

PROLOGUE: A JOURNEY BEGINS

*I pick up my special belt
And wind it around my trouser
Ah – now I'm ready to take off!*

*Ever since the good old man passed away,
I've been lonely,
I'd been looking out the window
And gazing at the young women and men
Come back home,
Having sought great fame and fortune.*

*For years I've always looked up to them.
They've treated me as one of them.*

- The Young Foreigner -

*Now, as a young man myself,
I go on a journey of my own.
I gaze heavenward
And wonder what they're all thinking of me now.*

*I close my door and turn around—
The entire village is gathered in front of me—
The women with tears in their eyes,
And the men with pride on their faces.
As for the older denizens:
They couldn't have been happier
To send yet another child of theirs
In search of the famed treasure.*

*Ever since the good old man passed away,
I've been lonely,
I'd been looking out the window
And gazing at the young women and men
Come back home,
Having sought great fame and fortune.*

And now, it's my turn!

*I turn my nose Northwards
And tell myself,
'That is where I want to be,*

- The Young Foreigner -

*Wherever Destiny is going to take me.
She shall be my guide,
And I shall follow her alongside.'*

*Ever since the good old man passed away,
I've been lonely,
I'd been looking out the window
And gazing at the young women and men
Come back home,
Having sought great fame and fortune.*

*And now, it's my turn.
I'm ready to take off!*

PART I: THE YOUNG FOREIGNER

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Sahara

The young man, so far away from home, in a land of absolute strangers, could now be considered a foreigner.

He was called Yor Castel and he arrived on the shores of a land far, far away from one of the two southernmost territories of the world.

After a year of travel in search of the fortune he was convinced was awaiting him somewhere on Sahara, he arrived at the small island-kingdom of Aloris the night before, by a royal merchant ship that was headed in the same direction. The next morning, Yor was trudging slowly through the populated streets with the captain, who felt the need to repay the younger man's kindness on his ship by showing him around the shore. The people he saw around them all looked happy, like they had everything their hearts

desired. Such a look on their faces sent a pang of homesickness in Yor, since this was, by far, the longest he had been away from his village.

The land, he could see as soon as he stepped down onto the harbour, was green with lush trees, beautiful flowers, and exotic fruits – fruits he had only heard from traders in his village or read the in books in the libraries he visited. ‘*Ah, such beauty!*’ thought Yor delightfully. He could see happy families waving to ships as they entered the shores behind the *Stella Argentum*. The Sahara Ocean was calm to-day and by the way the aquatic creatures on this side of the shore were dancing, the weather had been like this for some time.

He could see mermaids and mermen dancing on the surface of the water, fishes and whales floating in and out around them in a circle, and sometimes, some joining or leaving them. It was a very beautiful sight indeed, especially to one who had never lived by the ocean before.

The captain of the ship watched him carefully with an amused expression on his face, which the young foreigner could see despite his mouth and part of his nose covered with grey beard. “You certainly have never been to this part of the world, have you, son?”

Yor turned to him, an awed expression on his face. "No, sir, not once! Uh – thank you so much for the voyage from Cramarick!" He dug into his belt pocket and brought out some Lirers. He counted them on his hand, before presenting them to the older man. "Here you are, Captain Andreas—payment for your generosity and a little more."

Captain Andreas guffawed. "I rather say you'll need the money more than I do, young man! Here, take these ten; I'll have five. It's all I can do for all the help you've given us, especially when some of the men that got sick." He saluted. "Aye, now, if you don't mind, I'll take my leave. Got some cargo to deliver and pick up. Busy day to-day for the *Stella Argentum*!"

"Aye-aye, Captain!" Yor saluted. "You take care of yourself and your men, sir, while I go explore the island and, eventually, the rest of the world!"

"Aye! And if you ever are in need of my help, do not hesitate to ask me or my crew!—we'll be glad to see your face again!"

"Thank you, sir! I'll know where to find you!" With that, Yor bowed and parted from the captain and his ship.

The land never ceased to enchant him. '*I wish I could stay here forever...*' he thought wistfully.

Yor sighed and turned away. He had business to attend now, a fortune to seek, for which he had begun this journey in the first place. And thus far, he had been only a little lucky, though the prophesised fortune still seemed far away.

‘I have a master to make proud,’ he resolved to himself with determination. *‘A chance to prove myself capable of taking on the world on my own!’*

With such thoughts, he walked on, away from the shore and happy creatures, towards Aloris.

Aloris was a very unique country, as far as Yor was concerned.

When he read about it in the libraries of the towns he had travelled to on his way, he noted with great surprise that it was simply an island – or “an island-country”, as it was described. There were cities and towns and villages spilled across it, but he reckoned there weren’t many of them, considering its size.

The best feature of this kingdom, he had noted with much fascination, was how these settlements were constructed: there was the germain’s palace in the centre and around it lived the common Alorian people!

As he approached the exit of the shipyard, Yor saw two uniformed guards standing on either side of the gate, which blocked passage by a heavy rod sitting across it supported by holders on both sides.

Yor paused; he was used to the security check by now—it was something he encountered in every city he had passed so far. From the folds of his tunic, he produced a parchment and handed it to the nearest guard. The woman unrolled it, read briefly, it seemed, before handing it back to him and waving to remove the hurdle. Yor passed through and very soon, he was inside a town. An enquiry told him that it was called Melvis.

“They all sound the same – the names of places in Aloris – see,” continued the denizen of whom Yor had asked. He looked to be a few years older, more tanned than Yor himself, and rugged in physique, had a broad forehead, and a rough but pleasant accent to his voice. “You seem nu ’ere – are you headed ’ywhere in particular? The Germain’s palace, perhaps? That’s easy!”

Yor shook his head with a smile. “No, sir, I’m not. Consider me a tourist in your humble country.” Inwardly, he wondered, *‘Does this man take me to be a merchant?’*

“Then, y’re right on time, young man!” The Alorian thumped him on the back. “It’s festival-time in Aloris! We

've lotta like you comin' over to our country to see it!
Promise me you'll stay here until it's over!"

Yor was touched by this sentiment and he bowed politely. He at once made up his mind to do so and promised such. The older man offered to take him to an inn he knew and Yor agreed.

The man turned around. "Follow me – it's not too far from in 'ere now. It was made for passerbys like y'self, y' know—with food, rooms, and everything!"

Yor was fascinated as he walked behind his new companion; he looked around and saw how peaceful everybody looked. Young girls and boys ran around with joyful giggly expressions on their faces, trying to catch one-another in sport. On the other hand, there were older denizens walking by hand-in-hand. The streets slowly turned into a marketplace as the two men walked on; he could hear shopkeepers shouting out names of unique and exotic wares he knew were available only in Aloris.

Before him, the man paused and turned around. "You could buy something here if you want," he told Yor.

