

The
Maledict
Knights
Book II

Arifani James Moyo

“The Maledict Knights, Book II”

~ by Arifani James Moyo

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Episode X

The grey stone porch was much like those of all the Gothic castles and fortresses in those olden days. Its beauty was in its simplicity and strength, with enough space between the pillars to allow ample daylight.

The fortress watchman walked nervously along the porch, looking for someone whom he might interrupt. He met Alikiya, a tall, slim but strong maid, not long past the years of motherhood. She had fair but oily skin, beautiful high cheeks and a sharp nose. She always tied her long brown hair behind her, and her clothes were for hard work, but clean. She carried a basket of large apples, and when the watchman said, “Do you have a moment?” Alikiya stopped to listen.

The watchman spoke worriedly: “There is a little peasant boy – well, a juvenile, only a little past boyhood – and he is standing in the courtyard. He is filthy with mud and grass from face to toe, and I cannot see his face well. He has curly black hair, big eyes and round cheeks, with a scrawny little body. He is not very tall, and does not have the posture of an upright squire. He slouches like a village boy, and how he found his way here, I cannot tell you. I think he might be a little troublemaker.”

Alikiya rebuked in a raspy, guttural voice: “Why did you let him in, then?” The watchman replied: “I pitied him; for he seems lost, and he said he was hungry.” Alikiya spoke with authority: “Well, he is not coming

into my kitchen without a bath. Tell Bharramba.” Alikiya walked on in her direction, and the watchman went another way.

The courtyard was where one could see much of the inside of the fortress, which was all austere and grey. Its stone walls were very high, with iron doors and very narrow wooden windows for all the chambers. There were upper and lower levels, stairs and pillars, guards and workers, land horses and carts. All the people went about their business without noticing the boy, Soralus, as he walked around slowly, gazing.

One curious soldier called to him: “You there!” Soralus turned to the approaching soldier, who said, “What is your name?” Soralus replied politely, in a squeaky voice: “I am Soralus.” The soldier said, “How did you get past the iron gates?” “The watchman let me in, sir.” “Are you sure?” “Yes sir.” “If you are lying to me, I will find out, and then I will find you.” The soldier walked away.

Bharramba, the big hairy dog, trotted merrily toward Soralus, and when they were close, Bharramba sat and barked his greeting. Soralus said, “Who are you?” and Bharramba stood, barking a few times and dancing. Soralus smiled, and Bharramba began to move away, barking for Soralus to come along. Soralus said, “You want me to follow you?” and Bharramba barked until Soralus began to follow.

Bharramba led Soralus further into the fortress grounds, away from the main courtyard, past the alleys and nooks, into the quiet backyard. It was green and shady there, with a water well and a little wooden bathhouse nearby. Bharramba led Soralus to the door of the bathhouse, and then Bharramba barked and danced.

Soralus went into the bathhouse, where there was a tub, already full with steaming warm water. There was a pile of clothes nearby, which Soralus could tell were his size. Soralus turned to the door and said, “Are these for me?” The barking of Bharramba outside replied, and then Soralus bathed. He came out of the bathhouse in his clean new clothes, and Bharramba barked and danced again to lead Soralus out of the backyard.

They arrived at the kitchen, and Bharramba danced at the door until Soralus went in, leaving Bharramba resting. The kitchen was cosy, with a fireplace, smoke, and a wooden bench where some men sat eating and drinking. Their metal utensils were clean but old and rusty, with dents of time. There were some maids cooking at the sooty iron oven, and one of them was Alikiya. Soralus looked around, licking his lips, and Alikiya called, “You there!” Soralus turned to Alikiya, who said “Hurry up!” as she beckoned with her hand. Soralus obeyed while Alikiya brought out a sizeable plate of dumplings, meat and celery. She said, commandingly, “Tell me your name first.” “Soralus” was the reply.

Alikiya handed the plate over, and while Soralus was accepting it, Alikiya pointed to the bench and said, "Sit down." Soralus went to sit at the bench with the men, but they paid no attention to him. Soralus began to eat voraciously while Alikiya placed a metal mug of warm milk near his plate. Soralus finished his meal and drank his milk, drowsy and happy, then began walking toward the kitchen door. He saw a basket of rather large apples near the door, and he took one but did not bite it. Soralus walked out of the kitchen and there was Bharramba resting quietly, then Bharramba rose up and began walking.

Soralus followed Bharramba to another area of the fortress, and they walked along the porches until they reached an open door. Bharramba danced, and Soralus went into the room, which was a small bedchamber. The simple bed was for one person, and the linen was soft as Soralus touched it. He said "This is much softer than mine at home" as the door creaked behind him. Soralus turned and saw the paws of Bharramba nudging the door to close, and Soralus went to close it fully. Soralus climbed onto the bed, tucked himself into the linen, and very quickly fell asleep.

The next morning was bright at the busy fortress, and Soralus walked with Bharramba on the porch. Soralus looked beyond, and then suddenly became live with excitement, turning to Bharramba. Soralus said, "There is the ruddy damsel I told you about, the one

with auburn hair, one of the four glorious knights that came for me. Their horses had wings. This damsel had a crossbow. Do you remember?” Bharramba barked.

Kerenike, in her full armour but not with her helmet or weapon, stood at full attention in the courtyard. Bharramba, leading Soralus, came toward Kerenike, and when Bharramba was close to her, he sat down and barked a noisy greeting. Kerenike did not look at Bharramba or acknowledge him, but she watched Soralus as he came to stand before her. Soralus looked up, squinting from the sunlight, and Kerenike seemed to tower over him in height. She was as motionless and beautiful as a glowing statue, only her hair moving in the wind. She spoke dispassionately: “We meet again, Soralus. I am Kerenike. You will follow me to the office of the commander.”

Episode XI

The underground stone corridor was dim from the cool shade as Kerenike led Soralus to an iron door with a knocker. Kerenike knocked, and the baritone voice of Muku inside said, “Enter.” Soralus became perky, and while Kerenike was opening the door, Soralus said, “I know him. He was the other knight, the negro, black as coal. He had a big hammer...” Kerenike interrupted, speaking sternly: “You will address the commander as ‘sir’, and you will call him ‘the commander’ at all times.” Kerenike stood while the voice of Muku said, “Come in, Soralus.” Soralus entered and Kerenike closed the door immediately.

The office interior was small and neat, with a dark wooden desk set, and Muku, who was in military uniform but not in armour, sat at one chair. The other chair, opposite to Muku, was empty, and as Soralus walked toward it, Muku rose up. Muku said, warmly, “Welcome, Soralus. I have waited keenly for this day.” Soralus smiled buoyantly as Muku stood upright, turning his gaze low to make eye contact with Soralus. Muku declared formally, “I, Muku, am your commander till we separate by death, or by lawful imprisonment, or by lawful banishment. The laws of Gothos, henceforth, oblige your unfailing obedience to me.” Muku pointed to the empty chair and said, “Please sit.”

