\*\*"THE LEGEND OF THE WIZARD LAND" \*\*

## \*\*PROLOGUE: THE DAY EVERYTHING CHANGED\*\*

The basement of 3 Science Street felt colder than usual on May 27, 2017. Devon's hands shook as he worked on the strange machine that filled most of the concrete room. Wires snaked everywhere like metal vines. Crystals the size of his fist glowed with an eerie blue light.

"Almost done," he whispered to himself, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Marina stood nearby, her red braid falling over her shoulder as she leaned in to watch. She always smelled like rain and flowers—a scent that made their little house feel like home.

"Are you sure this will work?" she asked, touching one of the crystals gently.

Devon nodded, though his stomach twisted with worry. The Para-Time Machine was his life's work, but he'd never tested it on anything living before. A crumpled note on his workbench read: \*One soul per jump. Use with extreme caution.\*

"Just a quick test," he said. "We'll send through a pencil first, then—"

The machine suddenly hummed to life. The crystals blazed brighter than the sun. Marina stepped back, but she was too close. Light exploded through the room like lightning.

"Marina!" Devon lunged forward, but his fingers only caught empty air where she had been standing a second before.

She was gone.

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## \*\*CHAPTER 1: EIGHT YEARS OF LIES\*\*

\*Eight years later\*

"Your mother died in a car accident when you were six."

That's what Devon had always told Jarus. That's what Jarus believed for eight long years. He'd grown up thinking his mom was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, under a headstone that read \*Marina Varnel: Beloved Mother.\*

But Devon had lied.

Every single day for eight years, he'd lied.

Now fourteen, Jarus sat on the old couch in their living room at 3 Science Street, playing video games and trying not to think about the empty feeling in his chest. The feeling that had been there as long as he could remember—like a piece of him was missing.

Sometimes he'd catch Devon staring at nothing, holding an old red scarf that smelled faintly of rain and flowers. When Jarus asked about it, Devon would just say it belonged to his mother and quickly put it away.

The house felt too quiet most days. Just Devon and Jarus, eating dinner in silence, watching TV without really watching. Devon worked at the university as an engineer, but he spent most of his free time in the basement.

"Working on important research," he'd say whenever Jarus asked. "Nothing you need to worry about, kiddo."

The basement door was always locked. Devon wore the key on a chain around his neck, never taking it off, not even to shower.

But today was different. Today, Jarus heard something from downstairs that made his skin prickle with goosebumps.

A low, mechanical humming. Like a giant computer starting up.

Jarus paused his game and listened. The sound grew louder, then softer, then stopped completely. He'd never heard anything like it before.

"Dad?" he called out, but got no answer. Devon was at the university, wouldn't be home for hours.

So what was making that noise?

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## \*\*CHAPTER 2: THE FRIEND WITH SECRETS\*\*

The doorbell rang just as Jarus was working up the courage to investigate the basement sounds. He opened it to find Helda Korran standing on his porch, her brown hair pulled back in a messy ponytail and her silver eyes sparkling with mischief.

Helda was Devon's best friend's daughter. She was also the most curious person Jarus had ever met—sometimes too curious for her own good.

"Hey, Jarus!" She pushed past him into the house like she owned the place. "Is your dad home?"

"No, he's at work. Why?"

Helda's grin got wider. "Perfect. I need to show you something."

She pulled out her phone and showed him a video. In it, a woman who looked exactly like Devon's colleague was being interviewed on some science program. The woman was talking about "temporal displacement experiments" and "quantum field manipulation."

"That's Dr. Elena Voss," Helda said. "She worked with your dad about ten years ago on something called Project Eryndor. Look at the date on this interview."

Jarus squinted at the screen. The date stamp read: May 28, 2017.

"The day after your mom supposedly died," Helda continued. "Funny coincidence, right? Especially since Dr. Voss disappeared right after this interview aired. No one's seen her since."

Jarus's mouth went dry. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying your dad's been lying to you." Helda's voice got serious for once. "My mom heard rumors at the university. People whisper about Devon Varnel and his 'failed experiment.' About how something went wrong in his basement eight years ago."

The humming sound started again from downstairs, louder this time.

Helda's eyes went wide. "What is that?"