The young foreigner contemplated this as he looked around. His eyes stopped at one of the stalls that had something green and yellow in its cart.

"Yes, I think I will," he said in response to his companion's query. He made a beeline for the cart and stopped directly in front of it. On it, lay a bunch of small round apples that he'd never seen before. "What are they?" he asked.

"That's Shaori apples, my friend!" replied the cart's keeper. "Found like it only in Aloris! Nowhere can you find them! Pick an emen of them – go on!"

Yor was very tempted to do so, especially since they looked fresh and inviting. Also, he'd heard that the special apples found in Aloris were medicinal.

"How much is half an emen?"

"Three quarters of a pier. Want a bag, sir?"

"No, thank you. I can manage. Two emen, please."

The Alorian denizen accompanying him at once leaned in with concern. "Young man, trust me, you'll need a bag."

Yor smiled at him reassuringly. "It's all right, I really don't."

Both the older man and the shopkeeper exchanged confused glances and a shrug.

"All right, suit yourself."

The shopkeeper weighed an emen of the apples and handed them to Yor, who had removed the belt he had been

wearing between his tunic and his trousers. Now, he held it towards the man, pocket opened.

The shopkeeper gave him a quizzical look.

“Please put them in, sir,” clarified Yor.

The man was still sceptical, but put the Alorian Shaori apples into the tiny pocket anyway. Much to the Alorians’ surprise, they went right in and disappeared! Both the men gaped.

Yor smiled. “It’s a gift from my master,” he explained.

Soon, and just as he was recovering from his shock, Yor’s Alorian companion led him away from the cart.

“You want anything more, sir?”

“No, thank you,” replied Yor politely, very excited.

“Let’s head to this inn you spoke of.”

“It’s ’bout quarter kammel away now. I know the innkeeper, will set you up very soon.” The older man paused, thoughtful, before going on: “I do not know if I need to tell you of this, sir.”

“Well, what’s it about?”

Suddenly, the mood around him seemed to have darkened considerably.

“Sir, are you a physician of any sort?” asked the Alorian. “Have you cured anybody so far?” His tone sounded

doubtful, which was expected since Yor looked so young. The latter was, after all, only nineteen years of age.

“Oh! Yes, that I most certainly have!”

The man paused and turned around with an uncertain rise of his eyebrow. “How successful were you?”

“Well, if you mean whether all my patients have survived or not, then yes, they have. They’re leading very healthy lives now, I assure you.” He swallowed before adding, “If you need any recommendation, I’m sure Captain Andreas of Grant will be very happy to give you. I’ve just travelled with him for over a month now.”

The man still looked unsure; but then, he nodded his head. “Yes, it’s probably somebody like you we’ve been looking for.”

Yor sensed something wrong. “What’s the matter, sir? May I know, please?”

The older man stopped in his tracks as did he. “Yes, yes. Well, in the neighbouring village, there’s a man whose wife has fallen ill and no physician all over Aloris – nay, Sahara – have been able to cure. You say you’re a healer – how are you with unusual diseases?”

“Unusual how?”

“A disease that cannot be cured.”

Yor looked solemn now as he thought this over. *‘I wonder what kind of a disease this is. Is it anything related to the rumours I’ve been hearing about?’*

He finally looked up and nodded once. “I see. Well then, I do believe I must go and see to this myself. Will you take me there – wherever this patient is?”

PART II: HEALER

On the other side of this small but prosperous kingdom lived a man called John Hudson, a farmer by profession as well as passion.

He lived in a cottage with a beautiful wife, Alia, and two small sons – Jim and Mike. John Hudson occasionally hired people to help him on his land. They were not the richest family in the entire land, but were very, very happy.

Alas, a few days prior to Yor's landing in Aloris, Alia Hudson fell severely ill. In a kingdom as small as this one, it did not take much time for the germain to hear of it. The Germain of Aloris was a big-hearted man and lived to help his loyal subjects as much as he could. Upon hearing of the tragic illness, he sent all the best physicians in the kingdom to John's home.

But none of them could tell what the matter with her was. None of them understood the queer symptoms she

showed—a bluish tinge on her cheeks, a high fever, and a great weakness that didn't allow her to get out of bed—but knew better than to make any assumptions. So, they told John that his wife's illness was beyond their knowledge and that they may have no hope of her surviving it.

Now, John loved his wife dearly and could not imagine the rest of his long life without her, if he could help it. So, he did not stop searching for someone who could remove her illness for good, as soon as possible, before her fighting strength completely died.

Even as his two young sons were losing hope, John rekindled it in their hearts, promised his ill-fogged wife everyday that he would definitely find a way to cure her, and prayed to all the legendary heroes and heroines he knew.

One day, as he lay kneeling on the floor beside his wife's bed praying, he heard a knock on the door. He ignored it, leaving his sons to take care of whoever it was visiting them at such an undesirable moment. He had no intention of getting up from his position without finishing his prayers.

And when he did, he turned around to see a young man, barely past his teenage, perhaps, flanked by his two

sons, standing at the door to the bedroom he shared with his wife.

The eldest, Jim, came forth. "Papa, he says he has a cure and would like to cure Mama."

When the farmer turned his gaze back to the stranger, the latter bowed deeply and said, "Sir, I said I'd try. That is, if you'll permit me to."

John stared long and hard at the young man. He was nobody he saw before – a stranger, a foreigner, perhaps. Not of Aloris, that was for sure, based on his clothing.

"Sir, I imagine you're wondering what such a young man the likes of me, barely out of his apprenticeship, is doing here, claiming to cure your wife. Let me introduce myself: I'm Yor Castel from the Kingdom of Grant and on my way around the world to seek my fortune and learn more about the world.

"As I was passing through the island, I heard from one of your fellow Alorians about your wife's terrible illness and that no physician was able to find a way to save her. As for me, I've had some experience curing illnesses with a special magic my master has taught me. Therefore, I implore that you allow me to try." The young foreigner paused. "For all anybody knows, I might even succeed. I'm a healer and I know my work very well."

Young Jim stepped forward. “Papa, he’s right. The more we stand around arguing, the more Mama’s life might be in danger! He might actually have a chance! Anyway, she may not get – get –” Here, the boy’s voice broke as his throat suddenly choked up with sorrow and tears began to glisten in his eyes.

The farmer at last gave in with a sigh. “Yes, I know what you mean, child.” He turned to the alchemist in question. All right then, young man, set to work.”

He and his eldest son stepped aside; Yor walked into the room to where the patient lay on a bed just beneath the window, eyes half-closed and looking dangerously frail.

“How long has she been like this?” asked Yor quietly, gravely.

“About ten days. The illness, anyway. To-day, she’s looking much worse than she did the first day.”

The young foreigner leaned over from beside the bed and took a good look at Alia.