Muku waited for Soralus to climb onto the empty chair, and then Muku sat down, speaking: “I

congratulate you, Soralus, for crossing the bridge of initiation, and surviving the ordeal in the forest of secrets. The forest sorceress, Liisani, whose voice guided you in darkness, found you worthy of manhood, worthy of life, and worthy of glory. If she had not, or if you had not been adequate, you would have died in the forest. You have achieved the greatest victory of your life so far, but not the greatest victory you will ever achieve. The man who helped to raise you, the old man Lokurru, trained me, though he was never a demigod himself. It is my honour to take after him; with me and my fellows, you will learn to embrace what you are...”

Muku leaned forward and said, “Soralus, you are a demigod. Do you know what this means?” Soralus said, “Are you like me?” Muku smiled, sat upright and said, “Yes, I am, and so is Kerenike, as well as the other two whom you met. Her Radiance and Loveliness, the Oracle M’Shee, chose all of us, whom she saw in her divine vision. The Oracle is the one who guides all of us; even the king obeys the Oracle; for she knows many things that are beyond the understanding of common minds. She loves her knights as a mother her children. Her own womb never bore fruit; for the destiny of an Oracle is only to mother the whole nation.”

Muku became serious and said, “Soralus, you have special gifts, not for your own sake, but because your life was always for a special purpose. The ordeal in the forest was only to awaken your powers, but you were

a demigod from birth. Every demigod has crossed the bridge that you crossed, and we all have survived the ordeal of the awakening. We are not immortal, but to ordinary men, it is as if we are gods in human flesh, and that is why the world calls us demigods. We are humble warriors serving the throne by enforcing the law, by apprehending criminals and by repelling the true enemies of Gothos.”

Muku urged sincerely: “You are an awesome and frightening power, Soralus. It is my hope that you will become one who truly loves the law, so that the world may love you. Gothos is your country. Nokut is your king. M’Shee is your Oracle. Love them, and serve them faithfully. Protect their people and pledge to bring all evildoers to judgment; this is your way to glory.” Soralus nodded vacantly, and Muku softened his face as he reminisced fondly: “I remember when I first rode into the radiant city on the mountainside. I had never seen a place like it, a city like heaven.”

The face of Soralus lit up with wonder as Muku continued: “There is a grand statue standing in the valley, the great golden dog of good fortune. It towers above everything from the depth of the valley to the highest altitude of the city, but not above the plain of the ancient citadel. The walls of the citadel are still perfect, and safe inside it is the radiant palace of the king, with the grandest courtyard you will ever see. I promise you, Soralus, one day you too will ride in that courtyard.”

The fortress courtyard was quieter in the middle of the cloudy afternoon, and Soralus lay on his back inside a cart, talking to Bharramba, who sat nearby. Soralus said: “I now know all their names, the knights who came for me at the village. The negro who carried a hammer is Muku, but he is the commander, not a negro. The ruddy one with fiery auburn hair is Kerenike; when I first saw her, she had a crossbow. Her twin brother – he had a pike – his name is Zaku. The fair one with golden hair is Juni, and she is a princess, but she has a sword. They all rode beasts like horses, but these beasts had wings like eagles.”

The fortress battle horn made a great noise, and when Soralus rose up to look, he saw the iron gates opening. There was an orderly galloping of four animals behind him, and when Soralus turned to look, behold, here were four glorious riders. The wings of each horse were in a neat fold while the armour and helmet of each rider shone in the daylight. The glorious weapon and shield hung on the back of each wielder. The knights did not look anywhere but forward toward their mission as they rode out of the fortress, into the surrounding grassland.

Soralus scrambled toward the closing gates just in time to see the backs of the four riders facing the dark forest. The knights rode as if they would enter the forest, but also moved apart from each other till they were perfectly side by side. They continued to spread out from each other until there was ample distance between the four. Suddenly, the horses opened their

wide wings, and with a thunderous flapping, they all launched into the air. Soralus gaped as the flying squad quickly reached the sky and vanished into the clouds. Bharramba barked noisily behind Soralus as the iron gates began to close. Soralus turned with an alert smile to Bharramba as the closing gates covered the view of the forest.

Episode XII

The fortress was still busy in the evening, though the kitchen was almost empty, except for Soralus and Alikiya at the bench. They were sitting opposite to each other, and Alikiya watched Soralus finishing his meal. Soralus spoke with food in his mouth: “Why did you not eat supper?” Alikiya said, “Did you learn to eat with your mouth full at home?” Soralus shook his head and continued chewing. Alikiya said, “I eat before your supper time.” “Why?” asked Soralus, and Alikiya said, “Who will serve everyone during their supper? I am not working hungry – and do not talk with food in your mouth.” Soralus, with a full mouth, replied: “Sorry.”

Alikiya spoke pensively to herself: “I was here before everyone else came in; I am here till the last person finishes his meal...” “...and then you go home?” Soralus interrupted. Alikiya said, “No. We still have to clean this place, and then I send the young maids off...” and Soralus interrupted again: “You work very hard, like my aunt.” Alikiya said, “Women must work. Little men must eat quietly.” Soralus said, “I like talking to you.” Alikiya smiled very slightly as she glanced at Soralus, who continued: “The commander Muku said the Oracle chose me, and he said one day I will go to the palace of the king.”

Alikiya said, “Did he tell you I used to work in the palace?” “No” said Soralus. Alikiya said, “The Oracle chose me to work here for the knights. She chose

everyone who lives here, you know.” Alikiya smiled as she reminisced: “I even had a royal escort of demigods to bring me here, because most of us cannot just enter the forest, you know. We would not find our way out, and we would probably not live long.” Soralus said, “...is that why they call it the forest of secrets?” Alikiya said, “You would have to ask someone else, not me.”

Soralus said, “The commander Muku said the Oracle knows many things.” Alikiya reminisced fondly and said, “The Oracle M’Shee is the most radiant woman you will ever see. She is very light and delicate, older than your grandmother, but beautiful. Do you know she is partly a Moor?” “What is a Moor?” asked Soralus. Alikiya said, “They are darker than you, but not as dark as Muku. The Moors are... browner than someone like Muku. The Oracle is fairer than most of them, because some of her ancestors are from Gothos. She is wonderful, Soralus.”

Soralus said, “Muku said even the king obeys the Oracle.” Alikiya said, “Nokut is the most majestic king you will ever see, Soralus. He is tall, handsome, aging well, with a beard – a long white beard – and the most gracious manner. You must know already that Juni is a princess.” Soralus nodded, and Alikiya said, “There is another one, you know, a little younger than you, I think. Her name is Maj’Lini. I last saw her as a tiny infant.”

