

THE GAME



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PART 1: AN EVIL KISS

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“Did you hear that?” Ridian whispered, peering over his shoulder into the dense foliage behind him. He eyed the bushes carefully. They were lush, green and crowded together, appearing suspiciously ordinary.

Annoyed by this repeated interruption, Blade said, “It was some sort of animal, a bird or squirrel maybe.” And he refocused his thoughts on the problem at hand. The path they had been following through the forest abruptly stopped at a riverbank and continued on the other side of the river with no obvious means of crossing. The remains of squat, crude stonework were apparent on either side, hinting of a bridge that had long since burned, washed away, or simply fallen down. The river was about fifty feet wide, with a strong current. Considering Ridian’s heavy plate armor and anything that might be living in the depths, swimming was out of the question. This left them with few appealing options. They could chop down some trees and construct a raft, which would be time-consuming and laborious since they didn't have the proper tools. Or they could leave the path and travel along the

bank, upstream or down, in search of a bridge or ford. He didn't like either of these options.

Blade spat a whispered curse upon Lieric, their “guide,” for getting them lost. According to Lieric, this was the Black Roc River blocking their path. But Blade had been harboring suspicions of Lieric for several days. Ever since Lieric decided to start “scouting ahead,” Blade noticed how he seemed to frequently look from side to side, as if confused. Yesterday, when Blade pressed him about their location and the distance to the Town of Stonebridge, Lieric answered with weak smiles, hollow confidence, and vague words.

The only thing Blade could be sure of was that they were somewhere in the Ravenwood. He guessed that they had probably been traveling more north than east for the past two days, and this river obstructing their path was a tributary of the Black Roc River, not the Black Roc itself, which was probably flowing further south along the border of the Hammer Downs.

Blade was debating their various options for crossing the river when Ridian interrupted his thoughts once more. “There it is again!” the knight grasped the hilt of his bastard sword and scanned the bushes to his right. Sensing danger, he moved to a more defensive position atop a low rock a few yards from the riverbank.

“I heard something too.” Lieric intoned with his annoying lisp. Unsheathing his long sword, he crept quietly toward a large fern that seemed to undulate peculiarly.

Fed up with his companions’ fears, Blade turned to face them. He was standing at the river’s edge and they had been behind him on the path. As he turned, he saw that Ridian had moved to his left, leaving the path and stepping onto a small, flat rock to get a tactical advantage. Lieric had skulked to the right and was slipping into the foliage like a rat. About twenty feet in front of Blade was a third figure.

The thing was humanoid in shape, but huge—nearly 7 feet tall. It had large lupine ears and fiendish, dripping fangs. It was

covered in shaggy, greasy fur and a crazed fire burned in its yellow, bloodshot eyes. A maniacal battle cry erupted from the beast as it hefted a jagged, rusty ax and charged.

“Oh gods!” Was all Blade could exclaim as he fumbled with his sword.

Ridian, sword in hand, was about to leap to Blade’s defense when he heard another creature crashing through the brush to his left. He quickly turned to face his attacker, but not before he felt a biting pain in his shoulder as the thing sprang from the brush and hacked at him with a chipped and broken sword. He recoiled and gave a little ground, more out of battle-sense than pain or fear. The trick was to fool his opponent into thinking he was more injured than he really was-- and it worked. Emboldened, the savage beast became reckless, leaping onto the rock and lunging full at the knight. But the attack was stopped short as Ridian dealt it a harsh blow with the broad blade of his bastard sword. Before the mangled carcass hit the ground, two more rushed from the tree line, flanking him. Ridian stood his ground and gripped his sword firmly as the

ominous sound of trembling foliage and snapping branches betrayed the presence of even more of their kind lurking nearby. Ridian cursed, but only slightly, as he realized what was happening. He was becoming surrounded. If he didn't act fast, his heroic saga could be ended right here. He recognized these creatures as Maeros, savage creatures who torture their prey before eating it alive. Their favorite meal: humans. To kill a maero was simple work for a skilled knight like Ridian, but to fight four or six at one time was a daunting task, even for him. And judging from the way they were swarming from the trees, there might be more than fifteen attacking right now. Without a horse and without a group of soldiers to command, he decided his best course of action was to have the river at his back and Lieric and Blade at his side. Parrying a chop at his head, he stepped down from the rock and maneuvered a few steps across the path in the direction Lieric had gone, but in the chaos he had lost sight of the repugnant fool. A gurgling cry of pain that could only be Lieric suddenly rang from the forest about twenty yards away and Ridian knew that the situation was becoming grave. He chanced a quick look behind him in Blade's direction.

