

THE LEGACY OF
KING
JASTEROTH
VOL. 2

THE JOURNEY TO OCLESEDOR

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PROLOGUE

DECIUS

Firelight flickered against the ancient slate walls as men in blue and black masks marched deeper into the catacombs. Footsteps shuffled and scraped the ground, and the soft sound of cloaks dragged against the sandstone. The masked men halted as they came to a dead-end and silently waited.

Decius, a young man with a tall, lean build, emerged from the heart of the gathering and strode to the wall blocking their path. A single bracket was fastened to its center, harboring a weak blue flame. Decius's pale hand extended from under the white silks of his cloak, reaching up to capture the dying flicks of fire as it trembled in the bracket. Whispers of flames circled his hand, spraying along his palm, engulfing it entirely like a glove of electric blue fire.

He slipped his other hand into his robes, retrieving a slim black wand. He gently pressed the tip of the wand into the palm of his fiery hand, and a pulse of blue light slithered from the base to its top. A faint sound was heard like an exhale of relief as the wand welcomed the fire into its core.

"Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako!" Decius boomed; his voice muffled beneath the mask. He triumphantly waved his wand in a semi-circle then pressed the wall with its tip. The blue fire ignited the air around him, casting a sinister glow upon his mask. Dark eyes gleamed beneath, flaring in the cold and eerie light.

Decius flicked his wand, making tiny jabs and light pops. He traced a familiar pattern against the stone, leaving a dazzling trail of electric fire in its wake.

"Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako," he hissed, and the blue fire ignited once more. Behind him was a ruffle of cloaks as his men retrieved their own wands this time.

"Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako!" they chanted in perfect unison, joining in with Decius's eager, yet steady movements. The tunnel erupted with pale blue light, and the walls rumbled in front of them.

"Stand back," Decius commanded, and the masked men obeyed.

As a crack hungrily etched itself down the center of the stone, the tunnel began to shake. Small chunks of rock fell from the top of the wall, releasing clouds of dust. Dirt poured from the cracks in the walls, filling the narrow tunnel. The crack reached deeper. It struck the single bracket, which then let out a resounding clang like a bell being struck by a hammer. It rang deep, echoing against the bedrock like a blood-curdling scream. The tunnel quaked, threatening to collapse.

A high-pitched cackle escaped Decius, piercing the air as it resounded above the continuous clang of the struck bracket. “Astha, Hurath! Asthaka! Hurathako!” he roared. Raising both hands, he summoned the power of his Inner Eye from the darkest fragments of his soul.

He waved his wand and focused his power on the swelling crack before them. An explosion of fire, light, and burning rock viciously blasted back, spraying blue lava throughout the tunnel. Screams of agony cried out behind him as some of his men were engulfed by molten fires.

Decius chuckled maliciously as the barrier broke apart. He stepped between the jagged rocks as his other comrades attempted to douse the fires of the burning. Without remorse for his men, he climbed into the cavernous chamber once concealed by enchantments of old.

The air was foul and dank. Movement in the darkness alerted him but did not frighten him.

“Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako,” he murmured into the darkness. The shadows shifted in the chamber, and a body scraping against the stones confirmed to Decius his summons had been heard. He raised his wand as a massive form slithered toward him. It crept closer, slinking, sneaking. A bone cracked in the suffocating blackness, and Decius flicked his wand. The tip ignited with a pale blue flame, illuminating the chamber. The shadows sprung back exposing nothing more than an empty cavern.

“Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako!” he yelled when he observed he was alone.

He directed the firelight into the furthest corner of the chamber, revealing thousands of tiny animal bones and maggot-ridden carcasses. Grimacing at the sight of the feasting maggots, Decius stepped back.

Something brushed him from behind, undetected as it crept upon him. It breathed on the side of his neck. He felt something sharp like razors graze his flesh, then a deep breath as it took in his scent.

“I have summoned you, beast. I have broken the spell,” he hissed. There wasn’t a trace of fear in his voice.

“You don’t smell like the meat I’ve grown accustomed to,” its haunting voice muttered in Decius’s ear. It sniffed at his skin, and it ran its tongue along its lips and teeth.

“I have come to release you from this wretched prison you were forced into centuries ago,” Decius said. Gripping his wand, he spun out of the reach of the beast’s tongue and teeth.

He spun around, pointing the blue flames in its direction. The flames illuminated the terrifying image of a pale, starved man, a man who hadn’t seen daylight in centuries. A sheer layer of skin with a bluish sheen stretched across his unaged face, and dark apathetic eyes sunk deeply in his sockets. Decius scoffed at the pathetic sight before him. “It’s true then--you’ve been imprisoned in the body of a man. Maybe I have no use for you after all.”

Decius smirked beneath his mask. He knew when the beast was imprisoned, the powers of the Nymphs, Elves, and Fairies were accidentally transferred to the beast as well. Without meaning to, they had turned the monster with an endless thirst for the blood of their people into a vastly powerful immortal. Yet, here the immortal monster was, sealed in a secret chamber beneath the Catacombs unable to escape.

“What is your name, beast?” Decius asked. He twirled his wand in his hand. Blue flames spat and sprayed eagerly from the tip, casting flashes of blue light and shadow across the chamber.

“I was once known as Haldoron the Bloodlust,” Haldoron whispered. His dark eyes gleamed with remembered ferocity, then the fire behind them died into nothingness.

“You shall be Haldoron the Bloodlust again. I will remove you from this pathetic existence, and I will return the glory you once knew.”

