Gothos? Now I am a hero, and I carry the heaviest of all burdens – trying to live up to my fame.”

Kerenike said, “You defeated the traitor once, and you will defeat him again.” Muku said, “I did not defeat him easily, and now he is stronger, faster, truly hateful. He is not the Omneferus that I remember, and I am not the warrior that I remember. Omneferus was a fugitive. He had lost his soul and forfeited his knighthood for murdering my commander, but he never lost his power.” Kerenike spoke: “I heard you removed his heart and limbs.” Muku smiled: “I sometimes fear who I become in legend.”

Kerenike asked, “What if this stranger was an impostor?” Muku said, “I would dread him even more than a zombie.” Kerenike spoke: “I know you would not burden us with what is beyond our understanding...” and Muku interrupted, “but I have burdened you nonetheless, because you know that he said something to me that you did not hear.” Kerenike looked down and said, “Forgive me”. Muku said, “You will regret what you have chosen to hear this morning, but it is not my place to spare you the lesson.”

Muku leaned forward and said, “I am going to tell the king that Omneferus is alive, by sorceries none of us could have foreseen. I will tell the king that four demigods could not prevail against the zombie; then I will tell the king what the zombie told me. Omneferus said, ‘bring the child, or I will destroy Gothos’. I do not know who the child is, but I will tell the king the truth: I am afraid for his little daughter, and I know of no force in this world that can protect her.”

The smaller courtyard was inside a porch border with rows of pillars, and at the centre of the paving was a beautiful fountain constantly filling the fountain well. Juni and Maj’Lini had lifted their dresses up to the knees in order to sit at the fountain well, facing the sprinkle, legs in the water. The princesses splashed and paddled, laughing together, until Mohantuu came by and said to them, “Your father is coming.” “Quick”, said Juni, nudging Maj’Lini as Mohantuu walked away. The princesses hurried out of the water, and

Juni said, “Fix yourself and cover your feet.” The princesses ordered their dresses, covering their feet, and poised themselves ladylike.

Mohantuu bowed to Nokut as she passed him, and he nodded to her before reaching the princesses. Juni curtsied and said “Good day to you, my father”, then poised herself again. Maj’Lini repeated the words and actions of her sister. “Good day to you both...” said Nokut, then he paused and said, “Why am I suspicious?” Juni opened her arms and shrugged her shoulders, and Maj’Lini did likewise. Juni put her arms together again, returning to her posture, and Maj’Lini did likewise. Nokut said, “Do not play at the fountain”. Juni said, “We know, father”, and Maj’Lini said, “We know.” “And do not encourage her” said Nokut to Juni, and Maj’Lini, pointing out, yelled “The Commander!”

Muku, arriving, said, “Pardon me, your majesty”, and Nokut said, “You are not interrupting. Come closer, my friend.” Muku approached them and turned to Nokut. Muku said, “My lord”. Muku and Nokut bowed to each other. Muku turned to Juni, and Muku said, “My lady”. Muku and Juni bowed to each other.

Maj’Lini interrupted, “You look handsome, Commander!” Muku smiled and knelt before Maj’Lini. Muku offered his hand and said, “May I kiss your hand?” Maj’Lini offered her hand and Muku took it and kissed it. Maj’Lini put her arms around him and kissed his cheek, and then she whispered closely in his

ear, “Juni too thinks you are handsome.” “Try not to smother the man” chuckled Juni as she held out her hand to Maj’Lini.

The princesses took each other’s hands and walked off together. Muku stood, and Nokut said, “Sit with me”. They sat at the fountain well, their backs to the sprinkle. Nokut said, “My throne is for decrees, and this fountain for secrets. I know why you came to the palace, but there is something I must tell you first”.

Episode VI

The larger courtyard was a grand enclosure between the tall structures of the palace, and soldiers lined up the whole perimeter. The army drummers and horn blowers stood in perfect formation at the periphery of the main courtyard. Four heavenly horses, folding their wings, stood at the very centre of the courtyard. Near each horse, a military attendant stood with the shield and weapon of the rider. There was the hammer of Muku, the sword of Juni, the crossbow of Kerenike, and the pike of Zaku.

The great doors into the palace antechamber were wide open, and in the shade of the arch entrance was an assembly. It included the royal family, the entourage of the king, Dindik, and the knights in their armour, helmets in hand, but not the Oracle. The knights bowed to the king, and Maj'Lini ran toward Juni, who knelt to receive a kiss. Maj'Lini went back to stand with her nursemaid Mohantuu, behind the king. Juni stood up to join the other knights as they became upright and wore their helmets.

