

THE YOUNG FOREIGNER

ONE JOURNEY CAN DECIDE FATE

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THE SAHARA CHRONICLES #1

Avalon Greene

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The Young Foreigner

This story is dedicated to my mother and my best friends who have continually encouraged me to keep writing.

Avalon Greene

The Young Foreigner

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: A JOURNEY BEGINS	9
PART I: THE YOUNG FOREIGNER.....	12
PART II: A DREAM.....	16
PART III: COMPANY.....	19
PART IV: LIGHT AND DARKNESS	23
PART V: PREPARING FOR THE SPRING FESTIVAL.....	24
PART VI: TRUST.....	30
PART VII: THE DARK PRINCESS	33
PART VIII: THE ALCHEMIST	39
PART IX: FOUND!	43

Avalon Greene

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

Avalon Greene

*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 girls and boys
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,
Wherever Destiny is going to take me.
She shall be my guide,*

The Young Foreigner

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 girls and boys

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

713 SM

Sahara

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

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 day before by a royal merchant ship that was headed in the same direction. Soon after thanking the captain, Yor was trudging slowly through the populated streets. The people he saw around him 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.

On the other side of this small but prosperous kingdom lived a farmer called John Hudson, a farmer by profession as well as passion. He lived in a cottage with a pretty 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 happy.

The Young Foreigner

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, the ruler of the kingdom, 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. Thereupon, 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, 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. So, he did not stop searching for someone who could remove her illness for good in as soon as possible.

It so happened that as Yor was passing the town square, he heard the town-crier shouting that the farmer, John Hudson, was willing to give up his land to that person who would cure his wife from a fatal illness very soon. The young man's ambitiousness overcame him. He checked his clothes to make sure he had all that he wanted—a flute, a hat, and a belt. He was neither a magician nor a physician, but he was confident that these three objects would help him cure the farmer's wife; they had cured all kinds of illnesses he had come across this past one year.

Thus equipped, the young man set forth to the farmer's cottage. He had to keep asking for direction, but he finally found it.

When he found John at the door and introduced himself and John heard what he had to say, he immediately let Yor in. He was led into the room where Alia lay on a bed just beneath the window, eyes closed and looking dangerously frail. John informed him in a

shaky voice that she looked much worse than the first day she had caught this terrible illness. The young foreigner went to stand beside her bed and took a good look at the victim.

In a moment, he knew just what to do. 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. He had never seen this young man before, although he had to agree that he looked sincere enough. He hoped that he found the right physician.

In the meantime, Yor set about with his task. He felt a movement from the direction of the bed; he took another good look at the pretty woman and realised that she was now awake, because she was convulsing in pain. He brandished his flute from the loop of his belt and put it to his lips.

At once, such sweet music floated through the whole room as no one had heard before; it somehow demanded to be listened to. As the notes of the music floated in the air, the invalid on the bed fell back into her slumber, looking every bit as relaxed as she felt.

When he finished his music, the young lad put the flute away. Then, setting his hat on a table beside him, the young lad took out from his magic belt two potions—one red, one brown—in small, narrow tubes; he poured the two liquids into his hat. Immediately, a bright yellow light flashed and, the next instant, the young lad had a yellow potion in his magic hat.

He then requested John, from across the bed, for a clean empty glass. John obliged at once. The lad poured this 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.

The Young Foreigner

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. If only his dear wife would come back to her regular self again...

Alia finally opened her eyes. Her gaze fell first 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.

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

PART II: 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. And soon, the lad began having visitors. John was very grateful for having his wife nursed back to health. He was quite willing to keep his promise and give away his farmland.

Yor, however, refused with utmost politeness. He would not take what little the farmer and his family had. And besides, he was a travelling man; he did not need a farm.

The farmer relented, but he would not be satisfied till he struck a bargain: "At least, let us host you for as long as you want to stay in Aloris, Yor."

The young man smiled warmly at this. "That I shall accept. 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." She looked healthier now and the colour in her face was beginning to come back to normal. She wore a different gown now; she had changed from the invalid clothes she had been wearing just moments ago.

The Young Foreigner

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

Alia laughed, “Oh John!”

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.

Yor had not planned on a definite period of stay in the Kingdom of Aloris, but he could not find the courage 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.

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.

What did keep him occupied was the recurring dream he had been having for a week since entering Aloris.

Now, a fortnight later, 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 to his cottage. The Selina Forest was rumoured to be a place where people didn't come back from. His parents scolding him did not matter to him, though, as it happened to him all the time. One 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.