“I have sat in this cage for centuries, starving, and living off the rats. Unable to break the bonds of the enchantments set, for I didn’t know the words to speak. Yet, you claim you can set me free? I am no fool. Everything has its price.”

“This will be the greatest war history has ever known. When I call, you will answer. You will fight for me. That is the price.” Decius pressed his wand directly against Haldoron’s throat. “And if you don’t, I’ll fill this chamber with a molten fire and then seal it to melt the flesh from your bones.”

Haldoron chuckled, his eyes flaring beneath the glow of the eerie blue flames. He bared his razor-sharp teeth at the young man. “What choice have I then? To join you, or to die?”

“You were already dead. I have brought you a chance to live again, to be reborn. Join me, and you will breathe the air of the seasons once more. Fight for me, and you shall spread your wings across the skies. I will free you from this body of which you are a prisoner!”

Haldoron gazed at Decius, surveying him for any indication of falsehood. He grimaced as he forced a smile. “How can you make such promises? What power have you? You are just a young blood,” he said as he sniffed in his direction.

“I am Decius the Unfallen, commander of the Black Magic Sorcerers. I have the power to remove the enchantments which bind you to this body, and I am the only Sorcerer in the Eastern and Western Realms that has this power. Deny me, and you shall feel the true strength of my power!”

“Decius the Unfallen,” Haldoron murmured thoughtfully. “Release me from this body, and I shall be your faithful servant.” He cracked a mischievous grin, revealing several broken teeth amongst the sharpened points.

“You take me for a fool, Haldoron? A blood-oath bound by Black Magic shall be performed first. After centuries of feeding on rats and bones, I imagine you have a deeper thirst that needs quenching. I shall not be made into your meal. Give me your left arm,” Decius commanded, not lowering the flaming wand from Haldoron’s throat.

“Very well. Do what you must.” Haldoron extended his left arm.

Eyes locked with Haldoron’s, Decius reached forward and grasped the frail arm before him. Lowering his wand slowly from Haldoron’s throat, he directed the blue flames downward until they met Haldoron’s arm. Decius dragged the point of his wand down Haldoron’s forearm from his elbow to his wrist, leaving a blazing trail of blue fire in its wake. The smell of burning flesh filled the chamber.

Haldoron growled in agony as his skin bubbled up, exposing his blackened veins. It melted down the sides of his arm, dripping on the chamber stones.

Decius whispered, “Hamuna, Hasthava.” He studied Haldoron’s painful grimace, his dark eyes bulging as his scalded flesh melted away.

“I call upon the power of the Sorcerers, the Black Elves, the Dark Nymphs, the banished Flesh Eaters, and the Demon Fairies who were banished from this world thousands of years ago by their counterparts. I bring to you Lord Haldoron the Bloodlust, restorer of balance to the Realms and faithful servant to the Black Magic Sorcerers. Release him from this prison! Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako, Hamuna, Hasthava!” Decius’s scream echoed off the barren walls and back to them in menacing distortion.

Haldoron let out a low growl, and the fire behind his eyes ignited. They sprung alive from the darkened gleam of midnight to a raging inferno of blood-red.

“Astha, Hurath, Asthaka, Hurathako!” Decius screamed. In a flash of movement, he pulled back his wand. He retrieved a small dagger concealed within, and gripping Haldoron’s arm fiercely, Decius drove the point of the blade into his exposed vein.

Haldoron cried, attempting to wrench his arm back, but Decius’s grip was stronger than a vice. Decius slowly dragged the tip of the blade down, splitting open the vein which spewed a sludge-like substance.

Decius roared, “Too long has Haldoron been confined to this cage! Too long has Haldoron been a prisoner of an unbreakable enchantment! Those banished to the Realm of Shadows, grant me your infinite power and release Haldoron from his

bonds! By my blood and his, and the power of the Black Magic Sorcerers, bind us. Bind our blood, bind our powers, and bind our lives. Bind us as Master and Servant! I command you to release him from the body of which he is a prisoner!”

His eyes rolled back as the force of wicked shadows entered the chamber and filled him. He dropped Haldoron’s arm and immediately slashed open his own, allowing the spurt of red to spill and blend with the blackened mess of Haldoron’s. Decius stowed his dagger. Placing their bleeding arms side by side, he ignited his wand with the blue fire once more. He drew a fiery circle across their arms which hovered in the air momentarily before it lowered into their flesh. The electric blue flames sizzled into their skin, sealing the Black Magic Blood-Oath. Then, the flame died away, revealing a circular scar which stretched across their forearms, half on each arm, binding master to servant.

Haldoron bared his teeth at Decius and let out a monstrous growl. Already, the change had begun. Decius stepped back, smirking as Haldoron’s body shook violently before him. Haldoron doubled over and dropped to his knees. He let out a blood-curdling scream and held his hands over his face as the skin began to bubble on his body.

Decius listened as Haldoron’s screams became shrill cries of agony. Screeching rang out over the occasional crackle of bones splitting. The body which confined him fell away, breaking the cage of the enchantments of old. His screams died down to sharp gasps and long steady moans. He dragged himself across the stones. His arms trembled under the immense weight of his restored body.

Claws like scythes sprouted from his hands, screeching and squealing as they scraped the ground.

Haldoron struggled to his knees. He was now comparable in size and strength to a giant. A winged giant with ten long dagger-like claws protruding from his hands, three curved horns that grew from his massive head, razorblade teeth, and piercing red eyes.

He shakily climbed to his feet and stretched his arms, back, and black membranous wings which spanned an alarming twenty-five feet, nearly touching the outer walls of the chamber.

