

IVÁN BOLAÑOS GAMERO

Kes and the pegasi of Bernia



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II. KES AND THE PEGASI OF BERNIA

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I. FRIENDS FOREVER

—He didn't come for lunch, and I haven't seen him around here all afternoon —the mother exclaimed.

—What is it, Ila? —asked Palur, who was lounging in his comfortable rocking chair as usual at that time of the afternoon.

—Did our son tell you where he was going?

—This morning, he told me he'd visit Vaz. That old man is our best client in the entire valley. His excellent taste in wine is undeniable.

—Kes went to Zun alone?

—I let him go with the caravan. Don't worry, Kasif is in command. He promised that he wouldn't let her get away from him.

—It's getting dark now. I just hope they camped in a safe place.

—Easy, my wife, he is accompanied by Alit. Remember that together they are invincible.

Ila smiled silently, remembering the joyful and adventurous spirit of the inseparable friends.

The neighboring town of Zun was two days' walk from Herol. It was reached by way of Efin that in the time in which the aures had to defend the kingdom got to be dangerous, but now it was not cause of major concern. The forest had become docile. Nature had regained its former balance after Gorn's ultimate defeat.

—Hurry, Alit. Your father is taking advantage of us.

—Wait for me. I am picking berries.

—Make no mistake about touching a poisonous mushroom —Kes warned him.

—That is not possible! I know those «hats» very well, succulent to the eye but so harmful to the gut. You know, my mother taught me long ago to differentiate them from the harmless mushrooms she uses in her kitchen. For years I have been in charge of removing them from our garden, even those that grow several steps outside the fence surrounding our house.

—It's okay, it's okay. I said nothing.

It was getting dark when Kasif ordered the vintners' caravan to stop in a wide clearing in the forest. The tents were not long in rising. The fire would soon dilate his pupils, and the smell of wild pig cooking would whet the general appetite. There was an atmosphere of peace and camaraderie.

After a while, everyone was singing with joy a song known throughout the Moaslan Valley, from Ukaris to Herol:

The shadows have been banished, life triumphed.

Peace has returned, death defied.

The kingdom breathes joy. The souls sing night and day,

Terralan is a place to prevail.

—Alit, don't eat too much —Kasif warned—. I don't want you to end up with indigestion.

—I have the remedy for that, Dad. I have some of Mom's digestive herbs on my belt.

—In the end, you turned out to be an expert in all kinds of plants, especially medicinal ones, and you, Kes, why do you visit old Vaz?

—He sent me a letter a few days ago. In it, he asks me to go, accompanied by Alit. An old friend will wait for us there.

—Who?

—He didn't tell me, but I'd bet it's Diruk.

—Our good friend Diruk. We haven't heard from him for a long time —Kasif exclaimed.

—I'm very excited about the idea of seeing him again. It's been almost two years since we were last together.

—Don't be impatient, soon we'll be in Zun.

After assigning those in charge for the animals during the night, Kasif accompanied the boys to their tent. A starry and calm night would shelter them until the next morning.

II. A DISTANT CALL

As was customary in Kes, dawn did not catch him sleeping. Before the last embers of the fire that lit and heated the camp the night before had died down, he was ready to resume his journey.

Throughout the day, he kept up with Kasif, who led everyone safely and steadily along the roads of Efin. Alit, a little behind, had had a chance to collect a variety of herbs. After a smooth journey, the rooftops of Zun were finally in sight.

Along with the knocking on the door, a powerful «Good morning, we're here» was heard.

—It seems they have finally arrived! —exclaimed an old man, revitalized by the voice he recognized immediately.

Upon opening, he found two boys of about twelve, accompanied by a large man with a profuse beard and long hair.

—How good it is to see you again! Come in, come in. You must be hungry. I'm going to bring you some tea and some muffins too —Vaz added, noticing the boys' half-hearted expressions at the thought of not sinking their teeth into something more succulent.

Shortly afterward, Kasif exclaimed:

—These muffins are so good!

—Elyta makes them. She's the best baker in Zun. Perhaps from the entire kingdom.

For a moment, no one seemed to intend to break the silence. That's how tasty those muffins were.

—Kes, Alit, you wonder why I sent for you. Surely you already suspect that our good Diruk is about to arrive.

—I thought he would be here by now —Kes exclaimed, somewhat impatient.

—He must have arrived last night. But don't worry, the carrier pigeon warned me this morning that he's very close —Vaz encouraged.

—It must be something significant to have traveled here. I know Diruk now lives on the other side of the Acuantalis —Kasif put in.

—That's right, friend. The Balkurian King commissioned him a little over a year ago to found one more town in that part of the kingdom.

—The ancient path of the unicorns —Kes exclaimed.

A complete silence settled over the room. They all looked at the center of the table with a worried expression: there was only one muffin left.

—Own! —Alit said, disappearing into his mouth with a speed that seemed magical.

Everyone laughed at his enthusiasm when it came to eating. The laughter was interrupted by a new knock on the door.

—He's here! —Kes exclaimed.

—How do you know? —Vaz asked—. Do you still have aure powers?

—No, it's the feeling you get when someone you love is around.

—Are you going to open me up or what? —the person on the other side of the door demanded.

—It's Diruk! —the old man exclaimed happily.

The former aure, rejuvenated during his adventure two years ago, looked much younger than his great friend Vaz.

—How good to see you, dear friends! —Diruk greeted, clasping both hands.

Kes jumped up and ran to hug him.

—How are you? We haven't seen each other for so long.

—The great little brave who saved us all from the shadows. Alit, you are not far behind. Thanks to you, everyone in Herol had the opportunity to defend themselves.

Kes was silent. Great happiness had shaken him. His eyes seemed to be about to betray his outer strength.

After offering the newcomer a cup of tea, Vaz made sure the windows were shut tight. He didn't want inopportune ears to hear what his old friend was about to reveal.

—What I am about to tell you must not leave this room —Diruk said.

—We won't say anything to anyone —Kasif promised, resting his hand on his son's shoulder.

—I have received a very distant call for help.

—Far away, you say? —asked Vaz, who didn't know much about the situation either.

—From beyond the sea. Farther than the horizon itself. From a place that can only be reached through a magic door.

Everyone was surprised. Magic was almost non-existent in Terralan. Only the unicorn spirits reflected in the waters of Aquantalis remained as the power that once inhabited the kingdom.

—Who called? —Kasif asked, as intrigued as the others.

—Less than two moons ago, when I was touring the north shore of the lake, the spirit of Unir spoke to me.

—The Lord of the unicorns! —Kes exclaimed happily.

—You can imagine my surprise when he contacted me. The consciousness of the purest being that ever-inhabited Terralan is still very powerful.

—How is it possible? —Vaz asked—. We all know that it is only its reflection that remains on the waters.

—I didn't believe it at first, either. I thought maybe I was dreaming and would wake up at any moment. But it was indeed about Unir.

—What did he say? —Kes asked.

—Two inhabitants of this land must travel to Bernia.

—Where is that place? And who has to go?

—I didn't know of its existence either, until my meeting with Unir. Now I know that it is an unattainable realm for any of us. Pegasi live there.

—What is a pegasus? —Alit asked, his mouth full of food. Without anyone noticing, he had slipped into the kitchen and returned with a plate of muffins.

—Son, don't talk while you're chewing —Kasif scolded him, then took the precious treasure from his hands.

—Pegasi are close cousins of unicorns. They do not have a horn but instead possess two mighty wings that allow them to fly majestically.

—You mean, they're winged horses —Alit concluded.

—Alit, if Unir listened to you, he'd have a thing or two to say to you —Diruk chided—. Horses are beautiful and noble creatures, very loved by everyone in Terralan, but you must not forget that they don't have a magical origin.

—Well then, they are unicorns without horns, but with wings. Flying creatures devoid of horns.

Once again, everyone laughed at Alit's peculiar and amusing eloquence.

—Listen carefully. Elan, the most powerful of the pegasi, contacted Unir and transmitted the call for help. Something terrible is about to happen in Bernia and to counteract it, they need the power of the Ruby of the Alliance.

At that moment, Diruk put a small bundle on the table. Something wrapped in thick cloth began to emit a gentle light. When the ancient aure discovered it, everyone was amazed at the beauty of the most precious gem that ever shone in Terralan.

—How does it shine so bright? Does it still have any power? —Vaz asked.

—Yes, dear friend. After our victory over Grom, King Balkurian charged me to keep it in a safe place. Recently, to my complete surprise, the gem had come to life.

—These pegasi you mention then require our help. They need the ruby —Vaz said—. You said that two would have to travel to that place. I'm not sure, but I think I know who it is.

Diruk and Vaz frowned at Alit and Kes, who had once again seized the plate of muffins.

—Before, when I had the powers of an aure, I think I would have understood why they would notice me. But, Diruk, I am now an ordinary boy. Why would the pegasi want me to help them? —Kes exclaimed.

—Elan was very specific when he asked Unir to be you and Alit to bring the ruby to Bernia. Your courage and sacrifice are qualities that have made you see pegasi as the one to help them in this difficult time.

—What is this great danger? And how are we supposed to get to Bernia?

—Vaz, do you have your latest invention ready?

—Yeah, I was checking it just yesterday.

III. A SINGULAR ARTIFACT

Morning reached the town of Zun amid a deep calm. Its inhabitants were getting up when a scream was heard that resoundingly broke the silence.

—I'm not going to dive in the water with that thing! —Alit asserted.

The night before, Diruk had had a hard time convincing Kasif to let his son go into the unknown. He promised him, he assured him, that they would return safely from their mysterious adventure in distant lands.

The noble and brave Kasif would be silent on his return to Herol about Kes and Alit's departure. Both boys needed to embark as soon as possible on their all-important mission. Ila and Palur had not yet found out what was about to happen.

—Alit, you don't have to be afraid. It's a very reliable suit —Vaz struggled to explain.

—Then why don't you try it first —the teenager argued, with a suspicious look.

—I'm too old for that. Also, if you want to go with Kes, you must learn to breathe underwater.

—I'm not a fish! —Alit replied.

—I didn't know your inventor side —Kasif interjected, trying to calm things down.

—Well, I'm a passionate inventor. The most curious among aures. I was always interested in knowing the operation of the various machines and devices. This is perhaps my best gadget —Vaz asserted.

—How exactly does it work?

—These tanks store the air that you can then breathe through this hose. This mask is used to see underwater, made with a new material that I have been experimenting with for months. It is much better than glass. It doesn't break so easily. Look how transparent it is!

—Awesome! They should use it on all windows. You could get rich.

—I'm not interested in money, Kasif. Since it looks like glass, I think I'll call it «Vaz-glass.»

—Hmmm... I see. A very original name. And haven't you thought about putting one more like yours?

Immediately Vaz laughed at Kasif's scathing intervention.

A few steps away, Alit had given in a bit in her refusal to use the diving suit, the underwater breathing suit Vaz had invented.

—We'll test them in the little pond near here —Diruk encouraged.

—Let me deliver the wine from my cart —Kasif said—. I'll be back in less than an hour, and we can take the boys together.

—Very well. I'll tether my horse here —Diruk added—. It will be better if we all travel together in your wagon.

Shortly after, they stopped at the edge of the lagoon, ready for the great test.

—Once you learn to breathe underwater, everything will be ready for you to begin your extraordinary journey —Diruk explained.

—Where will we go? —Alit asked.

—We'll circle Acuantalis to the west first. On its north shore, the spirit of Unir will be waiting for us.

—But how are we going to get to that distant realm by submerging ourselves in the water? —Kes asked—. He still didn't quite understand how they could leave Terralan.

—You'll find out soon. Now we must try on the suits.

—I'm ready —Alit exclaimed, seeming to take on a renewed courage. He thought that if he entered the water before Kes, he would prove to everyone that he could be as or more courageous than his friend.

—Slow down, son. First you must heed the indications of Vaz.

—Well said, Kasif. Guys, pay attention. For you to breathe comfortably, you must prevent water from entering your noses. Outside of that, breathe through your mouth using the hose nozzle. You must remain relaxed. Remember that if you do it right, absolutely nothing wrong will happen to you.

Standing on the shore, knee-deep in water, Alit began to practice breathing. By then, Kes had finished putting on his suit, with Diruk's help, and with a firm step, he approached the water, stopping next to his friend.

—Don't try anything too long —Vaz warned—. Don't forget this is your first try.

The boys continued to advance until the water was up to their necks.

—How are you? Are you fine? —Diruk asked.

Since they could hardly speak due to the mouthpiece in their mouth, both boys turned and raised a fist to sign that everything was going very well. An instant later, they disappeared under the water.

—How much time do they have, Vaz? —asked Kasif.

—I don't know exactly. I think about half an hour.

The father was somewhat concerned.

—That makes me a little uneasy. What will happen if they run out of air while still underwater?