"I... I don't know." Jarus's heart was pounding. "Dad never lets me in the basement."

"Well, he's not here now, is he?" Helda grabbed his arm. "Come on. Don't you want to know what really happened to your mom?"

Jarus stared at the basement door. He'd wondered about it his whole life. Devon's "important research." The strange noises. The way his dad sometimes woke up in the middle of the night, screaming a name that sounded like "Marina."

"We can't," Jarus said weakly. "It's locked."

Helda reached into her pocket and pulled out a small metal tool. "Good thing I know how to pick locks."

Before Jarus could stop her, she was already kneeling by the basement door, working at the lock with practiced fingers.

"Helda, don't—"

Click.

The lock opened.

Helda grinned up at him. "Oops."

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**CHAPTER 3: THE MACHINE IN THE DARK (REVISED)**

The basement stairs creaked under their feet as they descended into darkness. Jarus's hands were shaking so badly he could barely hold the flashlight app on his phone steady.

"This is a terrible idea," he whispered.

"The best ideas usually are," Helda whispered back, but her voice lacked its usual confidence.

When they reached the bottom, Jarus's breath caught in his throat.

The basement looked like something out of a science fiction movie. Strange crystals mounted on metal stands filled most of the room, connected by thick cables that hummed with electricity. Banks of computer monitors lined one wall, all showing scrolling data he couldn't understand.

But it was the machine in the center that made Jarus's blood run cold.

It looked like a giant metal archway, about eight feet tall and six feet wide. The frame was covered in symbols that seemed to shift and change when he wasn't looking directly at them. Inside the arch was nothing but empty air—but the air itself seemed to shimmer, like heat waves rising from hot pavement.

"Holy..." Helda breathed. "Is that what I think it is?"

Jarus approached the machine slowly, his heart hammering against his ribs. Something about it felt... familiar. Like he'd seen it before, in dreams he couldn't quite remember.

On a table nearby, he spotted a familiar red scarf—his mother's scarf. Next to it was an old notebook, open to a page covered in his dad's handwriting. But this wasn't the first page. Dozens of similar logs were scattered across the surface.

*Test Log: Day 2,847* *Subject: Still no sign of Marina* *Machine Status: Stable, but cannot determine destination coordinates* *Note: Jarus asked about his mother again today. I told him the same lie. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up. If I can't bring her back...*

Jarus picked up another page, then another. Each one told the same story—failed attempts, growing desperation, eight years of trying to find her.

*Test Log: Day 156* *The machine responds to emotional resonance. Marina's scarf triggered a brief portal opening.*

*Test Log: Day 892* *Strange dreams again. I see her calling for help, but I can't reach her.*

*Test Log: Day 2,156* *Jarus had another nightmare about "the lady with red hair." He's never met his mother, but somehow...*

The words hit Jarus like a physical blow. His legs gave out and he sank into a nearby chair, the notebooks clutched in his trembling hands.

"She's not dead," he whispered. "My mom's not dead. She's... somewhere else."

Helda was examining the machine, but she'd gone quiet. When Jarus looked up, he saw tears in her eyes.

"Jarus," she said softly, "there's something I need to tell you."

"What?"

"My dad... he didn't just disappear eight years ago." Her voice cracked. "He was working with your father on this. Project Eryndor. And the day your mom vanished..." She took a shaky breath. "That was the day my dad stopped coming home too."

Jarus stared at her. "You think they're together? Wherever she is?"

"I think they're both trapped somewhere, scared and alone, thinking no one is coming for them." Helda wiped her eyes. "If there was even a chance we could find them..."

Before Jarus could respond, something extraordinary happened. The crystals around the room began to pulse with a soft blue light. The monitors suddenly displayed new data—coordinates that seemed to shift and change.

And from somewhere deep in his mind, Jarus heard a voice. Soft and familiar, like an echo from a half-remembered dream:

*"My star... you're so close now. Please, find me before it's too late."*

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

Helda looked confused. "Hear what?"

The voice came again, stronger this time: *"The machine knows you now. It's been waiting for you."*

Jarus stood up slowly, drawn toward the control panel. The symbols on the archway were definitely moving now, rearranging themselves into new patterns. The air inside shimmered more brightly.