Then, he turned his attention to Decius who was curiously watching. This was the Haldoron he had heard about. In a movement so abrupt Decius himself could not foresee, Haldoron sprung forward and slashed at him. The tip of one of Haldoron’s claws dragged itself from Decius’ temple down the side of his face.

“Wretched fool!” Decius spat as blood spilled through the split mask.

Haldoron scoffed, “I swore I wouldn’t eat you. I never said I wouldn’t leave my own brand upon you!”

“Do that again, and you’ll never see the light of day. I’ll bury you so far beneath the Catacombs...”

“And you’ll fill my chamber with molten fires.”

“Fool, I should’ve let you rot.” Decius carefully peeled the mask from his face. He grimaced as he felt the steady flow of blood trickle down his cheek and neck. Without the mask, the gash opened wider. He hissed as the air bit at his wounds.

“You made a good decision, Decius the Unfallen, Commander of the Black Magic Sorcerers. Come forth, and I will share some of my power with you.” Haldoron grinned devilishly as he extended his massive hand, retracting his claws in a gesture of good faith.

“So, you can rip my arms off? May I remind you that if you try to kill me, the Black Magic Blood-Oath will drain you of your power and life. You will become less than what you were when I found you.” Decius pointed the wand right at his face.

“I am forever in your debt. Forgive me, Master. Come to Haldoron. I will heal your wounds and fill you with a ferocity more powerful than any living being in the Realms.” Haldoron flashed his razor-sharp teeth at Decius, attempting a friendly smile.

Reluctantly, Decius stepped forward. One hand clutching his wand and the other cradling his split face.

“Remove your hand,” Haldoron instructed, then he blew on Decius’ wound.

Scalding hot air passed over Decius, ruffling his hair and stinging his eyes. The curved gash across his cheek pushed back together. Sealing itself, it left a thick scar in its wake. Haldoron stepped closer and placed his hand on Decius’ chest. He roared fiercely, shaking the chamber beneath the catacombs.

“I have granted you immense power, Decius. Use your Inner Eye and awaken this power now!”

Decius grinned. He immediately felt the change and summoned his Inner Eye. New power awakened inside of him, vibrating through his veins.

A great wall of blue fire erupted from his hands, filling the chamber with a vicious blast of heat, but it didn’t stop there. The blue fire swelled, growing larger than Haldoron himself, flaring up and exploding across the walls and floors. A cyclone of fire spun dangerously around them, transforming into the shape of a great winged monster: a dragon. It spread its wings, spreading flames with each flap.

As Decius the Unfallen, commander of the Black Magic Sorcerers, malevolently controlled the blue dragon, he cackled, “The Eastern Realm will be mine. the Western Realm will be mine. Ciimyria will be mine!”

Haldoron kneeled, grinning wickedly. “What is your will then, Master?”

“Find the Princess and bring her to me. Kill everyone who stands in your way.”

CHAPTER 1

ARIELLA

Ariella gazed around her chambers, memorizing every detail: the mahogany furnishings; her balcony overlooking the waterfalls, river, and road; and the sweet smell of violets lingering in the air. This was the last time she would be inside her home for an incredibly long time, maybe even forever. She shuddered at the thought.

Her hands trembled as she changed from her dress into her disguise for the journey. She and her six warrior-guards agreed on a combination of riding leathers and the traditional light armor of the Golden Peaks. Ariella was skeptical about dressing like her father's guards. She'd only ever worn what was specially made for her: bright and beautiful dresses with stunning embroidery, ribbons, and frills. Though she knew the importance of her disguise, she couldn't help feeling uncomfortable in such masculine attire.

The journey to Oclesedor would break laws, expectations, and trusts. Yet, Ariella wasn't fazed by the potential consequences. She almost felt she hadn't a choice in the matter. She refused to wait in her castle. Refused to wait for King Jasteroth and the Black Magic Sorcerers to arrive. Refused to stand and watch while they burned her Kingdom and the Realm to the ground.

Her father King Lucien and brother Prince Edward were in danger. And even after the way they treated her, she would not, could not turn her back on them. She blamed their wicked behavior on the Black Magic enchantments that plagued the castle and killed her mother. Ariella told herself this constantly. It helped her forgive their actions and gave her the strength to move on.

"Are you okay?" Emily called from the other side of the door, snatching her from her thoughts.

"Yes, I'll be out in just...a...minute!" Ariella replied between grunts. She struggled into a pair of pants before falling.

Emily burst into the room. "What happened?" She rushed to Ariella's side, then helped her stand. "Haven't you ever worn a pair of pants before? Look, you

put one leg in here, the other one like so." She helped her regain her balance and pull her pants up.

"To be honest, no. I've only ever worn a dress or long skirt. It's not proper for me to wear pants. I can only imagine what my father would say if he could see me now." Ariella said, "I look like a boy!" She groaned as she looked down at herself.

"I think they look nice! They show off the shape of your legs." Emily said, and she wiggled her eyebrows.

Ariella's face turned red. "You're not helping!"

Emily showed her how to secure the pants and then straightened her tunic for her. The blood-red Amulet of Eyranmar flashed underneath, capturing Emily's attention.

"He really cares about you," she said with a small, warm smile. She picked up Ariella's violet cloak and draped it around her shoulders.

Ariella asked, "Where did they go again?" Ariella asked.

Emily fastened the cloak and tied a weapons belt around Ariella's hips. "Back to The Community to gather weapons and horses for the journey." Emily stepped back and admired her work.

"Weapons?"

"Yes. He better have grabbed my bow, or I'm not going to be happy."

