

LANI & THE DEITIES

Find The Book. Find The
Sword.



S Black

*To the people of Karlstejn.
This one is for you.*

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Train](#)

[Whispers](#)

[Karlštejn](#)

[Shattered Threads](#)

[The Old King Returns](#)

[Phoenix](#)

[Deities](#)

[Hope](#)

[Dawn](#)

[Epilogue](#)

PROLOGUE



Thunder rolled across the valley, except it wasn't thunder. It was stone.

Hussite siege engines hurled boulders at Karlštejn, and each impact shuddered through the fortress like a giant fist. Firepots arched over the battlements and burst in showers of sparks. At the front strode Jan Žižka, the one-eyed hero of the people. His single good eye blazed.

"Forward!" he roared.

His warriors surged. Ladders slammed into stone. Shields clanged. The night filled with steel and shouting.

The first great gate gave way, and the castle fought back. Arrows hissed from the towers. Boiling oil sizzled as it poured. Defenders bellowed from the walls.

Nothing slowed Žižka. His iron mace rose and fell like a forge hammer, scattering men as if they were made of straw.

Then, in the heart of the storm, something went wrong.

A bolt of darkness cut through the air, too fast, too sharp to be an arrow. Žižka jerked, staggered, and dropped to his knees. His mace slipped from his hand and thudded into the mud.

The Hussites froze. So did the defenders.

For one terrible breath, even the battle seemed to hold still.

Flames guttered. Men's breath turned to mist.

Through the shattered gate walked a man in brown robes, a staff in his hand. At his side padded a beast of legend, white fur gleaming and

eyes burning gold.
Veles. And Dažbog.
They crossed the courtyard as if time itself had
thickened around them. Veles stopped and knelt
beside the fallen general.
He murmured to the great hound at his side.
"This isn't good."



TRAIN



"Trains are the best!"

"You've said that five times, Katchy."

"So? I like trains!" The blonde ball of energy, Katchy to the teachers, Katchy to everyone else, grinned like she'd swallowed a whole firework. Both girls were thrilled about their latest school trip, though for wildly different reasons. Lani, eleven, red-haired and tall enough to see over most heads, loved one thing: no lessons. Her best friend loved facts. Especially facts with dates.

Katchy had her history book open on her knees and her phone in her hand, somehow reading from both at once, and loudly enough for the whole carriage to hear.

"Did you know Charles IV..."

Lani clapped her hands over her ears, turned to the window, and pretended she had never met the person sitting next to her.

"Well, we're almost there," Lani muttered when she dared to peek back. Katchy was already scrolling another "10 Fun Facts about Karlštejn" page, beaming at the screen like it was her favourite TV show.

They were on the S7 train with their class. An elderly couple sat nearby, quietly eavesdropping. To Lani's horror, they smiled at Katchy like she was a tiny tour guide.

"Oh, I'd love to hear that," the woman said kindly.

Katchy lit up and launched straight into Karlštejn fortifications. Lani stared out at the passing trees

and daydreamed about anything that didn't involve Gothic architecture or holy relics.

Katchy leaned in. "Say 'good day'."

"Why?"

"It's train tradition."

"Talking to strangers is weird."

Still, Lani managed a polite smile and a small "Good day," while Katchy enjoyed the couple's cheerful reply.

As the train neared Zadní Třebaň, the couple gathered their bags.

"We're visiting the castle too," the man said. "But we'll hike up through the forest."

Lani's stomach turned. A 2-3-kilometre uphill hike sounded like a very effective way to ruin a perfectly good day.

"Sounds... lovely," Lani said through her teeth.

"Okay, everyone, please gather your things," Mrs. Brosková called. "Next stop: Karlštejn."

"Woohoo! We're finally there!" Katchy beamed, practically bouncing.

"Yeah. Finally," Lani deadpanned.

"Miss Cloud?" Mrs. Brosková appeared beside them like a quiet ninja. "A word."

Lani straightened. "Yes, Miss?"