He requested John, who was standing at Alia’s side of the bed, to take his position ten steps away, in order for the healing process to succeed without side-effects. The farmer obliged, even if a little apprehensive, and hoped that he found the right physician.

Then, Yor set about with his task. He felt a movement from the direction of the bed; he took another good look at the pretty lady and realised that she was now awake and convulsing in pain. From the pocket of his magic belt, he brandished a silver flute, put it to his lips, and began to play.

At once, such sweet music floated across the whole room and eventually, the entire house, as no one had heard before... it somehow demanded to be listened to. As the notes of the music floated in the air from the instrument and surrounded her, dancing away, the invalid on the bed gradually stopped her movements and fell back into her slumber, looking every bit as relaxed as she felt. A small smile appeared on her face.

When he finished his piece, Yor put the flute away. From his pocket, he took out a hat and set it on the table beside the bed; he took out two potions—one red, one brown—in small, narrow tubes. He upturned the hat with his free hand and poured the two liquids into it. Immediately, a bright yellow light flashed from it and the mixture turned yellow.

He turned to the farmer. "Can I have an empty glass, please? Dry, if possible."

John nodded. “Yes. I’ll be right back.” Motioning for his sons to stay behind, he went out. He was back very soon with the article requested.

Yor poured his potion of yellow liquid, very gingerly, into the small glass. Then, setting the hat aside and picking up the glass, he bent and carefully parted the lips of the invalid with his fingers, enough to pour the yellow potion into her mouth.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Yor was hopeful, as he had performed this manner of treatment many times before. John, however, began to wonder if he placed his hopes in the wrong person. Yet, he watched on to see how it would all turn out, finding himself a bit fascinated by alchemy magic – something he had never seen before.

‘I might not care,’ he thought, ‘not until Alia comes out of this alive and well.’ He closed his eyes tightly. *‘Oh Lady Celia, Master Merlin, please help us – let my wife become better...’*

Alia finally opened her eyes. Her gaze fell first across the room on her husband, who, for a reason she did not know, had his head hanging as though in shame. It was only when she uttered his name the way she usually did when she was active, did he lift his head. A feeling of

absolute joy lit up his entire being as he ran over to her, almost tripping on his way, and knelt down to her left.

The young foreigner, still beside the former invalid's bed to her right, watched as husband and wife embraced in reunion. He smiled to himself for having saved yet another life.

PART III: A DREAM

It did not take much time for the story of Yor Castel's healing abilities to spread across the small kingdom of Aloris.

Soon, the young man was having visitors at the Hudson farmhouse.

He rather welcomed them, always happy to know everything they had to say. One even asked him for his secret in curing Alia Hudson, but he refused with his charming smile.

Another wanted her daughter to be cured of a Very Preposterous Issue.

"Oh really now? What is it?" asked Yor.

"She's in *love*!" exclaimed the distressed mother. "She refuses to listen to me, and when I tell her I forbid the match – he's a poor washerman's son – she tells me I have no right to say what she wants and I should let her be!" She

huffed. "Since when have young people's minds been corrupted like this?!"

Yor tried not to yawn out of boredom that was born out of her never-ending yarn. At last, John, having realised that the man needed rescuing, promptly rushed to ask him for help. Yor chose this opportunity to escape!

John was very grateful that his wife was nursed back to health, quite willing to give just about anything to the healer.

"Tell me, Yor," declared the farmer as the family sat together for dinner two days later, "what do you want the most that I, a humble farmer, can give you?"

"What I want the most?" Yor spent his first item of the meal pondering this. At last, his eyes lit up at a thought and he said, "Can you be very kind as to recommend me a place to stay? I shall be here at Aloris for some time, and I need a few days for my study."

"Definitely! You can stay right here, young man!" He winked knowingly at his wife, with whom he had already discussed this with. "That was going to be the deal, anyway! Anything *else* that you want?" "Nothing else, sir. Just stay."

The farmer relented, "All right, but you should tell me before you leave."

The young man smiled warmly at this. "That I shall agree with. Thank you, sir."

"Please," said Alia, approaching from behind her husband, "feel free to look at this humble home as your own. Do not hesitate if you need something." In two days' time, she was already looking healthier and the colour in her face was beginning to come back.

John noticed the dramatic change, too, for he smiled brightly as soon as he saw her. He pulled her to his chest for a warm embrace, as though he was going to lose her again.

Time passed quickly on the farm.

Yor observed the goings-on carefully, especially the labourers at work.

Or, the Alorian children playing about would draw him into their games. Jim and Mike loved him the best and they always made sure he was included in everything they did.

What Yor wanted to know, however, was what caused the illness in the first place.

That night at dinnertime, he prepared a list of questions to ask Alia, ones he thought were necessary.

When they began to eat, Yor cleared his throat.

"How is it that you contracted the illness, Mrs Hudson?" he asked. He put a slice of cucumber in his mouth.

Alia looked up. "Please, call me Alia," she said. "Well, that's what my husband and I have been wondering, actually." Here, she exchanged a glance with him. "That night, just before we realised I became ill, I had a regular meal of onions, tomatoes, rice, and fruit pickle. I've never had any problems with them before."

"I see. Perchance, it's something you had until about a week before you actually fell ill?"

John and Alia exchanged wide-eyed glances again.

"Maybe she developed some allergy for something?" he suggested.

Yor considered this. "It's possible. Though, unlikely, I think. Still, I think it's a matter to be taken seriously."

Yor had not planned on a definite period of stay in the Kingdom of Aloris, but he could not find the desire to leave either. There was something about the surroundings that made him feel at home. He had been to several places in the past year, but this was by far the only place that gave him such a homely feel, besides his own home country of Grant. He felt like he was waiting for something to happen

– what that was, he didn't know. Maybe, solving the mystery of the illness.

When he was not observing the labourers or playing with the children, Yor would roam around the small kingdom, gaining a sense of peace and tranquillity – just as though he were back home. This feeling was novel to him. It puzzled him a little, though not necessarily disturbing. He also sought audience with Germain Ayon and his royal physicians for some scholarly discussions about herbs and alchemy of the country, trying to gather intel on Alia's illness. The germain was only too happy to set aside some time from his busy schedule for this purpose and they had had some hearty discussions. Neither was felt dissatisfied; rather, more intellectual than they started out.

What puzzled Yor the most, though, was the recurring dream he had been having for a week since entering Aloris. He didn't think it was necessarily to do with the illness, but something more aligned to his purposes.

Now, a fortnight since his arrival at Aloris, it occurred once more:

Yor was taking a walk through his home village of Selina, one of the provinces of the Kingdom of Grant. He was a little boy of nine, his parents still alive. He was

dawdling around aimlessly, when, without deliberation, he chanced upon the Selina Forest at the edge of the village.