—In that case, they will have to get out very quickly —Vaz replied.

—What an inventor you turned out to be!

The minutes passed, and there was no sign of the boys. The three adults waited impatiently on the shore.

At that moment, they felt hands touching their back. They soon confirm that it was the two young adventurers.

—Surprised? —Kes asked.

—Not really —Diruk replied—. It reassures me to know that you have been so comfortable in the suits that you want to play a joke on us.

—They're easy to use —Alit exclaimed—. After we return from Bernia, I plan to keep it to carry out some underwater research.

—Underwater research? —his father asked him.

—Yes, in our short walk under the water, I was able to distinguish a great variety of plants that I must study.

In the afternoon, Kasif said goodbye to his son, promising Diruk and Vaz that he would not tell anything about the journey the boys were about to start.

—I will tell Ila and Palur that they will stay in Zun for a few days. They will be glad to hear that you have met Diruk.

Soon everything was ready for the first stage of that new and challenging adventure. Vaz had two beautiful and strong horses. The boys would ride one of them.

—Let's not forget the muffins —Alit exclaimed with exaggerated concern.

—We'll pass Elyta's house off Zun —Vaz said.

IV. THE SPIRIT OF UNIR

The four travelers left the village early in the morning. Diruk was attentive to the path due to the enormous responsibility he had to care for the Ruby of the Alliance.

The ancient aures now lived in peace, scattered in their respective towns and the kingdom's capital. But either way, Diruk did not think it appropriate to reveal Kes and Alit's mission to them.

—What do you know about Mias, Gaslan, or Nerus? —Kes asked—. I have not seen them since our return from the Moaskif Mountains.

—They always remember you very fondly. Now they lead an ordinary life, full of joy and hope for the peace achieved in the kingdom.

—Diruk, I want you to know that I understand the importance of our mission. The peace and joy that we live in Terralan should not only come from our land. If they need us in Bernia, Alit and I will help them as much as we can.

—I know, Kes, and Elan knows it too. That is why you were called. Perhaps now we should sing the song that reminds aures.

—I don't know it —Kes seemed to claim.

—It was composed by Elkos, who now also does not have magical powers but retains his great wisdom. Vaz will accompany me, listen:

*The guardians sang together once the kingdom needed them.
Then men saw their future in danger. Fear threatened them.
Good souls were gathered, and swords were drawn,
the magic of the aure and the sacrifice of a child saved us all.
Now we sing another song. The unicorn is a beautiful memory,
a calmer life is our new legacy.*

Kes smiled, deep in his heart grateful for the opportunity to help save his beloved Terralan. As Vaz had feared, the muffins didn't last half the journey. Alit's clothes were always full of crumbs.

The calm waters of the lake accompanied them for much of the way. In a short time, new villages had appeared, located between distant Herol, home of Kes, and Mut, the last town before reaching the Moaslan River.

King Balkurian had recently had a son and was caring for his young offspring.

—Diruk, what is the prince's name? —Kes asked.

—The king's heir is called Kalur.

—How curious! It sounds like your father’s name. I think maybe it was a way of honoring your family —added Alit, who also often displayed excellent mental acuity.

—In that case, I wonder whose idea it was —Kes exclaimed, staring at Diruk, who winked at him.

The travelers continued their march and, although the roads of Terralan were now being traveled in peace, a growing tension would take hold of them. Ever since Gorn was defeated and the aures lost their magic, everyone’s life had developed between ordinary chores. Magic was a memory still fresh in their minds but at the same time something that they now felt infinitely distant.

Diruk himself confessed that when the spirit of Unir contacted him, he experienced something very intense, which he could not explain. As if the presence of that being, so pure and noble, but at the same time so magical and powerful, left him dwarfed, vulnerable.

After a few days, they finally spotted the Moaslan River. From there, they would circle the Acuantalis to the north. One more day on the road would take them to the west bank: the unicorns’ ancient path.

—Diruk, you still haven’t told me how we could get to Bernia. Are there any magical passages or doors underwater? —Kes asked.

—Unir asked me to meet him at a specific location. His commission was that you, Alit, and the Ruby of the Alliance were together.

—We're close to Mut now. The last town on our way —Vaz put in—. I am sorry that we were unable to visit our friends.

—Me too —Kes said—. Nerus could have welcomed us into his home.

—Some say that even though he no longer has magic speed, he can still outrun anyone —Vaz added.

—That's because he keeps fit. He exercises every day —Diruk explained.

—I exercise too —Alit exclaimed.

Somewhat puzzled, they all observed him.

—Well, it's not that I run or do some gymnastics, but I also exercise with the culinary tasting. That requires training the stomach and palate and a lot of perseverance in chewing well.

They all laughed out loud. It was undeniable that Alit had taken it upon himself to make the trip more fun. The north shore of the Acuantalis appeared before his eyes. The night gave them a bright and beautiful full moon.

—Look at the sparkles on the surface —Diruk said.

The elegant silhouettes of dozens of unicorns briefly seized the waters.

—We will camp here. These trees will protect us from the cold.

While the boys set up the tent where they would sleep, Diruk and Vaz took charge of lighting the fire.

V. LIKE FISH IN THE WATER

A restful night's rest allowed everyone to resume their march the next day with renewed enthusiasm. Around noon Diruk gave the order to stop.

—This is the place. Here we must wait.

—I feel something very strange —Kes confessed.

—What could it be? —Vaz asked.

—I'm not sure, but it's as if a voice is speaking to me in a whisper. I can barely hear it.

—Concentrate —Diruk told him—. Close your eyes. I have a feeling that Unir is trying to communicate with you.

—If you're right. I can recognize it. His voice is warm and sweet.

After a few moments, in which everyone was silent, waiting for Kes's words, he finally exclaimed: —We need a boat.

—What boat? —Alit asked—. There is no boat here.

—We must build it ourselves —his friend explained.

—Well, well. Now it turns out that we must get wood and then give it the shape of a boat. That’s going to take a long time —Vaz complained, showing impatience, to the surprise of the others.

—Not so, dear Vaz. Wood awaits us behind those bushes. Unir wants us to work together in this endeavor.

Without being able to explain, the four travelers knew what they had to do. It seemed as if a magical hand was guiding them, since in a few hours, and demonstrating exceptional carpentry skill, they were able to build a solid and comfortable enough boat for everyone.

—We’re ready —Diruk said—. Let’s put up the breathing suits. Now we must start rowing.

In a short time, they found themselves tens of leagues from the shore. The sun was about to set on the horizon when Kes closed his eyes again.

—This is the place. We must dive in here.

Vaz and Diruk helped the boys put on their suits. The moment had come. A leather bag tied tightly around Kes’s waist would carry the ruby, which they found was still glowing with great intensity.

—Remember that Elan is waiting for you on the other side. He will be your guide in that land you do not know —Diruk told them.

—Don’t worry. We will return victorious —Alit said, exulting with excitement.

—If necessary, we will visit his parents. They will be fine.

After a loving hug, the boys jumped into the water. To Kes's surprise, Alit showed great skill when diving. At times he seemed to master the technique with much greater skill than him. A beautiful blue flash attracted them from the bottom of the lake.

As they descended, they felt their hearts race. Thanks to the suits' insulation, the icy water was not a bother, but venturing into the unknown kept them a little nervous and excited.

The light suddenly stopped shining, and a cavern appeared before their eyes, a kind of grotto that invited them to enter. Kes was the first to enter. Then Alit got lost inside too. The blue light glowed for a few more moments, then went out. The cave had disappeared.

—Do you know what they are going to face? —Vaz asked as he paddled with his old friend to shore.

—Unir told me that they would have to beat three who are one. An evil force that is trapped in an old prison.

—Do you think they return safely?

—I don't know. I am sure that Kes did not survive Gorn to die uselessly in this or any other land.

VI. A STRANGE LAND

The clarity of the surface seemed still far away when Alit felt a pain in his stomach. He remembered that he had eaten a lot the night before and that perhaps that oversight was taking its toll. He promised himself never to do it too much again.

He sped his advance, with Kes swimming right behind him. A series of brisk, quick strokes carried them to the reward of fresh air.

—I don't know how we got out of that cavern, but I tell you one thing: these are not the same waters we plunged into —Kes exclaimed.

—You're right. I also feel that we are in another place.

—When we entered the Acuantalis, the afternoon was coming to an end, and here the sun seems to have risen only a few hours ago.

They swam to the nearby shore, and after removing their heavy suits, they sat down to catch their breath.

—Is something wrong with you? You seem uncomfortable —Kes said.

—My stomach is hurting a lot. I shouldn't have eaten that much last night.

—Do you have any of your mother's digestive herbs?

—No. But don't worry, a moment ago I saw a very similar one near some bushes.

—Be careful. Perhaps it is a different plant.

Alit took a few leaves, and sure of what he was doing, he proceeded to shred them. Kes, who had flint in his hermetically sealed bag, was in charge of lighting the fire to prepare the infusion.

—Try not to use all the water in your bottle, Alit. Until we find a river or stream, we must take care of our provision.

The tea was ready in a few minutes, and the aching boy drank the equivalent of two cups.

—Kes, I'm not feeling well —he confessed to his friend shortly after.

—Well, your stomachache won't go away that fast.

—No, it's something else. I feel very dizzy, very sleepy.

Kes was about to offer him some water when Alit fell exhausted.

—Don't fall asleep, Alit. Come on, wake up!

The boy was fast asleep. He didn't wake up, no matter how hard Kes shook him.

Worried, with a feeling of helplessness, he began to search the surroundings. He was not sure what to do, but he had to find something or someone.

Some distance away, behind a group of leafy trees, he thought he heard a low and threatening noise. He approached, little by little, cautiously. As he advanced, he felt more clearly a powerful growl and loud howls that, intermingled, overwhelmed him.

His eyes widened when he recognized the figure of a bear. It was not just any bear. This one was about three meters high, much larger than the bears of Terralan.

Soon Kes discovered the reason for the animal's aggressiveness. A pack of wolves challenged him a few steps away. These also didn't look like the ones he had met in the forests of Efin. They were smaller but much more aggressive. Its fur, instead of gray or black, was a very intense brown. His fangs seemed larger and sharper. The size of the herd was also much larger than usual for animals of its kind.

High up in the tree, behind the bear, Kes discovered the reason for its enormous ferocity. No more than two months old, two cubs were kept at a safe distance from the ground. It was about a mother defending her cubs.

The wolves had her surrounded. Kes was not making the slightest noise, lest he is discovered. How he missed having the speed, he borrowed from Nerus, or the invisibility of Gaslan.

The pack was preparing to jump on the bear when a mighty thunder was heard. The canids fled in terror.

Still shaken by the din, Kes decided it was time to return to Alit. He was about to get to where he left off when he stopped in surprise. A figure covered in a gray cloak was kneeling next to his friend.

—Who are you? What are you doing with him? —he asked without hesitation.

The figure seemed unfazed. It had placed its hand on the sleeping youth's forehead and was repeating words in a language Kes could not recognize.

He moved a little closer, and at that moment, the figure turned around, revealing its real appearance.

It was a beautiful and at the same time athletic girl, who wore brown leather trousers and a jacket. She wore boots that looked worn but at the same time very well made. Her long red hair was tied in a ponytail, a detail Kes discovered when the girl pulled her hood back.

—He has eaten from the seven-day dream leaf—she said, in the language of Kes.

—Seven-day dream? Are you telling me that Alit is going to be like this for seven days?

—Yes. Unless you've eaten a lot, in which case the effect will be worse—the girl added.

Kes was concerned at those words.

—What language were you speaking a moment ago?

—More than a language, it's an incantation taught to me by extraordinary beings. It serves to heal. Sorry for my lack of education, my name is Kalya.

—I'm Kes, and he is Alit. Were you the one who scared away those wolves?

—Yes, it was me. I was not going to let them attack the bear and endanger the lives of her cubs.

—How did you do it? I heard a thunderous sound that reminded me of the power of an old friend.

—I used my thunder sticks. Look, —the girl said, showing him two short, thick bars she wore on her belt— they are a gift from Elan. By striking them, I can produce the powerful noise you heard. The only bad thing is that it takes several hours for them to regain their magic.

—Well, it's very effective. It almost made me run away in shock.

—Maybe you're not as brave as Elan thinks you are.

—Do you know him? Do you know the pegasus?

—It's not just a pegasus. He's the strongest of them.

—You were waiting for us? —Kes asked.

—Elan told me that today two foreigners would arrive, coming from a land beyond the horizon. I must be honest with you; After your friend's carelessness and your reaction to the thunder sticks, I'm not very impressed.

Kes did not like those words but preferred not to say anything. The most important thing was Alit's recovery.

—Do you know how to wake him up?

—Not quite. We need a wizard, and lately, these are scarce in Bernia.