"You're an archer?"

"Yes, and so is Austin. We inherited that gift from our mother. Didn't he tell you?"

"He doesn't speak about your parents. But he told me they died when you were younger, I'm sorry," Ariella added, smiling weakly. She crossed her chambers and grabbed the few possessions she was bringing.

"He didn't tell you how they died? He doesn't tell anyone how they died; he always leaves that part out." Emily sighed with distaste. "They didn't just die, Ariella." Her hands clenched into fists. "They were murdered at King Jasteroth's hand."

Ariella's eyes snapped back to Emily, "I thought you said the Black Magic Sorcerers?"

"King Jasteroth commands the Black Magic Sorcerers, Ariella. How many times do I have to tell you? He gave the order, and for that, I will have my revenge." Emily's voice was low and spiteful, her blue eyes unusually bright.

"I'm sorry, Emily. How did you find out?" Ariella asked. She picked up the vial containing the Draught of the Century from her dresser and stowed it in her pocket.

"Do you remember the mayor of The Community? Marconius Levi?"

"Yes." Ariella grabbed the sword of her ancestors and slid it into the scabbard attached to her weapons belt.

“Before he became the mayor, and before the war against King Jasteroth and his Black Magic Sorcerers was won, he was a close friend of my father, Lorentis. Members of the Elite confirmed that the Black Magic Sorcerers were conducting raids, and they killed everyone who opposed King Jasteroth, whether they possessed the Inner Eye or not. So Marconius and my father set out with other members of their order to head them off. They were caught in an ambush, and my father took an arrow to the chest. Its point was dipped in a poison called Slow Eater. It killed him in the slowest, most agonizing way.” Emily picked at her nails.

“That's horrible.”

“Yes, it was quite horrible—or so I was told. For the longest time, I believed the stories I was fed. That my father was tortured to death, murdered for trying to save my mother, but that was the story everyone was told to believe, what they were supposed to believe.”

“What do you mean? Why were they supposed to believe that?” Ariella asked, she stopped what she was doing and listened intently to Emily's strange confession.

“A Member of the Elite in The Community discovered that my father Lorentis was King Jasteroth's greatest commander and advisor. His most powerful and devoted servant.”

“What?! He what?!” Ariella covered her mouth with her hands, stifling the shriek that almost escaped her lips.

“He is the reason my mother is dead. If my father weren't a traitor to the Realm, playing both sides in King Jasteroth's favor, I would still have my mother. I will never forgive my father, and I will never forgive King Jasteroth.” Emily said, then her eyes caught Ariella's in a furious gaze, “I don't want you to bring this up to Austin. He wouldn't understand why I told you. He would never forgive me for telling you. Understood?”

Ariella nodded. “I wouldn't. I would never.”

“Good, because we're friends now, and friends are supposed to trust each other. Are you finally ready?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

Emily opened the door for Ariella, and they exited her chambers. Hurrying down the corridor, Ariella's legs became stiffer and heavier with each step. She glanced at the statues, portraits, and artifacts hanging on the walls. She captured the images, preserving them in her memories. She didn't know when she would be back, or if she would be back at all. There was too much uncertainty in the days, weeks, and months to come. The moment she stepped outside the castle doors; her life would change forever. There was no going back. Too long had she heard nothing, too long had she received no message from or about her father

and brother. With King Jasteroth and the Black Magic Sorcerers on the move, they needed to act quickly.

Shoving the lingering thought that Emily and Austin's father was once King Jasteroth's greatest Commander from her mind, Ariella's heart lightened with courage as she pushed the heavy doors open. She strolled outside. This journey she was about to embark on was for her family, her kingdom, and the fate of the Eastern Realm.

"Are you all right? I remember Austin saying something about meeting them by the old road?" Emily said.

Ariella nodded; her eyes trained on the horizon. Dark smoke billowed west of the King's Meadows, before the foothills of Monosland.

"The old road. Right," Ariella replied, shifting her gaze from the smoke to Emily. "We can get there through the courtyard."

She breathed deeply, hardly noticing how cold the air flooding her lungs was. She watched her breath float away in a steamy puff.

"I thought the Golden Peaks didn't get winter." Emily shivered.

"We don't. We're too far south. Even being as high as we are, on the mountaintop, there's never been a winter ever recorded here. Do you have winter in The Community?"

"Yes. Even though The Community is a Realm in itself, it still abides by the laws of nature."

"Weird. I wonder what's going on then."

Passing the graveyard on their left, they crossed an empty courtyard and headed down the path leading behind the castle.

"Look, there they are!" Emily exclaimed as she vigorously rubbed her hands together.

The sky was dull and gray, and a bitter cold breeze whispered around them, threatening to freeze their noses. In the distance was a group of riders all clad in the traditional light armor of the Golden Peaks, whom Ariella recognized as Austin, Casp, Damien, and Penny.

She jogged through the grass to greet the group who waited on the old road.

"Austin! Did you remember my bow? Oh!" Emily called out as she and Ariella caught up to them. "You brought Callisto too!"

Austin handed Emily the reins and then turned his black stallion toward Ariella.

"Charcoal!" She gave Austin an appreciative glance as he offered his hand to her. She took it then climbed onto the saddle.

"Ariella, we're going to travel down the old road. There's more cover that way. We'll have fewer chances of being spotted." Casp explained, as he paused for a moment to cough. "As I was saying, the most direct route is by the road of Monosland, but I'm sure the Sorcerers will be waiting for us that way. Instead, we

should travel by the old road, through King's Meadows, the Atric Falls Ruins, and then on to Oclesedor from there." His voice cracked again. Rubbing his wheezing chest, he spat on the ground.