"No sarcastic comments while the guide is talking."

"What?" Lani hissed. "I've already been forced to listen to every Karlštejn fact on the internet. Now I have to hear it all again?"

"Yes," Mrs. Brosková said, smiling so sweetly it looked painful. "And if you don't, you know what



happens."

"What? Detention in a library? Does the castle even have a library?" Lani asked, half-joking, half-hoping.

Their teacher didn't answer. She simply raised an eyebrow and marched down the aisle to deal with the boys, who were having a competition to see how many of them could fit inside the train toilet with the door closed.

"Actually," Katchy whispered urgently, "they wouldn't have said 'library'. It would've been 'bibliotheca'... or something more... Latiny."

"Latiny?" Lani stared at her. "That's not a word."

"Mrs. Brosková!" Katchy squealed. "Tell her. Latiny is a word!"

"Latiny is an adjective," Mrs. Brosková called back without turning. "Informal, but valid. It means 'having the flavour of Latin'."

She opened the toilet door.

Eight boys tumbled out at once, yelling.

Mrs. Brosková pinched the bridge of her nose, then pointed at their bags. "Everyone off. Now."

The class poured down the steps as the train slowed into Karlštejn station. Lani sighed dramatically.

"Here's to another boring school trip," she muttered.

Katchy skipped in front of her. "Hey. You never know. It might be fun. Or magical."

"Fun?" Lani sniffed.

"Doubt it."

WHISPERS



They watched from a wind-whipped hill: three figures cut from shadow and starlight. Below, Karlštejn crouched under a bruised sky. Smoke curled from shattered towers. War drums rolled up the slopes like distant thunder. In the valley, men shouted and steel rang; arrows stitched the air; the fortress fought as if the world might end by morning.

For a long moment, none of the three spoke. Then the leader lifted a pale hand.

Rozhanitsy.

Her voice drifted down the hill like a bell in the dark. "Sisters... she has made us more."

Beside her, Sudenitsy and Narechnitsy answered together, a single chime. "Yes, Rozh."

Rozh's eyes, molten gold, fixed on the burning castle. "Our mistress has toyed with the destinies of men again. Now she wants the holy relic."

"The cross," the other two murmured, as if the word itself tasted of power.

Rozh smiled, small and sharp. "A fragment of the True Cross lies here. The piece that matters."

Suden's fingers flexed, impatient. "Then take it."

"It is hidden," Rozh said. "Bound to this place.

Protected." Her gaze narrowed. "But war opens doors. When the one-eyed general falls, fate will grant us a moment."

Nare's mouth tightened. "Veles won't sit still."

"Of course he won't." Rozh's smile didn't reach her eyes. "He schemes. He keeps his hound close.

We will draw him away, scatter his attention, and step into the dark between heartbeats." Suden gave a pleased little sniff. "Death and distraction. That I can do."

Below, the castle hissed and cracked like old parchment.

Nare's worry slipped out. "And the girl?"

Suden whipped around. "What girl?"

"The Nexus," Nare said, folding her arms, childlike and fierce all at once. "The one with the dawn-sword. If she joins hilt to blade..."

Rozh's fingers tightened around a thread of wind. "The blade is not whole. Without its missing piece, it is only a fiery weapon."

"And that missing piece is lost to time," Suden agreed.

"Are you certain?" Nare pressed. "Even a sliver of that power..."

"We will keep them watching the wrong shadows," Rozh said softly. But there was ice in it. "Then we will end them."

Nare's eyes flicked to Rozh, then away. "And I sense another."

"Two little girls?" Suden scoffed.

Rozh's voice went hard. "It is her plan. Would you question our mistress?"

Silence fell, heavy as a chain.

Once, long ago, they had lived in Iriy, a bright garden where fallen gods rested. Then their mistress had pulled them out, twisted them, fed them power... and bound them.

Suden broke the silence with a snort. "Two little

girls. One old god. One cursed mutt. Once we have the relic, we will snuff them out."