—What will we do then?

—Pegasi can also nullify the effect of the seven-day dream leaf.

—Well, let's go with them! —Kes exclaimed.

—Not so fast. They live in the lake's center, and we cannot get there by boat because we would be swallowed up by the eddies surrounding the island.

—How do we get there then?

—On the back of a pegasus. You see, you will have to prove that you are worthy of riding one so that we can take your friend to their abode.

—I'm up for anything as long as Alit gets well.

—We'll see that in due course. Now join me in a prayer that I will say for his return to us. We are going to invoke the spirits that always accompany the pegasi. Repeat every phrase I say.

Beings of light, who take care of us every day,

don't let our friend go far away.

Give us the strength to fight for what is just and good,

do not let us falter in the face of darkness and falsehood.

Kes seemed more animated after repeating that short but encouraging prayer a couple of times with Kalya.

—What do you got there? Is it food? —the girl asked, noticing the bundle hanging from Kes's belt.

— Something that I must give to Elan only. Something very important.

—I see. Mysterious you turned out to be.

—Well, I guess I can trust you. You are a friend of the pegasi, and you are also going to help me heal Alit.

Kalya waited in silence.

—It is the Ruby of the Alliance.

—Interesting! Tell me more.

It was a much-needed gem in my land when the aures protected us from the shadows with their magic.

—The aures?

—The twelve guardians sent by the higher forces to take care of the men. I became the last of them.

—Then you are a wizard!

—I have no more power. I used everything I had to defeat Gorn.

—That name sounds like something very dark, something terrible.

—It almost killed all life in Terralan.

—That’s what your land is called. It’s a nice name, although Bernia is more so —
Kalya smiled.

Kes looked for a moment at Alit, who was still trapped in this strange dream,
completely cut off from the conscious world.

—Diruk says that pegasi are close cousins of unicorns.

—I’ve never seen a unicorn —the girl said—. But once, an old wizard showed me a
book in which beings like pegasi were drawn. They have no wings but a kind of horn that
protruded from their foreheads.

—Yes, those are! —Kes exclaimed—. Unicorns are the purest and most magical
creatures that have ever traveled our world.

—I have that same concept of pegasi. In the end, I think we are more alike than I
wanted to admit at the beginning. Come on. We should get ourselves lunch.

—Will we leave Alit alone?

—Don’t worry. We’ll take it to my shelter in the trees.

VII. THE REVENGE OF DELOR

Prince Landor could barely contain his anger and frustration. Indescribable grief seized him. In his heart grew a visceral hatred for the one who had ordered the horrible massacre.

The sorcerer had sent a warning just before his offensive: if they did not offer resistance and hand over the prince, he would not destroy Calys, the capital of Bernia.

The loyal subjects responded with a unanimous and resounding refusal. They didn't know that their destinations were already written. Very few survived. Such was the price the kingdom paid to defend Landor from the arts of the evil sorcerer.

The dark forces marched on Calys with impressive speed. Like a deadly plague that covered the city, they ripped the lives of its unsuspecting inhabitants.

Not even the queen managed to escape that terrible death, nor did she have time to alert the pegasi, who might have been able to prevent such great damage.

No one could imagine that evil could be so powerful. Through dangerous spells and incantations, which almost ended his life, Delor had achieved that power never seen in a sorcerer. However, the cost of his terrible decision to attack Calys would have to be considered too high. He had sacrificed many of his followers; men won to his cause by black magic. Now his soul was dominated by the most abject evil.

— How have you dared to end the lives of so many innocents? —Landor scolded him, fury injected into his eyes.

—Silence! You haven't seen anything yet.

—Will your madness never end?

—Oh yeah. I see an ending, a special one for everyone in Bernia.

—You won't achieve anything.

—You are wrong about that, prince. Now that you're my prisoner, no one else will be able to use the scepter and oppose my will.

—The Golden Scepter is meant for one thing only. Are you thinking of releasing the three-headed hydra?

—That's right, and even if the pegasi manage to get it before I do, it won't serve them without the added power of a gem from another land. The scepter alone is not powerful enough to stop the hydra, which when freed will sweep through each town and village, leaving utter desolation in its wake. Those it does not destroy with claws and fire it will force to attack each other. I will simply claim what rightfully belongs to me.

—Are you crazy, Delor! The hydra will kill you too. It will kill everyone.

—You underestimate me, prince. I have long since become the most powerful wizard that ever lived. Now I have the strength to control the beast. I am close to making the Cage of Virtue disappear.

—Poor stupid! Your pride doesn't let you see that nothing and nobody can control the hydra.

—We'll see about that. For now, I know that foreigners have come to this kingdom. They bring the gem that could threaten my plans. A big surprise awaits them. The evil of the hydra is already taking effect on Bernia through me.

Landor could not understand those words. He didn't know which foreigners the sorcerer was referring to.

Delor, once a respected wizard in the service of the kingdom, had undergone a profound change within his heart. His ambition had grown out of control, and when the King of Bernia refused to hand over the riches he demanded, he vowed that he would obtain them at any cost.

Disguised as one of the palace doctors, he managed to take the king's life, administering potions that were poisoning him without anyone discovering him and, not satisfied with his betrayal and taking advantage of the anguish of the court and the guard, he made the body disappear. The impossible was to find at least some trace of the late sovereign's remains, unsuccessfully, which increased the general grief.

In the most terrible pain, the queen managed to rule as firmly as she could, waiting for years, patiently, for the young prince to come of age and could be crowned the new monarch. Just days before his birthday, Calys was attacked, and Landor kidnapped.

Now captive within the dark tower of the sorcerer, the young heir desperately searched for a way to escape.

—Are you sure he'll be fine if we leave him alone? —Kes insisted.

—He will be fine in my house —Kalya replied.

The stretcher they prepared with branches and lianas allowed them to drag Alit quite comfortably. Thus, they advanced through the forest until they came to the foot of a very lush tree.

—Here it is!

—Do you live in a tree?

—Now you'll see.

Kalya gave four short whistles, and three ropes fell to the ground. Something was holding them from above.

—You expect us to bring my friend up with this?

The girl tied Alit to the stretcher with one of the ropes and then pulled it twice. Little by little, the small portable bed was lifted towards the top of the tree until it was lost among the branches. Kes thought that, indeed, Kalya's friends were raising his friend.

—Is our turn, around the waist and one of your feet.

—Ready!

Kalya pulled Kes's rope and hers, and they began to climb. They reached a height of more than ten men, surprising Kes with the curious device that turned the ropes wrapped around a solid wooden drum, this in turn attached to a strange disk with a skinny membrane. He understood that Kalya's coded whistles triggered this. Then he witnessed something extraordinary: a very well arranged and comfortable house appeared before his eyes.

It was a small but very well-designed construction, raised above the tree, and not visible from the ground.

—Like the thunder sticks, this was another gift from the pegasi. They raised me as a child after I lost my parents. Now I live in this place in the middle of the forest.

Kes was impressed. Once, he also controlled powerful magic, but now he was amazed to have a new friend, full of surprises and so close to creatures that he began to see as the equivalent of the unicorns of Terralan. They placed Alit on a soft bed, covered him with a blanket, and sat down to eat.

—This is delicious —Kes exclaimed—. What is it?

—It's a stew that I make with some herbs, potatoes, and some fish.

—Well, it tastes really good. You told me earlier that there were few wizards left. What happened to them?

—An evil sorcerer named Delor wiped out most of them. Now he wants to end the royal family. He killed the king and has the crown prince prisoner.

—Could that be the reason Elan contacted Unir?

—Who is Unir? —Kalya asked.

—The Lord of the unicorns. I fought by his side to defeat Grom.

—Elan told me that together, we would take the foreigners to his island, but he gave me no further details. He only said to me that they were two braves and that they would be vital to Bernia's fate.

—Then that's your mission. Take us before them —Kes exclaimed.

—Yes, but now that your friend is not awake, I will have to travel alone with you. The safest thing is that we carry the ruby with the pegasi. There is no choice for Alit to remain here until we return.

—I think you're right. How did you meet the pegasi?

—It's a long story.

—I'd like to know —Kes insisted.

—I was orphaned of father and mother when I was little. Some bandits attacked the wagon we were traveling in, and my mother barely had time to hide me in the bushes.

—No one else survived?

—Just me. I wandered through the woods for several days, eating what little I could find. The forces were leaving me, and I resigned myself to my fatal destiny when a winged shadow overshadowed the rays of the sun for a moment.

—The pegasi...

—Yes, it was Elan, the most beautiful and majestic creature I had ever seen. He felt sorry for me and took care of me.

—It was a lucky meeting —Kes exclaimed.

—I think it was more than that. I think it was destined to happen. When I was fully recovered, he allowed me to ride him and took me to his island. It is a place of incomparable beauty.

—So, you're a true friend to the pegasi.

—One of the few. They no longer trust most men. Since the dark sorcerer poisoned so many hearts, the sins represented by the hydra's three heads have been on the rise.

—The hydra? —Kes asked.

—It's a powerful evil spirit who was defeated long ago and confined to an impregnable prison. Elan suspects that Delor wants to free it.

—Well, we must avoid that!

—I see you have great inner strength, Kes. Forgive me for having doubted your worth before. Tomorrow we will go to meet the pegasi.

—Are you sure Alit will be okay?

—Don't worry. No one can enter this magical house without my permission —Kalya reassured him.

The beautiful creature flapped its wings with energy, reaching a great altitude in just a few moments. Another similar-looking, but smaller, caught up shortly after.

—Father, they are already here.

—I know, son. The energy of the gem is felt throughout Bernia.

—Do you trust Kalya to fulfill her mission?

—She has never failed us. This time will be no exception.

—Delor is getting stronger every day. Soon he will try to free the beast.

—We can't allow that, Elis. The hydra must never see the light of day again. If that happens, the three sins that it symbolizes will take over all living beings.

—What are those sins, father? What does each of their heads represent?

—Anger, envy, and pride. They have been contained thanks to the fact that the beast remains locked in the Cage of Virtue. The inhabitants of Bernia hardly knew them or had

already forgotten them. But now, with the looming threat of the hydra being released, a grim and dire future looms over everyone.

The pegasi closed their wings, folding them against their horse-shaped bodies. In that way, they plummeted rapidly, and when they seemed about to crash, they opened them again, demonstrating their incredible strength and majesty.

After the unnecessary maneuver, Elan realized that perhaps the damage to Bernia had already begun. Pride had never been a characteristic of their kind.

—What do you order, my lord? —asked a thin man with two fingers missing from his left hand.

—You must find the scepter before the pegasi.

—As you order, my master.

—You must not fail this time, Yor. Remember that you have already paid for two mistakes in the past. Now I could charge you with something more valuable.

—Thank you for reminding me, my lord.

—Don't waste any more time and go. Take the gray crows with you.

The sorcerer's tower stood deep in a dead valley, from which nature had long fled. A road, winding and narrow, allowed a cart drawn at high speed by two horses to carry Delor's servant to the main valley, where life was still thriving. The carriage had no driver. Black magic drove it.

Yor, the only apprentice of the sorcerer, had little magic but had a heart as black as his master's. He was determined to do whatever it took to please the evil Delor.

Above the carriage, a flock of gigantic crows, twice the average size, accompanied the dark emissary on his mission.

VIII. ELAN AND ELIS

After leaving Alit safe and secure in the treehouse, Kalya and Kes headed for a clearing in the forest.

—Are you going to teach me how to use the thunder sticks? —Kes asked.

—Perhaps. If I see that you are worthy of using it.

—It seems fair to me. How will you know if I am worthy?

At that precise moment, two shadows were briefly drawn near them.

—They are already here! —Kalya exclaimed.

Kes looked up too but couldn't see anything. Just an instant later, two powerful and beautiful creatures gently descended to perch next to them.

At first glance, the unicorns' cousins seemed to have a more combative spirit, more ready for battle, like a wartime version of the magical creatures.

—Their wings were enormous, and they could not be otherwise, to give them the necessary strength to soar with two and even three riders on their back.

—I greet you, Kes of Terralan. My name is Elan, leader of pegasi. The one who accompanies me is my son, Elis.

—It is a great honor for me to meet you. You are like Unir.

—My cousin is no longer among you physically, but as you have seen, his spirit is still strong in Terralan. Thanks to him, we were able to create the magical portal that allowed you and your friend to arrive in Bernia.

—I have brought the Ruby of the Alliance with me.

—I know. Its power began to be felt from your arrival. We will take you to our island, where we will explain the true magnitude of the threat that is about to overtake us —Elan said.

—He may not be ready to ride you —Kalya warned.

—He will be able to. Now we must awaken the one who sleeps so far from this world.

—Alit had two cups of dream herb —Kes revealed.