Here, young Yor decided to explore the forbidden territory, despite knowing that he would most likely get a sound talking to from his parents once he went back home. The Selina Forest was rumoured to be a place where people didn't come back from. His parents' reaction did not matter to him, though, as it happened to him all the time. Once more would not make much of a difference to the young hero.

As he walked, he kept a wary eye out for the forest beings that everybody in the village was always talking about. He could not help but feel a little nervous, although he refused to turn tail and run away. Knights didn't do that, now, did they? The little boy always dreamt of being one in the court at the Palace of Grant.

Soon, he stumbled upon a well. It was a regular-looking one, quite old, it seemed.

The wishing well! ' thought the boy, excitement building up inside his chest, for this was the first time he had ever seen something that had been, so far, only fabled.

The soothsaying well! This has to be it! '

Yor could clearly see water inside it. It appeared just like any other well, but he was not so sure. Magical material

always looked different—this he knew from his apprenticeship lessons. He peered inside once more; this time, though, the crystal-clear water changed colour and a face began forming in it: a heart-shaped face with a soft nose and a pair of soft dark eyes, red hair, and a small chin. A girl. She appeared to have golden brown skin.

Yor stared transfixed at the image in the well. He had never seen the likes of her before and wondered who she was.

Yor closed his eyes momentarily...

... When he awoke, he was back in the guest room of the Hudson family home.

PART IV: COMPANY

Yor sat up on his bed, before he realised that it was just a dream; memories of it still remained, though, as if the images were engraved upon his mind.

He frowned. The dream was different this time. Sure, it was a part of his childhood and his recurrent dream – the part about him going to the wishing well in the forbidden Selina Forest – but he had no memory of seeing the lady in the well in real life or in dreams before.

Yor pondered over this new occurrence for a while. Nothing came to his mind that could explain it.

‘I wonder if there was more in that dream that I’m missing?’

At last, he gave it up. He decided that it was time for him to get up, anyway; he had promised his hosts that he would aid them with the preparation for the Spring Festival in the upcoming week. It was a chief event in the entire

kingdom of Aloris, it seemed, and every Alorian was excited about it.

‘I must know more about the festivals here – haven’t read a lot.’

Yor slipped out of his bed and looked around. He found his magic belt on the table beside him, put it on, and walked out of the room.

In the kitchen sat a large cooking pot on the hearth. Alia was standing to the side, cutting vegetables with a sharp-looking knife at a table. She seemed to have sensed his presence behind her, for she abruptly turned around. When she saw him, she smiled.

“Yor, you’re awake! Come here, will you? Now, I know this is too much to ask of you, but I really need your help.”

Yor gave her a grin. “Oh, it’s not a trouble at all, my lady. Please, tell me what I can do to make myself useful around here.”

“Ah, such modesty!” sighed Alia. “All right. Please feed the chickens. John and Mike have gone to the marketplace to buy some stuffs for the festival, and Jim has gone to get more firewood.”

“Definitely!” Yor gave a short bow. He turned around and went out the kitchen door.

He had watched John and Jim feeding the hens before – they had even let him have a go at it once. It had taken a lot of time – a lot of it. The chickens kept running away from him the moment he started approaching them!

Nonetheless, after having been there for a few days, he was quite confident of success. Surely the chicks were used to him by now?

The moment he stepped outside and walked towards one plump little yellow hen; she startled with a loud squawk! This created a ripple effect: the other hens, cocks, and chicks noticed, and ran helter-skelter!

Oh, what a noise that was! Yor stood still, tried not to panic and to think.

Finally, he resorted to spreading the grain onto the ground. He pretended not to mind the chickens, which were watching his every move with growing curiosity, from where they finally settled – however temporarily – behind some trees and the fields beyond. When he had covered a large patch of the ground, Yor turned away and headed back to the kitchen. Then, he set the tin aside, settled at the window, careful enough to stay hidden from the chickens outside, and watched.

The chickens at first did not budge. They stared fixedly at the kitchen door. It was only when the largest of

them decided that the coast was clear and began walking towards where the grain was spread on the ground, did the others follow him.

“What’s the matter?”

Yor started and turned around to see Alia Hudson smiling down at him with an odd expression on her face. He sighed.

“They wouldn’t let me come near them,” he explained, “so I spread the grain on the ground, hoping they’ll eventually come to their senses and have their breakfast.”

Alia laughed heartily. “I understand. I remember the first time Mike was feeding them—he got so frustrated in the end, he resolved never to try and feed them again! Of course, they eventually learnt to trust him, so the problem was solved.”

“Yes, that’s true.” Yor turned back to see the chickens devouring hungrily on the grain. He smirked.

“Indeed. The Alorian chicks – all farm animals, as a matter of fact. They don’t trust strangers coming near them, not at all.”

Just then, the sound of a horse cart came to his ears. Most of the chicks stilled and looked towards the front of the farm.

Alia smiled in recognition. “There, that’s them coming back! Come, Yor, let’s go greet them!”

The two rushed out of the kitchen and into the living room.

“Alia, we’re back!”

Yor saw John, Jim, and Mike standing inside the threshold, large smiles on their faces. It was the farmer who had called out.

He went on: “We brought the firewood, which is outside, but there is another surprise waiting for you, my dear.”

Alia moved towards him, her face lighting up. “What is it, John?”

“Well.” He turned towards the door and called out, “You may come in now, young one.”

As she craned her neck to see outside, Yor noticed Alia’s eyes growing wide with recognition. Fascination built inside his chest, his heart beat fast, and he got a familiar itching in his fingers.

A grass-green skirt thrust into the doorway first. His eyes trailed up it, till they spotted a familiar feminine face peering in bashfully. A heart-shaped face, fair yet sun-burnt, with red hair, a pair of soft eyes, a smooth, soft, angular nose, and a small chin. As his gaze reached her

dark brown eyes, he realised that she was staring right at him.

At once, he was struck with a sense of déjà vu. *It was the lady he had seen in his dream!*

PART V: LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Seven years ago...

*Seven years hence
Along comes a man
Travelled and experienced,
Shalt be the decider of fates,
Feared even by the immortals.
He has the Light to capture Darkness.*

*But beware the power –
For, Darkness consumes all in its path!*

PART VI: OLD FAMILY, NEW FRIEND

Present day

As soon as she spotted the black-haired young lad, the lady froze.

She locked eyes with him for only Lady Celia knew how long. Her breathing became ragged, but she did not bother about it.

John noted her unease and said to her kindly, "Don't worry, sweetheart, he's a nice one. He's the one who cured your Aunt Alia."

Her eyes grew wide as saucers at this revelation. Yes, she had heard of the famous physician, all right – they were talking all about it in the market.

'So, this is the one,' she thought.

She felt as if a heavy weight had lifted off her chest; her legs began to feel weak, although she eventually did manage to hold her ground.

Uncle John's voice pierced her thoughts. "Come here, sweet heart."