Nare's gaze stayed on the siege. "Time bends. And when you bend it, it bends back."

"Yes, yes," Suden snapped, annoyed by her sister's doubt. "Save the warnings."

Rozh straightened, regal and severe. "We will succeed. In the name of our mistress."

"In the name of our mistress," Suden intoned.

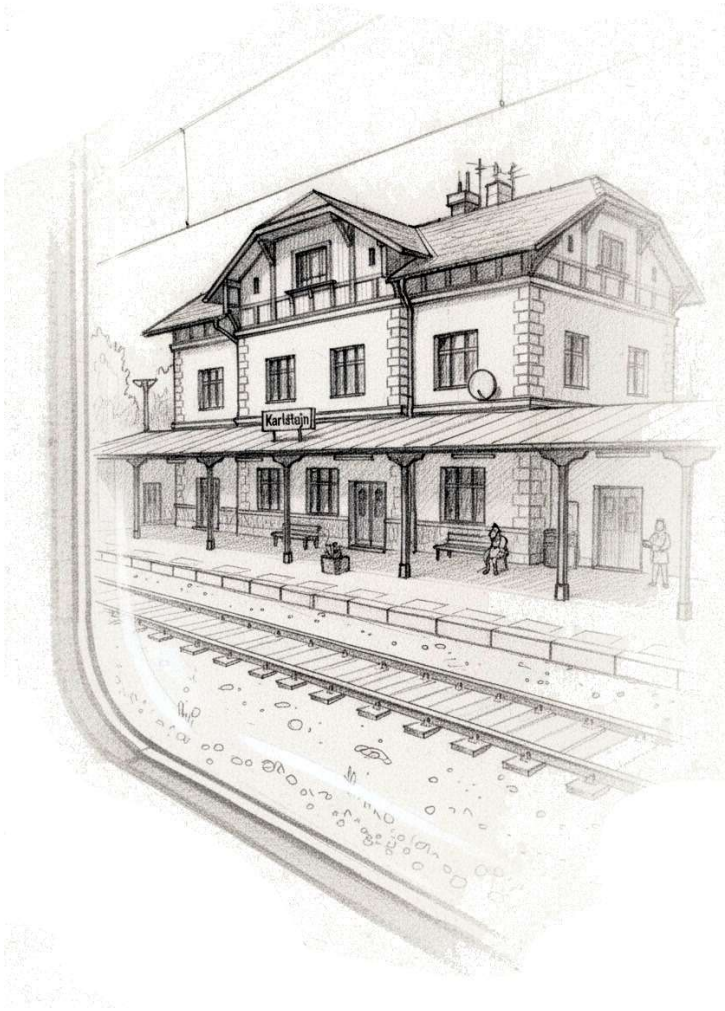
"In the name of our mistress," Nare echoed, grudging.

Suden stamped her foot. A purple spark spat into the night and shot down towards the castle like a cruel comet.

"The general will fall shortly," Suden said, watching it fly. Her hand unfurled, and an evil whip of crackling purple-black magic coiled into existence. "And when Veles tries to stop us..."

The three sisters turned as one. Their cloaks trailed like smoke as they drifted down the hill, quiet as mist.

KARLŠTEJN



The station buzzed like a beehive. People shoved, complained about late trains, and squeezed past one another as if it were a competitive sport.

Katchy beamed. "Delays are basically guaranteed here. They're building a new track!"

Lani groaned. She was not about to go from History Talk to Train Talk.

They had hopped off with their class, shuffled across a scruffy track, and ducked under an archway straight into Tourist Central.

The main road stretched left and right, swarming with people. English was everywhere, every possible accent at once.

While the herds of tourists drifted right towards the souvenir gauntlet, Mrs. Brosková marched the class straight across the road with the efficiency of a general.

"Locals don't walk the main road," Katchy whispered.

"Why not?" Lani asked.

"Because we're better than that," Katchy said, flicking her hair.