Soon, he stumbled upon a well. It was a regular-looking one, quite old, it seemed. Upon approaching, young Yor realised that the well went down much deeper than he had imagined.

'The wishing well,' thought the boy, excitement building up inside his chest, for this was the first time he had ever seen the fabled structure.

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

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.

PART III: COMPANY

Yor sat up on his bed when 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.

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

At last, he shrugged to himself and 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 next week. It was a chief event in the entire kingdom of Aloris, it seemed, and every Alorian was excited about it.

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

In the kitchen, he could see a large cooking pot on the hearth. Alia was standing to the side, cutting vegetables with a sharp-looking knife. She seemed to have sensed his presence behind her, for she abruptly turned around. Upon spotting 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 took a step forward with a grin. “Oh, it's not a trouble at all, my lady!” he said. “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 last-minute items for the festival, and Jim has gone to get more firewood.”

“Definitely, my lady!” said Yor, giving 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 time, though – a lot of it. The chickens kept running away from him the moment he started approaching them! Nonetheless, he was quite confident of success now. Surely after a fortnight of being here, the chicks were used to him!

Turned out, that was not the case. The chicks were not even close to being friendly with him!

Finally, the young foreigner stopping chasing them and instead, spread the grain onto the ground. He pretended not to mind the chickens, which were watching his every move with great curiosity. When he was satisfied, Yor turned away and headed back inside the kitchen. Then, he set the tin aside, settled at the window, careful enough to stay hidden from the chickens outside, and sat watching.

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 that the others followed him.

“What’s the matter?”

The Young Foreigner

Yor turned around to see Alia Hudson smiling 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 at this. “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 resolved.”

“Is that so?” enquired Yor, turning back to see the chickens devouring hungrily on the grain. He smirked at that.

“Indeed,” replied Alia. “They should have been fed an hour ago, though, but the boys did not have the time – the market would get more crowded the later they went.”

Yor nodded. “I understand. The festival’s approaching soon.”

Just then, the sound of a horse cart came to his ears.

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

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

“Alia, we’re back!”

Yor saw the farmer standing inside the threshold, beaming at his pretty wife. Jim and Mike were standing on either side of him with enormous grins on their faces.

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

Alia moved towards him with her face lit up. “What is it, my love?” she asked, eagerly.

“Well,” replied John. He turned towards the front 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 in recognition.

'I wonder who it is,' he thought. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he knew he was now at the end of his search.

He spotted a green skirt thrust into the doorway. His eyes trailed up it, till it spotted a feminine face peering in bashfully. She had a heart-shaped face with red hair, a soft pair of eyes, a smooth, soft 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 IV: 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.*

PART V: PREPARING FOR THE SPRING FESTIVAL

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, little one."

She broke her gaze away from the stranger and walked up to her uncle. She took small, hesitant steps, quite conscious of herself.

"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

The Young Foreigner

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.

The young girl once more stared at the lad 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 cheeks coloured and she ducked slightly behind her uncle. That smile though, never once faded away... at least, not on her account. In fact, if anything, it only grew amused.

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

"Hello," said Yor, gazing at her with the utmost fascination.

She 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, 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 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.

However, the presence of the young lad in the house distracted her each time, though in a good way. 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, 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.

The day before the Spring Festival began, the entire household decided to take a break. While Alia and John had gone 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. Only Elmeida and Yor were left behind at home—Elmeida because she did not want to be left alone outside the comfort of the home and Yor because he wanted to have some peace and quiet, away from the noises and cheers outside.

That morning, Elmeida stepped out of her room after having changed for the day and saw Yor already set to begin his. He was seated 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.

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

The Young Foreigner

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, you know,” his velvety voice spoke up, immediately causing her to lift 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 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 away from your path if that’s what you want.”

He shook his head, his amused grin still on. “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 remark alarmed Elmeida and she took a step backward. “Oh,” she let out, not knowing how else to respond to such flattery bestowed upon her without warning.

Yor’s smile faded and a look of concern took over his face. “Er – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to –”

But, 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 at once looked relieved. “That makes me glad, my lady.”

An awkward silence ensued, with not one of them ready to talk. A few moments later, Yor decided to make the first move:

“Come, sit here with me, will you?”

Elmeida started, but recovered the very next second. “O-okay,” she stammered.

She looked him over. He was wearing regular clothes: a dark grey long-sleeved t-shirt and a pair of black comfortable-looking trousers. His face was as pleasant as she had seen the first day she got here with her uncle and she could not help feeling more relaxed around such positive ambience.

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. I lived there for seventeen years, before I decided to travel in search of the fortune I know is waiting for me. 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.