Trying her hardest not to cringe, Ariella said, "Very well. Shall we set off then?"

Casp nodded and called Damien and Austin up front with him. The three of them turned their horses and galloped ahead. Ariella turned to Emily when they were out of sight and asked,

"Where have they gone?"

"To scout the roads, Ariella."

"Oh right, sorry." Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

"Come, let's go." Emily smiled at Ariella and gently dug her heels into Callisto's sides. They trotted down the road with Penny taking up the rear.

Ariella turned her head, watching the castle get smaller and smaller as they continued on. Soon, it was nothing but a speck behind them. *I'm going to miss this place*, she thought.

"This is it, this is the farthest I've ever been from my home," Ariella announced Emily smiled, the expression on her face unreadable. Sympathy?

Tall trees with spindly branches entwined, stretching over the road as they twisted around the mountain. Green heart-shaped leaves floated down, littering the ground. A sea of violets also cloaked the Earth's floor, creating a stunning visual of purple and emerald.

Ariella clutched the reins, captivated as the high cliffs rose beside her. Trees grew from the swelling cliffside. Silver waters trickled from the mountain face like tears. Birds sang foreign melodies as they wound lower and lower. After what felt like hours to Ariella, they caught up to Casp, Damien, and Austin.

"Your home is lovely," Damien said to her. His purple eyes locked with hers, and he flashed her a charming smile.

"Thank you," she replied, her face flushing as he gazed intensely at her. She nervously checked her surroundings, hopeful to avoid any more conversation with him.

A green hummingbird caught her attention as it flew in. It circled them repeatedly, singing a sweet tune before it landed on Austin's shoulder. Ariella watched awestruck as it chirped to him, pecking him affectionately. She looked at the others, but everyone was unfazed by the beautiful bird and its actions.

"Austin has a special gift," Emily whispered, reading her thoughts.

Ariella's mouth dropped open. "What do you mean?"

"He can talk to animals, trees. He can even hear the wind whisper."

"Wait, so you can too?"

"I can kind of understand animals, but he's extraordinary." Emily smiled at her before redirecting her attention back to her brother.

The hummingbird chirped and pecked him once before spreading its tiny wings and flying into the trees above.

"What news have you, Austin?" Casp boomed.

"She warned me of a massive clan moving through the Mountains of Monosland. Some evil is driving them from their homes." Austin said as he tugged at his beard. Ariella knew it was a sign he was anxious or worried about something.

"What do you mean?" Ariella interrupted, she steered Charcoal toward them. She studied Austin's face, his stony expression. His piercing blue eyes shifted to a darker midnight blue. Trouble brewed behind them.

"It means if we travel by the road through the mountains, we will likely encounter them," Casp replied.

"Encounter them? What about my family? What if they never made it to Oclesedor?" Ariella's heart raced at the thought.

"Your father did make it, remember? He summoned your brother and his battalion to Oclesedor," Austin reminded her.

"But my brother? What about Edward?"

"We'll keep our eyes open for them."

Ariella sighed. Now was not the time to panic. They'd only just left, and even if Edward and his men were in danger, there wasn't anything they could do. Not this far away at least.

"What else of the clansmen, Austin?" Casp asked, his face grim.

"A winged monster," Austin muttered, quickly averting his eyes.

"Like, a dragon?" Emily said, concerned.

"No. Dragons are contained in the West."

"I'm not afraid of a winged monster!" Damien growled, and he pulled a long, curved blade from a sheath on his belt. It gleamed dangerously in the light.

"Put that away, boy!" Casp roared at him.

"So, what you're saying is, the mountains are swarming with angry Clansmen who are on a rampage because a winged monster is terrorizing them?" Ariella asked, her mind boggled by the news.

"Right," Casp said.

"So, if by the grace of the gods, we aren't slaughtered by the clansmen, we have to worry about a winged monster that isn't a dragon."

"Right."

"A fire-breathing winged monster," Austin said quietly.

Everyone's eyes snapped to him.

"A fire-breathing winged monster that isn't a dragon," Ariella repeated back. The words echoing from her mouth and back into her mind were almost as ridiculous as they sounded.

"Are you sure?" Casp asked Austin.

Austin nodded; his face expressionless.

Ariella said, "Okay then. Shall we continue? I do hope to make it a little further before nightfall." She bit her lip as she scanned the troubled faces of her company. Apparently, a fire-breathing winged monster wasn't exactly a great omen.

"As you wish." Casp turned his horse and trotted down the road, away from them. Damien followed, and the pair were soon out of sight.

"Are you okay?" Ariella asked Austin whose face was wrinkling with concern.

"Yeah, I just...ah, never mind." He avoided Ariella's eyes.

She urged Charcoal into a fast-paced trot, aiming to catch up with Casp and Damien. She turned her head. Penny followed closely behind while Austin and Emily rode in the rear.

Ariella's heart sank; this was her fault. She insisted on leaving, forced Austin to let her. *Maybe we should turn back while we have the chance. It's safer back home,* she thought, guilt eating away at her. Another thought crossed her mind, stamping out the plea for reason. *I cannot go back. There is nothing there for me. I don't care about the danger or the Black Magic Sorcerers. I need to go to Oclesedor. I cannot go back. Not to the way things were. Never.*

CHAPTER 2

ARIELLA

The clouds thickened overhead as they traveled further from the summit. Through the shadows of the mountain road, the trees and branches grew together, entwining beside and above while massive cliffs rose around them, casting away what little light they had... To their left in the plummeting depths was a valley which stretched through the golden plains of the endless King's Meadows and beyond, the faint flicker of light coming from a village near half a thousand miles away.