The knights walked out of the arch, and the drummers and horn blowers immediately began a glorious noise in perfect rhythm. The music continued, with every other soldier saluting, for the entire march of the knights toward their horses. The knights took their weapons and shields, and as soon as they mounted, the royal army cheered. The military attendants ran quickly out of the way as the horses walked into a

straight line formation. Muku was in front, Juni following, then Kerenike, then Zaku.

The horses all at once spread their great wings with an enormous flap, and the palace army roared with delight. Suddenly there was a thunderous dash as the flying horse of Muku launched into the sky, the palace army voicing their awe. The other three followed suit, one thunderous launch after another, to great cheers among the palace soldiers. The four sky riders were high up within moments, becoming barely visible shadows in the clouds. Those on earth continued the commotion of joy and awe for what they had witnessed.

The farmers' market was still alive, though late in the day, with the hubbub of the peasant crowd, and noisy animals like goats, cows and dogs. There were tents, stalls, baskets and all the produce of the earth for sale, as crafts for homely life. There were also bards, with flute, tabor and tambourine, making a cheerful noise for the people. The village idiot mumbled his mumbo jumbo, complaining about the nuisance of crows. Peasant folk kept pouring in and out from the nearby village on the hillside, with its little houses, few trees and stone roads dividing the grassland.

The juvenile, Soralus, was swarthy like olives, with big, drowsy eyes under thick eyebrows, round cheeks and curly black hair. His shoulders and lips drooped, his body weakly, and his attire that of an unkempt country boy. He stood with an empty basket near the

outermost tent at the market, where there were few people. He was vacant and unaware until someone smacked him behind the head. Soralus stumbled and fell as three big boys surrounded him, chanting, “Worm! This is our festival, worm! Go home, worm!”

Soralus stood up, picked up his basket and remained silent, but the boys continued: “Did you not hear what we said, worm? Go now!” Soralus turned to them and said, quite innocently, “I have not finished yet, and it is not your market”. The biggest boy took Soralus by the collar and was about to punch Soralus in the face when the other big boy looked out and said, “The hag!” The three big boys sprinted away as a plump and vigorous woman in a thick dress arrived.

Hia’Nyda, the aging spinster, had a wide face, thin lips and sunken eyes, always tying her thin black hair behind her. Her strong working hands took Soralus by the cheeks and squeezed them. Hia’Nyda spoke with a raspy voice, “What have I told you about fighting?” Soralus whined, “I was not fighting...” “What have I told you about lying?” “I am not lying...” “What have I told you about contradicting me?” Soralus began to sob, and Hia’Nyda let him go, saying, “Stop snivelling and come and help me inside.”

The sun was low at the top of the hill, as Hia’Nyda led Soralus on foot, with baskets full of potato and cabbage, as well as bread, milk and meat. Hia’Nyda spoke: “I cannot look after you forever, you know. Did you come out of my womb?” “Nobody came out of

your womb” commented Soralus, quite sincerely. Hia’Nyda stopped and turned to him, “What have I said about speaking out of turn?” Soralus looked down, and they continued in silence.

They were approaching a cabin under the trees, at the very edge of a forest, when four strange silhouettes stood on the carriage road near the cabin. Hia’Nyda said, “Who wants what from me now, at this hour?” Hoofs clumped as the four figures approached, revealing the wondrous knights, on horses that had folded their wings. Hia’Nyda and Soralus stopped. Hia’Nyda grumbled, “What in the name of all sanity is this madness?”

The horses stopped and Muku dismounted, leaving his shield and hammer, and then walked up to Hia’Nyda. Muku stopped and said, “Does this cabin belong to you?” Hia’Nyda said, “Who wants to know?” Zaku shouted, “You will bow before a knight of Gothos, peasant!” Hia’Nyda growled, “I have paid all my taxes to your thieving government. If you think you can threaten me...” “We come in peace!” said Muku, raising his palms, “Knights, be calm!” He removed his helmet and said, “I am Muku...” Hia’Nyda interrupted, in a low voice, “I do not answer to a negro.”

Muku calmly said, “I am looking for the spinster, whose name is Hia’Nyda.” Soralus pointed, “That’s her!” Hia’Nyda turned around and said, “You be quiet, boy, or I’ll...” “What is your name, boy?” asked

Muku. “Shut your little gob!” Hia’Nyda told Soralus, but he spoke: “My name is Soralus.” Hia’Nyda raised her hand and Muku grabbed it. He said, “If you hurt him, I will arrest you, and even Lokurru will not help you, for I am higher than he.” Muku released Hia’Nyda and she calmed herself.