Soralus asked, “Did you like living in the palace?” “How could I not?” replied Alikiya. Soralus said, “Muku said I will see it one day.” Alikiya said, “It is the most glorious place on earth. It has many windows, the finest sculpture, and long corridors and many stairs, and chandeliers. There are spacious, beautiful bedchambers for the royal family and their guests. There is a glorious antechamber, with great doors, and it is full of light and beauty.” Soralus interrupted: “What is an antechamber? What is a chandelier?”

The evening was getting dark at the palace courtyard, where hundreds of soldiers and archers were pointing their weapons in one direction. The target was a lone figure standing at the centre of the courtyard. The palace antechamber was bright under the light of chandeliers, and the Oracle M’Shee stood facing Nokut and a crowd of soldiers. Nokut spoke nervously: “My lady, my men have said that the intruder is in full armour, like a knight. His helmet hides his face, but he is wielding a poleaxe.” M’Shee said, with her hoarse voice, “I know, my son. I know who he is; remember – I mothered every demigod. I cannot fear my own children.”

M’Shee turned to the antechamber exit, and Nokut said, “My lady, the traitor had no mercy on his own kind...” but M’Shee raised her hand, silencing Nokut. M’Shee said, “Your men are faithful, my king, but you know that all their hundreds will not stop Omneferus. He is demonic, but he cannot override me; for if he

could, I assure you, he would have already destroyed Gothos. I had already covered the palace and the radiant city with my decrees of protection. I knew he was coming, though he does not know of my power. He was once a knight, like the others, and he rebelled against the throne, but an Oracle is above rebellion. Evil shall never break me. Have courage, my son.”

M’Shee walked out of the antechamber, a group of soldiers following her, into the great courtyard, toward the centre. Omneferus stood still, showing his dreadful poleaxe as M’Shee and her military escort approached. The evening wind became strong as M’Shee cried: “Omneferus! Turn from your affinity with abominations, and return to your sleep!” The baritone growl of Omneferus replied: “What do you know of my sleep, witch? Where is your own tomb?” M’Shee said, “Who raised you from hell, zombie?” Omneferus said, “You will soon find out!”

Omneferus launched like lightning and swung his dreadful poleaxe at the head of M’Shee. Suddenly all motion froze as if time had stopped, and then a brilliant, blazing bolt burned Omneferus and threw him down screaming. His poleaxe fell aside while M’Shee and every soldier nearby collapsed. Smoke rose from the armour of Omneferus as he suffered.

Soralus opened his eyes to his bed at the fortress, the morning sunlight, and Zaku standing at the bedside, in military uniform but not in full armour. The bedchamber door was wide open, and Zaku spoke

sternly: “Did you have a nice holiday? Up, now!” Zaku marched out of the bedchamber and met the noisy barking of Bharramba outside. Zaku said, “This has nothing to do with you, Bharramba. The cadet came here to train, and train him I will. Off you go.” Soralus was still getting out of bed when the voice of Zaku called, “I will not say it again, cadet! Hurry up!”

Soralus hurried outside and Zaku said, “Stand!” Soralus paused and said, “But I am standing.” Zaku said, “Do you think you are amusing? Stand at attention, cadet!” Soralus said, “Stand at attention?” “The answer is ‘yes sir’! Stand up straight and look at me!” Soralus obeyed, and Zaku said, “Good; now follow me.”

Episode XIII

The fighting pit had two opposite iron gates in the wall, one of them open as Zaku and Soralus stood at the centre of the pit. Soralus, wearing wooden padding for protection, stood at attention while Zaku spoke firmly: “The awakening of your natural strengths was only the beginning; for natural talent does not win battles, and demigods are not immortal. All that sets us apart from ordinary men is that we are a little harder to kill. If you do not have what it takes to be a warrior like any other, you will die. Skill is what you need, and in order to have skill, you must first have discipline, which means controlling yourself.”

Zaku began to walk toward the already open gate as the other gate also opened and a large, lumbering bear came out. Zaku said, “You will practice combat with him, and if you lose, you will sleep hungry tonight. He is my very precious pet, so do not hurt him or I will hurt you.” Zaku walked toward the open gate and said, “...and do not think he will be gentle with you.” Zaku went through the gate and both gates closed, leaving Soralus alone with the bear, which stood tall and growled fiercely. Soralus ran toward the bear, but its thick paw swatted him to the ground, and then stood on him. Soralus carefully wrestled his way out without hurting the bear, and when he was free, it swatted him down again.

The benches above the pit were empty until Zaku went among them and sat down, calling, “We are having a

very special mutton dumpling tonight, the favourite of the whole army. Make sure not to miss it!” Soralus again carefully wrestled his way out of the grasp of the bear, but when he was free, the bear swatted him down again. Zaku laughed and said, “Go on, you big old rat! Show that little worm who is king!” Soralus became irritable and said, “I am not a worm!” as he freed himself once more and stopped the next blow from the bear. The bear threw several more blows at him, but Soralus blocked them all, until the bear lost interest and left him alone.

The pit gates both opened and the bear returned to where it had come from, while Zaku, carrying two thick wooden clubs, entered from the other side. The gates closed again, and Zaku handed one of the wooden clubs to Soralus. Zaku said, “Not bad for a newcomer, but you took too long, and your enemies will not be as predictable as the dull beast. Let us see if you can earn the comfort of your bed tonight, and do not think I will pity you.” Zaku launched at Soralus, who blocked and dodged a few blows, but could not outlast the stamina of Zaku. Soralus flew in all directions as Zaku pummelled him, until Soralus was too weak to resist and began to snivel.

Zaku stopped throwing blows and said, “Are you going to be a snivelling infant on the battlefield? Do you think the enemy will pity you?” Zaku dropped his wooden club and began to walk toward the pit gate where he had entered. The gate opened and Kerenike, in military uniform without armour, walked into the

pit. Zaku said “The cadet is a weakling...” as he walked past Kerenike, but she grabbed his arm to stop him, then Kerenike spoke: “Who taught him strength?” Zaku shook his head and said, “I will not bear this...” “Then where is your own strength?” asked Kerenike. Zaku shook his head and Kerenike urged: “How much patience did Muku have for you?” Zaku said, “I am only good at killing things.”

Kerenike loosed her hold and said, “The commander is leaving at noon.” Zaku nodded and turned back toward Soralus while Kerenike exited. The pit gates closed, and Zaku picked up the two clubs, giving one to Soralus. Zaku spoke: “This is what Commander Muku taught me, when I was like you, a newcomer, weak and ignorant. The Oracles of old told the ancient nomads that in three different generations, a child would reveal one of three laws, which the people of Gothos would know forever. Gothos and her people would never be sovereign without these three laws, and that is why we call them the laws of sovereignty.”