The mountains of the Golden Peaks curved sharply Northwest, then dropped down to mingle with the monstrous range that was Monosland. From the edge of the Sacred Mountains Ariella could see the jagged snow-capped peaks looming just at the horizon. Her castle on the summit was surrounded by the Sacred Mountains of the Golden Peaks, so it didn't surprise her that Monosland wasn't visible despite the intimidating stretch of range. What did surprise her, was the proximity to other lands, valleys, and Kingdoms. All along, the world was within her grasp, yet she didn't reach out to take it.

Ariella squinted through the shadows of dusk, but it was proving to be a hard task. They would soon be traveling in the dark, something she felt wasn't a smart idea with everything they had already spoken about, especially regarding the winged beast terrorizing those who dwelled in Monosland.

"Casp?" She nudged Charcoal to pick up the pace. "Casp? Damien?"

There wasn't an answer. She realized she was alone in the fast approaching darkness. How did this happen? "Halt, Charcoal," she whispered, and a strange feeling washed over her. The mountain grew quiet and still as if it were holding its breath. The air surrounding her pressed in, suffocating as the eerie silence enveloped her. *Where did everyone go?*

A twig cracked in the bushes to her right. She snapped her fingers, and an orb of soft light ignited in her palm: a glowing ball illuminating the twilight around her. A branch crunched. This sound was much closer than the other. Ariella hurled the orb

into the bushes, and a flash of white light exploded silently, lingering long enough for her to see what crept beside her: a white wolf with gleaming red eyes.

“Whoa!” Ariella commanded, and Charcoal reared back, the harshness of it nearly throwing her from the saddle.

Ariella froze as the wolf slowly slinked towards them until it wasn't concealed by shadows anymore. It bared its teeth at her, and a low rumbling growl escaped its throat. Charcoal whinnied uneasily, backing away from the wolf as it steadily inched closer, snapping its jaws between snarls. The wolf lunged. It transformed into a man with a hardened face, gentle waves of dark hair framing it, and bright red eyes. Black leather straps coiled around his arms and legs like snakes, clothing him and a blood-red cloak trailed behind.

“Good evening, Princess.” The man nonchalantly strolled towards her, “Vivasa!” he chanted in a deep voice, and blackfire ignited in his palms.

Ariella paled. “How do you know who I am? What do you want?” She urged Charcoal to take a few more steps back. The man cackled strangely as he lifted his hand, making a circular motion in the air. The blackfire transformed into a flaming whip. He cracked it threateningly to his side.

“You know why I'm here,” his voice harsh as he approached her and extended his hand. “Come with me.”

“I don't think so, servant filth,” A young man sang from behind them.

Ariella's heart fluttered. She knew that voice. The man in front of her lowered his outstretched hand, scowling. Ariella turned in the saddle. Expecting to see Austin, she gasped when she saw who was lurking behind her: five figures wrapped in white cloaks with black hoods. They stood in the middle of the road, their faces fully concealed by blue and black masks. The rising moon's light reflected against the sheen of them, revealing tribal markings. Only their eyes were visible between the narrow slits. How didn't she hear them? Who were they? Were they following her?

One of the figures stepped forward. Ariella observed their hidden face, their height, and familiar demeanor. Between the slits of the mask, their eyes were dark and foreboding until they caught a drop of moonlight and shifted into a blue so clear and light. Her breath caught.

“Servant of Jasteroth, step away from the princess now.” The blue-eyed man's voice was bitter and laced with disgust.

“Black Magic Sorcerer, the princess is coming with me. Unless you wish to die tonight.”

Ariella's eyes grew wide with shock. King Jasteroth's servant and his Black Magic Sorcerers were both there. At the same time.

The Black Magic Sorcerer commanded, “You're not needed here, servant. Be gone!” Those surrounding him laughed cruelly.

“Sorcerer filth! I am Lord Vasterin, and I don’t take orders from you! Stand down, or in the name of King Jasteroth, I’ll slaughter you like pigs!” Lord Vasterin cracked his blackfire strap for emphasis.

“Is that so, Lord Vasterin? I am Decius, Commander of the Black Magic Sorcerers, and if you don’t stand down and surrender the Princess to me, I will destroy you.” Decius looked to his comrades and nodded. Five swords were raised in a challenge to Lord Vasterin. “Any last words, servant scum?”

Lord Vasterin cackled again before unsheathing a dagger from his belt. He twirled the blade with his left hand while brandishing the Blackfire whip with his right. “I bet you’ll squeal like a wretch as I gut you, limb by limb.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Blue, black, and white flashes tore through the air as a rush of fire ignited the world around them. Ariella shrieked and threw her free hand up to shield herself as black flames devoured blue, while white fire whipped across the road. It circled Lord Vasterin and Ariella, encasing them in a fire vortex.

Steel rang as Lord Vasterin brought his dagger up to block the sword of the Sorcerer who sprang toward him. He cracked his blackfire whip, the strap connecting with the Sorcerer’s throat, strangling him. He yanked his whip inward, dragging the Sorcerer toward him, then he plunged his dagger through the Sorcerer’s chest. In a quick, flourishing movement he yanked it out and dragged his blade across the Sorcerer’s throat. The Sorcerer fell forward in a heap, dead.

The vortex opened, revealing three Black Magic Sorcerers, livid their comrade was dead.

“Surrender the Princess or die! This is your last chance!” Decius screamed, his blue eyes flaring behind the mask.

