

PRAISE FOR BRETT ARMSTRONG

The second book in Armstrong's *Quest for Fire* fantasy epic, *Shadows at Nightfall*, chronicles a cosmic confrontation between good and evil. Pursued by shadow assassins, carrion soldiers, and an assortment of terrifying creatures worthy of JRR Tolkien, the knights who serve the High King follow the path of noble self-sacrifice laid down by CS Lewis. Readers intrigued by dual timelines and parallel lives will be delighted with this riveting read.

— SUZANNE BRATCHER, AUTHOR OF *KOPELLI'S SONG*, WINNER OF THE 2021 SELAH AWARD FOR YA FICTION

Shadows at Nightfall

◀ *Quest of Fire* ▶

BRETT ARMSTRONG



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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

*This book is dedicated the glory of God without Whom there are
no words worthy of writing. And my parents, Rodger and
Patricia, who taught me to love learning and literature and the
Lord; gifts I can never properly repay.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It's an impossible task to say thank you to everyone who makes a book like this one possible. My parents for supporting my dreams as a child and not wavering in it once I reached adulthood. My wife and son who picked up the torch from my parents and bear with me on days when late night writing sessions aren't enough and I have to disappear for hours.

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Eric Dotseth who puts up with my intricate scene requests and increasingly complex maps and makes fantastic artwork out of my words and ideas.

With any series, particularly one as big and intricate as *Quest of Fire* there has to be positive feedback to continue. Without the readers and reviewers who embrace the stories and encourage me along the way, this story wouldn't have made it to print.

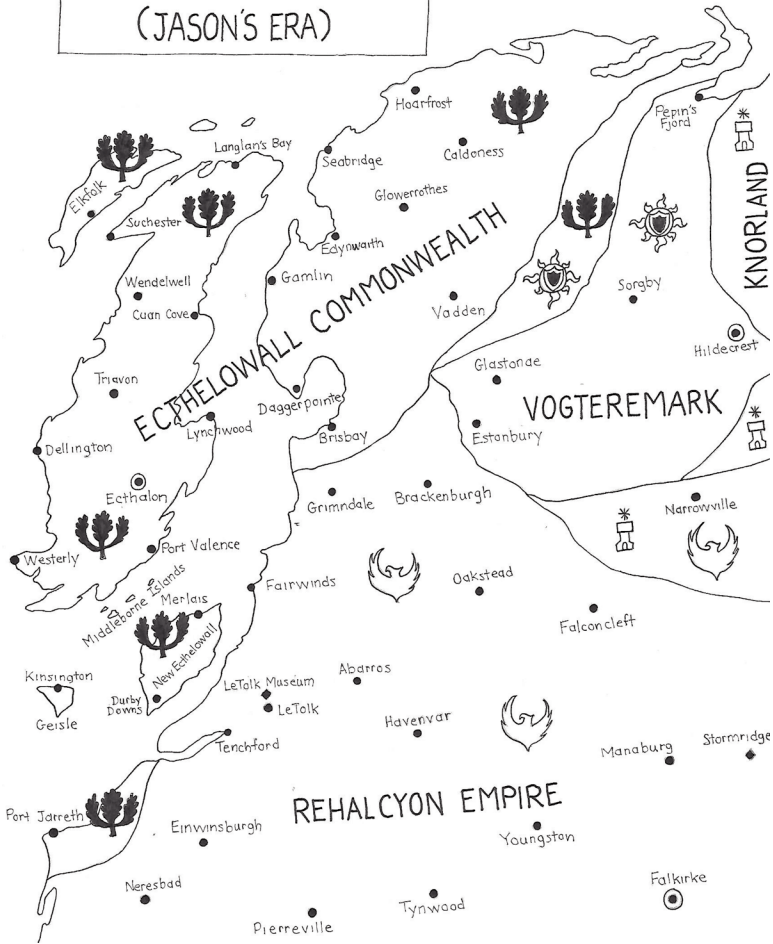
Most importantly, God has been very patient with me. I've

been blessed with the health, time, and unwavering conviction to tell this story. It seems a little silly to even try to capture in words a thank you to Him Who is everything to me. My prayer is this story honors Him and emboldens hearts to follow Him on the Quest He calls all of us to.

WESTERN LOWLANDS
MODERN ERA
(JASON'S ERA)



NORTHWESTERN LOWLANDS
(JASON'S ERA)



Northwestern Lowlands (Anargen's Day)



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(In Order of Appearance)

Jason Landsby : Modern Era teen with a checkered past who is captivated by the tales of Anargen's quest and its manifestations in the world around him.

Cinaed Black: Mysterious owner of the Black River Inn, Aria's grandfather, bearer of the tale of Anargen's quest, and Knight of Light.

Aria Black: Teenage granddaughter of Cinaed who assists him in tending to the inn and with whom Jason was immediately smitten.

