

THE WILDERNESS



The Kingdom of MISTHALIN

Path to Varrock & Morjantaria

Path to Draynor & Lumbridge

-  church
-  town
-  castle
-  fortress
-  village

The Kingdom of KANDARIN

EDGEVILLE

KINSHIRA FORTRESS

MONASTERY OF SAKADOMIN

ICE MOUNTAIN

THE KINGDOM OF ASGARNIA

THE EAST ROAD

The city of lights FALADOR

Path to Rimmington & Port Sarim

DEFENSIVE DITCH

DESKURTHORFE

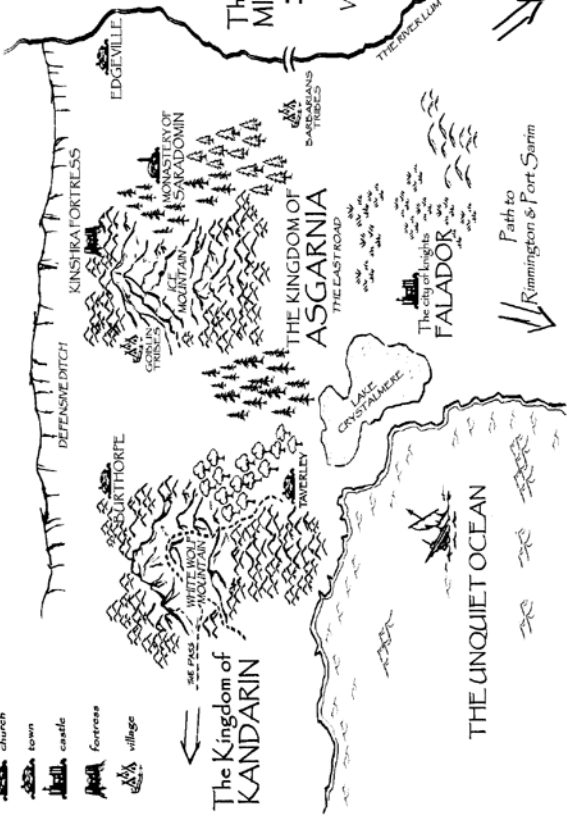
WITTE WOLF MOUNTAIN

THE PASS

TAVERLEY

LAKE CRYSTALMERE

THE UNQUIET OCEAN



ONE



“Get some light over here! We need some light!”

Master-at-arms Nicholas Sharpe shouted loudly into the wind in order to be heard by his fellow knights on the bridge. A fair young man ran forward, shielding his blazing torch from the anger of the winter storm.

“Thank you, Squire Theodore. Now, let us see what damage has been done.”

Half a dozen men stood around as firelight flickered over the fallen masonry. It was a life-sized statue of a knight which had come crashing down from the castle heights an hour after midnight, when the storm had been at its most ferocious. The crash had been loud enough to raise the alarm.

“That’s more than a thousand pounds of solid stone,” Sharpe said, peering up into the darkness from whence it had plummeted. “Must’ve been a wicked gust to move it.

“We can’t leave it here,” he added. “Get hold of it. On three we’ll lift.”

There was some jostling as the knights moved closer, every man packing himself as close to the statue as possible.

“One... two... *three!*” Sharpe counted out, and on his last call the small group of men lifted the marble statue with a collective

groan of effort. "Carry him to the courtyard. We can't leave one of our own out here in the cold!"

The men staggered under their burden, moving slowly from the exposed bridge toward the open gates, Squire Theodore lighting the way.

The statue will be safe there until the morning, the master-at-arms mused, as long as the damage wasn't serious enough to break it into a thousand pieces as they moved it.

And as long as nothing more comes down on our heads, he added silently. It wasn't safe in the streets of Falador that night; several people had already been killed by falling debris, and the quicker their party was back inside the castle, the better.

But the pessimistic thought turned to prophecy. A sharp crack, a sudden cry, and the statue dropped again to the paving, scattering the men who had lifted it. Only two had retained their grips on the polished marble, and now they held the right leg between them, detached from the rest of the figure.

"Get the torch back here!" Sharpe hollered, his temper rising. He swiftly noted the anxious faces gazing toward the courtyard. "Where's the torch?" he called. "Where has Theodore got to?"