Mrs. Brosková led the class through a hidden little path between two houses. The world opened into a dirt track skirting a wide field. Spring had painted everything green and gold. The breeze smelled of fresh soil. The Berounka curled behind the trees, flashing silver through the leaves.

Just before the bridge, Mrs. Brosková called a snack break. Lani flopped onto the grass, cracked open her bottle of malinovka, raspberry soda,

basically happiness in liquid form, and soaked up the warm sun.



Wildflowers. Rolling fields. Forest on the horizon.

She could stay here forever and skip whatever "educational fun" was waiting up there.

"Children, please listen," Mrs. Brosková called.

"We will walk." Her eyes landed on the Toilet Tribe. "Not run. Over the bridge, then turn right in single file. There's no pavement, so watch for cars. We meet our guide at the church.

Understood?"

"Yes, Mrs. Brosková," the class chorused.

"Please tell me it's not a boring church," Lani moaned as she got up.

"The Church of Saint Palmatius is far from boring," Katchy said, eyes sparkling.

"I'm not shocked you know the full name."

"It was our homework!"

Lani froze mid-step. "Homework?"

"You didn't do it, did you?"

"You guessed it."

"Mrs. Brosková will ask about it once we get to the castle, I'm sure," the blonde girl said, shaking her head.

"I've got time."

"Time? We're going straight there!"

Lani's brain short-circuited.

I need paper, a pen, and a miracle. Stat.

"It's four hundred words," Katchy said, looking at her friend as if reading her mind.

"Four hundred?!" A few classmates glanced back at the two as they kept walking.

"I'll think of something," Lani muttered, cheeks

burning.

"Better think fast," her friend replied in a sing-song voice, grinning.

Their guide rattled off castle facts as they walked through town.

"Charles IV made a no-women rule in the castle," he announced, "and its defences have never been taken!"

A blond student actually went, "Ooooh."

The town was cute but chaotic, medieval charm tangled in tourist madness. The air smelled of trdelník, klobása, and... something else.

"What's that smell?" Lani asked, wrinkling her nose.

"The stream," Katchy said, nodding at the slow, greenish water running alongside the road. "It gets a bit... ripe in summer."

"Lovely."

Then Lani saw it: Karlštejn Castle, perched above the town like a Gothic fortress from a fairy tale.

"Okay," she admitted. "That's... cool."

"Cool?" Katchy practically vibrated. "It's amazing!"

The road climbed past shops hawking "authentic medieval gear."

All made in China, Lani thought.

They reached a small square with a huge oak tree. Above them, the castle loomed, silent, stern, daring.

Two routes led to the castle: the steep, shop-lined road, or a quieter forest path.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Brošková," the guide said

nervously, wiping his brow. "Perhaps we can stop at a café up the road?"

Mrs. Brosková smiled like someone who had won this battle a hundred times. "We'll visit the shops on the way back."

The guide's smile twitched. "B-but... the forest way is longer, and the stairs at the end are quite steep. It could be dangerous for the children."

Mrs. Brosková looked the man up and down, one eyebrow slowly rising.

"Let's see, shall we?"

The class turned onto a skinny path that vanished behind the castle and into the woods. It was cool under the trees, but the climb still made everyone sweaty and cranky.

The road curled past the square with its great oak tree, then wound round the base of the castle and slipped behind it, where the tourist chatter thinned and the forest swallowed them whole.

At once the air changed. It was cooler under the trees, rich with pine, moss, and damp earth. The path narrowed, then narrowed again, until it felt less like a proper route and more like the castle was making them prove they deserved to visit.

Now and then, gaps in the branches opened like windows. Below lay the meandering river, bright fields stitched in spring green, and rows of dark pines marching across the hills. Above them, Karlštejn sat on its rocky crown like a stone giant waiting to see who would make it and who

would flop halfway up and ask for crisps. The trail grew steeper. Then steeper again. Then it gave up pretending to be reasonable. Lani reached the final stretch first, charging up the narrow path and taking the last stone steps two at a time like a mountain goat with something to prove. She burst out at the top, half expecting trumpets, and found herself staring straight at the great tower and the open main gates.

