

JOSHUA AND THE
MAGICAL
FOREST

PORTALLAS BOOK 1

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Portallas - Book 1

Prologue



Melachor and Veloria stopped just long enough to catch their breath.

Melachor felt Sandor's forehead with his palm. The skin was still damp and hot to the touch. The infant's breathing had become increasingly laboured and he was now gasping for breath. Melachor stared at the tattered map, his hand shaking.

"Please, Melachor, we must rest." Veloria leaned against a grungy building, barely able to stand, with the infant limp in her arms. Her fatigued toddler whined as he clung to her.

Sandor continued whimpering. Time was running out. Melachor shook his head and heaved a sigh as he caught his wife's eye. She clutched a protective arm around Jared's shoulders. Both of them feared their toddler might also catch this plague.

They peeked up and down the filthy alleyway. Screams rang out from all directions. Pandemonium in the distance wrenched at their attention but Sandor's wellbeing was all they could focus on right now.

"This way, Vel," he said, leading his exhausted family further into the maze of backstreets.

People had been running for cover, and the winding alleys were now all but empty. The sun's rays didn't penetrate into these narrow passages and a foul stench hung in the air. Shady figures

lingered in the shadows, and he felt eyes staring at them from hidden corners.

The rickety, wooden buildings gave no outward sign of what lay behind each door. Melachor knew it was unsafe to bring his family here, but if Sandor were to stand any chance of surviving the illness, he needed to find a Metamorph, and quickly. The pox had claimed so many lives already and time was running out for Sandor.

Although no longer a Trader, Melachor had spent many years travelling from village to village and was a good listener. It was by no means clear whether the legends were true or just tales told by drunks and con artists. But these were desperate times. The map was the only clue they had to help them find the mythical creature, and it had led them to these backstreets. Melachor had risked his life to get his hands on the map and he hoped it was not in vain.

Veloria clutched Sandor in one hand and clung to Jared with the other. She shuffled closely behind her husband as he led them through the muddy alleys.

The family reached an intersection. Melachor looked in all directions, trying to find a familiar landmark, but his search was in vain. It had been too long since he was last here in the Southern Tip. Already one of Forestium's largest settlements, it had grown considerably in recent years.

"Melachor, are you sure we're doing the right thing? It isn't safe. We're never going to find one here. The trader that gave you the feather could have been lying."

More screams from terrified Imps rang out in the distance. Melachor, too, feared for his family's safety. A storm was brewing and they could hear thunder rumbling in the distance. They

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looked up at the dark clouds stealing what little daylight they could still see.

“Look,” he said, “it makes sense that there would be a Metamorph here. If there are any left, this is where they’ll be and this is exactly where the map says we’ll find one. It’s easy to hide here. I’ve been a trader for a long time and I know when to spot a lie. Just don’t lose that Raetheon feather.”

Veloria pulled out the white tail feather and showed it to her husband. Before she could tuck it away, a short, plump Imp wearing a pointed hat and scruffy, brown waistcoat emerged from the mist in one of the dark alleyways.

“Looking for something, are we? Dangerous place to be wandering around with children, if you don’t mind me saying. Not safe for anyone to be outside right now.”

Melachor looked down at the Imp and narrowed his eyes. Clutching at his wife’s hand, he opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. The man stared at him, but remained silent.

Melachor felt he was out of options. He had reached the point that he needed to take the risk.

“I’m looking,” he whispered, “I’m looking for a Metamorph.”

The man squinted up at Melachor and glanced at the sickly child its mother clutched to her chest.

“I don’t know what you mean,” the Imp said dismissively, turning and walking away.

“No, please, help us!” Veloria cried. Her eyes reddened and tears welled. She held out the tail feather, her eyes imploring. The short man paused and looked over his shoulder.

To Melachor and Veloria’s surprise, the feather began changing colour. Within moments, it had turned from white to green.

The Imp looked at the feather and then at Veloria. “Quickly! Put that away!”

Veloria recoiled and tucked the feather back into her shawl, glancing over her shoulder. The Imp flicked his head to beckon them and led them down the alley he had come from.

They followed him silently as he made several turns before stopping at a nondescript door.

After glancing up and down the alley, he pushed it open and led them all in. A single candle cast eerie shadows in the dimly lit room, and a musty odour hung in the air.

A bolt of lightning lit up the alley. It was soon followed by thunder and rain as the little man pushed the door closed and whispered. “We must be quick. He has eyes everywhere. We can’t be too careful. Here, show me the child. Quickly!”

