

SWORDS OF ORLANDIA



A land as far off as the sun, yet as close as a whisper, makes itself known through story and history. Distant as the edges of space, closer than your shadow, Orlandia lives and breathes within us all. This is the story of Orlandia and its two most well known citizens.

Time before count sees the first dawn in Orlandia. It was a time of chaos; a time of judgment and a time of structure crawling from the mire. It was a time of war.

Emerging through the ensuing battles of man and beast, blood and brothers was the first and greatest King of Orlandia, King Friedryche, who brought order and peace to all the lands. It was at this time that the mythic twin swords, Vana and Nifl, were crafted for the eternal battle which lay ahead...day and night was their dominion. Wielding them in battle, the King saved Orlandia from certain defeat time and again.

Finally finding peace and ruling thusly, he retired the swords and cast a spell of holding on them to forever lay in wait for the time the Kingdom would need them again. They were never meant as ceremonial weapons; these swords had power unlike anything this world had ever seen before or since.

200 years later, his direct descendant King Darmoth ruled the land with his two sons, Horus of the day and Hesperus of the night.

This duality presented a problem for the Diadem of the kingdom, as Horus and Hesperus were technically twins, although their respective paths made them look nothing at all like twins, much less brothers. Rumor has it that Hesperus invoked the dark arts at an early age quoting a notion that "they called out to me, as if my lungs do for breath."

Horus was wise and gentle, although his ability to fight made him a forever foe of anyone who would dare bully the weak in his presence. His love of nature and science made him a natural student; as did his ever jovial nature make him everyone's friend. His smile was the only shield he ever needed.

Hesperus could not have differed more; his nature was that of a literal thing of night, creeping, sulking and always posturing as though there was a deep dark night afoot.

The brothers none the less got on well and their familial love was a beacon for the Kingdom's general peaceful rule. Theirs was a unique dilemma though...who would rule when King Darmoth passed on?

King Darmoth, channeling the wisdom of his forefathers, declared them both the dual heirs of the Kingdom Orlandia. As a display of this trust toward the two they were given the swords of destiny. This was the first time since the twin swords were used in combat to repel the Yaoguai...demons who threatened the realm at its earliest inception, that the swords were split up or even used.

This wise decision in theory proved to be poor in execution, as the darker nature of the sword's power proved to be a temptation to the brothers.



The mighty Swords of Orlandia, Van and Nifl, found themselves in new hands. And close to new hearts. Season after season passed. And as sure as the mighty redwood grows tall and strong in the deep forest Horus and Hesperus, the favored twin sons of Orlandia, grew steadily toward manhood and their destiny. A destiny, you will find, that was sanitized and made safe for the ears of the young heirs as its' original intent suggested nothing but great sadness awaited them both.

And so it was that Horus and Hesperus knew only that one day a great battle would threaten to tear the whole world apart and that no matter what the brothers must watch over one another. The entire truth was much more grim, and each time half truths were told to the princes every shadow laughed to itself and knew that one day this deceit would bring Orlandia into complete darkness. Still the King

and his elders hoped.

That all would not be lost...

That shielding his sons from the truth would in turn shield the world from devastation...

That running from Fate was an attainable goal.

While they feared and fretted, Horus and Hesperus, studied statecraft and swordplay. One always looking to best the other in whatever it was they were doing at the time. Often these friendly tournaments took the form of hunting excursions. Orlandia was a vibrant

land filled with energy and color and life. The twins loved nothing more than to feel that beneath their feet, to see it before their eyes and to draw it deep, deep into their souls. By bow and blade many creatures fell before the pair but whether it was Horus or Hesperus that gathered the greatest haul each day both would be proud of the others accomplishments. And both would laugh. Sadly, as time passed that very laughter

faded from Hesperus.

If absolute power corrupts absolutely, then both Horus and Hesperus were doomed; for although Vana and Nifl were intrinsically neutral by nature, their vast stores of immeasurable energy could be wielded without consequence by only the purest of hearts. They had lain guarded and unused for generations until now their twin potencies found themselves in the hands of two spirited and utterly competitive youths. Despite the best efforts of all who knew the truth and attempted to keep it from brave Horus and brash

Hesperus, the twins now held between them a force divided. Vana and Nifl hung silently at their sides more baubles than brazen world destroyers. Their silence was soon to be broken. Their screams would shatter a million souls.

Horus and Hesperus had become righteous examples of what brotherhood truly was. The good men and women of Orlandia often quipped they were more likely to see the steadfast walls of Castle Or Landythe come crashing down before the two brothers would ever part ways. Nature, it seems is not without a sense of irony. As seemingly unbreakable the bond between the twin princes was, a small, dark and deadly rift had begun to reveal itself. All it would take now was a catalyst to tear them wholly asunder, to rip them completely apart.

Her name was Raine, and she was the most beautiful woman in all the world.



It pleased the official scribes of the forefathers of Orlandia to rewrite a passage here and then. Not for personal gain, for that would be wrong, but to protect the lineage of the King's family and at some points, the family itself.