She broke her gaze away from the stranger and walked up to her uncle with small, hesitant steps, quite conscious of herself. Not that her uncle frightened her, but it was the stranger in the room whom she was not sure about.

"The man you behold," her uncle went on, "is a foreigner, who had chanced upon our blessed country on his travels, and has been here ever since he cured your aunt. By Lady Celia's Grace, he has accepted our humble home as his own for as long as he wants to stay. I hope you don't mind. In fact, I wish you'd take to him."

"Yes, he's great friend of ours!" chorused the young children in encouragement. She thought she could practically see stars of admiration in their eyes and suddenly, a giggle erupted that she stifled in time.

The young woman stared once more at the man and this time, he smiled pleasantly at her. Out of sheer habit than anything else, she smiled back. But the very next second, she grew conscious of herself and her smile disappeared, her head turned away. Her cheeks coloured and she ducked slightly behind her uncle. She peered around John's shoulder to see that that smile of the young foreigner's never once faded...

In fact, if anything, it only grew amused.

"His name is Yor Castel," Uncle John was saying, quite oblivious to this exchange, it appeared. "He is here from the Glorious Grant, and has set out of there in pursuit of his fortune." Then, he turned to the young man and went on, "Yor, meet Elmeida Yuri, Alia's niece."

"Hello," said Yor; she thought he looked fascinated.

She attempted and failed to gather the courage to reply, so simply nodded once in acknowledgment, still almost hidden behind her uncle.

Later that day, Elmeida Yuri became a little relaxed and contented herself by playing with her little cousins.

Of the two boys, Jim was the oldest, she remembered, having preceded the other by two and a half years. Elmeida was happy to be reunited with them, although she was a little upset about the events that had brought her here in the first place.

The events of her past, just a week ago, haunted her whenever she was left alone, even for a moment. Being in company of other mortals always seemed to ease her nerves. So, she decided that she would help in the Spring Festival preparation as well, just so her mind will be occupied with other thoughts. Right then, she did not want to think about how she came to be here.

And neither did anybody ask her about it. It seemed that her aunt and uncle didn't bother to know; and that the other denizens of the island trusted them too much to find out. It was all perplexing for someone who had endured all that she had, but very resolutely decided to keep her mouth shut.

It was the presence of the young foreigner in the house that distracted her each time: her heart rate uncreased ever so slightly, her body grew warmer than it usually was. She could not help but wonder if the prophecy she had been told seven years ago was talking about him. What was his name again? Castel... Yor Castel.

'Perhaps it is him,' she thought whenever she spied him helping around the house.

Elmeida loved to pick the flowers in the garden each morning. Even without her aunt requesting her, she would pick up a bunch of flowers of varied colours, loop them up with a thread to make a garland, and put it around the miniature painting of Lady Celia on the living-room wall. She would then close her eyes and pray for a minute, before she resumed her chores. This was something she had never failed to do for the past ten years and especially now, after all that she went through.

PART VII: THE SPRING FESTIVAL

The day before the Spring Festival finally arrived, John and his family – including Yor – decided to take a break.

While Alia and John went to the riverside to spend some quiet time together, Mike and Jim were free to roam the forest with Nina, one of the many part-time nannies in the kingdom, and their peers. Only Elmeida and Yor were left behind at home—her because she did not want to be left alone outside the comfort of the home and he because he wanted to have some peace and quiet, away from the noises and cheers outside. It didn't occur to either of them to go somewhere together... but then again, mayhap that was for the good of everyone in the world.

Elmeida stepped out of her room after having changed for the day and saw Yor already set to begin his. He was seated on a stool in the living-room, his back facing her. She could not help gazing at him. He had a straight, muscular back, as if he had worked on a field all his life, hair naturally curled and raven-black. And he was almost as tall as her Uncle John. He was wearing regular clothes: A light brown long-sleeved shirt and a pair of black comfortable-looking trousers, both baggy and giving anybody who looked at him the impression that he was heavier than he probably looked. *'Or maybe he is very heavy?'*

Even as she took in all these details, he abruptly turned around and, when their eyes met, she coloured and darted her gaze away.

"You don't have to be afraid of me, you know," his velvety voice spoke up; immediately, she lifted her head up to face him. "I'm not going to eat you. That's right: we've seen eye-to-eye at last!" The happy grin he gave her seemed to light up his entire being, and warmed her heart.

She smiled back at him bashfully. "Y-yes, I... I'm – er – sorry for being such a bother. I can stay out of your way if that's what you want."

He shook his head. "Please don't say that, my lady. You've never been a bother. As a matter of fact, you have been a source of intrigue to me all week."

This sudden flattery alarmed Elmeida and she took a step backward. "Oh," she managed to breath out. *'A flattery or an insult?'* she wondered.

Yor's smile faded as a look of concern replaced it. "Er – I'm sorry, I didn't mean to –"

Elmeida cut him off: "No please, I was so very flattered that – well, your words took my breath away, sir." For assurance, she gave him another shy smile.

He looked relieved. "Well... good, then."

An awkward silence ensued as they each tried not to catch the other's eye.

At last, Yor said, looking forward: "Come, sit here with me, will you?"

Elmeida started, but recovered quickly. "O-okay."

She looked him over again. His face was as pleasant as she had seen the first day; she couldn't help feeling relaxed.

Once they settled down on a pair of stools facing one-another, he began, "Let me introduce myself. I'm Yor Castel of Selina, in the Kingdom of Grant."

"Yes, I think my uncle told me." She couldn't help a sudden giggle. He grinned, showing his imperfectly-shaped teeth.

"But did he tell you I lived there for seventeen years, before I decided to travel?"

She shook her head. "Why?" A pause. "Why did you start your travel, your journey?"

"When I came of age, I knew I had fortune waiting for me. I started my journey in search of this fortune. I travelled for a year, paid my respects to the kings and their elders of the countries of Cramarick and Cordelia, sought their advice, and helped them with their problems."

"Cordelia?" she gasped, mouth dropped open and eyes wide.

"Er... yes." Yor blinked her at her, confused. "Anything the matter?"

Elmeida resolved a quick debate in her mind and shook her head. "Nothing at all – please go on!" *'Could he...?'*

Yor seemed to eye her suspiciously.

"You were saying...?" she prompted. Seemingly letting it go, he went on: "Well, about a fortnight ago, I arrived in this Kingdom of Aloris, and, upon hearing your aunt was taken severely ill, I decided to try my luck with my magical equipment."

"Magical equipment?" She blinked as something flashed in her mind. "Like that belt you keep carrying around?"

Laughing eyes confirmed her question. "Indeed. And a hat, which chiefly functions as a cauldron."

She stifled another giggle, thoroughly amused now. "You're *joking!*"

"Of course not, my lady. Elmeida – can I call you Elmeida?"