“Soralus... Put down your basket and come here,” said Muku. Soralus obeyed while Hia’Nyda implored him, “I have done nothing but protect you, boy, and feed you. Tell them, boy. Tell them...” Soralus stood facing Muku, who knelt and bowed his head. The other knights dismounted, left shields and weapons, and came behind Muku. They too removed their helmets, knelt and bowed. Soralus then spoke, pointing back to Hia’Nyda: “Should she bow to me as well?”

Episode VII

The inside of the wooden cabin was a small space with much clutter, a fireplace and flickering candles that made shadows dance upon the glowing walls. Soralus sat at the little table gobbling his potato, meat and cabbage while Hia’Nyda and Lokurru, facing each other, spoke. Lokurru was a very scruffy old peasant man with a small frame, a fluffy brown beard, a balding head and pleasant, twinkling eyes.

Hia’Nyda grumbled continuously: “All these years you have burdened me, and now this...” Lokurru spoke casually, with a soft voice and an aristocratic accent unlike a peasant: “How was I to know that they would come so soon? What did they say?” Soralus spoke with his mouth full: “They bowed to me.” “What have I told you about speaking with food in your mouth?” said Hia’Nyda to Soralus. Lokurru reached his arm to touch the hair of Soralus. “Hungry, are you, little fellow?” said Lokurru, and Hia’Nyda said, “Do not hearten the little glutton.”

“I will hearten myself then, with your scrumptious cooking” said Lokurru, returning to his meal. Hia’Nyda dispassionately mumbled “Old flatterer!” “What did they say, then?” asked Lokurru patiently. Hia’Nyda rambled, “What do they all say? All their pompous talk – no decency, coming here to vex an old woman – telling us all sorts of nonsense...” “What nonsense, then?” Lokurru persevered.

Soralus said “The negro, he said he is better than you.” Hia’Nyda said, “Shut it!” pushing her finger against the forehead of Soralus. Lokurru laughed quietly and heartily. Hia’Nyda said, “You find this funny, do you?” Lokurru said, “Of course he is better than me; am I a demigod?” “Huh!” said Hia’Nyda, “these demigods... what have they done for me? I pay taxes so they can stuff their mouths without having to work for anything” Soralus said “cross the bridge” and Hia’Nyda stood up to threaten, “I am getting tired of you...”

“Leave him alone” commanded Lokurru, with a sudden seriousness that surprised and arrested Hia’Nyda. Lokurru had stopped eating, and he said “I want to hear what the boy said.” Hia’Nyda said, “Fine then”, as she turned her back on them and busied herself at the kitchen. Lokurru said, “Soralus, I want you to tell me again what you just said.” Soralus replied: “Cross the bridge. The negro said, ‘tell Lokurru you must cross the bridge tomorrow’ and I said ‘yes sir I will’ and he said ‘promise you will’ and I said ‘I promise’ and they went away.”

Lokurru paused in thought and said to Hia’Nyda, “Listen, you old woman!” Hia’Nyda turned around and said, “Did I ask for any of it?” Lokurru continued, “Did you hear what the boy said? Did he speak the truth?” Hia’Nyda said, “Have I taught him to lie?” Lokurru asked, “Did you hear it too when the visitors instructed him?” Hia’Nyda said, “Of course I heard, but were they speaking to me? Who has any care for

an old woman in these dreadful days?” Hia’Nyda returned to her activity while Lokurru leaned back into his chair and sighed, sombrely.

Soralus stopped eating and became curious for the very first time, “What is this bridge? Do you know it? Lokurru...” “I heard you my boy” replied Lokurru, “Finish your meal – and I want you to go to bed early tonight.” “When we will go fishing again, Lokurru?” asked Soralus. Lokurru said, “I am not sure, my boy.” Lokurru stood up to kiss Soralus on the head, and then went to Hia’Nyda. Lokurru said, “Thank you” touching Hia’Nyda on the shoulder, and she said, “What must an old woman do for a little appreciation these days?”