A sudden gust of wind, biting cold in its journey south from Ice Mountain, swept across the bridge. The squire emerged from the gatehouse, bringing the torch with him and carrying a heavy bundle under his arm. As soon as he reached the shivering party, there was a crack from above and a cry of warning rang out.

"Watch your heads!"

Each man instinctively looked up, crouching low in readiness. Spinning from the rooftops, a tile crashed onto the bridge and exploded on the stonework scant yards away, sending sharp chips of slate into the turbulent moat below.

"Come on; we must not stay out here any longer," Sharpe said decisively. For all the statue meant, it wasn't worth the lives of the young men who stood close to him. "Theodore, don't run off

again. We need the light to see what we're doing."

He noted the look of disappointment on the young man's face. Theodore was an excellent squire; the master-at-arms couldn't recall any better. Yet he took himself too seriously, making him an easy target for any of his peers who envied his dedication, or even despised him for it.

"I have blankets, sir," Theodore said. "We can carry the statue on that. It will allow more of us to help lift it and prevent any more accidents like the last one..." His voice trailed off as a couple of the knights regarded him coolly.

But Sharpe nodded.

"It's a good idea, Theodore. Pull the blankets under the statue when we lift it—on three again!" And as soon as the men around him had obeyed, the master-at-arms began the count.

"One..."

"Two..."

"*Three!*" Each man issued a grunt as they hefted their burden.

A sudden flash erupted from the polished marble above the entrance to the courtyard, and once again the stone knight fell, the impact knocking several of the knights off their feet. One stumbled against Theodore, so that he was forced to loosen his grip on the spluttering torch and the light vanished as it splashed into a puddle.

Immediately, concerned voices called out in the darkness.

"What was that?"

"Are we under attack?"

"There's been no thunder—it must be magic!"

Sharpe bellowed from the side of the bridge.

"Get me a light!"

Theodore crouched and seized the torch, only to find that it was soaked from the puddle. He was on his feet in a second, running toward the gatehouse where the night watch kept lights burning.

He was careful to avoid the dazed knights who risked tripping him in the dark.

“Help me!”

A voice called out nearby. It was faint and unusual, and Theodore dismissed it, knowing he could not help anyone until he had light. As he entered the gatehouse, the voice groaned again, closer now.

When Theodore emerged holding the burning torch, he nearly dropped it in surprise. For lying not far away was a young girl, shivering from the cold. Looking closer, he could see that she was in shock from the savage injuries that covered her body. In one hand she held a strange flower, and in the other a golden ring, broken in two, that appeared to be smouldering in her open palm. It boasted a crystal clear gem, and an acrid scent hung heavy on the night air.

Her eyes, wide and dark, looked into his. He had never seen anything so...

“Help me... please.”

The girl blinked once and opened her eyes. Then with a sigh she closed them again, and her head lolled back.

Sir Amik Varze's mood reflected the weather outside.

Freezing winds howled down from the mountain and The Wilderness that lay beyond, and his order had been busy dealing with food shortages and a desperate population. Though the night was black as pitch, on a clear day, from his room in the tower of marble overlooking the city of Falador, Sir Amik could see Ice Mountain in the distant north, a foreboding sharp pinnacle which could look deceptively beautiful on those evenings when the sun reflected off the frozen summit.

Beautiful, but deadly, he thought as the gale blew open a shutter. It struck the wall with a raucous clatter.

From his younger days as an ambitious squire and all

through his long career, Sir Amik had travelled more than most throughout the lands of Gielinor, east to the borders of the dark realm of Morytania where even the dead could not find rest, and south to the vast wastes of the Kharidian Desert which no man had ever crossed.

Yet of all his achievements, he was most proud of his role in manoeuvring the Knights of Falador as a serious political force within the realm of Asgarnia. He had ruled in old King Vallance's place, making and enforcing the laws that kept the nation safe. For two years the king had been bedridden, and Sir Amik had made certain that the knights had filled the vacuum before instability could threaten.