She nodded.

"I'll show you one day, Elmeida, when the time comes. It's called alchemy. In our world, it's a form of magic very few people use."

"In our world?"

"Apparently."

"And so, with your magical equipment, you succeeded in curing Aunt Alia," she said, softly. "So, it *is* true... what I heard in the country the day I came here. It was all over the marketplace." She drew in a long breath and composed herself. Letting it out in a huff, she

lowered her head timidly, still looking at him from the tops of her eyes, she muttered, "Thank you, kind sir. It means a lot to me."

She looked up to see him gazing at her with a smile.

"You're welcome. Alia and her family – they're all you have, ain't they?"

"Yes. They're my parents from my mother's side. Uh – I mean, my mother's younger sister – that's Aunt Alia."

"That's nice. It must be nice."

"It is, sir. Uh –"

"Yor."

"Pardon?"

"Please call me 'Yor'. That's my name – not 'sir'." He grinned.

She smiled back, warming up more now. "Of course – *Yor*: Don't you have a family? Are they back in Grant?"

The man's eyes softened, though his smile remained the same. "No. Not anymore. Not for a while, actually."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You can..." She hesitated again, out of the blue.

He stared curiously at her now. "Yes?"

She cleared her throat. "I mean, you can probably consider this your home and come and go whenever you like. Aunt and Uncle trust you – they treat you just like you were family. Like I am. And if they trust you, so do I."

"You... er... you came in my dream last night."

Elmeida started. "P-pardon?"

"Well, not just last night, but for the last few, I suppose." And Yor proceeded to explain his dream. Her startled expression relaxed with each word he spoke.

"That explains a lot," she murmured, thoughtfully.

"Excuse me? Did you say anything?"

She shook her head. "Don't you think that's strange?"

"Me dreaming about a woman I've never met? Yes. Me dreaming about a woman I was about to meet?" He shrugged. "I don't think so. Anything is possible in this world."

A silence descended upon them, when Elmeida took to looking at the window; from where she sat, she could only see the grey of the clouds outside. Yor stared at the book he was reading.

At long last, Yor broke it: "So, what's your story?"

Her wide eyes shot up to his in surprise. "What story?"

"Well," he responded, thoughtfully, "if it was decided some time ago that you were to come here, I would have known about it before you actually showed up. Also, I've travelled across this country a few days before your arrival and hence, am positive that I've never seen the likes of you before. Though, I *have* heard of your name, it seems.

“So,” he leaned forward slightly, “who exactly are you, Elmeida Yuri?”

PART VIII: TRUST

Elmeida stared dumbly at Yor's expectant face.

Finally, when he didn't say anything more and she realised some response was expected of her, she blurted, "What?"

Yor smiled then, almost amused at her innocence. "Well, all I'm saying is that I want to know more about you."

He gazed at her face, which changed many expressions all at once – a series of images going through her mind – till it finally settled upon that of neutral acknowledgment.

"All right," she whispered at last, barely able to contain the shaking in her voice. "But you must be warned that it is not something you're going to like."

Yor nodded, his smile unruffled. "I guessed as much. I still want to hear it."

She cleared her throat. "All right then."

Elmeida closed her eyes and spread her arms wide. Yor noticed that her lips were moving in some sort of incantation he wasn't familiar with and grew alert. It hit him for the first time that this maiden may not be as delicate as she seemed on the outside and despite how young he thought she was.

As he watched her, the home of the Hudsons disappeared in pitch darkness. He looked around him and saw that the surrounding as he knew it disappeared, except...

Except for Elmeida Yuri, who sat in front of him like she did just five seconds ago, on apparently nothing. It was just him and her.

Yor tried not to be overwhelmed by shock, took in a deep breath and gulped. He looked at his strange companion once more: she seemed to be covered in a red bubble. Her eyes were closed, as though in meditation. Her reddish-brown hair swayed a little like light wind was blowing it. He thought he could feel it, too.

A moment later, Elmeida opened her eyes. A small smile spread over her face.

"My apologies for this sudden invasion into your mind," she said. "I want to show you something."

"M...mind?"

"I see you're afraid. It's all right. We can do this when I gain your trust."

Yor thought about it as he gazed at her earnest dark brown eyes, which he suddenly found himself mesmerised with. Despite such a strong feeling trying to take over and cloud his mind, his thoughts remained focussed.

‘Well,’ he thought. ‘I just hope nothing will happen in the process. It’s just a story, isn’t it? How hard is it going to be?’

Aloud, he said, “I think I’ll be fine.”

Elmeida looked up. She saw that Yor had a friendly expression on his face now.

‘Does he really trust me?’ she wondered. ‘I hope he does... I mean, he is The One, isn’t he?’ She pondered over this. *‘No. Sounds like I’m naïve.’*

Nevertheless, she smiled at him. “All right. Let me take you through my memories as I remember them.”

PART IX: THE DARK PRINCESS

Elmeida's voice was the only thing that was steady, while everything around Yor changed.

"I was born in the Kingdom of Cordelia," she began, "where my father was from."

The scene around them became clearer now and Yor could see a couple in between him and Elmeida. The woman looked to be a splitting image of her, with the same reddish-brown hair, but he knew it could not be her. So, he assumed it was her mother. The man walking beside Elmeida's mother was leaner and taller; perhaps her father. They were both smiling in his direction. Yor had to remind himself repeatedly that they were just a figment of Elmeida's imagination, so realistic was the scene.

"My mother was from the small island in the Far West called Jermis. We did go there on vacation for some time, to visit her parents, but when the Germain of Jermis, Aaron III, was overthrown, we had to stop going there, for they began..."

At this point, the scene of Elmeida's parents faded away and her face looked darker, sadder.

"Well, we simply could not go there again. My grandparents were killed in a massacre led by the enemy."

A moment of silence followed. Yor took this opportunity to digest all that he was told. A massive wave of emotion crossed him, anxiety dominant among them, and he began to feel scared. He didn't know why, though, until he looked at her again. He was feeling everything she was. Elmeida had a faraway look in her eyes and did not seem to be on the same page as he. He was curious to learn more, but waited patiently.

When she did not say anything for a long while, Yor decided to speak up.

"Something bad happened on your way here, didn't it?" His voice was gentle. "In fact... if I understand correctly, it was the very reason for your arrival here." A pause. "I might've heard something about it, though I was far from Cordelia until now."

At this, he could see that he had struck a chord. Elmeida seemed to look defiantly at him, but no words came out of her mouth.

He spoke more quietly this time: "What is the matter, Elmeida? You can tell me. I shan't make light of the matter, I promise. And besides, you need to take down that burden some time. It better be sooner than later. Don't you think so?" When she still didn't speak, he added, "You didn't speak of this to your aunt and uncle yet, did you?"

Now, she looked confused.