"Something's happening," he said.

Helda joined him at the controls. "Look at this." She pointed to a screen that showed two blinking dots. "These coordinates... they're not random anymore. It's like the machine is trying to lock onto something."

Jarus's hand moved toward the control panel without his conscious decision. His fingers hovered over a large red button labeled 'ACTIVATE.'

"We don't know how it works," he said, but his voice sounded distant to his own ears.

"Maybe we don't need to," Helda replied. "Maybe it knows how to work itself."

The voice in his head grew urgent: *"Now, my star. Before the connection fades. Trust the machine. Trust me."*

"Mom?" Jarus whispered to the empty air.

The crystals pulsed brighter. The monitors showed the coordinates stabilizing. And somewhere in the distance, he could swear he heard his mother calling his name.

"I have to try," he said, looking at Helda. "I can't live with the lie anymore. I can't pretend she's dead when she might be out there waiting for us."

Helda nodded, fresh tears streaming down her face. "For our parents."

"For our parents."

Together, they placed their hands on the activation switch.

The machine roared to life.

## \*\*CHAPTER 4: THE JUMP\*\*

Light exploded through the basement like a thousand camera flashes going off at once. The crystals blazed so brightly that Jarus had to squeeze his eyes shut, but the light seemed to burn right through his eyelids.

The humming sound became a deafening roar, like standing next to a jet engine. The floor beneath his feet vibrated so hard his teeth rattled.

"Jarus!" Helda's voice seemed to come from very far away, even though she was standing right next to him.

He looked around and realized he could see two different versions of reality at once. The basement was still there, but overlapping it was something else—a stone room with tall windows and sunlight streaming through. He was standing in both places simultaneously.

"What's happening to us?" Helda asked, but her voice was getting fainter.

Something was happening to his body. He could feel himself coming apart, like he was made of sand and someone was scattering him to the wind. His thoughts became fuzzy, disconnected.

\*This is how I die,\* he thought distantly. \*Just like Mom.\*

Fragments of images flashed through his consciousness as he dissolved: a stone castle, a red-haired woman singing lullabies, sword practice in a sunny courtyard, someone calling his name in a voice full of love and worry.

*"Find me, my star. Before it's too late."*

The voice was clearer now, more real. And for just a moment, he could see her—his mother, but not as he remembered her from Earth. This was someone wearing a crown, standing in a place of power, reaching across an impossible distance to guide him home.

Then everything went black.

## \*\*CHAPTER 5: WAKING UP WRONG\*\*

Jarus woke up to sunlight streaming across his face—which was impossible, because his bedroom window faced west and the sun never shone directly through it in the morning.

He sat up slowly, his head pounding like he had the worst hangover in history. Which was also impossible, since he'd never had alcohol in his life.

"What the..." he started to say, then stopped.

This wasn't his bedroom.

This wasn't even his house.

He was lying in a bed that looked like it belonged in a castle. The mattress was soft but lumpy, covered with heavy blankets that smelled like lavender and wood smoke. The walls were made of gray stone, not the familiar drywall of his house on Science Street.

Tall windows with diamond-shaped glass panes let in golden morning light. Through them, he could see rolling hills covered with forests that stretched to the horizon. In the distance, he could make out what looked like a massive structure with towers reaching toward the sky—and floating at its highest point, something that glinted like crystal in the morning sun.

No cars. No power lines. No buildings he recognized.

Where the hell was he?

Jarus threw off the blankets and stumbled to his feet—then immediately stumbled again when he caught sight of himself in a full-length mirror across the room.

The person staring back at him was... wrong.

It was still him, but not him. Same basic face shape, same height, but everything else was different. His normally blonde hair was now black. His brown eyes had changed to pale silver that seemed to glow in the morning light. His skin was paler, and there were small scars on his hands that he'd never had before.

But the clothes were the worst part. Instead of his usual t-shirt and jeans, he was wearing what looked like medieval prince costume: a white shirt with puffy sleeves, dark blue pants tucked into leather boots, and a silver belt with an ornate buckle.

"This isn't real," he whispered to his reflection. "This is just a really weird dream."

He pinched himself hard on the arm. It hurt. He pinched himself again, harder. Still hurt.

Not a dream.

