THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

DRAGONERA: THE DARK ONE CHRONICLES

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CHAPTER 1 - LAST BRAVE WORDS

Destruction laid before the young warrior as she ran, not just for her life, but for her kingdom. The faster she ran the more her legs screamed for mercy. It was a cry for mercy that she had no choice but to ignore As she sprinted she saw it all, images that would remain in her mind for the rest of her life. Wrecked buildings that were once homes to proud families, innocent civilians crowded the streets in terror, and dead warriors with broken weapons surrounding their corpses.

She muttered a curse in her own tongue under her breath as she ran. *Why hadn't they acted sooner?* She had worried that question around like a dog with an old bone ever since the attack began. She glanced behind her one last time to view the enemy, a large cloud of pure concentrated evil. The one responsible for the attack on the Kingdom.

It had no name, no true name. None that any of the races that it had attacked could call it by name. No one could really even say for sure what it was. There was only one title for this monstrosity. The Dark One. A being of pure concentrated evil born for one purpose - to eradicate every living being in the world.

And so far? It was accomplishing this goal.

The human, the harpy, the mage, and the elf kingdoms had all stood before this unstoppable force and all had failed. What survivors there were went either unnoticed or fled for their lives.

The only kingdom left standing before this atrocity? The mightiest of all the kingdoms. And it too, was beginning to fail before the Dark One's power.

The young woman had believed they were ready for something like this, how wrong she, and the King's council, had been. It appeared unexpectedly and began a path of destruction stretching for miles, a malevolent tornado. Many of her King's finest warriors fell in the battle against the unrelenting force of darkness and the horrible power contained within it. None were successful in slowing it down, let alone stopping it.

The young woman gritted her teeth as shame filled her. She was one of the greatest warriors of the Kingdom, the King's right hand. She had the honor of being the most skilled sword master in the kingdom, only being out done by her King himself. But against this evil she too was powerless. And so, she ran, like a coward.

"How could it come to this?" She asked herself. They should have taken the threat of the Dark One far more seriously than the other kingdoms. She should have convinced her King to do something sooner! Now, their home, their Kingdom was paying the price for her failure.

As she shook her head, the young woman continued to flee, her common sense returning. This wasn't the time to think about how they could have readied themselves. She had to reach the one who stood any chance against this evil: the King. He was the only hope the Kingdom, no the world, had left.

The malevolent force was catching up far too quickly. If she had any chance of making it to the King, she had to slow it down. Without a second thought she quickly turned to face her foe. She

held her hands out in front of her, her eyes flashed with an inner power.

"*Flarnea*!" she shouted.

A blast of white fire flew from her palms. The flame reached the darkness and slammed into it at full force. The evil reacted to this attack in just the way she expected: annoyed, but not stopping its approach. However, the attack was successful enough to put some distance between the two of them for another moment.

She took the chance that her attack had bought. With an expenditure of her power she pulled her arms back to her sides, closed her eyes and focused.

"*Winlan*." she whispered.

As she spoke, two great white wings emerged from her back, her feet lifted gently from the ground, and she rose above the darkness. Her heart soared. Even now, in this moment of terror, the joy of flight filled her spirit. So flew away from the enemy, her wings a brilliant white slash outlined against the eternal darkness covering her kingdom.

The chase began anew, but this time the young woman had a much better chance at getting away. She could see the outline of the castle in the distance. She knew her brothers would already be there, rallying the few troops still alive.

As she flew faster, the castle came closer. Behind her, the Dark One continued to approach, devouring all that lay before it under its dark clouds. The young warrior's heart felt like it would burst out of her chest as she finally reached the castle. When she landed in the castle courtyard, the first thing she saw were injured soldiers trying to treat their wounds as best they could. Other warriors were preparing weapons for battle, while some knelt in the corners of the courtyard, praying to the gods for redemption.

"Sister!" a young man's voice called out as he quickly approached her, accompanied by a taller man.

"Brothers," she replied, catching her breath as her wings slid

back into her shoulders and disappeared beneath the skin. "Thank the gods that you are unharmed."