"Now, about a fortnight ago, I arrived in this Kingdom of Aloris, and, upon hearing how your aunt was taken severely ill, I decided to try my luck with my magical equipment."

She sucked in a breath. "Magical equipment?" Her cheeks grew warm with guilt.

The young man didn't seem to notice this. "Yes, my lady," he replied.

"And so, you succeeded," she said, softly. "So, it *is* true... what I heard in the country the day I came here. It was all over the marketplace." Then, 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 top of her eyes, she muttered, "Thank you, kind sir. Curing my aunt, I mean. It means a lot to me."

When she did not hear any response, she wondered if she had hurt him in any way. However, when she looked up, she was startled to see Yor's face too close to hers. She yelped and stepped away.

His face took on a sheepish grin. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you like that." But, looking at his face, he did not appear like he meant it. Which made her smile.

When they recovered, both of them laughed their hearts out. Their pleasantries echoed around the house, till they fell silent, taking in the likes and looks of one-another.

"Truly," said Yor, "I didn't mean to pry. You see, you're someone I've never come across before and yet you strike me as a special girl." Inwardly, he added, '*And because you*

The Young Foreigner

happened to have come in my dreams. I want to know why – after all, there’s always a reason behind every dream.’

“What’s so special about me?” repeated Elmeida, confused. “Why, sir, I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well...” Yor hesitated. “I...I’m about to say something that might frighten you; there’s something you should probably know.”

“Oh? And what is it?”

“You... er... you came in my dream last night.”

Elmeida’s eyebrows wrinkled at this. But, frightened? Not at all. In fact, he had been expecting something like this.

“I did? Truly?”

Yor nodded. “Indeed. All of last week. ’Til the night before you arrived here.”

“Uh. That’s strange now, isn’t it?” Elmeida pondered over what she was just told. “I... don’t know what to say.” But, inside, she thought in delight, *‘I think he is The One!’*

“It’s all right,” said Yor with a reassuring smile. “It could be nothing, really.”

A silence descended upon them.

Yor broke it: “So, what’s your story?” he asked Elmeida.

Her 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 and am positive that I’ve never seen the likes of you before.

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

PART VI: TRUST

Elmeida could find no words in this moment of surprise. She stared dumbly at Yor's expectant face.

Finally, 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 said at last. "But, you must be warned that it is not something you're going to like."

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

"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. He grew alert. It hit him for the first time that this young maiden may not be as delicate as she seemed on the outside.

The Young Foreigner

As he watched her, he suddenly realised that his surroundings had changed. 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 Almeida Yuri.

Yor tried not to be overwhelmed by shock. He took in a deep breath and gulped. He looked at his strange companion once more. she seemed to be suspended in thin air, with a red bubble around her. 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, Almeida opened her eyes. A small smile spread over her face.

“My apologies for this sudden invasion into your mind,” she said. “But, I want to show, rather than tell you, my story.”

She looked at the expression on his face.

“M...mind?” was all he could manage to breathe out.

“I see you’re afraid,” she noted. “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.”

At this, Almeida 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.”

With that, the blackness around them faded away, paving way for a fresh bright scenery.

PART VII: 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 prosecuting..."

At this point, the scene of Elmeida's parents faded away and he could see that her face took on a darker, sadder expression.

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

A moment of silence followed this revelation. Yor took this opportunity to digest all that he was told. A wave of anxiety crossed him and he began to feel scared. He didn't know why, though, until he looked at her again. That was when he realised that he was feeling everything she was. Elmeida had a faraway look in her eyes and did not seem like she was on the same page as he. He was curious to learn more, but he was patient enough to give her time.

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?" he asked her, gently. "In fact... if I understand correctly, it was the very reason for your arrival here."

At this, he could see that he had struck a chord in her. When she focussed her eyes on him, Elmeida looked as if she was going to explode in anger, 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?"

Now Elmeida frowned at him, confusion smeared all over her face.

He added, "Your face, Elmeida, is like an open book and written in a language that's easy to read."

She nodded in acknowledgement. "All right," she whispered quietly, after a momentary silence. She took in a deep breath and let it out.

Yor waited patiently for her to speak again. He knew it could not be easy to talk about her troubles, which seemed far deeper than his own.

Elmeida spoke up: "Well, my mother was the Dark Queen and it seems to have passed on to me."

The Young Foreigner

Now, it all became clear to Yor.

“So, that’s how you can do all this,” he gasped at his own discovery. “You have magic! And the Dark Princess, too!”

Elmeida smiled wanly as she shrugged. “Not really. I mean, my mother never actually declared an heir to the throne of the Dark Queen, so I don’t know if I *am* her successor.”