Panic started to bubble up in his chest. His breathing got fast and shallow. The room seemed to spin around him.

"Okay," he said out loud, trying to stay calm. "Okay, there's got to be a logical explanation. Maybe I hit my head when the machine activated. Maybe I'm in a hospital somewhere and this is all just... hallucination from brain damage or something."

But even as he said it, he knew it wasn't true. Everything felt too real. The smell of the lavender, the texture of the stone walls, the weight of the unfamiliar clothes on his body.

He was somewhere else. He was \*someone\* else.

And he had no idea how to get home.

A knock on the door made him jump about three feet in the air.

"Your Highness?" called a voice from the other side. "Are you awake? Your breakfast is ready."

\*Your Highness?\*

Jarus stared at the door in horror. Whoever lived in this body, whatever this place was, he was apparently supposed to be some kind of prince.

And he had absolutely no idea how to be one.

## \*\*CHAPTER 6: QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS\*\*

Jarus stood frozen in front of the mirror, staring at his transformed reflection. His mind raced with impossible questions. How was he here? What was this place? What had happened to his real body?

Most importantly—what had happened to Helda?

The knock came again, more insistent this time.

"Your Highness? Prince Jarus? Your tutor is waiting for you in the breakfast hall."

Prince Jarus. So whoever's body this was, they shared his name. That couldn't be a coincidence.

"Just... just a minute!" he called back, his voice cracking. Even his voice sounded different—still recognizably his, but with a slight accent he couldn't place.

He needed time to think, to figure out what was happening. But he also needed answers, and the only way to get them was to play along until he understood more.

Taking a deep breath, Jarus walked to the door and opened it.

A young woman stood in the hallway, wearing a simple brown dress and a white apron. She had kind eyes and a worried expression.

"Are you feeling alright, Your Highness? You look pale."

"I'm... fine," Jarus managed. "Just a little confused. I think I might have hit my head or something. Everything seems a bit... fuzzy."

The woman's expression grew more concerned. "Should I call for the healer? Or perhaps send word to the Central Academy? They have healers there who specialize in memory ailments."

"No!" Jarus said quickly. "No, I'm sure it's nothing. Just... maybe you could remind me where I'm supposed to go? For breakfast?"

She gave him a strange look. "The same place you always go, Your Highness. Down the main staircase, second door on the left. Shall I escort you?"

"That would be great, actually. Thank you..."

"Sarah, Your Highness. As always."

Sarah. He was supposed to know her name, but he didn't. How many other people was he supposed to know? How was he going to fake his way through conversations with friends and family he'd never met?

As they walked through the castle—because that's definitely what this place was—Jarus tried to memorize everything he saw. Stone corridors lined with tapestries showing battles between different groups of people. Some wore the heavy armor he associated with warriors, others carried bows and moved with fluid grace, still others wielded staffs that seemed to glow with inner light.

"Sarah," he said carefully as they walked, "can you remind me what day it is?"

She gave him another worried look. "It's the twenty-eighth day of Mayblossom, Your Highness. The same as it was yesterday."

Mayblossom. Definitely not a month he recognized from any calendar.

"And... the kingdoms?" he asked, testing what he'd heard from the voice outside. "How many are there again?"

"Seven, as always, Your Highness. The five traditional kingdoms—Ironhold for the Warriors, Swiftwood for the Archers, Crystalvale for the Mages, Brightmeadow for the Healers, and Fairhaven for the Commoners. Then there are the Darkswamps where the Rogues dwell, and..." she paused, her voice dropping to a whisper, "the forbidden lands around Blacklake."

\*Seven kingdoms.\* Jarus filed that information away. This world was more complex than he'd initially thought.

They reached a large wooden door, and Sarah pushed it open to reveal a dining hall that looked like something out of a fantasy movie. Long tables, high ceilings, banners hanging from the walls. And sitting at the head table...

Jarus's heart nearly stopped.

It was his mother. Or someone who looked exactly like his mother, anyway. Same red hair, same green eyes, same warm smile. But she was wearing a blue dress that looked like it cost more than his dad's car, and there was a small silver crown on her head.

"Good morning, my star," she said, using the pet name she'd called him in what he'd thought was just a dream. "Come, sit. You look tired."