Lokurru kissed Hia’Nyda on the head and she stopped her chore, then Lokurru said, “Goodnight”, and Hia’Nyda nodded, “Goodnight.” Soralus said, “Goodnight, Lokurru”, and Lokurru replied, “Sleep early, my boy. I want to see you up early tomorrow.” Hia’Nyda continued her chore while Lokurru let himself out of the cabin and closed the door. Hia’Nyda turned to look at the table and said, “...and who will finish that?”

The morning mist and dew made everything glitter outside the cabin, and three figures were on the carriage road. Soralus sat on a donkey while Lokurru fastened two sacks on either side of the beast, and Hia’Nyda stood watching. Lokurru finished fastening and said, panting, “...that should have more than

enough for three days. The beast knows his way, and after he leaves you where you need to go, he will find his own way back. Look after him, will you?"

Soralus nodded and then asked, sulkily, "Why are you not coming, Lokurru?" Lokurru became sombre and said, "This is a journey you must make by yourself, Soralus. Nobody can come with you, but take comfort; for there are others who have gone before you. When you reach the bridge, leave everything with the beast. Take nothing with you but the clothes on your body; everything else you need will be on the other side of the bridge. There is one more thing I need to tell you, Soralus, and you must listen to me very carefully."

Lokurru moved closer and said, "When you have crossed the bridge, you can never return, and many things will change. Soralus, this journey that you are about to make will be the hardest thing you have ever done in your life. You will need all the courage and strength you can muster, much more than you may feel you have ever had."

Soralus drooped and looked down as Lokurru continued: "The first changes will happen to your mind, and you will think you are going mad; for the voice of Liisani, the forest sorceress, will speak to you directly as if she was right behind you. She will never appear to you in the flesh, but she will guide you, and if you obey her, she will save your life. If you disobey her, you will die."

Soralus began to shed tears, and Lokurru continued: “Another set of changes will happen to your body, and you will find this very difficult to bear at first, but you will adjust. Soralus, we may never see each other again, but it has been my honour to watch grow from an infant...” Lokurru blinked a wet eye and stepped back, saying “The Radiance of the Dawn is a light to your life, young man.”

Hia’Nyda came closer and squeezed Soralus by the chin. Hia’Nyda said, in a low and gentle voice, “What did I tell you about crying?” She pulled his head toward her and kissed his cheek, then nudged him back up, her eyes watering despite her sour face. Hia’Nyda said, “Look after yourself”. Lokurru tapped the donkey and it began to move.

Episode VIII

Soralus, with his luggage, rode the donkey past hills and grasslands where there were no villages or people. He stopped at each stream and river to eat his bread while the beast drank and grazed from the earth. Soralus reached the foot of a mountain at nightfall, and the beast would not go further but stood still. Soralus dismounted, took his blankets out of one sack, and then went to sleep in the grass. The donkey sat down a little distance from him, and stayed with him until morning.

The following day, Soralus rode up the mountain, which had low, dry grass, a few trees, and some mist as he went higher up. He stopped at each spring of water that he found, three times, and at nightfall he reached a cave. Soralus and the donkey were in the cave for the night, and continued journeying the following day. The mountain became rockier, mistier and more barren, with only one spring of water along the route. Soralus took out his last bread from the sack, but when he saw that there was no grass, he gave the bread to the beast.

Dusk was dim when Soralus and the donkey approached a wide and deep gorge with very steep sides. It was a misty, dreary place, and very quiet, as if there was no water at the bottom of the gorge. There was a low humming wind and the sounds of a few crows high above. The donkey kept walking until it reached two poles at the very edge, and on each pole

was a dry human skull. The old rope bridge, with wooden panels, hung from the two poles, stretched over the depth of the gorge, and faded into the mist.

The donkey stood still and Soralus dismounted to stare at one of the skulls; then he heard hoofs and turned to see the donkey leaving him. Soralus watched the donkey disappear into the mist, and then Soralus took a step closer to one of the skulls. He walked onto the bridge, slowly, and it creaked and swayed with his every movement. Some of the wooden panels were missing, or rotting, or diagonal.

Soralus walked carefully, holding tightly onto the rope, and when he stumbled, he glanced at the misty depth below. He walked more carefully, stretching his foot out as the wood panels became fewer and fewer. One panel snapped under him and Soralus slipped down but caught the bottom rope. Soralus breathed fast with terror, and tears were in his eyes, but he took the vertical rope nearest to him and hoisted himself with all his effort.