“How can that be? Unless, 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, he could see even from the distance, was close to tears. Her trembling voice confirmed it for him: “Y-yes.”

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

At this point, Elmeida’s knees gave way and she collapsed onto the floor, which he only then realised was there, invisible to him. 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.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a gentle voice. “I’m sorry I made you speak when you clearly weren’t ready to.”

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 and her trembling eventually stopped. They stayed like this for a while.

“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. It had to be tethered to a human being.”

Yor released her at this point and stepped back.

“I’ve read about that,” he remarked. “The Dark tribe Morgan, isn’t it?”

Elmeida nodded. “Named after our founder and ancestor, Morgana.”

“Well, do go on.”

Now, the scene changed to what looked to be a 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 his Darkness, shortly before Lady Celia and Master Merlin vanished from the face of Sahara. Salavador was then the Dark Prince, because he had no sister. He later succeeded his mother, and was named the first Dark King 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 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.

“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. 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.”

The Young Foreigner

“But, that isn’t the truth. 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 anything in the body of the person it was tethered to before.”

Now, Yor could see what looked like a big rounded object between him and Elmeida. It was black in colour. Not a particularly pretty sight, he thought. Still, he couldn’t help staring at it in fascination.

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

Yor looked up at her and had a sense of Deja-vu. For, he realised now that he was staring at the girl he had been seeing in the well of his dreams. He was now sure of this now.

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.”

His forehead creased slightly, indicating confusion. “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, as a matter of fact. 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.”

Yor's gaze penetrated into hers. "Are you?" he asked with deliberate emphasis.

Her eyes widened then. "I honestly never tried to know," she responded, when her tongue finally began to work again. "I never even thought about it! Well, you're the first to ask me that question!"

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

Elmeida's face took on an angry note at first, before it dissolved into a pleasant, rather sad smile. "Your wits are quite sharp, ain't they?"

He grinned. "I should say they are."

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

PART VIII: 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, you're deceiving me, ain't you?" His velvety voice turned husky with a note of alarm blending in.

She shook her head in negative. "No, sir, I ain't. They really were."

"B-but how?!"

Elmeida sighed as the recollection of the previous week's events filled her mind.

"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."

"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 as the memory of the tragic day replayed in her mind. For once, she did not care that she was showing her vulnerability to a stranger. 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."

"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 quite mechanically leaned forward to comfort her. She gladly accepted his strong arms.

They remained like that for a while until she ceased crying. He wiped her fragile face with gentle fingers.

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." She cleared her throat once more. "I say, what's *your* story?"

Yor's expression of concern changed to a happy grin when he replied, "Ah! Well enough to hear my story, I see!"

"Of course!" The Darkness around them faded away and they were back in the Hudson's little cottage. "Now, please, tell me. I've told you mine. You owe me yours!"

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

The Young Foreigner

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 over her smile.

Yor felt a little guilty about broaching the matter now. “I’m sorry to hear that,” he said quietly. “Well, I suppose you want to hear my story now.”

She looked up at him with a smile.

“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 happens, my lady. 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 obliviousness. “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 IX: FOUND!

The young lady's question threw him off. Yor did not know what to say. He stared at her with an outright blank expression on his face, blinking naïvely.

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

Elmeida opened her mouth and the soft, lilting voice of her laughter echoed around the small house. Immediately, a sense of tranquillity filled him and he relaxed, almost forgetting the topic of their discussion and concentrating only on the smile on her face.

"Well," she said, composing herself, "you do remember the story of Merlin and Lady Celia, don't you?" Her eyes still peered at him with a humorous glint.

"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.

"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 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 their fortune. 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 stopped when a loud scream was heard in the distance. It came 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 and he told her what he saw. At this, a gasp escaped her throat.

“What’s the matter?” he asked her. He knew that there was something on her mind that she hesitated telling him. “What is it, Elmeida? Perhaps I can help you.”

She adamantly shook her head. “No, you won’t be able to,” she told him. Then, she opened the door and walked out – just like that!

Yor, unable to remain in the dark any longer, followed her outside, just so he could keep a close eye on her. He felt around his hips for his prized belt and was glad to find that it was still clinging to him. He felt equipped enough to face any sort of emergency now.

Elmeida, in the meantime, 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??’*

The Young Foreigner

He did not have time to think more, as Elmeida went on.

“Why don’t you take me now and leave this peaceful kingdom alone?!”

Yor was startled at her words. He wanted to demand if she was out of her mind, but nevertheless, he stood his ground. He wanted to see how this would turn out.

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.

Avalon Greene