Jarus's legs felt like jelly as he walked toward the table. This couldn't be real. His mother was lost somewhere because of his dad's time machine. She couldn't be here, couldn't be a queen in some medieval fantasy world.

But as he got closer, he could smell her familiar scent of rain and flowers. Could see the little scar on her hand from when she'd cut herself making him a sandwich when he was five.

It was her. It was really her.

"Mom?" he whispered.

She smiled. "Of course, darling. Who else would I be?"

Jarus sank into the chair next to her, his mind reeling. None of this made sense. The machine had been built eight years ago. His mom had disappeared eight years ago. But if she was here, and if this medieval world was real, then how had she become a queen? How long had she been here?

And most importantly—did she remember him at all?

"You seem troubled," she said, reaching over to touch his forehead. "Are you feeling ill?"

Her touch was warm and familiar, but there was something in her eyes—a distance that hadn't been there before. Like she was looking at him but not quite seeing him.

"I'm okay," he said. "Just... confused about some things. Mom, do you remember our house? On Science Street?"

She frowned slightly. "I'm not sure what you mean, darling. We've always lived here in the castle."

Jarus's heart sank. She didn't remember. Somehow, the machine had brought her here and made her forget her real life. Made her forget him.

"Do you remember Devon?" he tried.

"Devon?" She looked genuinely puzzled. "I don't know anyone by that name."

So she'd forgotten his dad too. Eight years of marriage, erased like it had never happened.

A man entered the dining hall—tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair and sharp eyes. He wore robes that marked him as nobility, and when he smiled at Marina, there was genuine warmth there.

"Good morning, my queen," he said, kissing her hand. "And good morning, Prince Jarus."

Marina's face lit up. "Jarus, you remember your father, King Feron, don't you?"

\*Father.\* This man wasn't his father. His father was Devon, back on Earth, probably panicking about what had happened to his son. But Marina was looking at this King Feron with the same love she'd once looked at Devon with.

A terrible thought occurred to him. If his mom didn't remember her real life, and if he was somehow in the body of her son in this world... did that mean the real Jarus—the prince whose body he was wearing—was gone forever?

Had he stolen someone's life just by being here?

Before he could ask any more questions, the dining hall doors burst open and a boy who looked about nineteen strode in, wearing armor and carrying a sword at his side.

He had the same black hair and silver eyes as Jarus's new appearance, but he was taller and more muscular. When he saw Jarus, his face broke into a wide grin.

"Little brother!" he called out. "Ready for sword practice? Though I heard some of the Central Academy students are visiting today—they've been talking about unusual energy readings around the floating horn."

Little brother.

Jarus realized with growing horror that he wasn't just supposed to be a prince in this world.

He was supposed to be someone's son. Someone's brother.

Someone whose life he'd accidentally stolen.

And he had no idea how to give it back.

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## \*\*CHAPTER 7: THE GRANDFATHER'S GIFT\*\*

Three days had passed since Jarus's awakening in this strange world, and he was slowly learning to navigate his new life. The sword practice with Mehraj had become a daily routine, though his brother's skill remained far superior. Each morning brought new challenges—remembering names, understanding customs, pretending to know people he'd never met.

But today felt different. Today, there was an excitement in the castle that Jarus couldn't quite understand.

"Your grandfather arrives this morning," Marina announced at breakfast, her face glowing with happiness. "Kemran always brings such wonderful stories from his travels."

Jarus nearly choked on his bread. "Grandfather?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten Grandfather Kemran too," Mehraj said with concern. "Your memory troubles are worse than we thought."

King Feron leaned forward, his expression serious. "Perhaps we should have that healer examine you after all, son."

"No, it's... it's coming back to me," Jarus lied, though he was genuinely curious about this grandfather he was supposed to know. "Kemran. Yes. He's... traveling?"

"Always traveling," Marina laughed. "That man has been to every corner of Eryndor and beyond. He says the world is too interesting to stay in one place for long."

As if summoned by their conversation, the dining hall doors swung open with dramatic flair. A man who could only be described as larger than life strode in, his arms spread wide and a booming laugh echoing off the stone walls.