Not everybody had been happy about that, however. The Imperial Guard—under the direct rule of Crown Prince Anlaf—had questioned Sir Amik's intentions, and were aware that his knights controlled the nation's treasury. The prince had governed the town of Burthorpe in northwest Asgarnia for many years, placed there by his father to amass experience and prepare him for his inevitable succession to the throne. Under Anlaf's management, the Imperial Guard kept the nation safe from the trolls in the northern mountains, and rarely interfered in Asgarnia's wider affairs.

Yet the rumours swirled. Some predicted that a power struggle would plunge the nation into civil war, but Sir Amik would not let it come to that. As long as he lived, honour and truth would conquer the petty politics of such self-interested men.

It was the will of Saradomin.

Amik was old now, though. Not so old, however, as to be confined to the almshouses in the city, which the knights maintained to shelter those who had survived to reach the age of retirement, spending their days in the parks and lecturing the younger generation about the virtues of truth and honour.

No, not yet, he thought as he stood up to close the offending

shutter. He was still capable of putting in as many hours as were required to guarantee the security of Asgarnia and the blessings of Saradomin.

Rather than closing the shutter, however, he pulled it back, taking a moment to glance down to the courtyard. Even over the wind, which sung its shrill song amongst the rooftops, he could hear raised voices. He saw several torches flickering in the darkness and shadowy men running in animated confusion. Before he could call out, however, footsteps sounded on the steep stairwell outside the door to his private study, and a moment later it shook under the anxious hammering of a man's clenched fist.

"Sir Amik? Are you awake?" a familiar voice said. The man's tone betrayed his excitement.

The knight sighed, knowing that he was going to be forced to postpone his sleep.

"What is it, Bhuler?" he called out, closing the shutter and turning to cross the room. "What catastrophe has you running up these stairs at this hour?" He unlocked the door, and there stood his personal valet.

"It's a woman, sir!"

Sir Amik raised an eyebrow. "At your age, Bhuler?"

"No, sir." The man looked to the floor, disarmed by his master's quick humour. "Outside, in the courtyard. She just appeared on the bridge—it has to be magic. But she's badly injured—Sharpe doesn't think she'll pull through."

Sir Amik's expression hardened.

"Where is she now?" he asked. His curiosity was piqued. The knights had many enemies, and in order to counter any hostile entry, the castle was guarded by more than walls alone. It was supposed to be impossible to teleport anywhere within the perimeter of the moat.

"She's been taken to the matron in the east wing, sir."

They exited the room, and the valet led the way down the spiral stairs and across the courtyard.

The entire castle had been roused by the news, and Sir Amik couldn't imagine a swifter call to action. Lights shone from the dormitories of the peons—those boys who worked to attain the rank of squire and who carried out the menial labours. Above the howling of the wind, he heard a squire muttering of an elven princess, sent to warn the knights of impending disaster.

Already the rumours have started, he thought. *Even ones as foolish as that.* He smiled thinly, for the elven race had vanished from the world long ago—if they had ever existed at all. Yet this was a point the young squire ignored entirely.

Then his smile disappeared. Some things he would not allow.

“Turn out those lights!” he roared. Hastily the young peons extinguished their lamps and ceased their speculations, aware that tomorrow would bring a punishment drill. Sir Amik's attitude toward discipline was well-known: it was at the heart of their order.

Arriving at the matron's quarters, he found master-at-arms Sharpe and the young Squire Theodore there, as well. But it was no elven princess under the matron's anxious care, rather a very human young girl. Her blonde hair was matted with dried earth and sharp thorns were entangled in the long strands. Her skin was deathly pale. She looked like some feral animal.

“What do you think, matron?” he asked.

“She is badly injured, Sir Amik.” The heavy-set woman's eyes flicked to the patient. “Prayer is her best hope now.”

“Then I may help. The will of Saradomin is not known to me, but his wisdom has never failed to aid me before.” The elderly matron nodded. Her considerable skills were of no use to a girl with such savage injuries.

“Clear the room,” Sir Amik ordered briskly. The matron complied, taking the others with her. When he was alone, he

knelt at the bedside to pray, clearing his mind. His head bowed in reverence and his hands rested on the girl's cold forehead.

"My Lord Saradomin, I have served you without question since I was old enough to govern the path of my life, and I do not claim to know your will. I pray now for the sake of this unknown girl. I pray that you will give her the strength to live."