—In that case, it will be a little more complicated. But do not fear, he will return to us —Elan assured.

—It's time to test your courage and prowess, Kes —said Elis, who had been respectfully silent while his father spoke.

—I can't miss this —Kalya seemed to laugh.

Elan knelt on one leg, allowing the girl to mount him. Elis invited Kes to do the same.

The once-powerful aure realized that, like unicorns, these creatures also did not allow themselves to be saddled. He would have to hold onto the mane.

—Are you ready? —asked young Elis.

—I'm ready.

The pegasus spread its wings and took off in a quick run, soaring into the air. Kes immediately experienced a sensation of vertigo that he could not hide.

—Hey! Not so strong —Elis claimed, feeling as if part of his mane were being ripped off. Quickly the trees got smaller and smaller.

—Do we need to fly so high? —Kes asked, struggling to find a comfortable position on the swift creature's back.

—We'll have to go even higher when we look for the Golden Scepter —Elis replied.

Kalya was just behind, riding on the Lord of the pegasi.

—He's not so bad at it —the girl exclaimed.

—He once had a very great magical power.

—He told me he has nothing left.

—You must know something, Kalya. His strength came from the most powerful source of all, his heart. It's precisely that kind of strength we need at times like these —Elan said.

The boy from Herol seemed to get used to the flight finally and began to hold Elis's mane less tightly. The pegasus decided that enough was enough for that day. Together with his father, and the two young riders, he headed towards Kalya's house.

—«My Lord. The pegasi are flying over the forest. They carry two young men as horsemen. What should I do? »—said the note tied to the leg of one of the crows.

—Take this message to my master. Don't delay —Yor ordered in a firm voice.

Those birds were swift. They could cover vast distances without tiring, abilities that seemed to be increased in some way by the dark sorcerer. Delor would soon find out about the meeting between Kes and Elan.

—«See to it that you get the scepter, as I ordered. I'll take care of the filthy pegasi and their new friends »—was the answer that the bird brought back.

Kes and Kalya lowered Alit from the tree very carefully.

—He's further from this world every moment. We must act soon —exclaimed the Lord of the pegasi—. I wouldn't have wanted it that way, but we must part.

—How will we save him? —Kes asked.

—We will arrange it on my back, along with you. I'll take you to our island.

—Kalya won't come with us? I barely noticed when she left.

—She has another mission to fulfill. The envoys of the dark sorcerer have already informed him of our encounter. He will try to stop us, but not only that, he's also looking for the Golden Scepter to destroy it and thus prevent us from joining it to the Ruby of the Alliance. If he succeeds, nothing can stop the hydra —Elan explained.

—Where are they going? —Kes asked.

—To the north, to the Mountain of Eternal Winds. At its top, inside a forbidden temple, lies the scepter that once symbolized justice, courage, and truth in Bernia —the pegasus replied.

—Who put the scepter there?

—When Delor took the king's life, a brave soldier came to ask for our help. On my back, I carried him to the top of the mountain. He hid the scepter, where it would wait for the moment when the prince became a man. Only the king, or his rightful heir, is allowed to enter. Anyone else who attempts to do so will face great danger, a deadly challenge for their daring. The captain carried the scepter with him, and his intentions were good. That is why he was able to enter without risking his life that one time.

IX. MOTHER'S INSTINCT

—How could you let Kes and Alit go? —asked Ila, soon to discover that the story told by her neighbor was not entirely true.

—You don't have to worry, Diruk and Vaz promised me nothing would happen to them —Kasif repeated.

—We don't even know where they went. A kingdom outside of Terralan. How is that possible?

—After what happened to our son two years ago, do you still doubt the power of superior forces, dear wife? —asked Palur.

—We do not know what dangers they will face, but I am sure they will be able to avoid them —Kasif exclaimed.

—Yes, you're right. Deep in my heart, something vital tells me that they will return safely —Kes's father added.

At that moment, the flames in the fireplace came alive. A silhouette of a unicorn and a beautiful, winged creature dazzled them for an instant before disappearing.

—Come on, sit down. I'll pour you a good cup of tea —Ila said, calmer now, still enraptured by the enchanted figures appearing in the fire.

Kes missed his parents. He wouldn't have wanted to leave without revealing to them the importance of the mission entrusted to him. He also thought of Kasif, who had put all his trust in him to take care of Alit.

—He'll be fine, won't he?

—It will not be easy. Alit took a lot of the dream herb. The elders will know how to treat it —Elan replied.

—The elders?

—They are two sisters, the oldest on our island. They have great wisdom. Sometimes I have to resort to them when the challenge before me exceeds my knowledge.

—Yes, they will be able to cure him soon —Kes said to himself.

Almost mesmerized by the creature's vigorous flapping that carried them through the air, on the back of the pegasus, he felt something warm and pleasant. He remembered Diruk telling him the same about his experience with Unir. Despite the evil that Bernia wanted to take over, nature still prevailed strong, full of beauty, and the pegasus seemed to represent the pinnacle of that harmony.

The journey would have continued with complete peace of mind if Kes had not received a sudden and worrying warning from Elan:

—We are about to receive visitors! The sorcerer sends us his soldiers.

Moments later, the boy could make out a strange dark spot.

—What are they? Birds?

—No, something much worse. They are dragon hornets.

The name alone was enough to worry Kes.

—They have an indestructible stinger, and their jaws are fearsome —Elan explained.

—Why the dragon's name?

—Their sting will burn like fire, like the breath of a dragon. In their natural state, they wouldn't attack us. They couldn't even fly that high. But these poor creatures have been transformed by black magic.

—Surely you can leave them behind!

—If I were alone, but with the added weight, I'm afraid we'll be caught up soon.

—There is nothing we can do?

—I have an idea —exclaimed the pegasus.

Somehow, Kes knew what Elan would try. He made sure that the bindings Kalya had prepared to keep Alit tethered remained secure. He exerted more pressure with his legs and held onto the mane with both hands.

The pegasus folded its wings and began to plummet. Thus, he descended hundreds of meters in a few moments, approaching very quickly to the surface of the lake. The insects were coming after. Their instinct to swarm made them a little slower.

They were about to crash when Elan abruptly turned his body and began to flap with all his might. Thus, he managed to raise a powerful jet of water that surprised the enraged hornets. The water soaked their wings, making them heavier and preventing them from flying.

Kes could barely hold his breath after the effort it took to support himself and at the same time take care of his unconscious friend.

—We must continue. We must get to the island before another threat sent by the sorcerer reaches us —Elan said.

—I can't trust these stupid creatures! —Delor exclaimed from the shore of the lake. Hidden between a series of dead trees, lifeless, he had been able to see with his powers what had happened to Elan and the hornets.

—«I can't attack again, not so close to their island. You better find the scepter. I will not tolerate any more failures » —he thought angrily.

His faithful disciple had reached the base of the Mountain of Eternal Winds and was preparing to climb. Delor might have come faster than him, but the mountain was in the farthest part of the realm from his tower, where his magic was weakest.

Yor began to climb, driven by an obsessive desire to please his master. In a short time, he was halfway there when he decided to rest a little.

—Is it a long way before we get there? —Kalya asked.

—The mountain is already in sight —Elis replied.

The swirling clouds around the summit indicated the strength of the winds that dominated those heights.

—Get ready! We must make a low flight from its base to reach the top. If we move away from the mountain, even a little bit, we will be caught by the eternal winds that surround it.

Kalya held on tighter. Although she was an expert rider, the maneuver they were about to perform was hazardous.

Elis accelerated as much as he could, and when he was about to collide with the lower slope, he suddenly changed direction, upward. Suddenly, a net caught them. It was Yor, who had seen them coming from afar and had time to prepare his trap.

The net made it difficult for the pegasus to stay in flight. The sorcerer's servant then took the opportunity to shoot him an arrow that almost reached his heart. Severely injured, Elis began to weaken rapidly.

—Hahaha! My master will reward me twice. Not only will I bring him the Golden Scepter, but I will also end the life of a miserable pegasus.

All seemed lost when Kalya remembered that she could do something. Despite the net, she drew two short sticks from her belt and, without delaying more than an instant, struck them against each other in the direction of her enemy. The thunder, used so close to the mountainside, produced such a loud boom that Yor faint immediately.

Elis, still bleeding, struggled to stay airborne. After a moment, he found that he could not continue and fell heavily on the ledge from which Delor's disciple had attacked them.

The pegasus tried his best not to crush Kalya with his body. With no little difficulty, she managed to remove the net that covered them.

—I am seriously injured. You will have to go up by yourself.

—I'll go to the top. But first, let me put this on your wound —the girl said, proceeding to apply a healing ointment she always carried with her.

—I recognize that medicine —Elis exclaimed.

—You taught me how to prepare it. After I'm done with you, I'll take care of that soulless man. I'll bind him very tightly, ensuring that he doesn't have any hidden artifacts or magical substances.

The brave Kalya left the pegasus to rest. After totally immobilizing the still unconscious Yor and taking part of his gear, she began her slow and dangerous ascent.

She was an expert at climbing trees, and she had had to climb a rock wall on the bank of the river, but she had never faced such a challenge. That giant who defied the clouds would be the greatest test of courage and determination of her entire life.

Among the gear she borrowed from Yor was an exceptionally long rope, which ended in a very sharp hook. Kalya threw it with the best possible aim, and every time it snagged in a fissure or managed to drive itself deep enough into the rock, it immediately took her upon itself to lift her there. In this way, Kalya was able to ascend with surprising speed.

She knew that the evil Delor's magic was weak in that part of the kingdom, so she suspected that another wizard had made the rope. Its power did not decrease on the mountain.

—«Now I understand how that evil sorcerer's apprentice managed to get so far » — she thought.

What worried her was that while the medicinal salve she applied to Elis was effective, the pegasus's wound was deep, and he might not be able to fly for a long time.

—I must reach the top as soon as possible —she repeated aloud.

After his first extended trip through the air, which was not without its dangers, Kes could see on the horizon an island that shone beautifully in the middle of the waters.

—That is our home. We have reached the center of the lake —Elan exclaimed proudly.

—I didn't imagine it was that big. It took us several hours, and we have just arrived at its center. It is much larger than the Acuantalis —he exclaimed in amazement.

—This lake has no name, Kes. Maybe you want to pick one.

—I wouldn't dare. I don't consider myself worthy of such an honor.

—We'll see about that.

In the middle of a gentle hill, around a carpet of intense green, the agora rose. A kind of square where the pegasi, especially the older ones, met to discuss important issues.

Elan led Kes and Alit directly to that place, where half a dozen other pegasi were waiting. Among them, two that showed the passage of many years. It was the elders.

The boy could notice that, unlike unicorns, pegasi did show the passage of time on their bodies. He did not imagine a reason for this since, except for the evident differences in horns and wings, he was sure to find creatures like Unir's brothers.

—Put him on the floor —said one of the elders.

With the help of another pegasus, Kes was able to pull Alit off Elan's back. They laid him gently on the polished stone of the agora.

—He's hardly breathing anymore. He's near a place where he'll never return—the other sister said.

—No! We cannot allow that! —Kes yelled—. Elan, you told me that they could save Alit here. Tell me what I should do.

—The boy's love for his friend is a fundamental part of the cure. But something else is needed —said the first elder.

Kes looked at them impatiently. The slow tone and deep voice of the pegasi made each word take forever.

—They are right. I have never seen such a severe case. Never has the seven-day sleep blade plunged anyone into such deep slumber so quickly —Elan chimed in.

—Perhaps nature is already changing in ways we couldn't anticipate —the elder exclaimed—. The sorcerer must be stopped as soon as possible. Even without releasing the hydra, he is putting the lives of everyone in Bernia in grave danger.

—To save the boy, we'll need the power of the Golden Scepter —the pegasus explained.

—But this can only be used by the prince. He is captive in Delor's tower —Elan said.

—There is no alternative —the elder insisted.

—Elis and Kalya have gone for the scepter. Let's hope they find it soon —Kes interrupted vehemently.

X. OVERCOMING FEAR

Kalya managed to reach the summit when the sun had not yet set on the horizon. Despite using the magic rope, she felt exhausted. The thin air at this altitude made it difficult for her to breathe.

The walls of the forbidden temple were worn down by the erosive effect of the wind and rain. Inside, profound darkness seemed to drive away anyone who wanted to penetrate its secrets.

—The time has come! —she exclaimed, full of courage.

Elan had explained to her that inside the temple, she would not find the typical guardian.

She took one of the torches that hung near the entrance, and, using her flint, she was able to verify that the old oil with which it was impregnated still worked.

She immediately realized that something strange was happening. The light from her torch hardly illuminated the place. It was as if a veil of darkness was devouring the erratic flame struggling to achieve some luminosity.

Kalya then remembered Elan's words: —«Inside the temple, your fears will be the greatest enemy. Don't give in to fear ».