Melachor and Veloria looked at each other with puzzled expressions, but Veloria did as she was asked and laid Sandor on a table. The small man looked the sickly infant up and down and smiled.

The desperate parents watched as this stranger held his hand over their baby and slowly moved it side to side. As he did, a green glow engulfed him. The mysterious light seemed to be coming from Sandor himself.

Within seconds, the child fell quiet and stopped whimpering. His breathing improved. Melachor looked on with wide eyes and open mouth. The man stopped moving his hand from side to side and held it directly above Sandor. The green glow subsided before disappearing altogether.

“You’re a Metamorph?” Melachor said, looking at the Imp.

The man raised his finger to his lips and lowered his brow. He took a step back from the table and, to their amazement, began

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growing taller. His face stretched and his hair grew longer and changed colour. Jared, still clutching at his mother's hand, shuffled behind her.

After a few seconds, the transformation was complete. In place of an Imp, a fully grown Woodsman now looked down at the toddler and smiled.

"Don't be afraid, my young friend. You're all safe here," he said softly. He turned to Melachor and said, "But you must go, now. It's not safe for me to remain here for too long. I must leave you."

"Our son?" Melachor asked quickly, motioning to the cooing child on the table.

"The child is well now. Please, I must go before I am found. If He learns one of my kind is here, it will not be safe for any of the Imps that live here and I cannot put them in harm's way."

The man took another step back and began shrinking again. He carried on shrinking, and within seconds he morphed into a Chirvel. The furry forest animal stood on its hind legs, no taller than a chair. It squealed and sniffed the air before scurrying off into the dark.

Melachor and Veloria took Sandor and Jared and left. Melachor held his cloak over his family to shield them from the downpour. They went down the alley and tried to find their way out of the maze of backstreets. Melachor led his family through the ghetto and into the main square.

Before them was a scene of total devastation. Bodies littered the ground everywhere.

An Imp came running towards them screaming. "Quickly. Hide! He'll kill you. He'll kill us all!"

Melachor grabbed the man by the shoulders and tried to speak sense to him but he tore himself free and ran off screaming again.

Suddenly, a blinding ball of light came flying through the air and struck the fleeing Imp in the back. As it hit him, he and the ball of light both disappeared into thin air. Melachor squinted in disbelief. Several more Imps emerged from various alleyways. They, too, were screaming in panic. More blinding balls of light emerged and struck them each in quick succession. Just as before, they vanished as each ball of light struck.

Melachor hurried his family out of the square and towards the edge of the town. Every few seconds, they heard the sound of screaming followed by silence. Each time this happened, a streak of light illuminated the stormy sky. One by one, all the Imps of the Southern Tip were being wiped out.

The family rounded a corner and found their path blocked by a Trader huddled in a dark cloak. He was kneeling on the ground, holding a crystal orb in one hand. The man was muttering an incantation. As he did so, the orb began pulsating with flashes of light and a swirling vortex formed above it. Through the vortex, Melachor could see a field of green bathed in sunlight. The man stood up, glanced over his shoulder and jumped into the vortex.

Melachor turned to Veloria. Over her shoulder, he could see a blinding ball of light coming towards them. Veloria turned and screamed. Before any of them could react, the ball of light struck her. She and the two children vanished.

“NOOOO!” Melachor yelled. Tears streamed down his face and he stood there with his arm held out to where his wife and children had been standing.

Then another ball of light came flying around the corner. It hovered for a second before rushing towards Melachor at high speed. He turned and looked at the vortex over the orb, which was now dissipating. Without thinking, he lunged to grab the orb

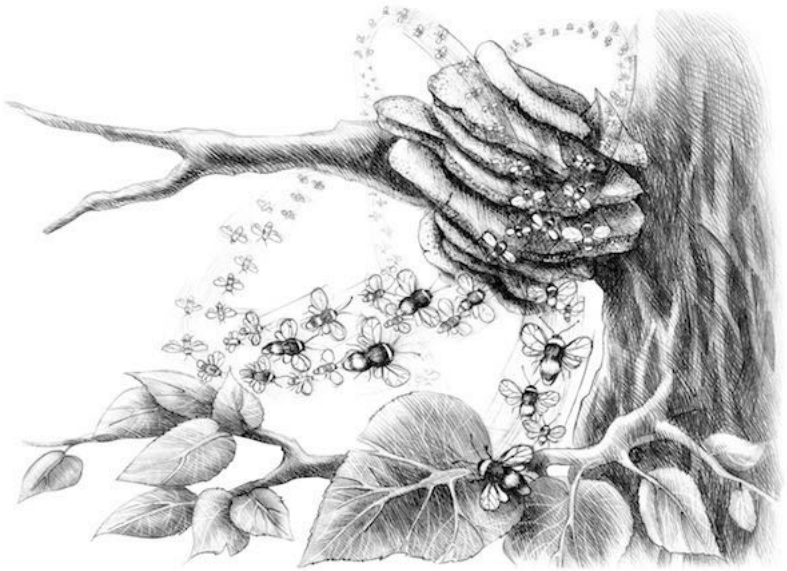
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just moments before the ball of light was upon him. There was a flash, and everything went black.