"Ha!" she said to absolutely no one. "Too easy." Mrs. Brosková appeared next, not exactly out of breath, just slightly shinier than before. She stepped into the shade of the tower and patted her forehead with calm dignity. Most Czech teachers, Lani suspected, had been raised in forests by wolves and considered a fifteen-kilometre uphill march in bad weather a pleasant way to clear their heads.

Then came the class.

They arrived in batches, each looking worse than the last. Some were merely pink and puffing. Some wheezed like broken accordions. One boy announced that his legs had "officially resigned." Another claimed he could see his dead ancestors. Two of the younger ones started calling for their mums as if they had been forced across a desert instead of up a hill.

Mrs. Brosková ignored all of it with the expression of a woman who had seen softer children and liked none of them. She surveyed her class with the triumphant grin of a general

after a flawless campaign. A quick headcount confirmed her victory: nobody had fallen into a bush, wandered off, or been lured away by something shiny.

The children bent over, gasping and clutching their sides.

"Where's the guide?" Lani asked.

Katchy, red-faced and breathing like a steam engine, could only jerk a thumb down the steps.

"Back... there... somewhere," she puffed.

A moment later, the guide appeared, or rather oozed, up the last few steps. He folded over with his hands on his knees, wheezing like he'd just climbed Everest in a wool suit while carrying a piano.

Mrs. Brosková did not even blink.

"Okay, everyone. Listen up. Nobody leaves the castle grounds. Got it?"

"Yes, Mrs. Brosková!" the class chorused, then immediately scattered in ten different directions like caffeinated squirrels.



"You have ten minutes! And please do not climb the walls, boys!" she shouted, glaring at the Toilet Tribe, who looked about ready to do just that.

The girls passed through the second gate into a cobbled courtyard of chaos. Tourists clung to the walls like barnacles, snapping selfies and trying to look majestic at the same time. Parents yelled at their children to stop throwing stones over the edge, umbrella-wielding tour guides recited fortress facts to groups of half-interested teenagers, and in the corner by the stairs, a large kiosk was doing a roaring trade in klobása and langoš.

The whole place smelled of hot oil, grilled

sausage, old stone, and too many people.

"You have ten minutes to explore and grab a snack," Mrs. Brošková called to whoever was still within hearing distance.

Then her eyes snapped to Lani like a hawk spotting something small and guilty in a field.

"After that," she added, "we'll discuss the homework."

Lani's stomach dropped.

Oh no. She's onto me. "What are you going to do?" a voice whispered right into her ear.

Lani jumped so hard she nearly swallowed her tongue. "Katchy! Put a bell on if you're going to do that!"

"Sorry," Katchy whispered, wincing. "I didn't want her to hear me."

Before the blonde girl could say anything else, Lani grabbed her hand and tugged her away from the group.

"Hey, wait! I ordered a langoš!"

"No time, and they're bad for you," Lani said, dragging her friend past the still-wheezing guide and towards an entrance marked with tour signs. "I have an idea."

That was usually the sort of sentence that made Katchy nervous, and this time was no exception.

"Lani, we shouldn't be here," she hissed, trying to pull free as they hurried up a narrow staircase. Her voice dropped even lower. "This feels exactly like the start of trouble."

"Oh, hush," Lani muttered. "I just need a quiet spot."

The stairs opened onto an upper walkway along the wall.

To their right rose a bastion, solid and stern. To their left, the land fell away into a breathtaking view of the town and river below. The Berounka flashed silver between the trees. Red rooftops clustered beneath the castle like toy houses. Wind carried pine and wildflowers from the surrounding forest and, faintly, the warm sugary smell of trdelník drifting up from the courtyard below.

For one brief second, even Lani forgot about the homework.

They wandered along until they found a small garden with a gnarled old tree at its centre.