Grandfather Kemran was not what Jarus had expected. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a magnificent white beard that reached his chest and twinkling blue eyes that seemed to see everything. He wore traveling clothes—leather boots, a dark green cloak, and a hat with a feather that had definitely seen better days. But it was his presence that filled the room, a warmth and energy that made everyone smile just by being near him.

"My family!" he boomed, sweeping Marina into a bear hug that lifted her off her feet. "How I've missed you all!"

He embraced Feron with equal enthusiasm, clapped Mehraj on the back hard enough to make him stagger, and then turned to Jarus with eyes that seemed to look right through him.

"And my youngest grandson," Kemran said, his voice suddenly softer. "Come here, boy."

Jarus stood uncertainly, not sure what to expect. But when Kemran's arms wrapped around him, he felt something he hadn't felt since arriving in this world—a sense of safety, of belonging. It was as if this man could see past the confusion and fear to something deeper.

"You've grown," Kemran murmured, holding him at arm's length to study his face. "And there's something different about you. Something... new."

The way he said it made Jarus wonder if Kemran somehow knew he wasn't really the prince. But before he could worry too much about it, the old man was already moving on to other topics.

"I bring news from the Central Academy," Kemran announced, settling into a chair with theatrical flair. "They're having their spring exhibitions next week, and I thought young Jarus here might benefit from a visit."

"The Academy?" Marina looked uncertain. "But his memory troubles—"

"All the more reason to go!" Kemran's eyes twinkled. "Nothing jogs the mind like seeing the floating horn and watching the students practice their class abilities. Besides, I've already spoken with the instructors. They're quite eager to see how our prince has progressed."

Jarus felt a flutter of panic. He had no idea what these class abilities were, let alone how to demonstrate any. But Mehraj was nodding approvingly.

"It's a good idea," his brother said. "The Academy has the best healers in all seven kingdoms. If anyone can help with memory loss, it's them."

"Then it's settled!" Kemran clapped his hands together. "We leave after lunch. Pack light, boy—we'll only be gone a few days."

The next few hours passed in a blur of preparation. Sarah helped him pack clothes he'd never worn, books he'd never read, and supplies for a journey he wasn't sure he was ready for. But it was Kemran who provided the most interesting moment of the morning.

"Before we go," the old man said, appearing in Jarus's doorway with a small wooden box in his hands, "I have something for you. A gift I've been saving for the right moment."

Jarus accepted the box with curiosity. It was heavier than it looked, made of dark wood carved with intricate patterns that seemed to shift in the light.

"Open it," Kemran encouraged, his voice unusually serious.

Inside, nestled in soft velvet, was a necklace unlike anything Jarus had ever seen. The chain was made of what looked like silver, but it caught light in ways that silver shouldn't. And the pendant... the pendant was extraordinary.

It was shaped like a horn—similar to the ones he'd glimpsed on some of the castle's warriors—but this one was different. Instead of a single color, it contained five distinct hues that seemed to flow and blend within the crystalline structure. Deep blue like ocean depths, bright red like flame, silver like moonlight, green like new leaves, and gold like sunlight. The colors moved within the horn as if they were alive.

"It's beautiful," Jarus whispered, lifting the necklace from the box. The moment his fingers touched it, he felt a strange warmth spread through his body.

"It belonged to your great-great-grandfather," Kemran said, though something in his tone suggested there was more to the story. "It's been in our family for generations, waiting for the right person to wear it."

Jarus fastened the necklace around his neck, and immediately felt... different. Not physically, but as if something inside him had awakened. The pendant settled against his chest, warm and comforting.

"How do I look?" he asked, turning to the mirror.

But when he looked at his reflection, he saw only his transformed face and the clothes he wore. The necklace was gone—completely invisible.

"Kemran?" he turned back to his grandfather, confused. "I can't see it in the mirror."

The old man's eyes were bright with something that might have been pride. "Only you can see it now, grandson. That's how you know it was meant for you."

"But why can't others see it?"

Kemran moved closer, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Some gifts are too important to display openly. Some powers are too valuable to advertise. You'll understand in time."

Before Jarus could ask more questions, Mehraj appeared in the doorway, already dressed in traveling clothes and carrying a pack.

"Ready to go?" his brother asked. "The Academy is a full day's ride, and Grandfather wants to arrive before sunset."