CHAPTER ONE

The Dream

Ten years later.



Despite the legendary tales of his father's heroic death in the war against an invading tribe, Joshua clung to the hope of one day finding him alive and well. The enemy tribe was located in the far north of Forestium, many weeks' journey from Morelle, and too far for a young Woodsman to travel. Even a Raetheon, with its majestic white wings, would take many days to reach that far.

For all Joshua knew, his father could be living out his days there, possibly held captive. Perhaps he just couldn't find his way home again.

Joshua often gazed pensively into the forest canopy at the swarms of twinkling Finkle flies in the evening twilight, lost in contemplation. All he really knew was that his father never returned.

The teenager neared his seventeenth name day: the age of decision and the age at which he could attempt the ritual trials and finally be able to call himself a true Woodsman.

Joshua's thoughts dwelled more and more on his father and how proud his dad would have been to see his son complete the trials at such a young age. These thoughts disturbed the young man, and he found it increasingly difficult to sleep at night.

And his dreams were getting worse. A wave of dread washed over him at the end of each day when the evening mist settled in. It had reached the point that he no longer wanted to sleep for fear of what the next dream would bring him.

Joshua had spent the day making arrows and strings for his bow. These were some of the skills he would need to demonstrate for the upcoming trials. After a full day of practicing, he lay on his side and gazed out his open window into the distance, fighting not to sleep.

He distracted himself by trying to make out, through the thickening evening mist, which points of light were candles from other village huts and which were Finkle flies. But the soothing humming sound of the slow-flying Denge bugs grew louder, and Joshua found he could no longer force himself to remain awake. His eyes grew heavy and he felt himself slipping away.

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His dream gripped him intensely and carried him further with each passing breath. He was powerless to resist the disturbing imagery flooding his mind.

Hazy and disconnected thoughts tormented him and he tossed and turned. His head moved rapidly from side to side as his mind desperately tried to wrench him from the terrifying experience. This nightmare was far worse than anything he had previously experienced.

A dark figure swirled in front of him. It wasn't clear who or what it was, but it screamed in fits of pain and misery. The relentless sobbing and sheer agony of the poor soul tormented Joshua, but he couldn't muster the strength to intervene, paralysed by the intensity of his emotions.

Desperate to help, he wanted to reach out and comfort whoever it was. The figure came into sharp focus only briefly before fading into blurriness again.

The face was somehow familiar but only as a distant memory. Despite being fast asleep, Joshua had the sense that perhaps the figure was his father.

The man cried out Joshua's name. He seemed to be pleading for help but Joshua was still void of strength to do anything.

The swirling persisted, and as the young Woodsman's despair intensified at his failure to stop this suffering, the hazy image changed. The veil of darkness lifted and the image of the tormented figure receded, eventually fading altogether.

Joshua felt a wave of relief that he was no longer subjected to this torment. As the fog of confusion faded, he found himself sitting up in his bed with the dawn mist lifting. He looked around, sweat dripping down his cheeks, his breathing laboured.

He heard a rustle coming from somewhere but his senses had not yet fully returned. Suddenly, there was a crash, and a figure came flying through the window.

“Hey, Joshua!” Andrew blurted as he finished his favourite window-entry manoeuvre and landed on the end of the bed. “You look terrible. Are you all right?”

“What are you doing?” Joshua mumbled.

“What do you mean, what am I doing?”

“Shhhh!” Joshua said, holding his finger to his mouth. “Do you want to wake the whole house?”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten?” Andrew lowered his head and looked at his friend with raised eyebrows. “Target practice?” He went on. “Today? Remember? Come on, we don’t have that much time left before the trials.”

Both boys had been working hard to hone their forest talents. They had been practicing different skills each day for the past several weeks ahead of the coming trials.

“Oh, yes, that’s right, target practice. Lake Morelle.” Joshua snapped out of his nightmare and was mostly himself again.

“Well?” Andrew demanded eagerly. “What are you waiting for, an invitation? Let’s get going!”

Joshua grabbed his keeper bag and weapon belt. The two of them crept through the window and out onto the roof.