Soralus continued on the bridge, using the ropes more than the panels, until he reached the end of the bridge. He threw himself to grasp the poles on the land, and these ones had no skulls. Soralus fell onto the land, panting his exhaustion, then after a little rest, he stood up and looked behind. He saw the swaying bridge over the misty gorge, and then looked ahead of him, toward a tall forest with the thickest blackness inside. The

crows had gone, and Soralus stood there snivelling as the humming wind became stronger.

“Soralus!” called a very close and intimate female whisper, which startled Soralus to raise his eyes, breathing fearfully. “Soralus!” called the whisperer again, and Soralus looked around him frantically, but saw nothing. Soralus crouched, covering his ears and straining for breath, fearful as he was, and the whisperer called again: “Soralus! Go to the trees, Soralus! Go to the trees, Soralus!” Soralus kept covering his ears, chanting “No... no... go away...” “Soralus! Go to the trees, Soralus!” “Go away... go away...” “Soralus! Soralus!” “Stop!” cried Soralus, and there was silence.

Soralus slowed his breath, raised himself up, trembling, and walked cautiously toward the trees. He entered their darkness, wherein dry leaves crunched under his feet and shrubs shuffled out of his way. Soralus walked faster and faster, following the clearest opening as the shrubs and bushes became thicker and thicker. “Soralus!” called the whisperer, but Soralus covered his ears and said “Go away!” Soralus walked on, and the whisperer said, “Run!”

Soralus heard faint voices howling and barking at a distance behind him, and he turned back toward them as the whisperer said, “Run!” Soralus began to stumble hastily, and the whisperer said “Run, Soralus!” as the barking voices became louder. Soralus began to run strenuously, and when the barking animals became

much louder, Soralus glanced at the wolves gaining ground fast. “Run!” said the whisperer, and Soralus began running with all his might. The wolves glided through the shrubbery, their feet thumping the ground, and growled right behind him.

“Run! Soralus!” said the whisperer, and Soralus began to sprint with grace in his feet and terror in his eyes. The wolves growled hotly behind him, and one leaped toward his back but only pushed him forward. “Run! Soralus!” insisted the whisperer. Soralus groaned and sprinted harder, his feet and arms rapidly chopping through the wind. The wolves sped faster and leaped toward him, but Soralus forced motion faster than theirs and crashed past a tree.

Soralus stumbled at great speed, throwing dust and leaves in the air, while the wolves caught up to him. Soralus kept running, with all his force, then landed his foot on a log and leaped forward like a frog, gliding the air for a distance till he landed ahead of the wolves. He kept on running, faster and faster, till the wind hummed in his ears and the forest blurred around him. His motion roared like a flame and a great clash snapped a tree while Soralus tumbled. He rolled like a speeding boulder of dust and splashed into a thick mud swamp, slowing him down to a halt.

Soralus struggled to get up, but the mud was heavy, and he quickly began to sink. The wolves barked at the edge of the mud swamp, and one of them stepped in but hurried out. The wolves barked less and less until

some of them began to quieten. Soralus struggled in the mud but tired quickly and gave up, slowly sinking, sinking, sinking... The mud swallowed his whole body, only his head and shoulders above it. He kept sinking, and tried to struggle again, but kept sinking. The mud came up to his neck, then chin, then mouth, his eyes wide with terror.

“Soralus! Jump!” said the whisperer, but Soralus could not move. “Soralus! Jump!” said the whisperer, but Soralus closed his eyes and went under the surface. The mud bubbled and more ripples of mud piled over the place where Soralus had sunk. The wolves walked away from the mud bank and vanished into the dark silence.

Episode IX

The forest wind had become quiet when the surface of the mud swamp suddenly erupted and a dirty Soralus soared high into the air. He crashed into a tree and tumbled onto the hard land opposite to the side of the swamp where he had been. Soralus lay still to catch his breath, and then rose up to stagger away from the swamp.

Soralus stumbled when his foot caught a thick vine, and then the voice of the sorceress whispered “Fight, Soralus!” The vine moved and wrapped itself around his ankle, pulled him to the ground and dragged him across the dust. “Fight, Soralus!” said the whisperer as the vine brought Soralus to a large entanglement of thick, moving vines. They all writhed and disentangled toward Soralus, then some wrapped around his legs, arms and neck. “Fight, Soralus!” called the whisperer, but the vines quickly overwhelmed Soralus.

Some vines snapped into pieces as the hand of Soralus became free, but more vines wrapped around it again; the whisperer said, “Fight!” More vines snapped as the feet of Soralus became free, then his hands. He pulled the vines away from his face and neck while more vines came to wrap around his limbs. “Fight, Soralus!” said the whisperer and Soralus yelled, “I am trying!” “Fight, Soralus!” repeated the whisperer.