"Our bodies may not yet be injured, sister," the taller man spoke, "but our pride is most grievously wounded."

"Perhaps if we had listened to the earlier warnings, this would not have happened," the shorter man said, glaring to the taller one. "If someone had alerted His Royal Majesty we would not even be here now. The cost of this...It is far too high for any warrior to pay." He spread his hands outward, pointing to the wounded men and women littering the courtyard.

"Now is not the time to talk of injured pride or to argue among ourselves!" the woman interrupted. "Where is his Majesty? I must speak with him!"

"The King?" asked the taller man. "The last I saw of him, he was headed towards the top of the castle."

"Then I must make haste." She clenched her fists. "By all that I am, I refuse to let this Kingdom fall. Order your men to hold the Dark One back for as long as they can, I will make my way to the King!"

Before either of them could argue with her, she headed up the stairs to the top tower of the castle. As she ran, she could hear the echoes of her brothers' orders to their men. She knew that the soldiers could not hope to stop the Dark One; the best they might do would be to delay it, pray to the gods that was enough.

She cursed under her breath once again. If they had listened to the warnings from the other Kingdoms, their fate would not be the same as the fallen members of the races whose lands and people had already been destroyed.

As she ran up the stairs, she heard the sounds of battle. She hated to see warriors that she herself had trained falling in battle, but she could not let her grief blind her to what was most important. In war, good people die: it was a fact she had accepted long ago. The gods alone knew if this was the final battle for their race. Her mission now was the King; she must reach him, their

world depended upon it. She couldn't fly inside though: the stairway was too narrow and the turns to quick.

At long last she reached the top of the castle, breathless, exhausted, and afraid, something she very rarely felt. The one person she had been looking for stood alone as the Dark One slowly boiled around the base of the castle, a fog of evil from which cries of despair wailed.

"Sire!" she shouted, her breath short.

The King stood silently, his back to the young woman, his face hidden in the shadows of smoke covering what was left of his burning Kingdom. He turned to the young woman behind him, the remnants of a failed smile flashing across his face.

"So, this is how it ends?" His voice drifted off at the end, fading away into the smoke, punctuated by the fall of a building somewhere in the darkness.

"No, Sire! This is not the end! We can still save you, if not the Kingdom!" cried the young woman. She was trying her hardest to encourage him to continue the fight. Although her face was hidden by the smoke, he could hear the tears in her voice.

The King sighed heavily as he shook his head. A small smile appeared on his face as he placed a hand on the young woman's shoulder.

"It's over. The other Kingdoms did not last long against this foe, and now my Kingdom falls to the hunger of the Dark One."

"It is never over, my lord. Not while we live, while we breathe, and while we fight!" The young woman continued, tears forming in her eyes, "You still have your soldiers, your guardians and me! We will never abandon your side!"

Once again the King shook his head, turning away from the young woman. He sighed as his eyes took in the creeping darkness coming closer to the tower.

"You are my most fierce and loyal warrior. You have led my armies to many victories, but this is a battle not even you can win." He finished, closing his eyes once more.

"Surely you don't believe this is the end?"

"All things end," the King answered, raising his hands against the darkness. "The Kingdoms of the other races only lasted a few days against the Dark One. It was my foolish pride that made me believe we could possibly avoid the choice that confronts me now…" His hands dropped limply to his side.

"Sire…" She reached out, touching his shoulder. His eyes opened at her touch, a resigned smile on his face.

"I will not allow our world to end. I will not let the light of magic die." The echoes of ancient kings could be heard in his voice. "If it is possible I will stop this beast from destroying our world."

With wide eyes she pulled away from her king, body trembling in fear as her mind began to piece together what he planned to do.

"You don't mean you're going to…"

"Yes, that is exactly what I am planning to do."

"But my liege, your death is certain if you do this!" she said, her voice cracking as she spoke.

A soft and surprising chuckle escaped the King's lips.

He spread his arms wide, pointing out the destruction everywhere. "You tell me: how could I live with what has happened around us? What is there left to live for? The Kingdoms have fallen, the world is ending, there is nothing that can completely stop the beast. How could I hide in the face of this, knowing that I might have made a difference and that I did not try?" He took a deep breath. "In the end it is not whether we fail or whether we prevail, it is how we face the darkness when it comes for us that matters."