Determined, with a slow but firm step, she advanced, taking care not to fall into some hole or fissure. Suddenly she heard something that startled her. It was a hissing sound. She was alarmed to think that the only animal that frightened her was going to meet her.

Searching for courage from the bottom of her heart, she kept moving forward. Now the extremely low visibility could play a trick on her, especially if she stepped on what she did not want to find.

—Come on, Kalya —she said to himself. Everything is only in your mind.

After counting fifty steps, something prevented her from continuing. It was a solid wall of rock that felt extremely cold to the touch. The torch weakened even more when she heard that hiss from before but now much closer.

—You are not real. You are not here —she repeated to herself, trying to call on all her inner strength.

Then she closed her eyes. The almost absolute lack of light was increasing her real fear: snakes.

Her heart seemed about to explode, overcome by terror. She only managed to remain still. She even tried not to breathe. They were moments that seemed like an eternity. Drawing strength from her brave and firm character, she shook herself hard.

Guiding herself by touch, she noticed that the wall blocking her way no longer felt so cold. Something like an extrasensory vision allowed her to move to the side. Somehow, a map of the place had been drawn in her mind. She knew where she had to go.

Thus, she came to a room with a circular shape. In the center, the opening of what looked like a deep well threatened to swallow her if she slipped. —«That's not there either» —she thought.

She advanced very carefully, checking that the well did not exist. Little by little, an elongated silhouette began to take shape in the vision inside her head.

—I found the scepter! —she exclaimed excitedly.

At the precise moment her fingers touched it, everything around her lit up. She opened her eyes. She was in the first room of the temple. Dozens of torches almost blinded her.

She wrapped the scepter in a cloth that she had brought with her and left the place. Panting and almost fainted from the exertion and the thin air, her mind flew quickly to where Elis was.

With the scepter strapped to her back, she prepared to descend using the magic rope. Despite her haste, she took a moment to contemplate the challenging and beautiful landscape from that height. When the eternal winds abated a bit, they allowed observing the great lake from a distance. Vertigo was never a problem for her.

The rope worked great again. It was as if a series of strong arms held her from one end and slowly released her, allowing her to descend safely and quickly.

It wasn't long before he saw Elis, who was lying down in a pitiful position.

—Here I am, dear friend.

—You found it? Do you have the scepter? —the pegasus asked in a faint voice.

—Got it —Kalya replied.

After winding the useful rope, she proceeded to unwrap the precious treasure.

—Here it is!

—It's beautiful —Elis stammered—. It is perhaps the most beautiful object that men have ever made.

—I didn't know human hands made it.

—That was a long time ago when the wizards of Bernia were numerous and more powerful than you have ever known.

—I have an idea —Kalya said enthusiastically.

Not sure what she was doing, she held the scepter close to her friend's wound.

—I don't know what to say to use its power, so I'll improvise.

Elis looked at her, smiling.

Golden Scepter, I call upon your power to heal Elis.

If you were pleased with my courage in the test you imposed on me,

I ask you now to help my friend.

—It doesn't sound very poetic, I know —Kalya said—, but it's the only thing I could think of.

To their surprise, the scepter began to glow very brightly. An instant later, a kind of energy left its upper end, reaching the pegasus' body. In seconds, the deep wound was fully healed.

—I can't believe it —Kalya exclaimed.

—Not even a scar —Elis added.

—How you feel?

—Very well. I feel like my strength has returned.

— That timely! Because we will need your speed to meet with the others as soon as possible.

—Delor's puppet will wake up soon.

—What will we do with him? —Kalya asked.

—It's a miserable life won from evil. A tormented soul. But we still can't leave him here.

The girl verified that Yor's hands and feet were still very well tied. With an additional rope, she tied his belt to the body of the pegasus.

Despite carrying Kalya on his back, and Yor dangling from the rope, Elis could fly at a speed never achieved by any pegasus. The power of the scepter was granting him extraordinary strength.

—How long do you think it will take us to return? —Kalya asked.

—Surely less than it took us to come. I can see the waters of the lake already.

At that moment, the sorcerer's apprentice woke up:

—Ah! What have you done? Where are you taking me?

—Quiet. We won't hurt you —Elis replied.

—Easy for you to say. You don't hang hundreds of feet above the water —Yor exclaimed, terrified.

—You're our prisoner —Kalya said, with a smile that sought the approval of the pegasus.

—You will have the privilege of knowing our island —Elis added.

—What is that? To the west —the girl interrupted, identifying a dark spot on the horizon.

—I do not know. It looks like a swarm of insects.

—Are they following us?

—We'll find out soon.

Yor was glad. He knew what it was about. He had been in charge of sprinkling the hornets with his master's potion. He trusted that they would force the pegasus down and then use their fearsome jaws to cut the ropes that prevented him from moving when they reached them.

Elis accelerated to full throttle, his new speed allowing him to outrun any threat easily. Yor was dumbfounded. He didn't know that his captors carried the Golden Scepter with them and that its power had strengthened those wings.

—I didn't remember you guys being so fast—he exclaimed in frustration.

—Prepare for more surprises—Kalya said, looking south with renewed determination. They soon made out the island.

When Kes recognized his friend on the back of the pegasus, he ran towards them as fast as possible. In the agora, several adult pegasi were gathered, the two elders and Elan, who before Kes could tell Kalya how happy he was to meet her again, said with force:

—You did well, son. The scepter brings us new hope.

Kalya listened with pleasure to the imposing leader of the pegasi.

—Thank you, Father —Elis exclaimed proudly—. You couldn't have chosen anyone better for this critical mission —he added with a smirk in his eyes.

Elan thought about those words for a moment, remembering the risky and unnecessary aerial maneuvers that he carried out with his son before.

—Delor may be close to accomplishing his mission —he exclaimed worriedly, without trying to explain himself.

—You're right, Elan. You are strong, and you guide yours with wisdom. But not even you are immune to the dark power of the three-headed hydra —one of the elders interjected.

—The Cage of Virtue is getting weaker and weaker —her sister exclaimed—. That is why the three sins are growing stronger throughout Bernia, affecting all its inhabitants. Anger, envy, and pride are increasingly present in the kingdom.

—The Cage of Virtue? —Kes asked.

—It is an old prison, built to hold the hydra —Elan replied—. The work of the first kings, who, with the help of the most powerful wizards, managed to trap inside it the only being that could end all the good things in this kingdom. The cage's strength comes from the virtues that are manifested deep in each creature's heart that inhabits Bernia.

—The wizard will try to destroy the cage —one of the sisters said—. You must avoid it at all costs.

Yor looked at the pegasi with a mixture of hatred and helplessness. He was a low-ranking wizard, and his bonds prevented him from attempting any enchantment.

—All of you are going to die —he threatened—. The scepter won't do you any good.

—Silence! —Elan yelled—. If you don't want us to drop you from the heights, you will shut your mouth!

The Lord of the pegasi was surprised by his own words. He had never threatened someone like that before. It affected him to feel that it was a feeling of anger that had dominated him.

—There are more and more signs that the hydra is close to regaining its freedom. We must leave for our battle with the sorcerer as soon as possible —he said.

—And Alit? When will we wake him up? —Kes asked worriedly.

—The time for your test has come —one of the elders raised her voice.

—I'm ready for anything!

—Very well. Follow us

After leaving Yor in a tree prison, guarded by two pegasi, Elan, his son, the two elders, Kalya and Kes, headed towards a cliff at the opposite end of the island.

Elis explained to the two boys that it was the Cliff of the Sacrifice. In that place, in exchange for offerings, the superior forces had granted special favors to the pegasi who requested them, although in this case they didn't know what was going to happen.

Elan handed the scepter to Kes.

You can use it for this one time. Its power will allow you to ask for whom you care so much even if you are not a pegasus. Walk with it to the edge of the cliff. Once there, you must close your eyes and open your heart.

The boy did as instructed. The seconds passed in deathly silence. Even the sound of the waves crashing against the rocks had been completely silenced.

Holding the scepter with both hands, Kes seemed to balance himself, standing in such a dangerous place.

Then a voice spoke directly to his heart. For moments he remembered Elkos and the other aures, when he had to pass that test in the city of Ukaris: —We have observed you for a long time, Kes of Terralan. Your courage and sacrifice have already been tested before the most profound darkness in your world.

The boy was silent, his eyes closed.

—However, Bernia requires a new payment if you are looking to reverse the fruit of the dark sorcerer's evil.

Kes understood what it meant. The seven-day dream blade had also been affected by Delor's black magic.

—You must abandon what you love most. The way back must be closed.

Kes realized what was being asked of him. He was willing to accept it, but something else was bothering him. He let that conscience know that Alit should not pay for all this, that he should return to Terralan.

—Your heart is big indeed, brave boy. Elan was right to ask Unir to send you. The portal will remain open, but only one can use it to return. Now go back to your friend, he is about to wake up.

Kes opened his eyes. Now he could hear the sea again. He turned his head and saw Kalya and the pegasi waiting for him with expressions of affection and encouragement.

He just realized that his face was wet. They were tears of joy that had surprised him to hear that Alit was safe.

—Come, your friend is about to wake up —Elan said.

—Did you hear that voice too?

—No, but from the joy on your face, I know he's fine already.

When Kes reached the place where Alit had slept, almost lifeless, he had just opened his eyes.

—What happened? Where are we, Kes?

—What's the last thing you remember?

—Well, after I ate the last of Vaz's muffins, I tried to clean up the crumbs as well as possible so he wouldn't discover me.

Kes laughed and then asked:

—You don't remember anything else?

—Of course, I do, dear friend. I drank the tea that I prepared with those herbs so like the ones we have at home. Then I got terrible pain and very sleepy. Did you think I didn't remember that we are far from Terralan?

—For a moment, I believed it. You will never stop being a joker.

Elan, Elis, and Kalya, who had listened to all the fraternal dialogue, were happy about the reunion. The Lord of the pegasi knew that added to the scepter, those feelings, that force that emanates from the heart would be their best weapon against Delor and the hydra.

XI. BITTER CAPTIVITY

Prince Landor was desperately searching for a way to escape his confinement. He knew that not everything was turning out as Delor had planned. The pegasi had captured his faithful apprentice. Most importantly, the villain had had to divide his evil energy a great deal with the spell he was managing to weaken the Cage of Virtue's beneficent influence.

—I must release the hydra as soon as possible—he yelled near the prince's cell, clearly intending for the prince to hear him.

He was convinced that as Landor's despair grew, his powers might be increased. In that way, he had become such a powerful sorcerer, taking advantage of people's fears and weaknesses.

—Don't do it, Delor! You will not be able to control the beast.

—It's no use trying to convince me. That is my destiny.

—The hydra will devour whatever vestige of reason you have left. Your heart can still be healed.

The sorcerer silenced him with an energetic and strange hand movement, using his magic to impose his will.

—From now on, you will listen carefully and politely—he exclaimed sarcastically.

Through the only window in the room, which served as a prison, Landor watched a sad sunset. He imagined a desolate world, without color, without life. The people who would survive the hydra would be no better than Delor. Everything seemed lost.

The sorcerer kept the prince in the tower because that way, he could better watch over him, with the help of his faithful servants, the gray crows, capable of quickly killing a person using their enormous beaks.

These birds had escorted Yor to the base of the Mountain of Eternal Winds, then returned to their master, who did not want to expose them to the dangers surrounding the rock massif. Not even the pegasi could overcome those currents.

In one of the gloomy fortress rooms, the sorcerer was stirring his cauldron's contents when a hornet entered through the window. After flying over the boiling liquid a couple of times, it fell into it, evaporating almost instantly.

—One of my smallest and most loyal servants brings me the news —Delor exclaimed.

Indeed, the insect carried a message. Its body, expelling a black and smelly vapor, drew a figure that only the heartless sorcerer could interpret. In it, he could see the foreigners marching on the back of the pegasi towards the Swamp of Desperancy. Deep in the hollow lay the Dungeon of Oblivion, inside which the Cage of Virtue, the only thing pure and healthy in that degraded underworld, still held the hydra.

Adding to the cauldron some powder she drew from a small chest, Delor raised her voice: —Listen well, my loyal creatures. The time to fulfill my will has finally arrived. It is time to march towards the swamp.

Before long, a gigantic swarm of hornets was flying around the tower. An equally impressive flock of crows made it a little higher, like a similarly menacing second ring, like a shadowy omen of the total darkness that loomed over Bernia.

Inside the fortress, the black soldiers, common men that the sorcerer's hatred and unbridled evil had managed to transform, also waited ready. They raised their swords, still stained with the blood from the attack on Calys, and howled fiercely, like a pack of wolves in the middle of the night.

Prince Landor feared the worst. The buzzing of insects, the cawing of hundreds of crows, and the animal cries of many men who had once served his father, tore every fiber of his being.

