



ARROWS *of*
DARKNESS

World of Arcas

By B.I. Woolet

ARCASARTS

Excerpt from ARROWS OF DARKNESS

ARROWS OF DARKNESS

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Appendix star charts and pronunciations were adapted with the courtesy and written permission of IAU and *Sky and Telescope Magazine*.

Cover designed by Regina Wamba of www.maeidesign.com

Copyediting and Interior Design by Amy Eye of www.theeyesforediting.com

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-0-9898735-2-9 (paperback)

978-0-9898735-3-6 (eBook)

Visit us on the web: www.worldofarcas.com

First Edition

Prologue

Orlund Johannes looked out at the tumultuous waters swirling twenty feet below the falls. Taking one last breath, he pushed against the rocks to his right with the blade of his paddle. Plunging down, down, down through the liquid vector splashing violently around him, he held his paddle straight alongside the cockpit and tucked his body as close to the deck as he could bend. The riotous waves were deafening, but his mind remained clear and focused. He dove straight down, beneath the rapids. Battle raged against the orange hull of his kayak, flipping him instantly. His paddle's blade crashed into a hidden rock pile underneath the plunge pool. It broke, sending the half in his left hand flying violently backward into his lip and nose. He was still holding his breath but now tasting blood.

Watery vortexes continued pushing Orlund under. Like the gates of Hell, merciless rapids above barred him from reentering the world of the living while the waters below beckoned him like an open portal to enter a new realm. Terror and adrenaline flooded him, but Orlund was used to these sensations. Each time he developed a new method of cellular manipulation within his field of biomedical nanotechnology, he felt the same. One wrong digit could cost him his hold on a groundbreaking experiment; one wrong twist below the rapids could cost him his hold on the breath of life.

Orlund felt both powerful and powerless releasing the useless, broken paddle from his right hand. Then, instinct took over. As his chest constricted from the lack of oxygen, he tightened his abdominal muscles and rolled. Orlund's head and body fought up through the current in the plunge pool. His mouth gasped open, pulling in the taste of moist air and blood as he balanced himself above the water. The rapids pushed him downstream as his friend Zach paddled out to him.

"That was a monster!" Orlund yelled out as his friend approached.

"Yeah, you look like you got in a fight with a monster." Zach shook his head, pointing at the blood and bruising.

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“Dude, I told you to chuck and duck!” Jeff lightly smirked as he threw a rope from the bank, grateful his friend was safe. Orlund grabbed the rope through his gray gloves as Jeff pulled him to the bank.

The three buddies set up a quick camp to rest and eat before they continued down the river. The weather this fall was unseasonably warm out west, allowing them to kayak much later than usual. Occasional clusters of trees in this rocky, desert terrain still held the majority of their yellow, red, and orange leaves. Colorful leaves along with tan-and-red-striped rock, and the bright yellow sunlight surrounding them, created a deep sensation of visual and physical warmth.

This quick, early-November weekend trip to the wilds of Utah was Orlund’s “last hoorah” before winter’s cold took over. Orlund, a man of action and an innovative genius, typically surrounded himself with sterile environments, precise equipment, top technology, and statistics. The wild outdoors was his mind’s retreat, and adrenaline was his preferred drug. Kayaking every free moment supplied Orlund with a frequent dose.

Orlund pulled the rubber wetsuit off his arms and shoulders near the chosen campsite. After sitting to remove his shoes and tugging the suit’s legs off, he rested for a moment and admired the amazing bluffs. Out of nowhere, a silvery, white image appeared in the distance, blazing with a striking contrast to the red-rock landscape.

“Guys, look at that!” Orlund anxiously pointed toward a natural rock arch in the distance where the brilliant image was standing.

“What’s it this time?” Zach asked, uninterested. Orlund’s antics and jokes wore thin after a while. He wouldn’t fall for his friend’s convincing emotional hype this time.

“Dude, quit playing around and help get the fire started,” Jeff added.

“No, I’m dead serious. I couldn’t make this up! There is a man with huge white wings up that hill by the arch. He just appeared dragging a kid along with him.”