His eyes narrowed, his hands bathed in a strange glow. The woman took a step back as he walked towards the edge of the tower.

The King's eyes focused on the dark shadow below.

"I may not be able to stop it," he said through clenched teeth, "but that does not mean I cannot delay it."

"You speak of suicide!" the woman screamed, taking a step towards him. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks as she reached out to him "To seal such a force away will drain you completely!"

"If that is the price then so be it. It is my decision, my responsibility. As my loyal knight, my friend, my," he paused, swallowed hard and went on, "as my dearest friend I demand that you step aside. It is my final order."

He stood, hands outstretched and whispered, "Remember me."

The glow around his hands took the form of twin blue orbs. He slammed the two together before holding the combined orbs above his head. The power of the combined orbs formed a bright beacon of light against the seemingly endless dark sky.

The beacon illuminated the faces of warriors running up the staircase. They both knew what those orbs signified One ran to their comrade, his voice filled with shock.

"Why are you standing there?! His Majesty will die if he does this!"

The young woman lowered her head, a single tear traveling down her cheek as she glanced away.

"I'm sorry, brother, but his mind is made up. The orbs are cast, it is already too late."

The third warrior, the tallest of them all, took a step forward, reaching out towards the King with one hand.

"Sire, please, no! You can't!" He shouted, his deep and powerful voice filling the darkness.

"Be silent!" the King ordered, his eyes shined with power as he glanced back at the three Warriors.

In an instant the three were surrounded by golden orbs. The young woman pounded on the orb around her, trying to call upon her powers to free herself, but nothing answered. She

stopped, tears streaming down her face as she realized what the King had done.

"Please Sire! Let us stand by you one last time! Do not take this burden on alone!" She begged. "Please...don't leave me alone..."

The King only smiled.

"No," he said quietly, "this is not your end. I cannot defeat this evil, merely contain it. The three of you must find a way to stop it when the Dark One rises again. Accept my final command to you. Survive, watch for the signs and prepare. Remember me with fondness." He took a deep breath and bellowed. "Now, be gone!"

Before the warriors could protest, there was a blinding flash of light. When the darkness returned they were gone. As he took a deep breath, the King turned back to the shadowy force that had finally reached the tower. His orb of light grew larger and brighter.

"Though it cost me my life, you will not have your way on this day, you spawn of evil!"

The Dark One let loose a roar as it reared back. The King stood his ground and released his entire life force into the gaping maw of darkness. The shaft of light flew from his chest, piercing the darkness, consuming everything in the radius of its brilliance.

From the top of a broken tower, in a shattered Kingdom, the King's final words echoed across the now peaceful palace:

"When your power stirs again, they shall rise and stop you… in the next life."

CHAPTER 2 - THE LAST NORMAL DAY

Aiden Russell groaned as his alarm clock beeped loudly in his ear. He lazily reached over and grabbed a hold of it, eventually finding the off switch. He opened one eye to glance at the clock and grumbled as he shifted in the bed.

"What school has you get up at this awful time in the morning?" He thought.

Slowly he pulled off the covers and rose up from the bed, stretching his arms as he glanced over to the clock. He missed the days where he didn't have to get up until at least seven. But ever since he started middle school, he had no choice but to get up every morning at five.

"Aiden?" His mother's voice echoed down the hallway. "Aiden, are you awake?"

"Yes, Mom," He called out to her, rubbing his eyes. "I'm up."

"Good," She said. "I was worried that you were going to ignore your alarm clock again."

He sighed as he stood up and headed for a shower. His mother's voice echoed from the hallway once again.

"If you're planning to take a shower, please remember to save some hot water, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am." He called back, closing the door before she could call out again.

If a stranger were to describe Aiden Russell, he might say merely that Aiden was a thirteen-year-old boy, about five feet and eight inches tall, with dark ocean blue eyes and chocolate brown hair. And while he was not completely out of shape, his physic was not as impressive as most boys his age. His arms and legs were scrawny in comparison. Aiden believed that his skinny arms were not meant for lifting weights or doing chin-ups, and no one had been able to convince him differently. At least not yet.