Once again, he wanted to tear off the bars that held him captive. His hands still showed the blood from his previous attempts. —If only I had the scepter with me —he pronounced after a sigh.

—Don't try to escape, prince. If you leave the tower, you will have to face a terrible guardian —threatened the sorcerer, who had just appeared through the hatch in the ground.

—You have no soul, Delor! Don't think that you will achieve what you set out to do.

—Who’s going to stop me? The pegasi? They also have been infected with the sins of the hydra. They feel superior to others, so proud. That will be your biggest mistake, having underestimated me. As for the foreigners who have called from beyond the kingdom, they are only little boys. They are no match for the magic that I am capable of.

—You must let me go, Delor. You can still save yourself.

—Hahaha! What a ridiculous claim. I don’t need to be saved. Very soon, I’ll be the master of everything.

The sorcerer said goodbye to the prince:

—Come on, I dare you to try to get out of my tower. Someone is waiting for you outside.

As Landor tried once more to move the bars of his cell, the hums, squawks, and screams of Delor’s servants were heard farther and farther away. The dark forces had been on the move. The tower was soon in the most sepulchral silence.

At that moment, something magical happened, the bars disappeared. Nervously, the prince raised the hatch that led to the lower level. A wooden ladder invited him down. He had no weapon within reach, but he felt brave enough to face any danger.

He reached the ground, and the first thing he saw was an enormous cauldron, the contents of which barely bubbled. He thought that, indeed, the sorcerer had consumed some dark spell.

Now, a long stone stairway wound up to the first level of the tower. Landor continued to advance cautiously, first grabbing an ax that he found hanging on the wall. It wasn't very sharp, but it meant a far better weapon than his bare hands.

Making as little noise as possible, he reached the first floor. Every muscle in his body was tense, ready to face danger. The room was empty. Some old furniture was the only thing he found.

The prince turned the latch, and the heavy door began to swing inward as if pushed by the wind. Once he could see outside, he found that the courtyard was also empty. He was about to leave when he heard a noise that startled him.

XII. AERIAL WARRIORS

Thanks to the care of Kes and Kalya, Alit had made a full recovery, and his excellent appetite was proof of it.

—This is delicious! Elis, what is your favorite dish?

—Alit, pegasi don't eat man's food —Kalya explained—. They only graze the grass that grows on this island.

—I see. So, they are vegetative.

—Hahaha! —Kalya laughed—. You might mean the word vegetarian, but no, they are herbivores because they don't eat eggs or drink milk either.

—That's what I meant —Alit replied, rarely admitting he was wrong.

The figure of Elan interrupted that funny moment:

—Are you ready to go?

—Yes, father. Alit is the only one who has not yet practiced riding on our back, but I think he could travel with Kes.

—Very well. The most challenging hour for all of us has come. I cannot predict victory, but what I am sure of is that we will not hesitate to show what we are made of, whether we come from Bernia or Terralan.

When Elan moved, he allowed the boys to watch the rest of the pegasi, ready for war. They numbered almost a hundred. Beautiful designs were exquisitely carved into the different pieces that made up their armor.

—Here, they belonged to courageous soldiers among men —said a beautiful pegasus they saw for the first time. Alena, Elis’s cousin, had been in charge of getting armor that would serve Kalya, Kes, and Alit. With the help of the blacksmiths, they had been groomed for their adolescent bodies.

—Thank you —Kes said—. We will try to honor the memory of its previous owners.

—I’m sure you will.

—We cannot unite the Golden Scepter with the Ruby of the Alliance without the help of Prince Landor —Elan warned—. It is the only thing that will stop the hydra if Delor manages to free it.

—What is your plan? —Kalya asked.

—We will take both pieces with us. We must try to rescue the prince before heading to the Swamp of Desperancy.

—What a little name! —Alit exclaimed, hunger sated, now paying full attention to every word.

—The elders tell us that the sorcerer has already left his tower. It is the opportune moment to save the prince.

—I don't think we should all go together —Elis interjected—. Father, I can fly to the sorcerer's tower.

—I'll go with you —Kalya seconded, who felt a particular bond with the pegasus.

—I agree —Elan said—. You two will head to the dark tower. The rest of us will go to the swamp to try to stop Delor's madness.

Alit was the one who took the longest to wear his armor. He had stopped for a moment to listen to what his heart was telling him. His best friend had saved everyone in Terralan. Now he too had a chance to prove that he could be a hero on the battlefield.

When they were both ready, they looked at each other for a moment in silence. They did not recognize themselves in armor. Helmets, breastplates, gauntlets, and greaves. Wooden shields with central metal discs and short swords completed their combat outfit.

—Do you think we'll go home? —Alit asked.

Kes looked at him and smiled:

—You will be back with your parents soon, dear friend.

—We must get moving —came Elan's deep but beautiful voice.

The other pegasi waited ready in the agora for the order of their lord.

—You look great! —Kalya exclaimed, who mounted on Elis took flight.

—Don't delay. It is vital that you rescue the prince —Elan said.

—Don't worry —the girl exclaimed.

Kes and Alit stared at her. More beautiful than ever, her red hair fluttered in the wind.

The elders waited until the last moment to reveal something vital:

—Your courage and prudence are known to all, Lord of the pegasi, but we must reiterate one final warning.

The other elder continued:

—If the sorcerer succeeds in freeing the hydra, the sins it represents will spread like wildfire.

—The end will come that fast —added the first one—. The scepter and the ruby must unite before the beast makes its first attack.

—I trust in the strength of my son and the courage of Kalya to free Landor from his prison —Elan asserted.

—What if the prince doesn't show up on time? —Kes asked.

—I fear the hydra could destroy the scepter and the ruby, extinguishing all hope of life —the pegasus replied—. Come up, young warriors. The courage of the children of Terralan will be essential in this battle.

As the more expert of the two, Kes would ride in front.

—Don't worry, Alit, I won't let you fall.

—I trust you. Besides, I don't think you want to deal with my mom.

Elan took a few steps, flapped his wings vigorously, and took flight. Alit felt initial dizziness but quickly got used to this new and intense experience. Clinging to his faithful friend, he had no fear. Soon he could make out the waters of the great lake to the north. He turned to look at the rest of the island, but something blocked his gaze: the imposing army of pegasi that soared through the air.

—We fly as we’ve never done before! —Elan harangued his people—. The city of man has been destroyed, many have died, but there are still just and noble hearts ready to fight. Let’s fight together with them for everything we love under the Bernia sky!

Simultaneously, a small, determined army of men marched from Calys towards the Swamp of Desperancy.

The pegasi felt stronger than ever. They flew with a vigor never seen before, convinced that superior forces were helping them.

They soon made out the land. They had crossed the lake in less time than they imagined.

XIII. SHADOWS FROM THE PAST

Prince Landor held his breath for several seconds, trying to determine the source of the sound he had just heard. It didn't take long for her fears to be well-founded.

Near the opposite end of the square, a ferocious animal challenged him with fire in its eyes.

—I never believed it was true. The great blue wolf's legend was just a story that they told me as a child, to go to sleep —he said to himself.

His mother, the queen, began telling it to him shortly after his father's tragic disappearance. It soon became his favorite story. The bravest warriors recounted how they had been forced to face a terrible animal, which guarded the sorcerer's tower. They could never defeat it, and the few who made it back to the palace alive had to resign themselves to being crippled and to the painful consolation of being able to tell it. Although its veracity could never be proven, the story of the blue wolf had become the obligatory topic of conversation for men who fantasized about wanting to prove their worth.

It was indeed a wolf, but not a small one like the ones Kes met in the woods when the bear defended her cubs, but one that could have defied a horse in size. Even its fangs would have been the envy of any large feline.

The evil Delor had created that monstrous creature. No one knew how he had achieved it, entrusting it with the care of his tower.

The dull ax the prince wielded seemed more useless than ever, but there was no turning back. Drawing strength from weakness, he began to walk, ready for anything. The animal also advanced cautiously, guessing value in that young man he saw only as another prey in any case.

Landor tried to calculate his chances. They were few. He could never beat the wolf in speed, and he certainly couldn't beat him in strength either. Courage was his best weapon.

When they were a few feet apart, the wolf growled louder, showing its teeth, and preparing to attack. The prince waited with his guard up. Something in the creature's gaze caught his attention as if it was simultaneously waging an intense internal struggle.

But the animal was dominated by rage. Its foamy mouth indicated so. Landor decided he wouldn't wait any longer and lunged at him. After the crash, the prince went to the ground, face up. Standing on him, the wolf had him reduced. With its huge legs, it prevented it from moving its arms.

Landor resigned himself to the worst when he noticed something change in the creature's gaze. It began to sniff him with great intensity. It was still growling, but it certainly wasn't attacking him.

Unexpectedly the animal backed away, allowing the prince to get up.

—I don't get it. Why didn't it kill me? —Landor wondered.

The wolf looked up at the sky and howled for a long time. It was a loud and pitiful howl, such as had never been heard in Bernia. Then he advanced toward the entrance that he protected so much, crossed the stone arch, and walked away. The prince was confused. The terrible creature had spared his life.

It would take him several days to travel the winding path that started from the sorcerer's tower. He had no choice, and began to walk, encouraged that he had been so miraculously unharmed.

Thus, he walked for several hours. When he stopped for a moment to rest, he replayed the encounter with the wolf in his mind. I still couldn't find an explanation. The animal's eyes of apparent suffering seemed to have wanted to tell him something.

Instinctively, he ducked when he noticed a shadow rush over his head. Moments later, he recognized one of the majestic pegasi, and above him, a girl with red hair. When they descended, he noticed that they were both wearing shiny armor.

—Prince Landor! It's a blessing to find you safe and sound —Elis said.

—Who are you?

—I'm the firstborn of Elan, the Lord of the pegasi. She's Kalya. We are marching to war.

—The war, you say. Against Delor?

—He is about to release the hydra.

—I know. Just a few hours ago, he left the tower accompanied by all his armies.

—We need you, noble prince. Only you can unite the Golden Scepter and the Ruby of the Alliance and stop the three-headed beast —Kalya explained.

—Do you have the scepter? That’s good news! But you must explain one thing to me. What ruby are you talking about?

—Many are marching into the Swamp of Desperancy at this time. Even foreigners, from beyond the horizon, have joined in our fight. They have brought the ruby from the distant Terralan kingdom.

Landor was silent for a moment.

—Then Terralan isn’t just another myth —Landor exclaimed.

—There are other worlds out there. Different from Bernia, but with something in common. The hearts and spirits of many brave have fought and will always fight for peace and justice to prevail —Elis said.

—What other myth are you referring to, Your Highness? —Kalya asked.

—I have just experienced something extraordinary. The great blue wolf, who has nested the worst fears in men and women’s imagination, exists. It was true that it was guarding Delor’s tower and with great ferocity.

—How did you get rid of the beast? —Elis asked him.

—When I thought all was lost, it suddenly stopped its attack. At that moment, it seemed to want to tell me something with its eyes. Then it howled and just walked away. I

could swear that overpowered by great sadness. It is so inexplicable that you would have to think that the stories woven around it are exaggerated.

—Perhaps after we defeat the hydra, we can uncover that mystery —Kalya added.

—I like your confidence, young lady. Now we must go to meet your people —said the prince, waiting for Elis's invitation to ride him.

XIV. THE SWAMP OF DESPERANCY

The sorcerer stopped half a league from the edge of the swamp. Even with all the evil that carried him, he hesitated a moment before entering the most inhospitable and dangerous land of Bernia.

His forces waited behind him, ready to follow him into the darkest of shadows. Barely an hour separated them from dusk. A gray crow had just returned with important information.

—You have done well, my loyal servant. Thanks to your timely notice, I know that our enemies are about to arrive. A second army also comes to fight, one of men. Hahaha! The poor devils are sure to kill each other by the time they get to the swamp.

His laughter, shrill and throaty, seemed the howl of some unfamiliar and overwhelming animal.

Delor then turned to the men under his command, those whose souls were now prey to evil and who did not suspect the terrible additional price that many of them were to pay.

—It's time to enter the swamp. With your help, I will be able to free the hydra.

As they did in the tower, the crows and hornets flew in circles, waiting for the next order.

—You will wait here, my unconditional creatures. You will be the welcoming committee for those nosy pegasi.

Despite still being a considerable distance from the swamp, it carried an awful stench. But it wasn't just the smell of decaying animals, plants, and other things. It was as if evil itself materialized within its limits, giving off a supernatural stench.

Many of the men hesitated for a moment. Some even seemed to regain some reason, refusing to follow the wizard. But those who persisted in it were killed by their companions, who, totally trapped in that living death, could no longer distinguish between good and evil. Luckily for Delor, the casualties were few within that alienated army of men.