“Your paddle hit you good, huh?” Zach wasn’t buying it and wasn’t looking up. “A man wearing wings. Poor guy just missed trick-or-treating in the desert.”

“Ha! Funny, Zach. Let’s see, the storyteller has threatened us with tales of bears and water snakes and cave dragons before, but a drag queen in the desert might be his scariest tale yet!”

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Rather than laugh or reply with a sly remark, Orlund continued to stare at the arch. Faint voices echoed off the canyon lands until Jeff and Zach casually looked up to see where the noises were coming from.

“What the!” Jeff exclaimed.

“I told you. That man has wings.” Orlund scrambled to his feet and grabbed his dry pack concealing his pistol and phone. “I’m going up there. I think the kid is injured.”

The arch faded out of sight as they climbed the steep bank. When the huge, curved landmark came back into view, no one was there.

“Where are they?” Zach scanned the uneven terrain.

“Maybe it was just a large bird?” Jeff reasoned.

“No. That man definitely had hands and legs. Feathers, yes, but no beak.” Orlund continued, unraveling his black .44 Magnum and phone from the waterproof layers.

“Dude, seriously?” Jeff looked at his armed friend, preparing to fight the vanished villain.

“It could have been a Native American ritual costume! Maybe the boy was starting a coming-of-age ceremony. There’s a reservation up north.” Zach would often bring up Native American culture. He claimed to be some sort of expert because his great-great grandfather was supposedly a full-blooded Cherokee.

“No way, that bird man was even whiter than you are,” Orlund teased.

“Hey, I’m not totally white,” Zach protested.

“Believe what you want, man, but one-sixteenth Native American wasn’t enough to get you a scholarship, and it really isn’t enough to claim you’re a minority,” Jeff jumped in.

“Whatever. You’d both claim me as a Native American in a second if it got us another research grant.”

“That’s right, Tonto,” Orlund agreed with a smile.

The three reached the base of the huge arch towering before them. The canyons lay quiet. A few birds flew high in the distance and several rodents scurried in the valleys below, but no humans moved within sight.

“There’s nothing here. We’re just hungry.” Jeff turned to walk back to the river. “Let’s go eat.”

“Wait! We walked all this way. Let’s at least get a picture under the arch.”

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“I’ll take one of you guys first.” Orlund replaced his pistol in the dry pack and grabbed his phone. “Step back a little so you’re right under it.” The young scientist took several rapid shots with the tap of his finger.

Suddenly, Jeff and Zach disappeared from the frame on his phone. When he looked up, the arch appeared empty, though strange, colorful heat waves seemed to be dancing within it.

“Did you guys find something?” Orlund walked under the arch expecting to see his friends on the other side of the natural rock columns, but he saw much more.

Orlund joined his paralyzed companions as they witnessed a black horse and rider gallop, then dive off a cliff to their left into the ocean below. A bear, woman, and man ran from the scene and climbed up and over the white fortress walls.

“Someone is hurt!” Jeff alerted. As a former battlefield surgeon, he instinctively ran forward followed by the other two.

Nothing could prepare them to see the dead body in front of them. Blood pooled around and on top of the corpse with a severed stump at the end of his arm and a large hole through his chest. A second lifeless body was lying nearby.

“What is this place?” Orlund grabbed his .44. White-winged flags waved in the sunlight on top of the fortress while the sound of horns and shouting echoed beyond the walls. Suddenly, soldiers, wearing red tunics with white wings and three suns, streamed into the large courtyard in front of the seaside peninsula.

“There! At The Bridge!” Soldiers shouted. “Those Earthians killed Sulafat! Find White Wings!” Threats, commands, and accusations exploded through the air as otherworldly troops stampeded toward the confused travelers.