After his shower, Aiden got dressed and headed to the kitchen for breakfast. His mother, who shared his dark chocolate brown hair, smiled at him as she flipped pieces of bacon in the frying pan.

"Good morning, dear," she said. "Did you sleep well?"

"I can't really complain," Aiden answered, taking a bite of bacon. "I mean, I got about as much sleep as a person can get before five in the morning."

"I know it's not easy, but remember: somewhere else in the world, someone has gotten up even earlier. You should consider yourself lucky that you don't have to get up at four instead of five."

Aiden shivered at the thought. He took another bite of his bacon and sipped the orange juice his mother gave him.

"Did Dad already leave for work?" he asked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Yes, you know that his job has him there early in the morning," she answered. "But before he left he wanted me to tell you that he put a gift for you in your backpack."

Aiden blinked some as he turned to his backpack in the corner of the kitchen. He shrugged and turned back to his breakfast plate.

"Did he tell you what it was?"

"Now Aiden, if I told you, it would ruin the surprise, wouldn't

it?" She smiled as she ruffled his hair. "But I am allowed to tell you that he said it's something that you'd be interested in."

Aiden glanced back to his backpack. Now his curiosity was piqued. *Something that he would be interested in?* He couldn't figure out what his father meant by that. While he and father weren't at opposite ends with each other, they did have very different interests.

Aiden's father was an extremely successful businessman, the right hand man of the CEO who ran the furniture company Pasquale. Aiden, however, was not interested in business. He wanted to learn the old, forgotten secrets of the world.

His father would often say that Aiden's mind was still "in a fantasy world." They never had a big argument over it, but Aiden knew his father would be hesitant to give him a gift to feed his interest in such things.

He finished the bacon on his plate and took a sip of what was left of his orange juice before standing up.

"Well...okay, Mom," He said, reaching for his backpack. "I better get going before the bus arrives too late."

"Ok, Aiden, but remember to stay close to the bus stop. I don't want you wandering off before your bus arrives."

"Don't worry, Mom," He reassured her. "I promise I won't leave the bus stop."

He kissed her on the cheek and headed towards the door, slipping the backpack on his shoulders as he left. He glanced back at the house as he walked. He lived in a cul de sac in an average neighborhood in a boring town. Exciting things really never happened in this town. He often wondered why his mother would worry about him getting lost; the bus stop wasn't that far from their home.

He shrugged it off as he walked slowly as he checked his cell phone. There was still time to get to the bus stop. He groaned a bit as he glared at the time it now read. Five thirty AM. What kind of sick person made a young teenager get up at this hour?

Before he could ponder on the question further his eye glanced up to the bus stop. A girl standing at the bus stop had caught his eye. He grinned as he put his phone away before he spoke up.

“I figured you'd be here early, Theresa.”

Theresa Goldwin turned to him and smiled. For as long as he could remember, Theresa had always been his best friend. Many of the kids at their school envied their friendship - most of the boys had a crush on Theresa. She had bright emerald eyes that lit up depending on her mood. But perhaps the most unusual thing about her was her hair.

Unlike most of the girls at school, Theresa had never once colored her hair; it was long, straight and white like snow itself. It could have been close to platinum blonde hair, but he had known Theresa for too long to make that claim. Aiden had never seen anyone else with hair like Theresa's.

Needless to say, she was a very pretty girl. Which made a lot of the boys at their middle school wonder how in the world someone like Aiden Russell ended up being her best friend.

“Well now,” she said, “you're here much earlier than I thought you would be, Aiden.”

“Hey, cut me some slack.” Aiden joked, taking his spot beside her. “I'm not that lazy.”

“Oh yeah? Then I guess your mom never dragged your lazy butt out of bed on the first day of school, hmm?”

“Hey! It was cold and I wasn’t ready to end my summer vacation!”