The vines overwhelmed Soralus again, and then the vine pile vibrated, throwing leaves in the air. Vines

stems shredded off, and soon there was a cloud of dust, leaves and plant matter. The face of Soralus emerged as he screamed, his hands paddling furiously in all directions. His legs also paddled to free themselves, and then he snapped big vines off his body quickly. He leaped away from the pile and the vines launched after him, caught his foot and pulled him down.

The vines quickly surrounded him again, but Soralus twirled around and around until he became a whirlwind. It shredded the vines when they but touched it, until the space around it was clear. Soralus stopped twirling, became dizzy, and while he staggered the vines crept back toward him. Soralus leaped higher than all the shrubbery and further than all the vines, landing on his feet.

One big vine lunged toward him, but Soralus caught it, and though it shook violently, he would not let it go. Soralus held on as the vine yanked him into the air and knocked him hard against the tree trunks, but Soralus would not let it go. The vine brought him back to the writhing vine pile, out of which a great bulb emerged. The bulb opened like a mouth, showing many spikes like teeth. "Fight, Soralus!" said the whisperer, and the big vine fed Soralus into the mouth of the bulb.

Soralus held onto the vine as the bulb mouth closed, and he would not let the vine come out. The bulb mouth opened, and the vine lifted Soralus to shake

him off, but Soralus would not let it go. The other vines rose up, pulled his arms open, then threw him into the bulb mouth, which gobbled him up and swallowed him. The vines began to recede to the ground while the bulb stood upright on its thickest stem.

The stem suddenly burst open, slime pouring and as the legs of Soralus kicked out, and Soralus slipped out of the stem. Soralus fell onto the vine pile at the foot of the main stem, and he while the vines pursued him, he raised himself up. Some vines wrapped around his arms and legs, and Soralus pulled back with all his might. He yelled, “What did I tell you about making me repeat?!” Soralus groaned a great effort and yanked himself from the vines, which snapped off, but many more came and wrapped his body.

Soralus turned to the main stem and pulled hard to reach it, then held onto it, pressing in with all his might. The stem began to cave into his grasp while more vines wrapped onto him, and the big vine wrapped its tip around his head. All the vines tried to pull him away from the main stem, the big vine bending his neck, but Soralus held on tight. He squeezed the stem in his arms and it became thinner and thinner, ripping its skin and letting out slime. Soralus put his hands into the tear, and then held on as the vines pulled him away from the stem.

The vines yanked Soralus, ripping the bottom of the stem so that the bulb collapsed onto him. The vines

writhed in all directions while the bulb opened and closed its mouth repeatedly. Soralus rolled the bulb aside to crawl out, and the vines knocked him in all directions as he stumbled out of the vine pile. Soralus staggered away from the plant and looked back to see the bulb still moving. Soralus took a little run, leaped into the air and stomped onto the bulb,, his feet cracking through the bulb, then it became still. The vines began to weaken, and Soralus came out of the bulb, and he walked away as from the plant.

Soralus walked on through the night until he collapsed in exhaustion and fell asleep on the ground. Bird sounds and daylight rays between the treetops woke Soralus to the lush and shady forest. Soralus continued walking, always following the clearest path between the thickets. He arrived at a clearing, where he could see a wide plain, a big stone fortress at the centre, and mountaintops over the whole forest.

Soralus approached the iron gates of the fortress, where he was like an ant before the great structure, and he stood quietly for a moment before knocking at the gate. “You there!” shouted the watchman on the watchtower above, “What are you doing?” Soralus replied, “Please sir, if you have something to eat...” The watchman said, “What? I can’t hear you!” Soralus shouted, “I am hungry!” The watchman said, “Hungry, you say?” Soralus nodded. The watchman continued: “Does this look like a kitchen? Go back to wherever you came from, little nuisance!”

Soralus turned to the forest behind him, then turned back to the watchman and said, “No!” “I beg your pardon?” said the watchman, and Soralus shouted, “I am not going anywhere!” The watchman wagged a finger and said “You would do well to obey, you little...” “No!” cried Soralus, “Let me in now!” The watchman lost words and sunk away from the watchtower.

There was a deep rumbling within the fortress walls as the gates began to open, revealing the courtyard, land horses and busy servants. The gates stopped moving after a little gap, and Soralus walked through it, then the gates rumbled again, closing.