After a few minutes of staring at one-another, she finally turned away. "No, I didn't."

"You're... afraid?"

A single nod. "Well, my mother was the Dark Queen and it seems that her power has passed on to me. You can imagine."

His eyes widened. "So, that's how you can do all this," he gasped. "You have magic! And you're the Morgana mia, too – the Dark Princess of Jermis!" He at once stood to salute her—a hand across his chest and bowed.

Elmeida smiled wanly as she shrugged. "Please, do sit down. And no, not really. I mean, my mother never actually declared an heir to the throne of Darkness, so I don't know if I am her successor."

"Ah. Don't you have siblings?"

"Indeed – a sister and a brother, both younger than me. It could go to any of them, but I think it usually goes to the female offspring."

"So, it could be you or your sister?"

Elmeida sniffed, sudden and loud. Her voice trembled as she responded. "Y-yes."

"What happened to your family, Elmeida? Where are they now? Why are you here?"

All of a sudden, she covered her face with her hands and burst into tears. The image she had created faded, threatening to clear away. He rushed to her side, in spite of the voice screaming in his head not to. He knelt beside her and put a tentative hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry I made you speak. You're clearly not ready."

Elmeida shook her head. "N-no, that's – quite all right," she gasped. When she finally looked up at him, he could see the tears flowing freely down her eyes.

Yor hugged her out of sheer impulse. He could feel her relaxing against his chest. They stayed like this for a while, until she stopped trembling.

At long last, she removed herself from him and the scene in the magic bubble grew clearer again.

Yor felt he could release her now.

"Well, there is a tribe in the Kingdom of Jermis," Elmeida began once more, "whose inhabitants have some amount of Darkness inherent in them. This has been passing on for generations from time immemorial. This Darkness is to counter the Light and balance both in nature. It had to be tethered to a human being, because it is humans who can really control it." A pause. "Of course, there is always the chance of going mad with power, but lesser as compared to any other creature."

Yor nodded thoughtfully, his brain rereading old books at top speed. "I've read about that. The Dark tribe Morgan, isn't it? Morgana the first witch was its founder."

"So, you're a reader?"

"Indeed. My home is the library."

She gave a sudden giggle, making him smile. "Is that right?"

"Oh yes! You should probably visit some time."

Elmeida nodded, her face becoming neutral again. Now, the scene in the bubble changed to what looked to be a grey battlefield with a vast amount of death and destruction surrounding them.

"After the Great War with Chaos," Elmeida went on, "my ancestor, by the name Salavador, offered to consume Chaos' Darkness, shortly before Lady Celia and Master Merlin vanished from the face of Sahara. Salavador was then the Dark Prince – Morgana mion – because he had no sister. He later succeeded his mother, and was named the first Morgana mion in the history of the Morgans. Upon Salavador's death, his son, Alandor, inherited the Darkness.

"That was about five hundred years ago, as I'm sure you're aware. And now, my Mama inherited the Darkness and became Morgana Mathra – the Dark Queen. However, she was never able to fully conquer and control her Darkness, until she met Papa. He helped her contain it within her and not let it overcome her. He had magic, too, you know. It's not how it manifests usually in our world, but I know for certain that it is."

"Well, I'm an alchemist. Perhaps he was, too."

She shrugged. "Then, I was born out of their love and after me, my sister and brother. Like I said, we used to visit Jermis, Mama's old home. But we had to stop visiting when I was barely nine; that was the year when my grandparents were killed." She paused.

"Oh, I'm so sorry about that," muttered Yor.

If she heard him, she just ignored it. "You see, the military there fears my kind, the line that tethers the Darkness. The belief is that once we agree to do it, we are tainted for life. That means, once Salavador had agreed to tether the Darkness, he had doomed the lives of his descendants." A pause. "Though the rest of the Morgans haven't been 'tainted', they still feared his anger and so, I've been told, they have gone into hiding."

"But ain't the Morgans considered to be saviours and held in high respect in Jermis?" Yor remembered a book he read in a library in western Grant called *Thi Chronos de Morgans*, literally translated in the Common Language to "The Morgan Chronicles".

"Yes. The belief the royal army holds is false. Merlin made sure that when Salavador decided to transfer the Darkness to somebody else to carry on the tradition, it would be transferred without leaving behind any traces in the body of the person it was tethered to before." She paused. "In other words, there would be no side-effects of such a transfer."

Now, Yor could see what looked like a big black rounded object between him and Elmeida. '*Not a particularly pretty sight,*' he thought, though he couldn't help feeling fascinated.

She sighed. "He was a pretty great magician, you know, a true Saharan wizard! The entire world ought to acknowledge him."

Yor had to admit, he hadn't heard or read much about Morgana Mithra Salavador as much as his companion apparently thought he should have.

"Merlin compressed it into a ball of Dark Magic, so that transferring it would become easy and no one else but Salavador himself would be affected by it." The ball then moved slowly towards Elmeida and her body absorbed it. That was when he realised it was the real one and not just an apparition!

Elmeida went on. "And since our tribe has been carrying on Dark Magic over the generations since the Time of Morgana, it was not too difficult to control. There were some who were weaker than the Chaos' Darkness, like my mother, but they all eventually found ways to control it." She let this sink in as the scene before them darkened and a young woman appeared, with eyes darker than mortal blood and a crazy smile. "And those who couldn't, let the Darkness consume them and themselves perish."

He cleared his throat. "You say that you're the most feared tribe. Is it only in the Kingdom of Jermis or all over Sahara? Because I didn't find a sign of it anywhere during my travels."

Elmeida shrugged. "Only by the military of Jermis. Even the common Jermians treat us like normal people, like they have always been. In fact, we are treated fairly by every person on Sahara, except the Jermis military. To the rest, we're just normal mortals. I haven't heard of such a thing in history – only since the last ten years or so. But since the other mortals fear for their life, they do not show their affection upfront."

"And what of your family? Where are they now?"

Elmeida's face dissolved into a sad smile. "Your wits are quite sharp, ain't they?"

He shrugged, feeling the intensity of the temperature around them dipping.

"Oh well." She gulped, as her eyes became distant once more. "Well, they... they were killed the day before I reached here."

PART X: THE ALCHEMIST

Elmeida could see the slight confusion on Yor's face before it contorted into a look of shock.

He shook his head and said, "No, that can't be true?" His velvety voice turned husky with a note of alarm blending in. "How did that happen?"

Elmeida sighed as the memories of the previous week's events filled her mind, despite how badly she didn't want to see them again. "It all happened a week ago," she began, "the day before I arrived here, in the Kingdom of Aloris. Life was just as beautiful as it had ever been, save for my grandparents, who are perhaps even now looking down upon us from the Heavens. My parents, Jarvis, and I were preparing to leave for here, to be with Aunt Alia and Uncle John for the spring festival. This has been our tradition since long before I took life in this world."