Orlund dropped his gun in alarm, terrified they would arrest him for murder. Dead bodies, angry allegations, and sword-wielding soldiers devoured the three friends with panic. They bolted frantically back through The Bridge. In moments, they were in the familiar canyons just past the arch. They raced over rocky mounds and down steep valleys. Stopping to breathe or look behind weren’t luxuries they couldn’t afford. Frenzied upon reaching the campsite, they threw together only essential gear, grabbed their kayaks, and slid back into the safety of the white rapids.

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The vivid visions of the dead, the strange creatures, and the great white fortress haunted their well-educated minds while riding away on the river. For their safety and sanity, the friends swore each other to secrecy. Once safely back in the company's private jet, they headed to the Pacific Coast. A quick medical-tech innovations seminar and then a day of calm ocean kayaking would clear their troubled thoughts. But the extraordinary world they had wandered into was going to collide again with them soon, for the ocean tides were slowly pushing a creature to shore, a creature that didn't belong to Earth.

Chapter 1

The Split and the Stone

Jackson held his sword firmly with both hands. *Chop! Chop! Swing! Hack!* With speed, precision, and strength, he cut his way through the jungle using only the princess's voice to guide him. As soon as he heard Andi was captured, Jackson grabbed a sword and took off in pursuit.

Queen Cassiopeia,

The princess for the crown jewels.

Yours Dually - The Gemini

Though the queen and her men stood paralyzed by the surprise abduction note left on Andi's vanity, Jackson ignited into action. He refused to let the wretched thieves get away, especially when he'd traveled so far to see her again. The thick jungle and menacing Gemini were no match for his courage and resolve to rescue the princess.

The Gemini were twin brothers, a notorious bandit duo who hid out in the eastern wastelands past the Eridanus River. Legend told that the Gemini moved so quickly they could enter and exit a dwelling before the front door ever creaked on its hinge.

"Don't worry, little princess." One of the men suddenly appeared next to Andi's face on the right.

"Yeah, little princess," the other agreed, appearing on the left. "If dear Mommy doesn't pay today..."

"I'm sure dear Daddy will pay tomorrow," he finished as both twins erupted into rumbling laughter.

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“Oh, you’ll get your pay alright,” Andromeda threatened, proudly looking straight ahead as if she weren’t bothered by the criminals breathing down each side of her neck. “When you’re swinging at the end of a rope!”

“Dear Mommy and Daddy can’t swing us if they can’t...”

“Can’t catch us!” the twin echoed.

Jackson crouched low behind a large fern, watching the Gemini laugh, taunt, and show-off their unique skills to the princess by rocketing from tree to tree. Distracted by their hubris, it was the perfect time for Jackson to act. He slid behind the tree Andi was tied to and softly squeezed her hand.

“I’m getting you out of here,” Jackson whispered, sawing away at her binds.

“Jackson, is that really you?” Andi sighed with relief and excitement. “Watch out behind you!”

Jackson spun around, swinging the sword in defense as one twin zoomed at him. In an instant, the other Gemini appeared. Without a moment for thought, the Son of Earth clashed his sword back and forth against each attack.

“Ahhh-a-ahhh!” A Tarzan holler flew through the jungle as a giant, camouflaged Ursa swung down from the trees and shoved his clawed feet into both of the twins. The thieving thugs fell down into each other. Jackson crouched over the twins and placed his long blade across both identical necks.

“You have two choices, boys.” Jackson bargained as Otava joined him, bearing his teeth. “Get eaten by this bear today, or run far, far away and live to see tomorrow.”

“We’ll run fast!”

“Yeah, we’ll run fast, fast away.” They agreed with fearful, wide eyes.

“Then go.” Jackson removed the sword. “Now!” The Gemini ran and ran and ran like they’d never run before as the giant bear roared loudly, shaking the jungle around them.

Jackson quickly cut the rope that bound Andromeda. She ran into his arms and they embraced.

“I didn’t know if anyone would come, Jackson. I thought you returned to Earth.”

“I couldn’t stay there—not when *you* were here.” Jackson brushed a wisp of hair away from her eyes.

And just as before in the cool caves of Deneb, the two teens gazed into each other’s eyes and...

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Chush. Chush. Chush. Snap!