“Servants of King Jasteroth never die, Sorcerer wretch!” Lord Vasterin flicked his whip dangerously close to the nearest of the Sorcerers.

Ariella squinted hard, observing them through the twisting firewall. Sweat dripped down her neck and arms as the heat intensified. She thought, *That’s odd, I thought there was one more.*

The fire exploded behind them, and Charcoal reared. Ariella tumbled from the saddle, not expecting the sudden movement. Then, Charcoal leapt through the flames and bolted down the mountain away from them.

Ariella sprawled out at Lord Vasterin’s feet, winded. Before she could catch her breath, the wall of the vortex blasted apart, and the fourth Sorcerer sprang through the raging flames. With blade extended, he slashed at Lord Vasterin’s back.

Fighting the stun, Ariella struggled to her side. Panting as she flung herself upwards, she brought her sword up in a quick slashing movement, deflecting the Sorcerer’s assault.

Iron rang in the ring of fire as Ariella and the Sorcerer's blades clashed. She struggled to remain on her feet as the Sorcerer struck again. She ducked, stepped back, then caught his edge with hers. Locked together, Ariella glared through the mask, and purple eyes stared back.

Lord Vasterin turned abruptly, and the three Sorcerers dove forward seizing his distraction as their opportunity to attack. The fire raged, swelling into a vicious cage of flames as the other three closed in.

Back to back, Ariella and Lord Vasterin fought against the Black Magic Sorcerers. The heat around them magnified, threatening to incinerate them. Swords and daggers met, and the sound of steel clanging echoed across the foothills. Blackfire and blue battled for power and control, hissing then exploding. Blinding flashes of light ignited the dark sky as the prison of flames contracted, the oxygen slowly depleting within.

Ariella knew they couldn't win this fight. Not like this, anyhow. She wasn't a honed warrior. She hadn't much training with a blade, but luckily, the Sorcerer she was dueling against hadn't either.

She brought the sword of her ancestors up once again, catching the Sorcerer's mid-strike. With only a moment between blows, she summoned her powers. Her veins chilled as her Inner Eye awoke. Dodging another blow, Ariella drew her ice into her free hand and unleashed it upon the Sorcerer. A cascade of ice shards tore through the white robes on his body.

Seizing her opportunity, Ariella plunged her sword into his abdomen. He screamed as she thrust the blade as deep as it would go. Grabbing his shoulder for leverage, she watched the blade pass through him. Then, she ripped it from within, blood dripping down the edges. When he collapsed, the Sorcerers immediately stepped back from Lord Vasterin and Ariella.

A flash of purple burst across the sky and lightning crashed down, striking one of the Sorcerers.

"Ariella!" Emily shrieked. She brandished another orb of electricity as Penny nodded and released an arrow through the crowd.

Ariella turned from them and surveyed Decius who never turned back, unstartled by their arrival. He faced forward; eyes locked with Lord Vasterin.

"Servant scum! You afraid to fight without your friends?" Decius taunted, his eyes quickly darting to the wounded Sorcerer lying motionless on the ground, blood pooling around him.

Lord Vasterin cackled wickedly, "They are no friends of mine. You know, I was beginning to think killing you was going to be boring. But I'm going to enjoy killing you--and them! Now watch everyone die, Sorcerer filth!" He screamed, then rapidly flicked his whip catching the Sorcerer beside Decius by surprise. Lord Vasterin laughed as the strap tightened around the Sorcerer's neck, tearing

through his flesh. He snapped his whip back, a sickening crack echoing over the screams of Ariella's guards. The Sorcerer's body crumpled to the ground.

Lord Vasterin summoned the blackfire back, extinguishing it. Grabbing another dagger from his belt, he stalked toward Decius and bared his teeth at him.

"Enough! That's enough! Servant of Jasteroth, we will meet again. The Princess will be mine, mark my words." Decius vanished into the air.

Ariella's eyes shifted from where Decius once stood to Lord Vasterin and then to her guards. She gasped and fell back, startled as Decius materialized beside her. He gazed at her, his eyes alive with fascination and longing. Crouching beside his fallen comrade, Decius grabbed him under his shoulders. They disappeared into a wisp of white smoke. The fire vortex billowed up and away, vanishing with them.

"Ariella! Are you okay?!" Emily shrieked, she dismounted Callisto and ran toward them.

Lord Vasterin hissed, glaring as Penny fired arrow upon arrow at him. He flicked at the air, immobilizing all of them before he shifted to his wolf form and bolted down the mountain.

Ariella turned to Emily and Penny. The fire vortex was gone, yet her lungs struggled to inhale. A massive weight crushed her, suffocating her in a way she never felt before. Decius's eyes burned into her memory. Beautiful yet haunting.

"Wait, where did that servant go?" Emily asked.

"He shifted. I saw his wolf-form run down the mountain," Penny replied, unstringing her bow.

Emily turned on Ariella. "You can't keep riding off like that! I don't know how many times we must tell you it's not safe! You were surrounded by King Jasteroth's henchmen! Who knows what could've happened if we didn't show up!"

"I don't know," Ariella said, dropping her head shamefully. *Emily is right. What would've happened if they didn't show up?* she thought, but then she remembered the interaction between Lord Vasterin and Decius. *If King Jasteroth controlled the Black Magic Sorcerers, then why were they fighting over me? Why were they slaughtering each other?*

Giving Emily an anxious glance, Ariella held her tongue. She refrained from explaining what happened. She didn't know why, but something prevented her from mentioning it.