Zaku paced about speaking: “The first is the law of force, which says, ‘force returns force’, and this law is for combat. The child who discovered it grew to become the first Viking general, and he created the first Gothic armies. The nomads before him, even his own parents, had known nothing of the first law. The ancient nomads had always fled from every threat, and that is why they never had stability. The first rule of survival is to always return force for force, and never be the last to receive force. You must retaliate

until your enemy concedes to be the last to receive force. It is not a crime to lose in battle, but it is an abomination to capitulate by will. Do you understand, Soralus?” “Yes sir!” was the reply, and Zaku said, “Show me.”

Zaku launched toward Soralus and pummelled him, but Soralus rose up each time and returned blow for blow. Zaku felt nothing from the blows he received, and he spoke while they were fighting: “It does not matter if you fall, Soralus. The shame is only in capitulating by will. If you return force for force, if you keep the first law until you die, you are a warrior. If you break the first law, you are a failure. Force must always return force. You must never give in, never surrender, never forgive your enemy, and never show mercy. All your enemies will keep the first law, and so must you; for none who break it shall be worthy to live.” Zaku finally defeated Soralus, who lay in exhaustion, and Zaku stood over him.

Zaku said, “Our forefathers, the Vikings, were no longer wandering nomads; for they no longer ran from the beast or the marauder. The Vikings took the land which they desired most, and it became our country, Gothos. Nobody has ever moved our people again, for Gothos has prevailed over all her enemies.” Zaku offered his hand and helped Soralus to stand up again, and then Zaku spoke: “Gothos was safe from outsiders, but then the native became an enemy to himself. Gothos became a land of endless civil war among her own children, who now used the law

against each other. Gothos ceased to be a land worth living in; for everywhere, there was strife and treachery among the people.”

Episode XIV

The palace bedchamber of the Oracle was large and ornate, a gentle late afternoon wind moving the curtain. M'Shee, in a comfortable gown, lay on her bed while Muku, in full armour without helmet, knelt beside the bed. M'Shee said, "I had hoped you would not come, but I knew you would be stubborn. I assure you, son, the enemy will not bother us; for he suffered greatly, and he is weak enough for the dungeon to keep him. I want him to be near me, for the rebel is weakest near me, as you are strongest near me. I know what you want to ask. You want to say, 'for how long?' No, the dungeon will not keep him forever, but as long as I am alive, you will have time to train the boy."

The evening at the fortress was warm, and the kitchen was almost empty except for Soralus and Alikiya at the bench. Soralus had finished eating, and he rested his arms on the bench table, listening with fascination as Alikiya spoke: "If you ever meet the palace jester, you will not like him. His name is K'Cheechik. He looks mean, scrawny and withering, though he is not yet an old man. He is a ridiculous man, proud without reason, though his father was a true noble. You will like Sir Dindik, the historian, who also advises the king. He is about your height, maybe shorter, rather fat, and very kempt, with a perfect beard. He knows many things, not like the Oracle, but like a man of learning."

Juni walked in, still in her uniform but not with her armour, and she said cheerfully, “Are you telling stories without me?” Soralus got off the bench and stood at attention while Alikiya stood up to curtsy. Juni smiled mischievously and curtsied back to Alikiya, who said, “Behave, young lady. You have a cadet.” Juni smiled and lowered her gaze at Soralus, who said, “Your highness...” Juni giggled and said, “Who taught you that?” Soralus said, “Commander Muku said you are a princess, and the people call you Your Highness.” Juni laughed and said, “Please, I am not a princess here; call me Juni. I am very glad to finally talk to you, Soralus.” Juni became upright again and said, “Please, will you both be as fun as you were; these are not working hours.” Juni sat near Alikiya, who spoke while taking her seat: “My working hours are every hour, my dear.”

Alikiya looked at Soralus, who was still standing, and Alikiya said, “Sit, Soralus. Juni will not bite.” Juni giggled joyfully and said, “Go on, Soralus. Sit with us.” Soralus relaxed and sat opposite to the women. Soralus began to listen intently as Juni spoke: “Alikiya and I have had many years together. She lived in the palace, you know.” Juni hugged Alikiya, who said, “I told him.” Juni said, “Soralus, do you know I have a sister, a little younger than you?” Alikiya said, “I hear she is just like her big sister.” Juni said, “She is a little blonde beauty. She has the clearest blue eyes, like little diamonds. She is not as plump as I think a child should be, but she is quite healthy and lovely to look at – her

name is Maj.” Alikiya said, “I meant as mischievous as her older sister.” Juni giggled and hugged Alikiya.

Alikiya said, “I was telling Soralus about the entourage of the king.” Juni said, “What a thing to bore a young man with at this hour. Soralus, my little sister, Maj, has a nursemaid, whose name is Mohantuu. Her father was a man like Muku, dark and foreign, but her mother was fair like me, or like Alikiya.

Mohantuu would mesmerise you with her uncommon beauty. She is plump and motherly, a ripe maiden. Her skin is soft and a glowing brown, her hair like yours, Soralus, thick and curly, and soft.”

Midnight at the palace was quiet and still, guards standing watchfully everywhere within the citadel of the king. The Oracle M’Shee woke from her sleep in the darkness of her bedchamber, and she moved her linen to sit upright. She said, “Have you come to betray all that Gothos has suffered for, evil man?” K’Cheechik was sitting within the shadows near the open window, and he said “The days of Gothos are gone, old woman, and I must purge the land of all that is unfit for the age to come.”

The eyes of M’Shee began to glow like pearls, and she said, “These are the words of an Oracle, son of Gothos; for you have turned from the way of...” “Shut up!” snarled K’Cheechik, “You old hag, shut up and let your superstitions rest...” “He will come, the elucidator of the third law, and you will not escape his judgment” “Bah! There is no third law! Open your

eyes, old sorceress; for all the legends you believed in, and for all the faith of this nation, Gothos yielded nothing. The monarchy failed. The knighthood failed. The oracles failed. You failed. When will you wake up and admit it?”

M'Shee lamented, “The night of the banquet, I saw the malice defiling the palace of the king. I had no heart to tell him all of it; for I know that the elucidator comes...” “What a farce!” interrupted K'Cheechik, but M'Shee continued, “Oh you bitter, bitter man...” “I am bitter?” said K'Cheechik, “All you ever wanted, you people, was to turn Gothos into a land where savages govern while the true descendants of the Vikings...” “You are a disgrace to your father...” “Speak not of my father!” “He would sorely regret the day he conceived you...” “I warn you, hag!” “May you never see his radiance, you coward —” “Shut up, I say, or these words will be your last!”