Finally, they entered the rotting vegetation. Using his magic, the sorcerer knew where to take each step, but not all his followers would suffer the same fate. Some fell into the deadly quicksand. Others were caught and eaten by strange creatures that lurked in the darkest corners.

—Keep moving forward! We must not delay—he ordered his soldiers.

As they went deeper and deeper, their pulse quickened. They seemed to suffer a lot inside, but they didn't hesitate to continue. Such was the power of the sorcerer.

The Dungeon of Oblivion was not yet in sight, but Delor felt in every fiber of his being that he was very close. For a moment, he seemed to forget his men and almost ran in the direction he knew was the right one. He picked up his pace, but not enough to lose them.

The pegasi finally spotted the swamp. Their flight had carried them through most of the realm in less time than they had imagined. Even so, Elan found that it was already late. There was no sign of the sorcerer, and an army of gray crows and dragon hornets stood in his way.

—The final hour has come! We'll win or die fighting! —the Lord of the pegasi praised his brothers.

On Elan's back, Kes and Alit held their shields tighter and prepared to use their swords.

—It's been a great honor to be your friend all these years —Alit exclaimed.

—What nonsense are you talking about! —Kes exclaimed—. We will not die here. I'm sure we have more adventures to go on.

At that moment, the crows stopped circling and, like speeding arrows, fell on the first rows of pegasi. Below, at a much lower height, the hornets did the same.

—Here they come! Get ready! —Elan yelled.

The first crash was terrible. Many birds died from the strong impact against the much heavier pegasi bodies, which also had their protective armor. Still, many others managed to dodge them and now attacked them with their powerful beaks, looking for weak points that could be unprotected. Some pegasi paid a high price when the crows managed to gouge out their eyes.

Many insects also ended up being crushed between the bodies of their adversaries, but those that came out safe delivered a painful punishment, stabbing their stingers and gnawing at the flesh with their terrible jaws.

Alit and Kes effectively deflected most of the attacks with their shields but ended up getting some stings. Kes could see firsthand why they were called dragon hornets. At times it seemed that Alit would not resist the pain either, but their courage drove them to continue fighting, and they were managing not to be bitten.

The sorcerer smiled wickedly when he finally found what he was looking for. The Dungeon of Oblivion greeted him with a cold and macabre hug. Now a heavy gate was the only thing separating him from the hydra.

Delor soon realized that the door did not have any kind of latch. Opening it would represent a formidable challenge. He tried it first with a simple spell:

Dark door, door of evil.

Open up now, let me in.

Try as he might, the door did not budge at all. Delor repeated the spell a couple more times, with the same futile result.

XV. THE CAGE OF VIRTUE

The sorcerer was delighted when he thought he had discovered a way to gain the strength necessary to enter the dungeon. Using his dark arts, he forced many of his black soldiers to kill each other, thus offering their lives a macabre blood sacrifice. This time his spell did work, and the heavy door fell.

Inside, the most profound darkness awaited him. Courage seemed to leave him when he felt something more wicked than anything he could have imagined or wished to invoke. He forced his men to enter before him.

A sound like a bull's snort, but much louder and throatier, reached them from the depths.

Measuring each step, Delor inched forward, using the dim light his staff provided. A huge moat awaited him in the middle of the gloomy building. When he reached the edge, he discovered a rock ladder that descended until it was lost in the blackest darkness.

—At last! My destiny awaits me. The hydra will make me the most powerful man — he exclaimed with wild eyes. He started down when he noticed that his escort was hesitant to follow him.

—Don't be afraid, cowards! —he yelled at them in anger. The snorts were barely heard now. It seemed as if the beast was gathering strength.

Delor had to use all his energy to prevent the light of his staff from being extinguished. Such was the power of that evil darkness.

They finally reached the lower level. In the distance, an ethereal, diffuse shape began to attract them. They moved in that direction, and the silhouette of a gigantic prison grew sharper.

The Cage of Virtue bars had stood firm for centuries, but now they were severely weakened. They hardly emitted light anymore, an unmistakable sign that sins were winning the battle against the heart's pure feelings.

The wizard approached with a racing pulse. He was not sure how far the power he was about to expose himself reached. At that moment, his men jumped back, as an imposing creature slammed into the bars.

It had four enormous legs, ending in claws capable of cutting a man in two with a single slash. A long, muscular tail threatened to crush anyone within reach. Not only a pair of gigantic membranous wings were born from its body, but also three necks, each ending in reptilian-shaped heads. One of them had a kind of fin that was held above the eyes. The second, slightly larger than the others, showed a mane of thick, dull hair. The third was crowned by a series of short, very sharp thorns. Envy, anger, and pride were represented in each of the monstrous heads.

The hydra watched them with eyes of fire, capable of penetrating to the depths of the soul. A new and terrible snort brought more than one down. Delor stood, holding his staff

tightly. The hatred of that beast for everything was enormous, it far exceeded him, but the sorcerer resisted.

But no matter how weak the Cage of Virtue was, the hydra could not overcome the power of the legendary prison. With each thrust, the entire dungeon seemed to shake from its foundations.

Beyond the limits of the swamp, Elan could feel the struggle of evil to free itself. He wanted to move through the rotting vegetation but realized that it would be useless. His son and Kalya had not yet arrived with the prince. It would be futile to confront the hydra with only the ruby. Separately, the Golden Scepter and the Terralan gem were not powerful enough.

—What is it, Elan? —Kes asked, sensing the indecision of the Lord of the pegasi.

—Evil is about to be released! We no longer have time.

By then, many pegasi had fallen under the sting of hundreds of hornets. Others were seriously injured before the fierce attack of the gray crows.

The men from Calys, who had fought bravely, were now under the evil influence of the swamp gases, enhanced by the severe weakening of the Cage of Virtue. It caused many to start fighting each other. Inordinate anger was dominating them.

Kes and Alit, on Elan's back, did not suffer the same sad and evil effect.

When Delor realized that the hydra could not overcome its prison's bars, he devised new cowardice. He cast a horrendous new spell with his remaining magic, which stopped the men's heartbeat who accompanied him.

Delor would never know if the sacrifice of those poor souls had strengthened the power of the hydra or finished weakening the cage, but in a new attempt, the beast lunged against the bars obtaining its freedom.

The enormous creature advanced to where the sorcerer was, who, trembling, only recently realized the atrocious madness that he had just perpetrated.

—I freed you... you must obey me! —he stammered, not entirely understanding that he was dealing with a force of evil beyond his control and understanding.

The hydra looked at him with eyes of death. He snorted loudly, Delor's heart sinking in terror.

—Back off! You must obey me!

They were the last words of the sorcerer, who died charred by the flames that the central head of the terrible monster spat out.

The hydra flapped its enormous wings a couple of times and took flight with a powerful jump. Now, in full freedom, it passed through the dungeon's still-open door and sped towards a world in which it would sow absolute desolation.

—They are losing the battle! —exclaimed the pegasus, who had finally reached his father.

—Quick, Elis! Let's take the prince with the scepter and the ruby! —Kalya yelled.

At that moment, they all turned towards the swamp after a terrifying unearthly roar took over the hollow.

—It's late! —Elan managed to say, just before a tongue of fire passed too close to him and his riders. Kes and Alit tried hard not to fall from a deadly height.

The brave Kalya raised her sword in defiance and prepared to defend the prince with her body and steel blade.

The hydra continued to spit fire, but this time it came out not just from one but its three heads. The pegasi had to perform dangerous maneuvers to avoid falling victim to the terrible attack.

Elan realized that the battle had become too dangerous for Kes and Alit. He decided to leave them on the ground, in the care of the ruby and the scepter. Then he made a sign to Elis, who understood perfectly what his father was asking of him.

In a coordinated move, while Elan and some other pegasi distracted the hydra, Elis reached where Kes and Alit were waiting.

The prince quickly dismounted, taking the scepter and ruby from the boys' hands, who waited for him with outstretched arms while Elis and Kalya guarded the rear.

On the way to the swamp, there was time to explain to Landor what to do with both pieces. The prince raised his eyes to heaven and, as if saying a prayer in his mind, joined the two parts of what would be the only weapon capable of stopping evil.

Kes and Alit looked on expectantly, realizing very quickly that nothing was happening. Desperate, Landor tried a second and a third time, but nothing happened.

Kes then remembered the words of the elders: —«The scepter and the ruby must unite before the beast unleashes all its fury. »

—It's too late! —he cried helplessly—. Now we can never stop it.

XVI. THE COURAGE OF FOREIGNERS

The terrifying hydra struck the Lord of the pegasi with its tail, who fell to the ground, severely injured.

Alena flew at top speed to Elan. She verified that he was still alive and protected him with her wings from a possible new attack.

At that moment, the beast turned one of its heads and noticed what the prince was trying to do. It descended precipitously, crashing almost to the ground, and with a threatening step approached to the place where Landor awaited it, with the scepter and the ruby in his hands. The heir to the throne of Bernia was not daunted, and far from it, he stood firm, defiant.

The hydra sucked in a deep breath as if preparing its final attack when Kes and Alit stepped between it and the prince. The boys raised their shields to protect him.

— Run away, you won't survive! —yelled Landor.

Ignoring his words, they both waited for the attack. It was time to show the real strength of their hearts.

Then something happened that no one had ever imagined. The hydra's tongues of fire could not defeat the small and seemingly fragile shields of those brave boys.

As much as the beast tried, it simply failed to damage their impregnable defenses, perhaps the product of some powerful magic that seemed to have no explanation.

Once again, higher forces admired for Kes' courage and sacrifice had given him the power to resist evil. Alit had earned that recognition too.

Kes felt then that his mind was invaded with resolution by an energy that urged him to understand that now it was he who had to unite the parts. Despite Landor's enormous bravery and tireless effort, he was no longer the one who could carry forward the vital endeavor.

—Prince, you must give us the scepter and the ruby!

Still impressed by the prodigy that was taking place, Landor immediately heeded the words of the brave little warrior. He also believed that boys could accomplish what he failed to carry out.

The hydra was still confused by what had happened. That gave the children of Terralan time to act.

Alit took the ruby, and in one swift, confident movement threaded it through the upper end of the scepter held by Kes. An explosion of light spread across the valley in an instant, illuminating everything for several seconds. Men and pegasi felt a force of goodness flood their hearts, completely overwhelming them.

Even the swamp of hopelessness seemed to regain some of the life it lost so long ago, when it was decided that it would house the prison that would contain evil. Kes now carried in his hands the Rod of Virtue, the union of the scepter and the ruby.

The crows and hornets stopped attacking when the force of good killed the dark magic that had made them servants of the missing sorcerer.

The hydra, bewildered by the tremendous power that came to it as well, shook itself with froth. It no longer achieved the same devastating annihilation of just moments ago. Their hideous heads stared at each other in confusion, and they chose not to attack.

So, it decided to take flight and direct its evil elsewhere. At the far end of the valley stood villages and towns inhabited by many hundreds of innocents.

Landor was still speechless. He couldn't quite believe what his eyes had witnessed.

Alena then screamed: —Elis, your father needs you. He is gravely injured.

The pegasus ran to Elan's side, while Alit and Kes knew just by looking at each other what they had to do. The prince knew it too, nodding his head.

Without wasting a second, the speedy Alena let the boys ride her, initiating the hydra's chase.

The beast was swift in the air, but the graceful pegasus was even faster. They soon caught up with it, just as it was about to sow death in the first town it found.

—We won't let you do that! —Alit yelled.

—Well said, friend —Kes seconded.

The hydra turned its heads and spat out three tongues of fire, but these were no match for the Rod of Virtue, which in the hands of Kes displayed an impenetrable invisible shield.

The creature from the deep tried to attack them again, when Kes, who knew he would not return to Terralan, made a decision.

—Alena, fly directly over the beast—he asked his winged companion.

The pegasus did so, and when Kes calculated that the moment was right, he jumped into the void. He intended to drive the rod into the neck of the main head of the hydra.

Everything happened very quickly, and Alit watched in horror as the creature devoured his friend. He screamed in pain, unable to understand what had just happened. Alena moved a bit away from the place while trying to comfort him. Profuse tears ran down his cheeks.

But then something else happened. The hydra seemed to writhe in pain and, after a moment, fell to the ground, lifeless. A point of light began to glow on its central neck until it became a very bright and regular-sized sphere.

Everyone looked in dismay at the macabre spectacle offered by the horrendous body of the gigantic beast, from which, by contrast, emanated a light that seemed to give them a spirit that they could not explain.

Slowly, the sphere of light faded until it was almost extinguished. When it finally did, they saw something laboriously moving within the neck of the hydra. Kes appeared before their astonished eyes, covered in a dark, smelly substance, rendering him almost unrecognizable.

They ran towards him, confirming that he was safe and sound. Kalya arrived first and embraced him with immense tenderness. She did not seem to care about the appearance and smell of his friend.