He felt the power within him, stemming from his heart and cascading along his outstretched arms and into the still body. His eyes snapped open with surprise. Never before had he felt so much energy. He struggled to keep his hands steady and his mind clear, lest the conduit that he had become be broken.

After a minute the charge ceased, and Sir Amik called to the matron.

"Saradomin be praised!" he claimed as he stood. "She will live."

At his words, the girl stirred as if gripped by a fitful nightmare. She *would* live.

As he left the room carrying the mysterious girl's belongings, Theodore glanced back at her.

He didn't want to leave her side, and Sir Amik's order to clear the room had made him unusually angry, though he knew better than to voice his feelings. Instead he decided to keep himself busy, accompanying Sharpe toward the armoury to catalogue the girl's property.

"I saw the way you looked at her, Theodore," the master-at-arms said as they ascended a polished stairwell. "You know that as a Knight of Falador there can be no chance for romance. A lonely but honourable life in the service of Saradomin is our reward—not for us a hearth and a home."

"I know that, sir," Theodore replied, his face warming. "But as the only person she has spoken to, I felt it might be best if I was there when she wakes."

Sharpe looked sympathetically at the squire.

“You should prepare yourself, Theodore,” he said calmly. “She might not wake up.” He didn’t slow as they entered the armoury. The squire stopped for a moment, shocked at the fatalistic thoughts of his tutor.

“She will wake up, she will!” he declared.

Bending down and opening a wooden box, Sharpe didn’t even look up at the young man’s brief tirade. After a moment Theodore followed him.

It only took them a few minutes to catalogue the girl’s property. Her leather armour was cut deeply in a dozen places, to the degree that it would offer her no protection should she wear it again, and her clothes were so torn that they would have to be replaced. The nurses had found no weapons save her sword, which the knights had retrieved from the ground at her side. Her scabbard was empty and bent, as if she had fallen on it, and her quiver—slashed viciously from one side to the other—contained no arrows.

The items that she had held in her hands were the most interesting, however. The white flower offered a clue as to where she had come from, and the ring that had broken into two pieces could help to identify her. Theodore could recognise neither of them. He knew nothing of botany, and herblore wasn’t among the skills he had studied.

Such was the case with Sharpe, as well. Both men stared at the flower for several minutes before admitting their total ignorance of where it might have grown. The only thing they could determine was that neither of them had ever seen one like it before. But there were people who were well-practised in the identification of such things, chief amongst them the druids.

“I can take the flower to Taverley, sir,” Theodore offered. “It is two days’ ride. The druids will know where it grows, and it

should be clear to them, for how many other flowers bloom in winter?"

Sharpe nodded.

"I shall put your idea to Sir Amik tomorrow," he said thoughtfully. "But it is not the flower that I am so interested in Theodore—not yet. It is the ring in her hand."

The older man's eyes glazed over as if he were searching for some memory of an event long past, the ring held closely before him, its small diamond faded to a milky white since Theodore first retrieved it.

"Do you recognise it, sir?" Theodore asked eventually.

Sharpe shook his head.

"No. No, I do not. I thought it was something that it was not, something it could not be. But I shall be certain in the morning, when I discuss this with older heads than yours."

"What did you think it might be, sir?"

Sharpe peered at him for a moment.

"It was a foolish idea, Theodore, and it is time you went off to bed. It will be light in a few hours, and if I know Sir Amik he is going to want a reliable squire to drill some sense into the peons for their boisterous behaviour. They had no business being up at such an hour."

Theodore bowed his head and left, yet he felt entirely unsatisfied at their findings. He returned to his chamber to try and snatch a few hours' sleep, which he knew he would find evasive. All his thoughts were on the girl.

Sharpe did not sleep either. He sat silently in the armoury, alone under a burning torch, his eyes fixed on the broken ring.

Could it be? Is it possible? His mind ached with questions, none of which he could answer.

Finally, as the cold grey light of a winter dawn began to appear in the eastern sky, he stood, his bones cold and weary

from his long vigil. He stretched briefly and then took the ring in his hand, carefully, reverently. With a furtive glance around him, he left the armoury.