M'Shee was silent, and then she closed her eyes and said “This is what you wanted, is it not? A reason to kill me... here it is then: I am a Moor, but I say to you, K'Cheechik: You are not worthy of me. You are not worthy of a place in this palace. You are not worthy of the name of your father. Come. Show me the man you are, and I will dream of the one you are not.” The face of K'Cheechik emerged from the shadows, a cold countenance making him as a ghost. He had a cushion in his hand, and he came to the bedside of M'Shee, who mumbled to herself, “Forgive me, my fathers.

Forgive us all.” K’Cheechik placed the cushion on the face of M’Shee.

Episode XV

The servants in the royal palace found the Oracle M'Shee sleeping her final sleep, and she was no more. They told Dindik who went to the throne of the king, and when Nokut heard the news, he could not speak. Dindik then spoke to Maj'Lini, for she and M'Shee had loved each other as a grandchild and her grandmother. Maj'Lini ran in tears, and could not find consolation even in the embrace of Mohantuu the nursemaid. News reached Muku, at the secret fortress, and he went at once, in sombre compassion, to tell Juni. She too had grown up as like a grandchild of M'Shee. Juni received the news calmly as a soldier, but when she was alone, she wept bitterly.

The palace overlooked the valley below, wherein the great sculpture, the golden dog, towered over the vast city. The dog stood over the main city square, where thousands of citizens, hundreds of soldiers and dozens of nobles had gathered. Nokut and Maj'Lini, the four knights in their amour, and the royal entourage were all at the foot of the golden dog. Under the belly of the idol was a golden crematorium with open doors and a chimney, which had no smoke. The soldiers carried the coffin of M'Shee into the crematorium and the cremators closed the crematorium doors. The horn blowers and drummers made a great honorific noise. There was the sound of a roaring fire inside the crematorium, and when blue smoke rose from the chimney, the city roared its praise.

The knights were still in their armour as they convened in the chamber of assembly, back at the fortress, and Muku spoke formally: “Gothos will have dark times now that we no longer have the radiance of the last living Oracle among us. Not all of us were close to the woman, but she cherished each of us.” Kerenike touched and gently squeezed the hand of Juni, who was sombre but brave, while Muku continued: “M’Shee saw each of us in vision, even before we met her. She is the one who commanded the king to find us, one by one, and call us to the harrowing crusade. She has been our protector and guide, her prayers keeping the knighthood pure from all that would bring curses upon us.”

Muku placed his hands on the shoulders of his fellows, who all did likewise with each other to make a circle of embrace. Muku said: “Let nothing ever break this circle of trust; for we only have each other now, and we cannot rely on anyone, not even the king. I pledge my allegiance to you, my friends, and I will sooner die than leave you. This circle will soon become wider; for the Oracle found worthiness in one more son of Gothos – the boy, Soralus. He is the last of us, but unlike all of us, he will never meet the one who chose him; he has no Oracle, no father, and no mother. We are now his oracle, his family – his people.”

The fortress kitchen was at its final hour of the evening, and only Soralus and Alikiya were inside, sitting at the bench. Soralus had long finished his meal and was drooping forward in attention as Alikiya, who

had wept, spoke: “Juni was barely a woman herself when she lost her mother, Queen Lygandria, wife of the king. It was not long after the birth of Maj’Lini, who was a marvel, you know. The Queen was too old for motherhood, but she lived long enough to bring the child, thanks to the Radiance. The Oracle was there too, giving strength to us all; now we have lost the Oracle too.”

Alikiya reached her hand touch the face of Soralus, and Alikiya said, compassionately, “I am sorry, my darling. I am so sorry you will never meet the Oracle. She was a majestic woman, and I know she would have loved you so much.” Alikiya returned her hand and continued: “You would have loved her too, you sweet soul. Not everyone did, you know; even someone like the Oracle M’Shee had enemies – would you believe it? The hypocrites, the bigots – they will all be glad in secret. They hated her.”

Soralus asked sincerely, “Why did they hate her?” Alikiya shrugged and said, “They never wanted the king to respect the religion of the Oracle in the palace. They said it was a foreign religion, and they even tried to make laws against it. Zorkan, the lawmaker, was one of them; you might recognize him one day, if he still lives, but you will not like him. He is an old, bald and dreary man. He has a harsh face with merciless eyes and a thin little black beard. We maids often mocked him in secret, because he was a pompous old snoot, and he always dressed like a dreary old crow at a funeral.” Soralus and Alikiya smiled together.

There was a brief silence as Alikiya began to reminisce more deeply, and she said: “Zorkan did everything he could to banish the Oracle and her religion, especially when Queen Lygandria still lived. The king became harder to convince as a widower, because he cherished everything his wife had cherished. Queen Lygandria had a gentle soul, loving everyone the same way, and Juni inherited her kindness. Oh that poor girl, she has lost so much – her mother, her home, her time to be a young princess. She is here instead, fighting wars against creatures from hell.” Alikiya focused on Soralus, who was still attentive, and Alikiya said, “I know you have lost everything too, dear Soralus. Do you know who your parents were?”

Soralus spoke plainly: “My aunt, her name is Hia’Nyda, and my uncle, his name is Lokurru. He has a donkey.” Alikiya said, “Who are your mother and father, Soralus?” Soralus said, “My aunt said they died when I was in the cradle.” Alikiya asked again with more concern, “Who were they? What happened, Soralus?” Soralus replied: “My aunt said ‘What does it matter? They left me a burden, and I tire of it. Do not ask me any more foolish questions or I will make you regret it’, that is what my aunt said.” Alikiya, with a tear in her eye, reached her hand again to touch the face of Soralus. Alikiya said, “I am sorry, dear Soralus.”

Alikiya looked intently at Soralus, and Alikiya said, “Listen to me, Soralus, and believe what I say to you.

Believe me wholly; for I will never lie to you. I say, you are not a burden. You are a gift. What did I say?” Soralus said, shyly, “I am not a burden.” “What else?” asked Alikiya. Soralus said, “I am a gift.”

Episode XVI

The fortress was quiet at midnight, and Muku, almost ready to sleep, lay in his bed, meditating with his eyes shut. His mind heard the whisper of Liisani, the forest sorceress, calling, “Muku!”, and Muku opened his eyes at once. He put on a warm jacket and went out into the fortress courtyard, then to the fortress gates. The watchman walked briskly to speak to Muku, and when the watchman said, “My lord...” Muku said “Open it.” The watchman saluted and ran into the bottom entrance of the watchtower. Muku stepped back as the gates opened enough for a man to walk through, then Muku walked out of the fortress.