Such was the somber occasion when the dead language of Arctinung was deciphered many moons ago that predicted all you have heard and all that soon shall be. It is not merely that Horus and Hesperus were lied to; no, in fact they were told the truth... with facts omitted. Things that will eventually make their way to the forefront and although the King knew of this one instance, the scope of which could never be imagined.

One night, after their reintroduction to their erstwhile playmate now a beautiful woman, Raine, Hesperus quietly conducted himself among the halls of the Castle Or Landythe late into the evening.

Feelings had arisen in both the brothers for Raine, and her affectionate nature belayed the nagging doubts Hesperus now felt. Clearly, to Hesperus, the Princess adores them both, but would be betrothed to him. Still, however, doubt lingers longer than the scent of love, thus Hesperus is distracted during his usual daily walk at midnight.

"The Swords" was whispered from what seems to be a million miles away and simultaneously right next to Hesperus, as if emanating from his own shadow.

Over and over again, the two words used in conjunction to gain his attention were uttered. "The Swords." Hesperus called out, but was answered only with the repeating of "The Swords."

The usual grey white moonlight this night shone a darker hue, more akin to a purplish red than grey. He followed the seemingly obvious path and objective of the light to the mounted Swords, Vana and Nifl which sat in their rightful place during peaceful times.

The light glinted and for the first time, as if a fog were lifting from his mind, Hesperus noticed the etching on the blades, not a mire design, but as writing in an ancient tongue, a language he understood, and what they did portend. Could it be that his occult studies were about to provide him with a knowledge that only he would possess?

With worked up fervor, he read aloud the words in front of him that traveled from the blade of one sword to the next.

"From darkness' wings a soul shall fall" was on Nifl,

"An ivory hand will save them all" on Vana.

Again, like the lifting of an ephemeral veil, the meaning and significance made itself known to Hesperus. One of them shall indeed fall, and die, in combat, the other shall reign alone. But how and why? If it is fate, should he let this happen, or should he try to avert destiny?

Then he looked at his own hand, forged by night to a marked pallor... resembling ivory itself.

Racked with conflicting emotions, Hesperus wanders further into the night to decide what his next course of action may be. Tell his brother and lose his destiny? Or, not...



The day of the annual convocation was at hand. The King stood in the Great Hall, the two Princes on either side. Representatives from across the entire kingdom of Orlandia were in attendance to see and be seen, to hear and be heard. The King had just seated himself after announcing that in one month's time his twin sons, Horus and Hesperus, would take on the mantle of leadership and begin their reign over all the lands.

The cheering and applause slowly subsided when Hesperus, with grim determination upon his brow, stepped forward to address the audience and his sibling. He had spent a great deal of time wrestling with whether or not to share what he had learned from the swords with those now assembled but had settled on his own conclusion; that it was he and he alone who should rule and that by doing so he would both capture the Princess and save everyone.

"From darkness' wings a soul shall fall, an ivory hand will save them all."

These words haunted him as he stood before the adoring crowd and sat so heavily upon his temples that it was a few moments before he noticed Horus now stood next to him. A youthful and innocent smile tweaked Horus' lips, "It seems we both have grand announcements with grand consequences for our kingdom."

"By all means, I implore you, speak first" Hesperus replied not out of vanity but from concern and love for his brother. Knodding Horus stepped forward and announced that not only would he take on the role of King, but that of husband as well for the fair and lovely Princess Raine had agreed to take his hand in marriage. In an instant the brotherly love that Horus and Hesperus had shared shattered and their world would never be the same.

A rug torn out from beneath you might twist an ankle or bruise your backside...how much more damage do you think occurs when one's life is likewise torn? Hesperus' normally pale pallor seemed to fade even more so as the blood rushed out of his face. He stood there speechless. A look, equal parts heartache and rage, flashed across his eyes as he stared.

At Horus. At Raine. At all those assembled.

He simply turned and walked away. Horus, in a state of both excitement and confusion, called out to him. Called out to inquire as to what he now wished to tell. Hesperus, in the last moment before he left the great hall, replied that it was not important. A gloom and depression dark as a moonless night beset fateful Hesperus. The days following the convocation were laced with bitterness, sadness and hate.

Horus, naïve and sympathetic as always reached out to his brother but was always turned back by a scowl or a harsh word. That is until he suggested that they both take one last trip into the forest together. To hunt alone and unminded, to be free to be themselves one final time. And that perhaps even Raine might join them. This offer caused Hesperus to pause and with a sly grimace Horus mistook for happiness he agreed with uncharacteristic enthusiasm.

"One last hunting trip into the forest then?" Horus shouted from atop his mount.

"Indeed, before the coronation chains us both to a life of boredom." Hesperus sputtered.

"You two are such babies, and you'll be crying even more when I manage the first catch of the day! Hyah!" And with that Raine rode out of sight.

Horus laughed out loud, turned his steed and then to Hesperus. "After you dear brother. I wouldn't let her get away if I were you."