The weighty onslaught of two bloodthirsty maeroes had pressed Blade into the shallow water at the river's edge. Standing knee deep in the water and balancing on the smooth round rocks of the river bottom, the swordsman was unable to perform many of his famous acrobatic fighting stunts. He could only thrust, parry and dodge as he worked to keep his balance. He feinted and blocked with skill, but was unable to land a clean shot on either of his attackers.

A glancing blow to Ridian's helmet reminded him of his own predicament. He lashed out with a heavy-handed blow that sank to the heart. The wounded maero staggered away, howling in agony as more of its comrades rushed in. Ridian began moving back toward the river, but he only managed a couple of steps when one maero landed a solid shot to his right thigh. His step faltered and he crashed to the ground. Panic seized him for a moment when he found himself on his back, monsters looming over him with weapons raised high. He scrambled desperately back to his feet as a shower of blows rained down on him. His armor took the brunt of the assault,

but he felt the bite of an axe blade in his back as a two-handed blow split his cuirass. He made a clumsy and somewhat frantic swipe at the nearest creature as he stood up, but the beast easily parried his off-balance attack. Encircled and lame, things were grim indeed.

Knee-deep in the river, Blade wasn't doing much better. Beyond the two brutes he faced, he saw Ridian get mobbed and fall. Then his vision was blocked by a third menacing maero. Keenly aware of their desperate situation, Blade called upon what magic he could. He uttered a few unintelligible syllables of arcane power and a cone of flames shot forth from his outstretched hand, wrapping two of his attackers in a burning torrent. They cried out in horror as they were engulfed with fire, their greasy fur combusting instantly. Forgetting the battle, they flung themselves frantically into the water. Blade was about to dodge away and sprint to safety when two more beasts came splashing toward him through the reedy shallows.

Leiric, having crept discreetly away, had hoped to sneak up on those who were sneaking up on him. He was reasonably

successful until some slippery clay thwarted him and sent him sprawling at the "feet" of a fiendish, frothing creature with broken teeth and hulking shoulders that blocked out the Sun as it raised its heavy sword for a death stroke. As Lieric panicked and floundered in the slick clay trying to regain his footing, he was dealt a vicious slash across his chest. He cried out in agony and fear as the forceful blow hurled him clear of the clay. Clutching his bleeding chest, he climbed to his feet and started to flee but—which way should he go? Off to the left looked as familiar as off to the right! He staggered in confusion. Hot breath on his neck warned him to duck and turn as a sword slashed at his head, narrowly missing and flinging his own blood on him. Distantly, he heard the screams and clatter of battle. With a panicked, lurching gait he stumbled toward the noise. But as he ran, another maero suddenly stepped from behind a tree and clubbed him in the face. He was thrown violently to the ground; his face reduced to a shattered pulp. As he struggled with unconsciousness, two white arrows lodged in his attacker's chest.

Back on the trail, Ridian's wild swing had left him poorly exposed; a maero wasted no time jabbing him in the ribs with its sword. He cried out to the gods as he fell to the ground, bleeding heavily.

Blade was preparing to meet more of the onrushing beast-men when suddenly he saw several shafts of light arcing into the fray, wounding four of the creatures. The beasts reeled in surprise, their skin pierced by pale arrows. Another volley quickly followed and three maeroes fell dead. Now besieged by unseen archers, the remaining maeroes lost their enthusiasm and fled into the forest, scattering like frightened animals.

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After driving the maeroes off, the elven huntsmen of Lyrinnam helped the three travelers cross the river and brought them to their nearby campsite. They treated their injuries and offered the travelers food and they were very intrigued by their presence in this part of the forest.

The travelers were an unusual group, two uncommon elves and a human knight. One elf was actually a half-breed human. He was the only one of the three to escape the battle without serious injury, apparently being very agile or lucky. He was average height with a trim build and handsome features. He wore a pair of fancy leather boots, a suede vest and a gaudy purple tunic with an obnoxious, patchwork pattern. His flamboyant outfit was topped-off with a golden cape and a wide, foppish hat. His demeanor was confident, his gestures were grand. With a twinkling eye and a beaming smile he introduced himself as "Blade the Magnificent, Swordsman of Stage and Story." He was, in fact, quite charming.