Muku walked across the plain until he reached the edge of the thick forest, and there was a human shadow under the trees. Muku said, “Why have you come here?” and the visitor emerged, a greying old man of the same race as Muku. The visitor, Mesujian, wore a single long robe, like a priest, and walked with a long staff in his hand. He was uncommonly upright and strong for a man as ancient as he, with a clean beard. Shiny stones decorated his robe, his staff, his necklaces and the rings on his fingers. Mesujian smiled in the moonlight, and Muku spoke commandingly: “Why have you trespassed...” “Trespassed?” said Mesujian, “Do I not hear the voice of Liisani? Who trespasses these woods and lives?” “You came to argue about the wilderness?” “I came to see you.”

Muku shook his head and said, “We have boundaries in this land, and you know better than to be here; I am a man of the law”, and Mesujian said, “Do you know your own soul, Muku? You have a people that raised you.” “The Oracle raised me” replied Muku, and Mesujian said “The Oracle was not your mother.” Muku frowned and said, “The Oracle saved my life –” “– and who saved hers?” interrupted Mesujian. Muku paused and spoke: “Remember who you are talking to, outlaw; for these are serious matters, and if you wish to accuse anyone, I cannot keep your words a secret.” Mesujian said, “I am not the traitor”, and Muku turned to walk away, but Mesujian said, “Wait, son!” Muku turned sharply and said, “What would you have me do? Why is my service to Gothos not good enough for you?”

Mesujian said, “I came here to pay my respects...” and Muku shook his head, saying “Tell the truth, father. You waited many years to see this day.” Mesujian was silent, and then he said, “Gothos is my country too, son, and what is happening now is much bigger than all our differences.” Muku said, “Why would you tell me anything, knowing that I cannot believe you?” “You cannot or you will not?” “I believed the only true living Oracle, who guided all of us...” “Your Oracle, who betrayed her people, took my son and outlawed me...” “This is not about you!” said Muku, and Mesujian shook his head, saying, “You think you know it all because they honor you, but you are still a slave, cleaning their mess until you die for them.”

Muku was silent, and then he regained the composure of a knight, and spoke formally: “Do you have an accusation against any citizen or foreigner in Gothos?” Mesujian said, “The Oracle did not go before her time, for another is soon to come, and no true Oracle has ever had a teacher, like I did.” Muku said, “If you are reporting a crime that really happened, speak now, or I will arrest you for lying to a knight and wasting his time.” Mesujian laughed quietly, and then said, “I accuse a nobleman in the palace of the king. I do not know who it is, but I have seen in vision that there is treachery in the house of kings.”

Muku shook his head and said, “Vision, father..? What will I do with that in the office of the law?” Mesujian said, “What would you do if the Oracle spoke from vision?” Muku said “This is what you never understood, father. The knights are not servants of the Oracle but servants of the king.” Mesujian said, “Very soon, my son, Gothos will no longer have use for any more servants of the king. We need servants of justice.” Muku said “I beg you not to interfere with the law.” Mesujian pleaded, “Heed, my son. The lawmakers have failed to protect Gothos, and the hierarchy is crumbling.” Muku said “These are your opinions, your wishes.”

Mesujian paused, smiled and said, “Be careful, my son. Trust fewer, and let someone watch over the royal family.” Muku said “The palace has many guards, and no army on earth can defeat the royal army of Gothos.” Mesujian laughed quietly, shaking his head,

and turned away, saying, “Love your king, son.” Mesujian walked back into the shadows of the trees and was out of sight.” Muku turned and marched vigorously back to the fortress, where the gates were still slightly open. Muku walked through the gates and they rumbled to close again, then there was quietness.

The morning had begun at the fortress, and Zaku, in uniform without armour, walked along the porch toward the bedchamber of Soralus. Behold, the boy was already standing at attention with Bharramba, the big hairy dog, nearby. Zaku met them and Soralus saluted immediately, then Zaku marched away, Soralus following, leaving Bharramba.

There was a lush, rocky part of the forest where the river had mighty rapid water. Zaku and Soralus removed their clothes and were like cavemen with bare chests and bare legs. Soralus watched Zaku walk into the water until only his face was visible, looking toward the source of the current. Zaku was stable despite the current, and then he moved vigorously like a vibration. He rose up, running furiously until his whole body was over the surface of the water. Soralus had a turn, and he too ran on the water for a time, but tired quickly and the current took him. Soralus did the exercise again and again until he too could stay on the water surface, running.

They went to quieter waters, where Zaku sat inside a huge clam with a big, muscular mollusc pulling down the shell while Zaku lifted it up many times. Soralus

did likewise, and at first the clam snapped down on him and trapped half his body. Zaku rescued him, and Soralus repeated the exercise until he had mastered it, to train his arms and legs.

They went to a drying ravine, and Zaku leaped in and out of its depth with ease. Soralus began to imitate, and at first he could not land firmly or leap high enough, so he tumbled and crashed, but he soon mastered the ravine.

Episode XVII

Muku waited alone in his office at the fortress, and when there was knocking at the door, he said, "Enter." The door opened and Juni entered, closed behind her, and turned to salute, saying "Commander." Muku saluted, then relaxed and said, "You may be at ease, Juni." Juni relaxed, and then Muku pointed to a chair at his desk and said, "Please." They both sat at the desk, facing each other, and Muku spoke: "I am assigning you to a confidential mission on your own, and for as long as it takes to yield a result. There has been an accusation against a nobleman in the palace of the king. The accuser believes that the death of the Oracle was not natural or accidental. I want you to return to the house of your father, but you will live there as a princess, not as a knight. You will investigate stealthily if the claim of murder is true."

Juni looked down, and Muku said, "If you have any objection, speak freely." Juni said, "I am a servant of Gothos..." but she lost words and became silent. Muku said, "I know it pains you to hear of this report. It pains me that you had to hear it, but how could I have kept it from you? It pains me even more to ask what I have asked of you." Juni said, "I would never deny the Oracle her justice." "I know", said Muku, "and you are the only one I can send without rousing suspicions that would make the enemy vigilant and cunning." Juni said, "Are you sure we have such an enemy?" Muku said, "I am not sure, but an accusation of this gravity deserves our scrutiny. If the accusation

is false, then our duty is to thoroughly disprove it, and then to prosecute the deceiver for his abominable flippancy.”

Dindik, the royal historian, paced about in his office while the little princess, Maj'Lini, sat at the table listening, though history bored her. Dindik said, “Now, the second law was a cure for all the evils that men had created by the first law...” Maj'Lini sighed her boredom, and Dindik stopped pacing and said, “Are you listening, young lady?” Maj'Lini sighed in exasperation, saying, “Yes, Dindik, I am listening.” Dindik spoke patronisingly: “Good, because one day your decisions, Princess, may affect the affairs of the whole country, and you cannot govern this land rightly if you know nothing of its history.”