As they prepared to leave, Jarus caught Mehraj adjusting something at his neck—a quick, almost unconscious gesture. For just a moment, he thought he saw a glint of something metallic, something that looked like it might be horn-shaped. But when he looked more carefully, there was nothing there.

\*Just like mine,\* he thought, touching the spot where his own invisible necklace rested.

The ride to the Central Academy was unlike anything Jarus had ever experienced. They traveled on horses that moved with an otherworldly grace, their hooves barely seeming to touch the ground. The landscape around them was breathtaking—rolling hills covered in forests that seemed to glow with inner light, streams that sang as they flowed, and in the distance, mountains that touched the clouds.

But it was Kemran who made the journey truly memorable. The old man seemed to know every stone, every tree, every bend in the road. He told stories as they rode—tales of ancient battles between the kingdoms, legends of heroes who could command the elements, and myths about powers that had been lost to time.

"The world is full of magic, grandson," he said as they crested a hill that gave them their first view of the Central Academy. "But not all magic is obvious. Sometimes the greatest power is the kind that remains hidden until it's truly needed."

Jarus stared at the Academy in wonder. It was enormous—a complex of white stone buildings that seemed to spiral up toward the sky. Students moved between the structures like colorful ants, some carrying weapons, others with staffs that glowed with inner light, still others whose very movements seemed to bend the air around them.

But it was the floating horn that took his breath away.

High above the central tower, suspended in midair with no visible support, hung what looked like a unicorn's horn the size of a building. It rotated slowly, catching the afternoon sunlight and casting rainbow patterns across the Academy grounds. Energy seemed to pulse from it in waves, and Jarus could feel the power even from a distance.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Kemran said, following his gaze. "They say it's been floating there for a thousand years, ever since the first Chosen Ones established the Academy."

"Chosen Ones?" Jarus asked, his hand unconsciously moving to touch his hidden necklace.

"Ah," Kemran's eyes twinkled. "Now that's a story for another time. For now, let's just say that some people are born to greatness, while others have greatness thrust upon them. The trick is knowing which kind of person you are."

As they rode through the Academy gates, Jarus couldn't shake the feeling that his grandfather knew more about his situation than he was letting on. The old man's words seemed carefully chosen, his glances too knowing.

And when a group of students passed by, Jarus could have sworn he saw Kemran nod subtly to one of them—a young woman whose hand briefly touched her throat in what might have been acknowledgment.

But when he looked more carefully, she was just another student, and Kemran was already dismounting, calling out greetings to the instructors who had come to welcome them.

"Come along, Jarus," his grandfather called. "Time to see what the Academy can teach you about yourself."

As they walked toward the main building, Jarus felt his hidden necklace pulse with warmth against his chest. Whatever secrets this place held, whatever mysteries surrounded the Chosen Ones and their powers, he had the distinct feeling he was about to become part of something much larger than himself.

And despite the fear and confusion of the past few days, for the first time since arriving in this world, he felt truly excited about what lay ahead.

## \*\*CHAPTER 8: MEANWHILE: THE GATHERING SHADOW\*\*

\*Meanwhile, far from the Central Academy...\*

Two hundred years ago, Blacklake Castle was the site of the Great War that nearly destroyed all seven kingdoms. Warriors from Ironhold fought Mages from Crystalvale while the sky burned with magical fire. The First Emperor—the last of his kind—ended the war by casting a spell so powerful it cost him his life. But his spirit remained, bound to the castle forever.

Since then, Blacklake has been abandoned. No one can find it unless they're meant to. The Emperor's soul makes sure of that.

No one enters the castle.

No one... except the Chosen.

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\*\*Inside the Ruined Throne Hall\*\*

The castle looked like something from a nightmare. Broken towers rose from a dark lake like giant fingers. Dead vines covered fallen statues. The throne room was mostly rubble now, but ancient magic still hummed in the air.

At the far end stood a tall black mirror, the only thing that hadn't been destroyed by time.

Tonight, it was glowing.

Five figures walked through the ruined doorway, their footsteps echoing. Each wore different colored cloaks, and each had power radiating from them like heat from a fire. On their right hands, all five bore the same mark—a small horn seal that only other Chosen Ones could see.