Hesperus bowed regally from atop his own hell-black charger and then spurred the beast onward. Sneering he whispered "I never planned to dear brother, I never planned to."

And so, it was on this carefree day that life for all of Orlandia would irreparably change forever.

Many hours had passed and the sun drew low on the horizon. In a sprint to capture some quick footed quarry Hesperus had become separated from the other two. Alone, it was then he heard a voice; a scratchy, insensitive and inhuman voice calling out to him from just ahead in the shadowed woods.

He dismounted and crept forward until a lone crow came into view. It turned its head and spoke, "Greetings mighty prince. I carry with me your destiny." Intrigued, Hesperus inquired as to what the creature meant. The crow explained in great detail how the twins had been deceived their entire lives and that the prophecy was severely lacking.

One prince would indeed fall in a coming conflict and that the surviving sibling would rule Orlandia unfettered wielding both swords himself. The crow promised ultimate power, ultimate authority and ultimate love. Indeed the crow swore that Princess Raine would one day take Hesperus' heart if he were but ready. His heart began to beat faster, his head was reeling with the possibilities. He was ready to go to any length to see all these promises come to fruition. The crow looked deep into Hesperus' soul and asked, "Are you willing?"

Time seemed to stand still, nothing moved, not even the wind. Nature itself stood silent waiting for Hesperus reply.

"Yes."



The bright warm summer day belied the feelings in Hesperus' chest as he wrestled with the notion of what he had promised. The life of his brother, the familial ties with which this great Kingdom had always found its best strength in and perchance his own soul.

But the prophecy was true; in this great age where confusion meets certainty one who would make such a sacrifice surely is needed to secure the future of the kingdom. One who could oversee the merging of the arcane language and customs of the past with the vibrant discoveries of the future. Horus would never see this and the kingdom would fall to ruin, like the prophecy stated. Hesperus convinced himself that this was just; this was right for his people and they would see that clearly when he held the hand of Raine, finally.

But how to go about doing this? The Crow had suggested taking care of his brother now, lest the ensuing battle do them both damage. The Crow had, as you very well may guess, lied. Knowing that the swords are not evil or good, just the means to focus the truest intentions of the person who wields them. The Crow and his evil cohorts from an era long forgotten had long waited to get a grip on the kingdom from which King Friedryche had them banished. And, they'd use the very weapons that were used to drive them out to do it. The delicious irony was supped from for entire generations and all the Yaoguai desired was about to come to fruition. The truth is, the Swords of Orlandia can be used in unison or against one another. The only threat of destruction lies in the intentions of its wielder. But Horus does not know this and still thinks that the swords, if brought together as opposing forces, will destroy all he knows and more.

"Where are you, Brother? Raine has such a head start on us I fear today we will fail to catch up!" Horus cried out, and was met with the response "Over here, dear brother. I have something to show you." Hesperus stood admiring the view across a great chasm.

Horus approached to share with his brother the beauty of Orlandia.

The chasm has existed for millennia. No one knows what it leads to or how far down the chasm goes. Indeed, all who have sought out its secrets have vanished, never to be seen again.

"Have you ever really given much thought about where this goes? I have. It's the last bit of the realm

that no one completely understands... it is the last mystery we have." Hesperus was trying to get his brother off guard with his musings.

"Not really, no. When it is time to know what we can from this, surely we'll be able to decipher it."

"So you're content to sit back and let life happen, instead of grabbing it by the ears and making it what you want?"

"Brother, that was hardly the question."

"But it did provide my answer."

As Hesperus lunged at his brother intent on seeing him vanish forever into the chasm, something caught Horus' attention and he shifted his position to see a hawk fly over a nearby tree. Horus glanced back toward Hesperus whose face contorted in terror. It was too late, Hesperus lost his footing, and fell straight into the chasm. Horus tried to catch him, "Brother!", but all he grasped was air. "I'm so foolish, I have doomed my brother. What have I done here today?" Distraught he did the only thing he could think to do. "Raine!"

She was there in an instant at his side; they raced back to the kingdom's gate to secure a rescue party. They searched for days finding only a crow in the very spot where Hesperus fell. Hesperus had vanished like all the others before. Wracked with guilt, the Prince Horus blames himself for what happened and vows to find a way to recover his brother.

However that would have to wait as the day that next fell would be the one on which he dare not shirk his duties. Customarily any intended ruler who is betrothed must wed by sunset on the last day of the convocation. And thus it would be for Horus and Raine. A day of great joy and great sadness.

The town crier posted the invitation to all citizens of and visitors to Orlandia. "Come one, come all, attend the Royal Ball, on the Eve of Satyrs, in the Great Hall!" All the kingdom's Grand Events were held there.

As he walked through town crying out the invitation, no one took notice as a black crow cawed menacingly.

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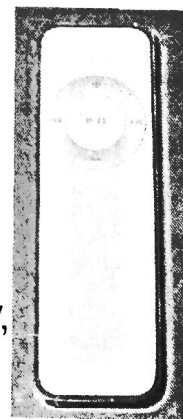
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