Maj'Lini sighed and said, “Yes, Dindik, you have said this before.” This surprised Dindik, and he said, “Oh. Did I?” Maj'Lini emphasised: “Yes.” “When?” inquired Dindik, and Maj'Lini said, “Many times more than once.” Dindik could barely hide his satisfaction, and he said, pompously, “Well then, I am glad you were listening...” Dindik returned to his pacing and said, “Now, the second law states that ‘feeling returns feeling’. It means whoever hates you deserves your hate, but whoever loves you deserves your love.” Dindik stopped pacing and said, “...is that clear, Princess?” “No”, said Maj'Lini indifferently, and Dindik raised his chest and cheerfully replied, “Very well then, I will explain it further.” Maj'Lini rolled her eyes.

Dindik resumed his pacing and lectured zealously: “Now, remember, the first law of sovereignty, which is the law of force, says that ‘force returns force’, and this law was the foundation of war. This law taught the ancient Vikings to repel every threat, but it also made men brutal amongst each other. The second law, however, is the foundation of a good society, and according to this law, ‘feeling returns feeling’. This means, whatever someone feels about you, let that be your feeling toward him.”

Dindik stopped pacing in order to turn toward Maj’Lini, then Dindik said, “That is why I said to you, a moment ago, ‘whoever hates you deserves your hate, but whoever loves you deserves your love.’ If your enemy strikes you in order to satisfy his vengeance, but he forgives you afterwards, he deserves your forgiveness. If he remains bitter, you too must remain bitter and use the first law against him.” Dindik resumed pacing, saying, “But that is all jurisprudence, which the lawmaker will teach you more precisely. Let us now return to history.” Maj’Lini showed her dismay with another sigh.

Dindik stopped pacing and looked at Maj’Lini, and then Dindik contemplated with fondness in his eyes: “The child who discovered the second law grew to become your ancestor, the first radiant king of Gothos. He ruled the people, not by threatening them, but by teaching them orderliness and restraint. His name was king Nok, and by his decree, he bequeathed his name

to his male descendants for all generations. That is why your father is Nokut, and your grandfather, whom you never met, was Nokyne.”

There was a knocking at the door, and Dindik paused and sighed, “Enter”, then the door opened. A palace attendant entered and bowed while Dindik spoke: “I hope this is more important than the history of Gothos.” The palace attendant said, “My lord, Her Highness the Princess Firstborn, Juni, has arrived...” Maj’Lini leaped from her seat and sprinted toward the door while Dindik urged, “Wait, Princess, we have not finished...” but Maj’Lini had already gone.

The dim and dreary office of the lawmaker had many books, a wide desk and a chair, where the lawmaker, Zorkan, sat writing. The door creaked open and Zorkan looked toward it, and then looked down to continue his writing. K’Cheechik entered, closed the door carefully, then walked to the desk and stood there, waiting for attention. Zorkan stopped writing and looked up again, and then K’Cheechik said, “My lord, I have some disturbing news.” K’Cheechik leaned onto the table and spoke in a secretive voice: “The older princess, Juni, has returned to the palace, to stay, my lord. She was not in her knightly armour when she arrived. They say she has come to live with her family during their time of mourning.”

Zorkan spoke with a naturally heavy voice, but little interest in the report: “Why should this news disturb you?” K’Cheechik replied, “I am suspicious, my lord;

for it is not common that a knight rests from her duty for the sake of matters in her family, such as grieving.” Zorkan said, “The law requires proper mourning for the greatest servants of Gothos. Knights uphold the law and honour their Oracle, whose death was not a family tragedy but a national affair.” K’Cheechik spoke diplomatically: “I am aware of that, my lord, but I fear the princess may have other motives or perhaps suspicions of her own...” Zorkan raised his eyebrows and said, “If you yourself did your own work perfectly, we should not have a problem, should we?”

Episode XVIII

Nokut leaned comfortably on the parapet of a very high balcony of the palace, where he could see a vast and beautiful landscape at dusk. There were rooftops of the palace domes and the citadel, as well as the city below, the golden dog and the mountain. The only sound was the soothing wind blowing in his hair, and the plants behind him were calming to the eye. Juni arrived, looking like an elegant woman of the palace, and she leaned beside her father. Juni said, "I miss these evenings." Nokut said, "Me too." Juni said, "I miss mother." Nokut took long to respond: "I miss your mother too; now there are even fewer in the palace, but you are here; your sister has been very happy, and so am I." Juni moved closer to Nokut, put her arm around his waist and leaned her head onto his shoulder as they stood in silence.

The interior of the palace was bright from the light of evening lamps and chandeliers. Juni playfully chased Maj'Lini through the corridors of the bedchambers, and when Juni caught Maj'Lini, they laughed and embraced each other. Juni said, "Come. I will tell you a story in my bedchamber, where we can be quiet and let everyone sleep." They walked to the door of the bedchamber, and when Juni saw that the door was open, she stopped. She said "Wait..." and held Maj'Lini back. Juni said, "Who opened my door?" Maj'Lini said, "The servants clean in the morning." Juni said, "Wait for me here; I will not be long. If you

see anyone at all, shout for me.” Maj’Lini nodded and Juni carefully went into the bedchamber.

Juni looked around the room, walking slowly until she saw the feet of a servant who lay on the floor behind some furniture. Juni hurried and, behold, there was Mohantuu, shivering, panting and sweating. Juni rushed to the floor and knelt down, putting her hands under the knees and back of Mohantuu. Juni easily lifted Mohantuu up, took her to the bed and placed her onto it. Juni said, “My dear Mohantuu! What has happened? Speak to me...” Mohantuu said, “I saw... I saw...” “You saw what, my dear Mohantuu? Who was here?” Mohantuu gasped in horror, and her eyes began to glow like pearls, then she touched the face of Juni, who said “Mohantuu...” Mohantuu interrupted, saying, “protect the child... from the evil one... protect the child...”

Mohantuu closed her eyes, moaning to herself while Juni spoke: “Child? What child? Mohantuu – what do you mean? Who is the child?” Mohantuu swooned and became like one asleep. Juni rushed out of the bedchamber and found the corridor empty. Juni looked around and said, “Maj?” Juni raised her voice: “Maj!” Juni ran through the corridor and around the corner, then ran to the next corner, then ran to the nearest palace guard. Juni spoke with authority: “Where is the princess?” The guard showed his confusion and fear: “I saw her with you, Your Highness.” Juni commanded: “I want every guard looking for her, immediately.”

Juni sped off before the guard could answer, and soon, everywhere on the palace grounds were lamps and soldiers, some with dogs. The voices of soldiers called from different places: “Princess Maj’Lini!” “Princess Maj’Lini!” “Princess Maj’Lini!” Some of the dogs began to bark, and one soldier shouted: “Hey! You!” Behold, upon a roof, and in the shadows of the night, stood a figure of short height. The dogs and some soldiers ran toward the intruder, who leaped out of the shadows like an acrobat. She soared into the moonlight, a small person in black unitard, gloves and boots, a face mask and a little pouch at the waist. The acrobat landed on another wall, and there was commotion as all the army men chased her, but she vanished.