"That's pretty," Katchy said.

"Is that the Oak of the Seven Brothers?" Lani asked, half remembering one of Katchy's train lectures.

Before her friend could answer, a familiar voice spoke.

"No, Lani. It isn't," it said mildly. "That tree is in town, as you'd know if you'd done your homework."

Both girls spun round.

A man in dark brown robes leaned on a staff, smiling like someone who knew every secret in the world and found most of them amusing.

"Veles," Lani breathed, her stomach flipping.

Katchy's mouth fell open. "What?"

"The one and only," the man said, bowing. "And you must be Katerina."

Katchy just stared and nodded. "Wait... is this the guy who gave you the... sword?" she whispered the last word as if it might explode.

Lani swallowed and muttered out of the corner of her mouth, "Yes."

She had told Katchy fragments of her Paris adventure, enough to explain the sword and the strange book under her bed, but not enough to sound completely nuts.

Yet here he was, real as rain.

"You do know I can hear you," Veles said, amused.

"W-what are you doing here?" Lani managed.

"Walk with me," the man said, ignoring the question. "Both of you."

Without thinking, the two girls followed him along the wall, up a small stairway, and through a narrow door.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the temperature shifted. A chill swept over them, then warmth rushed back.



They were no longer in a castle corridor. They were in a study out of a fairy tale: a huge desk, shelves crammed with books, a crackling fire in the corner... and the biggest white dog either girl had ever seen, snoring on a rug like he owned the place.

"That," Veles said, settling into an ancient-looking chair, "is Dažbog."

The dog cracked one golden eye at his name, stretched with a huff, gave them a look that said they had better not be loud, and flopped back down.

"Please sit," Veles said, chuckling. "Ignore Dazh. He's had a long day."

The girls sank into two velvet chairs, Lani still half convinced this was a stress dream.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Straight to the point. I like it, Miss Cloud," the man said with a smile. Then it faded. "I need your help. The fate of Bohemia, and perhaps more, is at stake."

"Again?" Lani groaned.

"I told you before. You are a Nexus. A focal point. One of the Chosen who can tip the balance when darkness moves."

"A what?" Katchy squeaked, staring at Lani as if she'd just grown wings.

"A focal point," Lani repeated flatly. "But he didn't say that last bit last time."

"Exactly, Miss Cloud," Veles agreed, ignoring the final comment.

Katchy's jaw sagged. "So everything you told me... was true?"

Lani's ears went pink. "...Yes."

Then she shot Veles a look as he gave her an enquiring one. "I didn't tell her everything. But I had to tell someone. Plus, she's my best friend."

"Best... best friend," Katchy nodded solemnly.

"What was I supposed to do?" Lani continued.

"Casually explain away a magical sword and a giant ancient book? 'Oh yeah, I got them on sale at Medieval Mart.'"

"It's fine," Veles said, waving it off. "Actually... it's good."

Lani's guilt flipped into suspicion. "Why is it good?"

"Because I need both of you."

"What?" they blurted together.

The man reached under his desk and pulled out a black bag Lani recognised with a jolt. He unzipped it, looked at her, and gave a small nod. Lani reached inside and drew out a sword that looked as if it had been forged from sunrise. Its silver blade shimmered with a warm orange glow, and at the base, a phoenix was engraved, wings spread as if caught in mid-flight. Her hands trembled as she took it. Warmth flooded her, like hugging a heated pillow on a freezing day.

"And this," Veles said, breaking the moment, "is for you, Katerina."

With a flourish, he produced an ancient tome bound in worn leather, its cover marked with a round silver emblem that seemed to glow from within.

Katchy ran her fingers over it, reverent and wide-eyed. "For... me?"

"It will help you on your quest," Veles said.

"What quest?" both girls demanded.

Before the cryptic man could answer, a thunderous boom shook the room. Books toppled and Dažbog sprang up, growling at the window.

"Girls," Veles said, his voice suddenly low. "Come here."

They hurried to the glass.