Werebeast: A monstrous creature with some characteristics of a werewolf but more physically imposing and with the full cunning and cruelty of a man. Anargen and his fellow Knights faced an army of them during the Siege of Ordumair.

Anargen: Middle Era teen from the village of Black River and Knight of Light seeking to understand the Oracle of Thane Ornard and its implications for his world.

Caeserus: Anargen's best friend, Knight of Light, and bearer of a vision strikingly similar to Thane Ornard's, which inevitably pulled Anargen and the others into the battle to save Ordumair and further into their current quest.

Bertinand: Another friend of Anargen's from Black River and the jokster of the group.

Terrillian: A friend of Anargen's from Black River who is the oldest and most world weary of the four teens.

Sir Cinaed: Knight Errant of Black River, mentor to Anargen and his friends, and secretly Meredoch MacCowell the most imminent Knight of the Northwest Lowlands bearing the title Defender of the Northern Realm.

Thane Duncoin : Ruler of the dwarfs of Ordumair and childhood friend of Cinaed/Meredoch.

Viceroy Ecthelion : Former ruler of the men of Ecthelowall, whose son conspired with the Grey Scourge to depose him and destroy the dwarfs of Ordumair.

Sir Bruce clan Loch: Brother to the ruler of Albaron whose forces helped save Ordumair.

Sombra: Arcane assassins who utilize dark magic to shift from shadow to solid.

Tumsas: A Modern Era Sombra, whose latest mark puts Jason and Aria in grave danger.

Count Eidolon: Unsettling ruler of the largest city in Anargen's homeland of Libertias, much beloved by his people.

Fiona of Falconcleft: Daughter of Falconcleft's aging count, renowned throughout Libertias for her beauty and wildness.

Karanlik: Middle Era Sombra leader who is tasked with assassinating the Viceroy of Ecthelowall.

Glewdyn: Anargen's father and an elder Knight from Black River.

Seren : The girl of Anargen's dreams with whom he began a courtship before leaving Black River.

Professor Goulder: Modern Era teacher and Knight living on the Ecthel island of Geisle.

Grey Scourge: Werebeast defeated at the Siege of Ordumair who was tasked with preventing the Knights from discovering the Oracle of Ormand and destroying the dwarfs of Ordumair.

Doppelgänger: Creatures capable of morphing their appearance and voices to match anyone, whom they then murder to replace for nefarious purposes.

Direnoir: Parasitic monster that feeds on its hosts fears while inciting their host into increasingly fright-filled circumstances until the host perishes.

Sadiq Kharoum: Zilnian Knight and Defender
of the Southwestern Realm.

Tirzah Kharoum: Sadiq's teenage daughter and
close friend of Aria.

Wyvern: Giant winged reptiles which breath
fire and were believed to have once dwelt in
Stormridge's valley.

Dorian Wernstrum: Jason's younger brother
whom he hasn't seen in years.

FIFTH INTERLOGUE: FAIRY TALES



The preternatural quiet would be unnerving even if horrors did not stalk Brackenburgh's streets. What skulked within the shadows at nightfall was enough to chill Jason's soul. His grasp on reality, the version with which he had been well acquainted, was being sorely stretched. Only two hours earlier, he had been drug from the Black River Inn with an old storyteller accused of sedition against Brackenburgh, or perhaps the entire Rehalcyon Empire. He still didn't know the extent of the charges because halfway to the asylum of their consignment, something happened. Something terrifying and baffling and, most peculiarly, marvelous.

Their accuser, Councilman Ericksson, had transformed into some fearsome creature; or else, something inhuman dropped the façade of the Councilman and attacked the tattered old remnants of the storyteller. As if to utterly destroy Jason's hold on sanity, the old man hadn't just withstood the attack but had handily bested the thing with uncanny speed. And a flaming sword.

Everything Jason knew about the world seemed askew, and

now he was dashing across and down back alleys like some wraith, all to rescue the storyteller's granddaughter from who-knew-what. *I'm supposed to be here settling the debt.*

"My debt," he forced himself to say, earning a stern shushing from the old man ahead who whirled midstride to deliver the rebuke. The storyteller, Cinaed, moved as though he were thirty years younger. If, in fact, he weren't much older than he appeared. He stood there looking outwardly as he had earlier in the night: silver-white hair cut short, a bushy beard, long duster over a white Knight's tunic, and piercing gray eyes in a weathered face.

Cinaed stopped at the street corner ahead. Jason stumbled to a stop beside him, drawing in a shaky breath. He took off his newsboy cap and ran his fingers through his sweaty mop of brown hair. Cinaed's breathing, though heavier, was even and calm. Of the thousand questions Jason wanted to ask, he knew after repeated rebuffs not to bother with any until Cinaed had recovered his granddaughter, Aria. "Where are we?"

"Not a navigator, I see," the old man replied, the ghost of a chuckle rumbling in his chest. Jason couldn't find a bit of humor in what he'd said, particularly given how far he had come in good faith. Before he could protest, the old storyteller took off in a crouched run.