Theresa rolled her eyes, giving him her sternest look, the effect ruined by the snicker bubbling up from her throat. Aiden couldn't help but laugh. If there was one thing Theresa could not do, it was give Aiden a stern ook. He laughed louder.

“Face it, Theresa,” he said after a few more chuckles, “you're never gonna be able to intimidate me.”

"Hmph." she huffed before folding her arms, "Don't get an ego now." She turned to him, folding her arms.

"So, anything new?"

"Eh, not really. Besides being forced to wake up for another day at school, last night was just kind of bland." Aiden said, shrugging. "Though mom said that dad left me something in my backpack."

This caught Theresa's attention as she quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Really? What do you think it is?"

"Hell if I know." He frowned. "The only thing he told my mom was that it's something that would 'interest' me."

Theresa frowned; she was one of the few people who knew that Aiden and his father didn't share much in common. Aiden shook his head, dismissing the thoughts of the gift.

"So what was going on in school the other day?" He asked, desperate to change the topic. "Looked like they were looking through backpacks."

"You're not kidding," Theresa said. "They've been pulling kids out of my classes like they're looking for something on them."

Aiden blinked, turning to her once again.

"Wait, in the middle of class?"

"Yeah, some of them were the smart kids as well." She frowned once again. "It's like they're up to something, but I can't figure it out."

Aiden rolled his eyes as he folded his arms across his chest. He knew what she was up to. All too well did he know how his friend worked and how she planned things out.

"Theresa," he began, "don't tell me that you're-"

"And since no one is asking about it," she mused, a confident smile was growing on her lips now, "Then it's up to us to find out exactly what they're doing!" She turned to him, smiling. "And you're going to help me find out!"

Aiden groaned, smacking his forehead with his palm.

"Theresa, no," he said. "You remember the last time you dragged me along to investigate something?"

"Vaguely," she said, pursing her lips as she placed a finger to her chin. "We were going to see if they were changing the meat in the school lunches to rat meat..."

"Yeah, and because of that we got detention and extra homework for nearly a week!" Aiden reminded her. She merely scoffed at him and brushed his comment off.

"You make it sound like it was my fault we got caught."

Aiden sighed before glancing away from his friend as he watched the road for the bus.

"I wouldn't worry about it too much, Theresa," Aiden said, "Nothing really happens in Raymond Virginia. Especially at our middle school."

"But that's the thing, I know a lot of the students that they are taking out. They're smart kids and each of them are passing like us." She folded her arms, "Tell me that doesn't sound odd to you, Aiden."

He sighed in defeat. Theresa had a habit of proving herself right to him whenever she felt strongly about a subject. Regardless of how he felt, he had to admit that she was right. It was odd that the school was pulling out the smart students from their classes, but it wasn't odd enough for him to become involved.

But he still remembered the time they had gotten detention. And after those long days in detention, there would be a new lecture from his father waiting for him at home.

"Theresa, I am not gonna get into some investigation that most likely will end up with us locked up in detention again." He said firmly, tapping his foot.

Theresa was silent for a bit, a rare thing for her. Aiden turned back to his friend, thinking he had upset her somehow, but instead her emerald green eyes greeted him. A serious expression slowly replaced Theresa's smile, dimming the brightness of her face.

"There are worse things than detention." She said softly, almost as if she suddenly became wiser in just a few seconds. "Remember that, my friend."

He blinked a couple of times. She sounded spooky. At first he thought she was just being overly dramatic, but he had known Theresa for far too long for that explanation to fit. She never gave him that look unless she absolutely meant it. It made him uneasy, almost scared, to see that expression underneath her snow-white hair.

Theresa turned away from him, looking towards the street for the bus. Aiden frowned, tapping his friend lightly on the shoulder to get her attention.

"Hey," He started, "I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry if I ..."

Theresa turned back to him, her familiar smile reappearing.

"Don't worry about it, Aiden." She nudged him with her elbow.

He smiled in relief. Still, he couldn't get what she had said out of his mind. If this were one of the books that he loved to read it would be an omen. The beginning of a perilous adventure where the hero found himself on a journey. He almost expected lighting and thunder to accompany the moment, but all he heard was the sound of the bus backfiring as it turned the corner.