Shade stepped forward first. He was tall and intimidating, wearing a black cloak that seemed to swallow light. Even the other Chosen Ones stayed a careful distance from him. His power was the strongest, and his reputation was darker than his clothes.

Next to him stood Veil, a woman in a gray cloak. She was an archer whose arrows never missed their target, no matter how impossible the shot.

Behind them was Echo, a woman who looked ordinary except for the way shadows seemed to bend around her. She was a Commoner by class, but her abilities made her anything but common.

Light stood to the side, a man wearing white robes with golden threads. He was a Healer, but his power could burn as easily as it could cure.

And finally, there was Rune—a young woman whose blue robes sparkled with tiny stars. She was the newest of the five, still learning to control her incredible magical strength.

The five approached the mirror together.

The air shimmered. The mirror's surface rippled like water.

Then a voice spoke—deep and ancient, like the sound of mountains moving.

"My Chosen Ones. You have come."

A ghostly figure appeared in the mirror. It wore the robes of an Emperor, but its face was made of shadow and starlight. This was the First Emperor, the one who had died to save their world.

"Shade, Veil, Echo, Light, Rune. All five are here. Good."

The Chosen Ones said nothing. They had been trained to listen first, speak second.

"Your horn seals burn brighter each day," the Emperor continued. "Your powers grow stronger. But there is something you must know."

Shade's eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

The Emperor's ghostly form flickered. "A Sixth is coming."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees.

"Impossible," Rune whispered, her young voice shaking. "There are only five Chosen. There have always been only five."

"Not this time," the Emperor said sadly. "The signs are all there. The ancient magic stirs. The balance shifts. Soon, a Sixth will awaken to his power."

Light stepped forward, his golden aura pulsing brighter. "What kind of Sixth?"

The mirror cracked slightly. "We call this one... the Calamity."

Echo's form flickered. "Calamity? That doesn't sound good."

"The name itself is a warning," the Emperor explained. "This Chosen One will not belong to any single kingdom or class. He will be something... new. Something we have never seen before."

Veil's voice was sharp as her arrows. "How powerful?"

The Emperor paused, as if the answer was too terrible to speak. "If the old prophecies are true... he could have the power of fifty Emperors."

The Chosen Ones looked at each other nervously. All except Shade, whose expression remained cold.

"Each of you is strong enough to match half an Emperor," the Emperor continued. "This Sixth could destroy all five of you without breaking a sweat."

"Where will he appear?" Shade asked, his voice like ice.

"We don't know," the Emperor replied. "He could be anywhere. He might not even know what he is yet. But when his power awakens..."

"What happens then?" Echo asked, her voice seeming to come from everywhere at once.

The Emperor's face looked tired, like someone carrying a weight too heavy to bear. "Then you must decide. Is he here to save our world... or destroy it?"

Rune looked scared. "How will we recognize him?"

"You'll know," the Emperor said. "The horn seals on your hands will burn when he's near. And when his true power awakens..." The ghost shook his head. "Every Chosen One in the world will feel it."

Light's aura dimmed with worry. "What if he chooses darkness?"

The mirror cracked again, louder this time.

"Then everything we've protected for two hundred years will burn," the Emperor said quietly. "The kingdoms, the Academy, the balance we've maintained—all of it will be ash."

The five Chosen Ones stood in heavy silence.

"When will this happen?" Veil asked.

"Soon," the Emperor said as his image began to fade. "Very soon. The signs grow stronger each day. Be ready."

"This castle is yours to use," the Emperor added. "Meet here when you need to. Plan here. But remember—the moment you've all been training for is coming. Don't waste it."

The mirror went dark.

As the Chosen Ones turned to leave, Shade hung back for a moment.

"Are you afraid of him?" he said to the empty mirror.

The Emperor's voice whispered back, so quiet only Shade could hear: "Terrified. And you should be too."

But Shade just smiled—a cold, dangerous smile.

"We'll see about that."

Then he followed the others into the mist, already planning what he would do when this mysterious Sixth finally revealed himself.

None of them knew that the Calamity was closer than they thought. None of them suspected that the one they sought might already be walking among them, wearing a face they would never expect.

And none of them could imagine what would happen when the truth finally came to light.