Jackson immediately stopped looking at Andi and turned toward the approaching noise in the woods.

“I thought I’d find you here,” Matthew interrupted the daydream. Trying to sound upbeat, the younger brother pried a half smile from his mouth. Forty acres of woods filled the world behind their house and Farmer John’s next door, but Matthew knew Jackson would most likely be sitting here on a bench in the clearing.

“Yeah. I just had to get out of the house for a bit.” Jackson put down his pencil, took one last glance at the beautiful Andromeda, then quickly closed the sketch book. He didn’t want to explain to his younger brother why the girl he drew was tied to a tree. Such old-fashioned romance scenes may be enjoyable alone but feel embarrassing, or slightly creepy, when discovered by others.

“You done packing?” Jackson asked solemnly, looking up to assess his brother’s condition.

Matt nodded while slowly walking up and sitting on the adjacent bench angled toward the large rock fire pit. Since Jackson had been working for Farmer John a few days a week, it wasn’t hard convincing his parents to let him stay. But his brother had no such voice in the matter. Jackson felt guilty that he had a choice as he watched Matt pick up a twig and methodically snap it in half. He continued to break the two halves in half until he had sixteen little pieces of almost-equal parts. Water began welling up in his eyes again, so the eleven-year-old boy silently focused on the twig pile in front of him. He arranged the first layer in a square with parallel pieces overlapping those underneath to create a tiny log cabin effect. When all sixteen parts were used and the little square cabin was still standing, he bent down to grab another twig, cracking it in halves again to build the structure higher.

“I’m sorry, man” was all Jackson could manage to release through the knots in his throat.

Matt nodded a small recognition of the sentiment, but he couldn’t talk. If he opened his mouth, the bubbling magma of emotion he kept swallowing down would erupt into a sobbing mess of destruction across his face. Matt didn’t want to lose his cool in front of his older brother. And he didn’t want his mom or dad or little sister to see the evidence of him crying.

As the oldest in the family, Jackson wanted to say, “Everything’s going to be okay. You’ll be back before you know it! Mom and Dad will work things out.” He wanted to say those things. He

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wanted to breathe hope into the situation, but he couldn't get the words to come out. Each wishful phrase felt somehow false. Like saying at a funeral, "Don't be sad, they're at peace now," or "Don't worry, you will see them again some day." Such words are meant to lighten the pain, but some pain is too heavy to lift. Some pain is meant to be felt. And nothing you say changes the fact that death still sucks. Death sucks. Divorce sucks.

Oh, sorry, Mom! Did I say that wrong? Jackson sarcastically asked himself the questions that he would never verbalize out loud. *It's just a little separation for the summer, right?*

"Jackson! Matthew!" their dad called from the back porch.

Both boys froze, staring at the ground. The smooth seventy-degree weather with clear skies and a soft breeze should be the type of early summer weather to fill the hearts of the young with energy and adventure, but in their hearts, it was thirty-five degrees and raining. For the brothers, it was neither cold enough to see the beauty of the snow nor warm enough to dance in the rain. Outside, all was green and life and warmth, but in the depths of their souls, it was damp and cold and ugly.

Matt flung the back of his hand into the tiny stick cabin as he stood, sending it flying to the grass below in scattered, separate pieces. Jackson stood as well and silently followed his brother toward the house. Mom was already in the driveway, trying to coax the littlest in the family, Maddie, to give up the treasure in her hands.

"That sketchbook belongs to Jackson, Maddie," she reasoned, bending down to the kindergartener's level. "You can't take that with you to Grandma's house, okay?"

Lori didn't want to cause a scene. Over the last uncomfortable weeks waiting for school to end for the children, she worked hard to convince the family that traveling back to her parents' house for the summer with the two youngest was the confident and rational choice. The last thing she wanted was for a well of emotions to overflow on the way out of the driveway. She wasn't going to give her husband an opportunity to say, "I told you. Look at what you're doing to our family, our children. What are you thinking?" Nothing was going to guilt her, and nothing was going to change her mind. She felt empty and cold. She needed time away from her husband, away from the stale routine. And now was the best time to withdraw.