A cry of frustration partially escaped Jason's lips, and he followed, noticing as he did they were running parallel to the block with the Black River Inn. Slowing and straightening, he asked in a hushed tone, "Hey, navigator supreme. The inn is that way." Cinaed stopped, straightened, and walked briskly back to where Jason stood, a scowl darkening his features. He grabbed Jason by the collar and drug the teen back to the alley he had been heading down.

"What are you doing?" Jason protested as he fought to wriggle free.

“Taking us around to the back of the building. We have to sneak in through the kitchen. I’d wager they’ll have found out about their puppet. We cannot afford to be taken.”

“But it’s your inn. Why don’t we just use the front entrance?”

By this time, Cinaed was already prying open the window with his sword, which burned with a steady fire rather than its earlier battle-blaze. “If you insist on asking unimportant questions, you’ll find others deaf to the ones you most need answered.”

With a faint screech of protest, the window slid up, and the old man climbed in. He did so slowly, with a grunt of effort more fitting for his age than anything Jason had seen so far. Grinding his teeth, Jason climbed in after and tumbled down into the kitchen. A plain but mostly well-ordered space, discounting the day’s dishes stacked haphazardly in a large sink. “Fine, how’s this one then: Do you even think she’s here? It looks like everyone left in a hurry.”

“She will be here. But so will the others,” the old man replied, offering a hand.

Declining, Jason got to his feet on his own. “You mean the travelers sleeping here?”

“No.” Cinaed sighed, his mouth and posture drooping. For a moment, Jason wondered if the old man had spent all his energy getting to this point. Just as suddenly, Cinaed scuttled across the room and replied, “I promised to tell you everything, but only in its time. Now, please, I do not want to lose my granddaughter to fiends like the doppelgänger you saw. Help me get her to safety.”

Not sure what to say, Jason just gestured for him to lead the way. Cinaed, however, shook his head. “We need to split up. I will take the upper rooms. You search on this floor.”

“All right,” Jason answered, though he waited for Cinaed to

leave the room. He wasn't going anywhere first if he didn't have to.

Seemingly unbothered by the distrust, Cinaed shrugged and walked to the room's exit. He waved to the right and then was gone. Jason stood in the dark, letting his eyes acclimate. A minute or so sufficed, and as there wasn't much more to the kitchen than he first gleaned, he followed Cinaed's example and exited.

The hall branched in two different directions. *Did he mean "go right" or that he was going that way? Bother.*

Opting to follow the right corridor, he found himself in a pantry just off the large room that served as a café, though it was more reminiscent of taverns from centuries past. The storeroom probably served as a staging area for servers. Everything about this place had an antiquated feel, which certainly fit its owner. In the quiet, alone, Jason couldn't escape the questions plaguing him any longer.

Cinaed can't be a three-hundred-year-old Knight, could he? But if he's not, what am I doing following him around?

A basket on a barrel at the room's periphery stood out to him. He peered at it more closely, finding in it a few rolls. Squeezing one, he found they'd hardened since being prepared. He had enjoyed the one Aria had given him thoroughly. Though she'd made dozens, he liked imagining it was for his benefit.

Am I here for her?

A creaking sound nearby startled Jason. Dropping the roll into the basket, he crept closer to the darker back of the pantry. He was suddenly very much aware he had nothing with which to defend himself. Separating from the man with the supernatural sword didn't seem like such a great idea after all. Worse, Jason could recall far too clearly the thing—*doppelgänger*, Cinaed had called it—crawling past them,

bearing no distinguishable features, just a blurred void where a man's face should be. In its last moments, it had sworn in a voice like the grave itself, "I will kill you!"

More creaking. Jason couldn't pinpoint the sounds. Given the age of the place, it could have been nothing. Just worn, old floorboards. Even so, his pulse quickened. What other awful things existed in the world without him ever knowing?

"You've been in worse scrapes," Jason murmured to himself. But the truth was, he could think of nothing in his life to compare to this. The problem was not just the prospect of facing fantasy creatures, or following a centuries-old Knight to rescue his granddaughter—a girl who, to be honest, was quite fetching. The problem wasn't the what. It was the how. It was as if a raging river were sweeping him away. This was a fairy tale, but not the pleasant sort.

No reasoning, no thought, just following along. Even the girl he was so inexplicably excited to see again was realistically an absolute stranger. Madness. Jason had made his way by being smarter than this, hadn't he?

He shored up his courage with a deep breath. Madness or not, he couldn't just stay put. "What am I getting myself into?" he asked, louder than was wise. He stepped out of the shadows, moving toward the room ahead, which was at least better lit.

At his back, Jason heard someone hiss an answer through their teeth. "Trouble."

Before Jason could react, an arm crooked around his throat, locked tight, and dragged him back into the shadows.