As the bus approached, he remembered a lesson his history teacher, Ms. MacDonnell, once taught. It was about omens in the medieval times, mostly based on the old Celtic religion, before the Druids, in the time of the ancient ones. Pieces of those stories could be seen in the tales of Scotland and England; the magic bones beneath many a medieval tale. He knew omens only happened in stories, but he couldn't help but feel that something dangerous was coming. Soon.

Then again, he always got that feeling whenever he got on the bus. Almost every morning he would have to avoid a spit-wad from the local bully, Eric, and it was no different this morning. Aiden ducked his head the moment he stepped onto the bus as a

massive spit-wad hit the windshield. The driver glared into his rear view mirror.

"Eric Noakes, don't make me write up a referral on you again!"

Eric Noakes was about the same size as most school bullies. He was a little fat in the stomach area, with small brown beady eyes, and buzz-short black hair. His eyes found his target, Aiden. He grinned deviously as he prepared another spit-wad, but he then noticed the bus driver's glare and snorted.

"Lucky punk." He grunted under his breath.

Aiden grumbled as he took his seat on the bus, not wanting to look at Eric. He had been dealing with Eric since the fourth grade, and he was quite frankly getting tired of it.

"You think he'd back off for once and bug someone else for a change." Aiden said, looking out the window.

Theresa frowned as she sat down beside him, gently placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't let it get to you, Aiden." she advised. "You know getting into a fight with him will only make it worse."

"Doesn't mean that he should get away with it." He argued. Theresa sighed as she shook her head.

"Aiden, as much as I agree with that, right now there is nothing that anyone can do to get him suspended," She explained, crossing her arms over her chest. "He might be a bully, but he's not stupid."

Aiden sighed in defeat. Theresa was right. She always was right. Eric wasn't the typical bully who would gather a group of friends to pick on one kid. He was the smart, loner kind who would slowly torment his victims until they snapped, throwing a punch at him. In the end, he would claim innocence and his victim would get in trouble. It was that one aspect Aiden hated most: Eric always got away with it, and that was just not fair.

The bus ride was slow and uneventful, for the most part, occasionally stopping to pick up the next bunch of students,

some of them greeted by spit-wads from Eric. Aiden just looked out the window and watched the scenery. It was still early in the morning; he was not really up for talking much, even to Theresa.

But as it roared down the streets all of a sudden the bus came to a halt at an unexpected red light, jerking the students forward. Aiden's backpack, fell out of his lap and as he bent to pick it up, he felt something odd, a shape he didn't expect. He blinked, confused at what he had just felt. Before he could investigate more though, Theresa tapped him on the shoulder.

"Uh, Aiden?" She asked, raising an eyebrow. "Unless you want a broken neck, how about you sit up before the bus goes again? You know the school loves to confiscate things."

Aiden nodded as he pulled himself back up into his seat. It would be best to wait to see what exactly his father gave him in secret. And that usually meant doing so at the lunch table they sat at every day. He just had to make certain that none of the teachers or administrators noticed when he did.

The bus ride continued on for a good ten minutes before it eventually reached their school, Saint Hope Lester Middle School. While the school had a fine reputation for good grades and students, bullies and rival students would often play a cruel joke on school. They would rearrange the sign's letters to say "Hopeless Middle School." It was an act that got really old, really quickly.

Today though, the sign was spared from the terrible nickname. When the bus came to a halt, Aiden did the next daily ritual: get off the bus quickly before Eric fired another spit-wad. Again, he had to duck to avoid it, hearing Eric's tormenting chuckles in the background.

"This is gonna be a long day," he said, glancing up at the sky above.

"Just relax." Theresa frowned. "Complaining about it won't make the day go any faster."

"I wish it did." Aiden told her in a sarcastic tone. "Today is the last day before spring break! No school for a week!"

Theresa giggled as they reached their homeroom.

"Always looking forward to getting as far away from this school as possible, aren't you?"

"And you're not?" The two shared a good laugh before taking their seats.

The day might not be so bad after all. Maybe if he got lucky the day would move at a quick pace.