Matt shuffled his feet through the grass, watching his tennis shoes move painfully forward. His muscles walked in conflict with his bones that wanted to run back far into the woods and hide until

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this whole mess blew over. When he reached his dad, Tim put his firm arms around his son and hugged him. Matt stood limp in the moment like a puppet who had given up trying to walk on his own because he knows other forces are controlling the strings. His dad finished the embrace and ruffled the top of Matt's brown hair.

"Take care of your mom and sister, okay? You're going to be the man of the house over there. Help Grandpa out, okay?"

"Okay," Matt agreed, then walked straight for the car, sat on the passenger seat, and shoved headphones into his ears. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the seat, wishing he could sit in the back. Matt didn't want to talk to his mom during the forty-five-minute drive. The front was too close to her, but the back was covered with bags and suitcases next to his sister's booster seat.

"What's wrong, Maddie?" Jackson knelt down on the grass near the driveway.

"Mom doesn't want me to take your book, but I want to!" Maddie wasn't loosening her grip.

"You can take it with you. Tell Matt to read it to you, okay?" Jackson smiled warmly. Maddie kept hold of the sketchbook as she jumped full force into Jackson's arms, nearly causing him to lose his balance. Dad was right behind, waiting for a hug from his little girl.

"I'll see you soon, baby, okay?" Tim lifted her up in his arms.

Okay—it was the one word we all could agree upon and the one lie that nobody believed.

"Bye, Jackson." His mom walked over and hugged him. "I love you." Now taller and broader than his mother, Jackson stood stiff and gave a half-hearted pat on her back in return. She turned swiftly and slid into the driver's seat while her husband buckled Maddie in.

While over half of his family drove away, Jackson turned and walked briskly back into the woods. Well hidden by the thick, growing greenery around him, the tears finally streamed down uncontrollably. The liquid sorrow continued to fall as he picked up a stick and whacked it furiously against a tree over and over again until it broke. He was angry. Angry at his dad for not fighting harder to keep the family together. Angry at his mom for leaving. Over and over again, he blamed the stress of his autumn disappearance on the split. If he caused it, perhaps he could fix it again, right? But deep down, Jackson knew his parents were barely functioning together even before he was thrown into Arcas. Exhausted, he cast the tattered stick to the side and collapsed to his knees.

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“Ow! Aag!” Jackson grunted in startled pain. His knees had not landed on the soft, rich soil as he expected. Something stiff and hard sent painful shocks through his bones instead. Normally, he wouldn’t pay much attention to a rock underneath him. But this rock felt oddly large and flat, so he pushed aside the grass and weeds smashed on top to examine it. Jackson then peeled up a thin layer of decomposed leaves and dirt. *Stars?* Jackson wondered at seeing the familiar shape carved into the homemade stepping-stone. His eyes grew wide and his heart began to pound. Quickly, he scraped the rest of the debris off the rock until it revealed a crescent moon, sun, star cluster, and gem shape.

“A pillar stone?” Jackson breathed out, staring at the flat rock and rubbing his hand over each carved object. As he stood to make sure that his dad didn’t follow him, he noticed a small “X” carved into the tree directly behind the stone and knew exactly who left the clue. “Oh, Grandpa, you’re still looking out for me.”

For the last six months, Jackson had often been tempted to use the transport gem he found in the attic after his return home. He longed to visit the quiet cabin surrounded by mountains in the Starling Forest. He wanted to feel the warmth of the crimson, coral, and golden suns. He wanted to gaze in Andi’s purple eyes and learn more about her, learn everything about her. Until now, the safety of transporting was a gamble at best. But now, he knew where Rigel and Merope had entered to bring him home. If his assumptions were correct, transporting from here would lead him safely to the front step of the cozy cabin in the Starling Forest. In an instant, the weariness of this world melted under the promise of another. Summer was here, and it was time to plan his vacation.

ARROWS OF DARKNESS will be released on October 2nd, 2015.