The other elf was taller than most, and lanky. He was dressed in the soft green tones of the plains-dwelling elves. His physical appearance, however, was not like most elves of the plains or the forest or anywhere else. His visage was near repulsive, as if the gods of Love and Beauty had played a cruel joke on him. Indeed he was the ugliest elf the huntsmen had ever seen. His uneven features and feeble jaw-line accentuated the worst aspects of elven physiology causing him to appear

distorted, gangly, and grotesque. His lip was twisted with a wide, disfiguring scar. His large, hooked nose looked to have been broken several times and he was covered with pock scars. He had shaved his thin, greasy hair in an unfashionable style and a distinct odor hung about his person. To make the whole ensemble worse, the maero's club had smashed his face into a swollen lump of bruises. "Itssc Okay. I've had worssce." He said when they fussed over the gapping rip in his chest. He called himself Lieric.

The human, dressed in plate mail, spoke with a Western accent and the huntsmen recognized by his symbols that he was a man of honor and nobility. "Sir Ridian Wyrmsshield, Marshal Knight of Falconbridge," he said when they met. He shook their hands with a vice-like grip and his piercing blue eyes captured their attention as he spoke. His armor shone like silver and his white surcoat was stained with blood. Although he had suffered a terrible chest wound in the battle, he recovered quickly, the healing hand of his deity rapidly reducing the deep wound to a superficial cut.

The leader of the elven hunting party eyed these strangers with interest. "I am called Kian" he managed with the human language, attempting to accommodate Ridian. Indicating the three other elves with him, he added, "We four are huntsmen from the Lyrinnam clan, we've been tracking those maeroes since they attacked our village a week ago. We've harangued them for days and reduced their numbers to about half their original strength.

"What brings you three to these remote glades?"

"We met in Driftwood, a human village in Atheia." Blade answered. "We discovered that we were all traveling in the same direction, north to the city of Longspear and beyond. I'm planning to do a few shows there and Ridian is going to be in the King's Tournament. Lieric is traveling further north to the coast. Since the road between Driftwood and Longspear is long and dangerous, we decided to travel together, for safety and companionship. Ridian offered his sword and shield as protection from the bandits and beasts along the way. Since any road can be boring and tedious, I offered to provide

entertainment with my famous stories and performances. And Lyric offered to guide us along a shortcut.”

A long, quiet, uncomfortable moment fell on the group while all eyes shifted to Lieric. First the huntsmen eyed him curiously, then Blade and Ridian noticed their behavior and also began looking at Lieric as if he should have something to explain.

At length, Kian said, “We know of no shortcut between Driftwood and Longspear.

“Moreover, you are leagues from any road that can take you to either place. The path you are following is an old road that was built during the Emerald Reign. It hasn’t been used in over a century. It leads into the mountains and ends in an abandoned mining town.”

Blade’s eyes sharpened with distrust as they stabbed into Lieric’s flesh. Lieric wrung his hands nervously in his lap and muttered, “I- I got lossct...” his eyes trailed on the ground,

unable to meet the suspicious, accusing glares of elves and men. “There *issc* a *sschortcut* from Driftwood to Longsscppear... I *jussct* got *lossct*....” He repeated weakly.

Another long moment passed while the others watched him with hard eyes. He was pathetic, ugly, uncouth, unkempt, and in poor condition, thanks to his multiple wounds. But no one could sense he was lying. And no one could think of why he would lie. It was easy to believe that such a low and ill-bread person could become lost in a foreign country.

Kian finally broke the silence. “There is more.” He said. “We also have a prisoner.” He indicated a large sycamore tree near the edge of the campsite and said, “A letter was found on her addressed to ‘Di’Rah.’ So that’s what we call her. She won’t tell us her name or her business. She only speaks to insult, which isn’t surprising since, as you can see, she is drow.”

And indeed they could see that very well. Hidden in the shadows of the sycamore, unnoticed by them until now, was a

thin female shape, only slightly blacker than darkness. She was lashed to the sycamore in a sitting position with her wrists bound behind the wide, bent tree. She leaned forward, her long silvery hair hiding her face in deep shadows like the hood of a great cloak. The powerful sinews of her arms were stretched tight beneath her onyx skin and her dainty, nymph-like feet were planted firmly on the ground, as if she were straining against the bonds. As their attention turned her way, Di'rah's eyes flared with fiery rage and shone like burning embers beneath her silvery cowl.

They all stood several feet away and eyed her with guarded interest. "You can get closer." Kian assured, "she's tied securely, she can't hurt you." But they were not so easily convinced. They had all heard the awful legends. Blade and Lieric, both being familiar with elven history, also knew that many of those legends were true.