XVII. THE CURSE OF THE WOLF

It had been only moments that Kes spent inside the hydra, but they were enough to make Alit believe that he had lost his friend forever.

—You're crazy, did you know? —he seemed to claim.

—Do you remember our song about the gargoyles?

—Yes, I think so —said Alit.

—Well, this time, the beast had to be attacked head-on. I hope I never have to repeat something like that —Kes confessed.

Alena led them back to the edge of the swamp. Life had already begun to claim that land. The vegetation showed signs of healing, and the smaller animals were seen in more than one corner. With Elis's help, Elan had stood up. His wounds were also recovering.

—I can hardly believe we have conquered evil —Prince Landor exclaimed.

—It wasn't just the hydra that was destroyed today. We will never have to worry about Delor's evil again —Elan said.

—We will always be grateful to the brave children of Bernia —added the prince, resting his hands on the shoulders of Kes and Alit.

—They come from a faraway place, Your Majesty —the pegasus reminded him.

—It's true, I had forgotten. From distant Terralan. My father once told me about that land beyond the horizon. To this day, I thought it was just a legend. How did they get to Bernia?

—It's a long story —Kes replied—, we'll indeed have time to tell it to you after we heal the wounded.

—You're right! First, we must attend to the pegasi, the men, the women, to all the brave ones who today risked their lives —the prince asserted.

—Many of our brothers are no longer with us —Elan said.

—Fallen pegasi will be honored as heroes in Calys, alongside the men who fought alongside them today. Those poor people tortured by the sorcerer's dark magic will also have a place in our memory. I imagine that later you will want to take the bodies of the pegasi to your island. Let me help you with that. It will be a great honor if my ship transports you to its final resting place.

—No ship can reach the island of the pegasi —Kalya explained.

—This time, yes —Elan intervened—. I will go with them and guide their sails to our home.

After the queen's postponed funeral, which could finally be carried out, the fallen in battle would be honored. Bernia's subjects' bodies were interspersed with Elan's brothers on a long line of beautifully decorated carriages.

In front of the palace ruins, the Lord of the pegasi accompanied the heir to the kingdom. Along with them were Elis and Alena, Kalya, Kes, and Alit, dressed in fine, elegant clothes.

The next day, after the coronation ceremony, the now King Landor would invite his new friends to a party the likes of which had never been seen in Bernia. There, everyone witnessed Alit's famous appetite, who did not hesitate to try each dish that paraded before his eyes. At times it seemed like he was going to choke from eating so fast. Kes looked at him with a subtle gesture from time to time, as if to tell him to be more polite.

—Do you know what would make this perfect meal? —Alit asked.

—I don't know —Kes replied, trying to imagine among so many things that his friend liked.

—An Elyta's muffin!

—Surely you can be back in Zun soon and enjoy them.

—We'll be, you mean —Alit corrected.

—Yes, I meant that. So much food makes me a little queasy —Kes apologized.

Although many brave men had been mourned, the people were able to enjoy a succulent meal in their homes, encouraged by the hope of a future free from the most terrible

evil that will be remembered throughout the kingdom. Courtesy of King Landor, no one was short of delicious delicacies on the table that night.

When everyone was chatting happily at the palace after dinner, the new monarch wandered off to be alone with his thoughts. He knew that now his parents had become a beautiful memory, but there was something that disturbed him from the depths of his being. For some reason, he couldn't forget the great blue wolf who spared his life in the sorcerer's tower.

Without being able to explain it, he went to the mausoleum where his mother's remains rested. Sitting on a bench in front of the tomb, he thought he heard the breathing of an animal. Something in the shadows was staring at him. He was not afraid, and with a slow but sure step, he approached the mysterious creature.

It also took a few steps forward until the moonlight illuminated part of its body. It was the blue wolf. The animal moved even closer, making Landor's pulse race.

After a moment, the new king realized that he was not afraid. He stretched out his arm and brought his hand close to the animal's snout so that it could smell it. The wolf did it very delicately, then looked to the side and approached the grave.

To Landor's surprise, the creature capable of awakening great fear in the heart of the bravest lay down and began to moan, seemed to sob.

The king couldn't explain it to himself, but something inside him told him what to do. Shortly after, he returned to the place with the Rod of Virtue. Invoking the intervention of

higher forces, he touched the wolf on the head. Then something magical happened. The animal's body began to fade until it became something ethereal, resembling a vapor cloud.

Little by little, the cloud took the shape of a man. At first, Landor could not recognize that figure, but he began to cry when he could see his father's image after a few moments.

It didn't take long for him to realize what had happened. The evil sorcerer had not killed the king years ago when the prince was still a child but had transformed him into that terrible creature.

After smiling at his son, the old king disappeared into the beautiful tomb, next to that of the queen. From that day on, King Landor would feel a deep peace of soul. His parents would rest together forever.

XVIII. THE WAY BACK

—Diruk, I had a dream last night that I can't quite interpret —Vaz said with obvious concern.

Both friends, once-powerful aures in the service of the kingdom of Terralan, waited in the newly founded Village of Talir to return Kes and Alit to the north bank of the Aquantalís.

—What did you see? —Diruk asked.

—The boys, defeating evil. That filled me with deep joy.

—But something else was going on, wasn't it?

—Yes. I saw them struggling to get back.

—I had the same dream, Vaz —Diruk revealed—. I think the future is what we see, dear friend.

Now none could control the forces of nature or summon magical creatures at will. However, they still retained a sensitivity that allowed them to maintain some contact with the worlds beyond the borders of Terralan.

—A threat that I could not identify looms over them. Caught in a massive tide. A powerful wave is about to engulf them —Vaz said.

—Do you think it's about the evil for which they traveled to Bernia?

—No, this is different. I have never felt anything like this. It is a very great power, but it is disguised among others who are not like it.

—Does that power want to harm our friends?

—I don't know, but unpredictably it will compromise their return trip.

—I hope we're wrong, Vaz. I hope we're wrong.

Shortly after the coronation, everything was ready for the pegasi fallen in battle to be transferred to their beautiful island.

—We will always remember this day with a mixture of sadness and joy, King Landor —exclaimed Elan, who had now fully recovered from his injuries.

—I trust that from today on, we will not live apart.

—I also predict a new time, noble king. Now you can build a strong and just kingdom founded on the best feelings.

Kes, Kalya, and Alit were invited to board the ship.

Suddenly, the wind began to blow, as if it had been waiting for the right moment, and the imposing and beautiful royal ship was able to begin its journey. It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining brightly over their heads.

Halfway through the journey, Elan remembered the promise he had made to Kes before the battle.

—What name would you like to give our lake?

—I've been thinking about it since this morning. I think it could be called Unir.

Elan seemed satisfied with the idea. He thought that surely his unicorn cousin would approve too: —I'll speak to King Landor later. I know he will agree.

Shortly before arriving on the island, the best friends separated a little from the rest.

—Do you know what will be the first thing I do when we get home? —Alit asked.

— Finding a way that your mom doesn't punish you.

—You're right, I hadn't thought of that. A reprimand awaits us.

—I have something important to tell you —Kes said, in a tone of voice that worried his partner.

—What happen?

—You must be strong, Alit. I will not return to Terralan.

—What are you talking about? What you mean you will not return?

—It was the price I had to pay to wake you up from the deep sleep you were trapped in.

—I don't understand what you're saying. We will return through the cave, under the water, just as we did to get here.

—No, Alit. The cave will only welcome you. I will not be able to return.

—I'll never leave you here, friend.

—You have to go back. Our parents must know that we are okay. That the adventure we ran together here was worth it.

During the evening, the pegasi bodies were honored in a ceremony preceded by Elan. The winged creatures were paying, one by one, their homage to the fallen, describing beautiful formations in flights that were difficult to describe. Kes, Alit, and Kalya watched in ecstasy the fantastic spectacle that was presented to their eyes.

Then the Lord of the pegasi called out to Kes and Alit. Elis and Kalya also accompanied them.

—I know you are ready to fulfill your destiny.

—We are. Alit has agreed to return to Terralan alone.

—You never cease to amaze me, dear friends. The courage and sacrifice shown by you will never be forgotten.

Still tearful, Alit wanted to clarify that he had accepted because he recognized the importance of his parents knowing that they were both okay.

—What are you going to do here? How will you manage alone? —he asked his friend.

—Don't worry, brave Alit. Kes will always have a home in King Landor's palace and on this island. He will never lack the affection and company of the many new friends he has managed to win.

—When will I leave?

Kalya answered the question: —Tomorrow we'll go to my house, near the shore opposite the lake. There I have stored the suits to breathe underwater.

Elis, who knew very well about Alit and Kes's grief, had a strangely optimistic expression, almost of joy.

—Father, I think I know of a way that they could both return.

—We listen to you, Elis.

—The elders revealed to me that there is another path, one that is very risky.

Kes and Alit listened to each word from the pegasus with renewed hope.

—If we fly among the currents around the Mountain of Eternal Winds carrying the Ruby of the Alliance, and we manage to make it faster than the South wind, they believe we could briefly open a portal to Terralan.

—I know what you're talking about, Elis. But in this case the elders are wrong.

—Won't the portal open?

—Maybe yes, but there’s no way we can resist those winds. Much less fly between them and do it faster than the current coming from the south. Only death would await us.

—I would gladly lay down my life for them, father! We cannot let them down.

Elan looked at his son for a moment, then at Kes and Alit, who waited in silence:

—You have grown to be a pegasus of whom I am very proud. You don’t hesitate to make the maximum sacrifice for those you love and respect so much.

—Then we will try? —Elis asked.

Alena surprised everyone with her sudden appearance and comment: —If we’re going to try to fly that fast, we’ll need to do it in a triangle formation.

—She’s right, father. If there are three of us, we can cut the wind more effectively.

—It will be very risky, and I do not predict that we will be successful.

—What do you say then?

—We will try!

Kes and Alit hugged each other with joy as if they were already back in the peaceful and beautiful town of Herol.

The pegasi flew fast and majestic over the great lake, heading for the Mountain of Eternal Winds.

Being the least experienced, Alit was riding Elan, Kalya was riding Alena, and Kes was riding Elis. A feeling of hope animated their hearts.

—We must enter from the north face of the mountain —Elan advised.

That way, they would have time to prepare for the faster and more challenging south wind.

—Hold on tight to us! —the Lord of the pegasi pointed out—. This is going to get ugly!

Soon, Kes and Alit could see that the name Mountain of Eternal Winds was not gratuitous.

Wind currents from the four cardinal points converged in that place, originating a whirlpool of enormous force. No one had ever tried such boldness before.

—We must fly in formation —Alena reminded them.

Kalya, who had always shown herself to be bold and brave in the face of danger, had to admit that she was also terrified: —I don't know if we'll get out of this, Alena! The winds roar as if to tear the mountain into pieces.

—Let's stay together! Do not be dominated by fear! —Elan shouted in a powerful voice.

—They are too strong! —Elis seemed to doubt her strength for a moment.

—Hold on, now comes the worst! —the Lord of the pegasi warned. They were about to be hit by the swift south wind. Kes carried the Ruby of the Alliance with him, ready to use at the right moment.

After the violent crash, the currents stabilized a bit, giving them a little respite.

—Now, Kes! It's now or never —Elis said.

Kes lifted the ruby, holding it with his right hand, while with his left, he held onto the mane with all his might.

—Come on... it must work! —the boy yelled.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Then the gem began to emit a very bright flash, and an instant later, a disk of light formed right in front of them. Kes and Alit watched into the disk and thought they recognized the Aquantalis and then, in a very diffuse way, the figures of what seemed to be their friends Diruk and Vaz.

—Is it the way home? —Alit asked.

Then the wind increased dramatically, threatening to smash them against the rock wall. The pegasi flapped with all their might, with all their hearts.

Realizing what was about to happen if they stayed a moment longer in the deadly current, Kes yelled: —We must get in!

The six brave friends entered the portal.

At first, everything went dark. No one could see anything, but they could feel that the winds no longer threatened them.

—Kes?! Where are you? —Alit yelled.

—Here. I hear you close.

Little by little, his eyes got used to the gloom. Then they could make out the same image that they had seen moments before when they were flying around the mountain: the Acuantalis, and now, the figures of Diruk and Vaz, which filled them with courage.

—It's over there, Elis. We must go there —Kes said confidently.

After checking that they were all together, the pegasi advanced towards the vision indicated by the boy. They were about to reach it when a force began to pull them down. It was so powerful that no matter how much their wings flapped with all their vigor, they could not free themselves. The mysterious force continued to carry them down, faster and faster.

Then everything lit up and, before falling unconscious, they were able to observe part of a strange and unknown land. A very tall structure, almost touching the sky, challenged them from a distance.