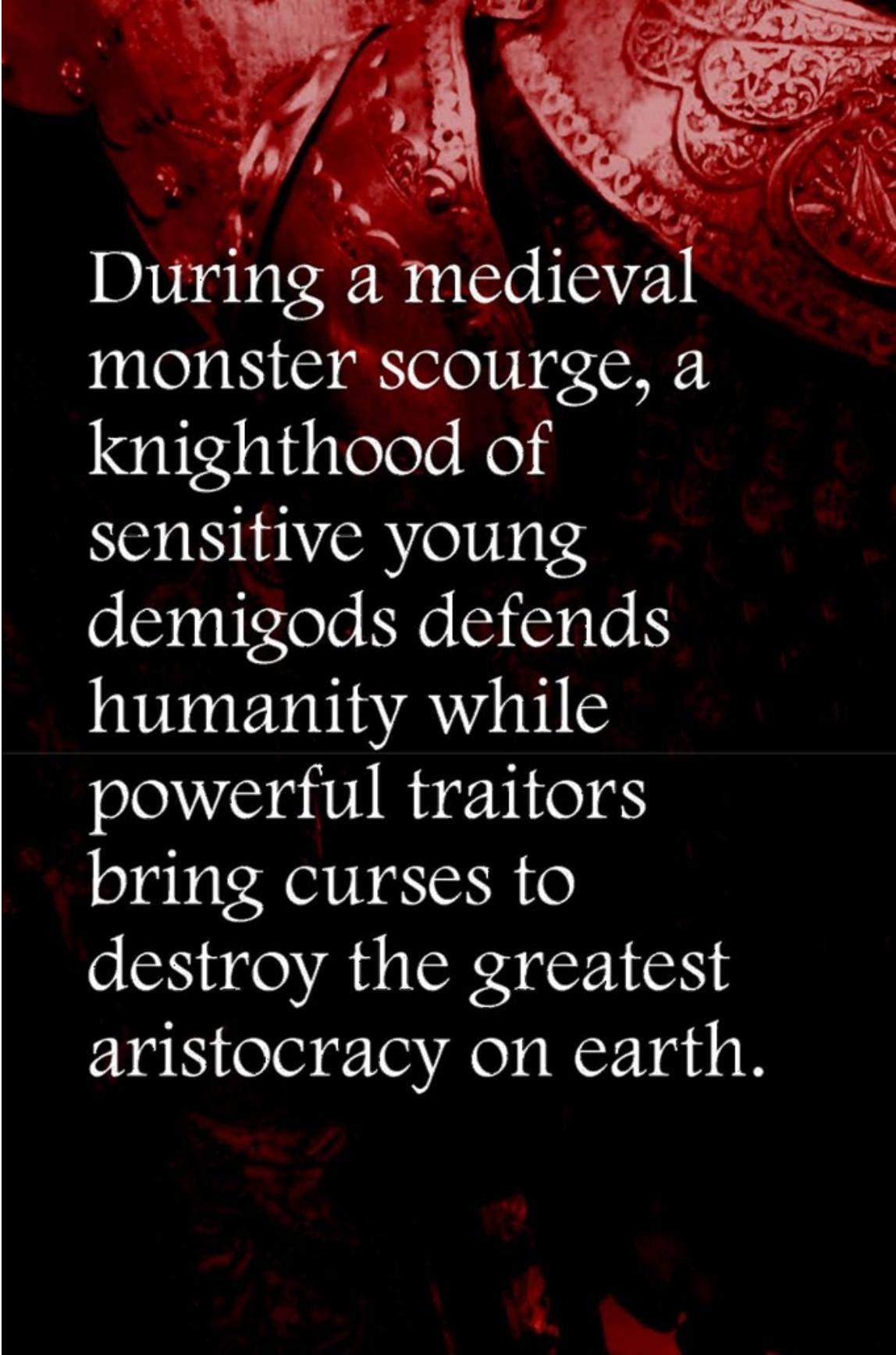
The acrobat leaped and leaped from wall to wall, and she leaped again into the grasp of Juni, and they tumbled together into the treetops of the palace orchard. They ruffled the branches and leaves, and then fell together onto the grass underneath the canopy of trees. The acrobat at once slipped out of the embrace of Juni, and a chase followed through the maze of tree trunks. The acrobat sped faster than Juni, who cried, “Stop! I am an enforcer of the law! I command you to stop!” The acrobat stopped suddenly at the bank of a glittering stream, and at the other side of it, on clear lawn, stood a horse with open wings. The horse wore a bridle and saddle. Juni stopped behind the acrobat, who turned to face Juni, and Juni stared at the horse. Juni said, “What is this?” as she

turned her gaze to the acrobat, who pointed a finger at Juni.

The voice of a young girl commanded from the mask of the acrobat: “You will not tell anyone!” Juni became dizzy and said, “Maj?” The acrobat spoke again: “I am serious! Stay out of my way and be quiet!” Juni said, “Maj! What on earth have you been doing?” Maj’Lini removed her mask and said, “I know what I am doing. Do not let father know anything.” Juni walked toward Maj’Lini, who stood still, and Juni said, “Have you any idea how this would make him feel?” Maj’Lini said, “You are not going to tell him!” “How long have you been sneaking out – and where did you find that horse?” “Say you will not tell him!” “Maj...” “Say you will not tell him!” Juni paused to think and said, “Maj, listen to me, you should come inside and tell me what you have been doing.” “No!” said Maj’Lini, “Say you will not tell him! Say it!”

Juni said, “Maj, please trust me.” Maj’Lini turned away to face the horse, and Juni said, “I love you, Maj.” Maj’Lini turned back again and said, “Then be there for me.” “I am.” “No, you are not.” “I am here, Maj.” “You are not always here...” “I have to work” “So do I” “You are a child, Maj. What could you possibly be doing in the middle of the night?” “Whatever you can do, I can do too.” “No, Maj. You cannot imitate me. You have to listen to me.” “Why will you not support me?” “I am trying to teach you...” “You are not my mother.” “Maj...”

Maj'Lini turned away, put on her mask and leaped easily over the stream, landing at the other side. Juni was motionless as Maj'Lini ran to the horse and mounted. The horse flapped its wings and made a mighty wind, launching into the sky and soaring quickly till the rider and her beast were far.



During a medieval
monster scourge, a
knight hood of
sensitive young
demigods defends
humanity while
powerful traitors
bring curses to
destroy the greatest
aristocracy on earth.