"Come on, we need to find Charcoal," Emily said, then she wrapped her arms around Ariella. "You can't keep worrying me like this. Now where has my brother gotten off to?" She stuck her two fingers into her mouth and whistled. Charcoal swiftly returned, trotting merrily toward them.

Ariella mounted him. "Damn horse." She gently dug her heels into his sides. Her back ached from the fall, surely it was bruised. Scrapes on her elbows and arms burned beneath her tunic, and her hands shook as her adrenaline faded. The

altercation between Lord Vasterin and the Black Magic Sorcerers replayed in her mind.

Not to mention, she had almost killed a man. He could be dead now. There was so much blood. His robes were soaked with it, and the pool of red was spreading across the ground. She shivered despite the sweltering heat. She had almost killed a man. His purple eyes haunted her as she remembered driving her sword through him. She turned, staring back at the dead bodies of the Sorcerers on the road. *He's not dead. I didn't kill him.*

They rode around a sharp bend, and three riders came into sight. They caught up to Casp, Damien, and Austin? *Wasn't Austin behind her with Emily before the disaster unfolded?* Overwhelmed by the confusion of the situation, she slumped forward in the saddle and promptly released the reins.

"Everything okay, Princess?" Damien asked, his slimy voice attempting concern.

"I...No...Black Magic Sorcerers...Jasteroth!" she gasped, incapable of forming sentences.

Austin dismounted his horse and rushed to her side. His eyes raked over her slumped form. "What happened? Talk to me." He rested his hand on her arm.

Emily cut in. "She was caught in the middle of a battle between the Black Magic Sorcerers and one of King Jasteroth's servants. They were fighting over her for the recognition and reward of delivering her to him," She stared sternly at her brother as she joined them. "And where were you, Austin? If I hadn't caught up to her when I did, she could be in the hands of King Jasteroth as we speak! She was trapped in one of their Black Magic fire vortexes with the servant of Jasteroth! He could've vanished with her! Then what?!" Emily's voice rose, cold and accusatory.

Austin silently glared at her, like he wanted to say something nasty in return. "I'm sorry, Emily. We were scouting the roads."

"They were both there, and they were killing each other," Ariella whispered. She stiffened in the saddle, "I think--I think I killed a man."

"You killed someone? Who? Tell me everything."

Emily interrupted again. "Austin! Do you really think now is the time or place to talk about this? We have to keep moving before they come back!" Her eyes flashed, and Ariella's hair stood on end. Something prickled inside of her, was it her Eye?

Austin lifted his hand. "Go on, Ariella."

"His name was Lord Vasterin. He was the white wolf following me. I watched him transform into a man. He knew my name, but he didn't seem to care I was there. I mean, he cared I was there, but he wasn't there for me, it seemed." She ranted, hoping her babbling made sense to him.

Austin shook his head and said, "Then what?"

"We don't have time for this." Emily sighed with exasperation.

"Enough, Emily, we need to know what we're dealing with." Casp bellowed, and he waved her to come to him so Austin and Ariella could speak without further interruption. She stormed away.

"Five men appeared behind me. I don't know where they came from. I never heard them approach." Ariella whispered, her voice dripping with fear, "Lord Vasterin stepped between them and me. He fought them. He had the power of blackfire."

"And what of the Sorcerers?"

"Decius was their commander."

Austin stepped back, his expression darkening. Tears welled in Ariella's eyes as she watched him, examining the person she thought she knew. There was no way Austin was Decius. Was there?

"What is it, Austin? What's happened?" Casp asked as he joined them.

Austin muttered quietly so Emily wouldn't overhear, "One of King Jasteroth's shapeshifter spies followed her. He revealed himself only to fight the Black Magic Sorcerers, who I'm assuming showed up to capture her." He and Casp exchanged perplexed glances, then turned their attention back to Ariella.

"Did the shapeshifter or the Sorcerers say anything?" Casp wondered.

"Decius said, 'the Princess will be mine, mark my words,'" Ariella repeated, her voice quivering.

Austin looked at Casp, mulling over what Ariella told them.

"What I want to know is how they figured out we were on the road with Princess Ariella!" Damien cut in, his purple eyes were dark with suspicion as he stared between Ariella, Casp, and Austin.

"The shapeshifter tailed her since we left the summit. He must've known we were on the move. He could've been a spy in The Community, her kingdom, the villages, her castle even. Now, how the Black Magic Sorcerers discovered this? I don't know. Their Inner Eyes are vastly powerful. They may have seen her in their readings. But I have other suspicions. Suspicions I have felt for an incredibly long time." Casp's voice was low and inaudible. He whispered a few more words to Austin and Damien, then the three of them became deeply submerged in their thoughts.

"It's decided then. Let's rest here tonight. It's too dark to see what lurks in the shadows of the mountain. Tomorrow, we must risk the treacherous roads through Monosland. We can't risk an encounter with this Lord Vasterin. Knowing he can handle five Black Magic Sorcerers with ease, it would be suicide. We cannot and will not take that chance. I'll let the others know of this plan, and I'll place a protective enchantment here so we can rest safely."

Finally, Austin glanced back at her. “Are you all right?” He reached out, grazing her fingers with his, comforting her.

She nodded silently, feeling the warmth of his touch as it settled her nerves. “I’m sorry this happened to you. It won’t happen again, I’m sorry. I promise I won’t let anything happen to you,” Austin squeezed her arm affectionately then returned to Onyx.

Ariella sucked in a breath. Remembering the uncanny resemblance of Decius and Austin, and the eyes of the man she thought she had killed, she fought the urge to cry.

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