She paused, sniffed. Yor waited patiently. The scenes around them fizzled and stopped, and they were back in the bubble of darkness.

"Then, as we were ready to leave, the Royal Army of Jermis descended upon us from nowhere and attacked our village. My parents tried to shield us by hurrying us down into the basement of our house. But after they killed our parents, they eventually found us. My brother, Jarvis, being the brave lad he'd always been, that young boy, wanted to protect me. I tried talking him out of it, but he simply wouldn't listen." Tears streamed out of her eyes and for once, she did not care that she was showing her vulnerability to a stranger; it is possible that she didn't notice, as she went on with her story: "You see, Jarvis is a master sword-fighter and had his prized sword always on hand. He had it on him that day, as well."

Her voice trembled and she stumbled over her words as she went on:

"I admit Jarvis put up a good fight. In fact, that was the best thing he had ever done in his short life and I'm proud of him. But in the end, they managed to kill him as well. I panicked but found a secret way out, and escaped to the only refuge I knew would accept me for who I am—my Aunt Alia."

Even before she realised it, she had begun to shake with fear. Yor at once leaned forward to comfort her. He didn't think she noticed, so glassy-eyed was she.

When her nerves calmed down, Elmeida gently pulled herself away from him. "Thank you," she sniffed, wiping her eyes on the sleeves of her plain brown dress before turning to face him once again. There was a small yet confident smile on her face. "Really, thank you. You barely even know me. So, thank you."

Yor nodded. "Are you okay, though?"

"Yes, I am. Well, I will be." She cleared her throat once more. "So, that was my story. I ran and ran and ran. Used a little magic where I couldn't. Before I found my little cousins in the marketplace here in Jermis and they took me to their father. And here I am."

A long pause as he considered her words.

"So. What's your story?"

The Darkness around them faded away and they were back in the Hudson's little cottage.

"Indeed. But before that, I want to ask you something."

Elmeida nodded in assent.

"You never mentioned what happened to your sister."

"Oh," she breathed, her tone sad once more. "Well, honestly, I don't know where she is. She left us soon after Jarvis was born and I never saw her again." A look of wistfulness clouded her smile.

Yor felt a little guilty about broaching the matter now. "Well, I suppose you want to hear my story now." He cleared his throat. "I am from the Kingdom of Grant," he began, "Homeland of Merlin and the Seafarers, and the Land of Magic – as you might know. I am an alchemist, trained under the all-powerful magician, Merlin himself."

At this point, Elmeida's heart nearly ceased beating. She gaped at him, transfixed, wondering if she had heard him right. "Trained under who?" she whispered.

An understanding smile crossed his face. "Yes, I'm aware that this is hard to take in, but it's true. I was an Apprentice under Merlin himself!"

"Intriguing," she breathed. "How was it like?"

He laughed, probably finding her pensive expression fascinating. "Well, unlike your imagination, Merlin is actually as much humane as you and me. Except, obviously, for his immense Magical power. He was no doubt envied and awed by many Magicians all over Sahara."

"And, among all of them, he chose *you*?!"

Yor shook his head. "Oh no, that's not how it happened. As a matter of fact, he had had many a renowned Magicians as his Apprentices—the Earth-shaker of Grant, Alda, the Essence of Cordelia, Jenna, and the Singer of Cramarick, Onda."

"Indeed," admitted Elmeida, chortling at her own silliness. "That's true. Well then, you were one of the great Merlin's Apprentices?" Her delicate brows then creased as she realised that there was a piece missing in what she was hearing. "But wasn't Merlin supposed to have died a long time ago? Or, are you very, very old, Yor Castel?"

PART XI: FOUND!

The young lady's question threw him off, leaving Yor to stare at her with an outright blank expression on his face, blinking naïvely.

When he finally found his tongue, he uttered, "What?"

The soft, lilting voice of Elmeida's laughter echoed around the small house, instantly filling him with a sense of tranquillity, and he relaxed, almost forgetting the topic of their discussion and concentrating only on the beautiful smile on her face.

"Well," she said, composing herself, though her eyes glistened with humour, "you do remember the story of Merlin and Lady Celia, don't you?"

"Oh, that I do," he responded, mentally chiding himself. "Yes. Well, no, actually. After containing the Darkness, Lady Celia's essence went into a coma, while Merlin simply vanished from the face of the world. His disappearance was quite unnerving to the people, so they made it that he died with the exhaustion of using too much Magic. Or so it seems that's how it happened.

"But in reality, he was just in a coma himself – hidden from all civilisation – trying to regain the strength he lost. He awoke about two decades ago in my land, the Kingdom of Grant – his homeland – and eventually took to teaching Magic. My father was one of his students. Then, when I was nine years of age, my parents left me with him and never came back. Merlin told me that they went on a journey to seek someone. However, when three years passed by and I stopped hearing from them, I realised they were never going to come back. He took me in and took care of me until I was old enough to experience the world on my own."

Elmeida opened her mouth to speak, but –

"Eeeekkkkk!"

The scream had come from outside the house.

The two companions glanced at one-another and, without wasting a moment, they rushed towards the front door. Yor motioned her to stay quiet and went to peer out of the window beside it.

To his immense horror, he saw an army of black-clad soldiers running towards them, crushing every denizen that stood in their way!

Yor turned to Elmeida, debating if he could tell her. But the determined look she gave him changed his mind. He was about to tell her what he saw, when she gasped.

"What's the matter?" he asked her. "What is it, Elmeida? Perhaps I can help you."

Her face turned grim and her eyes narrowed. "I know who that is causing havoc. I can sense them. They're not to be messed with." A pregnant pause. "And they're here for me."

Without waiting for a response, Elmeida opened the door and walked out – just like that!

Yor instinctively followed her outside, feeling around his hips for his prized belt.

Elmeida took a few steps towards the approaching army and stopped. "Hey, you Jermian fatheads! Your target is right here!"

'Jermian?' Yor thought, incredulously. 'Oh no... have they found her already?! She must've sensed them!'

As he put all the puzzle pieces together, Elmeida went on: "Why don't you take me now and leave this peaceful kingdom alone?!"

Yor was startled at her words, but trusted her to know what she was doing. *'It's the only thing I can do now. And maybe they really will stop attacking innocent people.'* All around him, there were young and old women and men, and children – all dressed for the Spring Festival in traditional Saharan clothing – and now, staring in horror. Some even lay unconscious near the approaching army.

The head of the Jermian Royal Army, a mortal wearing the same black clothing with the only addition of a single gold band across his torso, held up a hand. At once, the army behind him stopped in its tracks. The head stepped forward and walked towards Elmeida.

Every sensible cell in Yor's body was telling him to protect the girl, but he held back such thoughts. Instead, he concentrated on getting ready to whisk her away at a moment's notice.