"How did you catch her?" Ridian marveled, the first to dare a step closer.

"Her presence in the forest frightened many of the animals. They told us where she was camped and we set upon her in her sleep. Subduing her was no easy task," Kian continued solemnly, "Gynlynn's arm was almost severed and Feldynn will never walk the same again—but we got her."

"You jussct attacked her in her ssleep and abducted her?" Lieric asked.

The huntsmen nodded.

"You don't have any idea who ssche issc, or if ssche hassc done anything wrong? You jussct kidnapped her, took her thingssc, tied her to a tree and ssstarted interrogating her? I'm not ssurprised ssche won't talk to you!" Lieric said.

"What are you talking about?" Blade interjected, yelling at Lieric. "Her kind have slaughtered thousands of innocent people! People of all races, clans and beliefs! She is probably on just such as mission right now – that's why she won't talk!"

Turning to Kian, Lieric said, “Have you tried talking nicely with her, untying her, giving her things back to her and being polite?”

“She’s a drow!” Kian was shocked by Leric’s attitude.

“Maybe ssche isscn’t like other drow? You shouldn’t assscume what kind of person ssche is bassced on how ssche lookssc.”

At this all the elves laughed heartily and Kian said, “The legend of a ‘good Drow’ is just that my friend - legend. They are *all* evil as the Dark Lord. No, no. We won’t be untying her and giving her things back. We will take her to the village for questioning by the Council. They will find out what she has done and determine a suitable punishment.”

Being a professional storyteller, Blade was familiar with hundreds of different legends and tales. Remembering a common element of the many stories about drow, he said, “I can prove she is evil right now. We all know that light is the

essence of life, right? The foulest creatures that exist all shun light, don’t they? Vampires, spirits and demons all flee from pure, bright light. It burns their skin and forces them to stay in dark places because they are vile, evil creatures.” Not waiting for the others to agree or disagree, he stepped closer to Di’rah. As he clapped his hands together one time, he uttered a few syllables. A bright light sprang from his right hand and he shinned it directly on her.

She cringed from the light, as if burned by the radiant glow. Snarling through her teeth, she fixed Blade with a glare of smoldering hatred.

“Oh, you don’t like that, do you?” He taunted. “How do you like *this*?” He waved his hand and spit out a few arcane words. A swirling rainbow of colors sprayed from his outstretched hand and washed over her in a scintillating shower. As fast as it stated, the coruscating spray of color ended. She reeled from the power of the spell and struggled to endure its mind-bending effects. No longer snarling and glaring, she fought to remain conscious.

Blade laughed.

“Ok. OK! That’s enough.” Kian said, gripping Blade’s shoulder and pulling him away from her. “A little *light* spell is one thing. Powerful arcana is something else. I’m not going to let you torture her.”

“Yeah, that’s a little too far.” Gynlynn said. “We don’t want to stoop to her level.”

Even Ridian lent his silent support to the elves, giving Blade a look that said he wasn’t going to stand for mistreatment of prisoners, no matter how vile their reputation.

Blade sighed and said, “Yeah, you’re right. I guess I got a little carried away. I could tell you so many stories about the atrocities her people have committed.” He turned a stiff eye on Lieric and said, “I can’t believe anyone, especially an *elf*, would suggest that we let her go and be nice to her!”

Lieric, looked at the ground and wished for the strength to respond to Blade’s remark. He wished for the strength to defend himself, but he was too scarred by years of scorn, emasculated by ridicule. He lacked the strength of character to argue with someone as charismatic, articulate, and quick-witted as Blade, especially on a point as difficult as this. He looked at the ground and wished for the strength to respond, but it never came. He stood shamefaced and said nothing.

“Well, *you* aren’t going to do anything with her.” Kian said to Blade with a friendly smile, “She is *our* prisoner.” He indicated himself and the three huntsmen with him. “We will be taking her back to the village for questioning, as I said. You three are welcome to camp here with us this evening. We’ll be leaving in the morning. If you want to get to Longspear, you must travel back the way you’ve come for about three days. You should come to a fork in the road near a large waterfall. Go right, east, and you’ll be on the road to Longspear.

Blade and Ridian exchanged quick glances of affirmation and Blade said, “That sounds fine.”

As they settled around the campfire and prepared a meager dinner, Kian said to Ridian, “You might be interested in this, my friend.” He reached into his sack and withdrew a

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Part 2: Separate Ways

Part 3: Victory and Defeat