
Lunis
Swamp
Stella
Astaroth
Umbra
Cave
Nightmare
Plains
Lunavale
Nexus
The
Parent's Tree
Nubis
Ignis

UMBRA TALES:
Legends of the Lightcasters

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Introduction

The stars never lie. They tell stories every day, and once a month they tell the same story: 'The Legends of the Lightcasters'.

The constellation is a prophecy – one that says that the kingdom may one day fall to a man filled with shadows and rage.

For the kingdom to have any chance of survival, the shadow beasts, creatures born in the heart of dark and light, are key. And beside them will be two children with the power to change the world.

A girl wielding a staff takes the lead at the forefront of

battle, the boy beside her aiding her fight. The light that shines around them symbolises the hope they will bring back to our people.

There is no telling when this prophecy will come to fruition, but may my family far in the future take heed and keep this book safe until then. It will contain everything I know of the world that we, the founders, have created.

May the light save us all.



PROLOGUE

Three years ago . . .

Today, no matter what, we were going to see a wild umbra.

Under the light of the forever moon, we wove in and out of our starlit city. My shoes clicked against the pavement of the empty streets, the two of us listening out for any sign that we were not alone.

With glowing blue roofs, the houses and shops towered over us like silent watchers, keeping our secret. In the distance the faint buzz of the market-day festival sounded ahead, keeping all the adults in town busy with celebration pastries, doughnuts, and trinkets to buy from the few cities left in our kingdom.

'Are you sure this is a good idea, Mia? What if we get caught?' Miles whispered, trying to keep up.

Pfft, of course it was a good idea. This was the best plan I'd ever had.

We ducked, the sweet waft of bread filling my nose as we snuck past Mr Davies's bread stall when he turned his back to check his leftover stock.

The cold breeze tugged at my dark curly locks as we blended into the shadows where the light of the floating glow bugs and bright streetlights didn't touch. I looked back at Miles with a grin. My heart was beating a thousand times a minute. There's no way I was giving up. We got this!

'I know what I'm doing. Trust me.'

The stars that dotted the sky sparkled, cheering us on as we dipped past Ms Dawn's little flower shop, decorated with the prettiest crystal lights and cherry vines. I exhaled with relief, having passed unnoticed, but nerves had my body tingling all over.

The Aquila constellation shone down as we neared the edge of our city and my excitement bubbled up more and more.

As long as we were back in time for dinner, Nan and Grandad would never know. Mum was in the lab all day and Dad was out on town patrol. It was perfect.

I smiled, taking off down the alley with Miles close

behind. Attached to my back, my baby brother gurgled, babbling to himself, all tucked into the blue-star swaddle blanket.

The last thing I expected was to be lugging Lucas around on my back, but like clockwork, Nan and Grandad had fallen asleep listening to the news channel on our hologram TV, and Miles and I couldn't just leave my little brother behind. He had to come too.

'Oh, just so you know, I'm going to be the best tamer in the world. I'm gonna have five – no, six – different umbra!' I said.

My pale, dark-haired friend quirked an eyebrow, slowing down to a stop. 'Yeah right. *I'm* gonna be the best. You're too short to be the number one tamer. You have to be THIS tall.'

He stretched his arm way above me and grinned. I stuck my tongue out but zipped it back in before he could pinch it. The meanie.

'You're such a liar. You don't even know anything about the umbra.' Ever since I could read, I'd devoured every book, hologram report and research paper I could find about umbra in the library and my mum's lab. These creatures had helped us when the Darkness came

and took over our city. They fought beside us against the reapers and we survived. They're the best.

'I know they're made of shadowy stuff,' Miles shrugged. 'And they look like a mix of different animals with awesome gold eyes. What else is there to know?'

I flicked his cheek and he hissed, rubbing it.

'They're so much more than that, you clown,' I said, looking left and right down the alley. 'Some have teeth so sharp they can bite through anything, even bones, and some have talons that can tear you apart in one second flat.'

His eyes widened. I raised my hands like claws, ready to say more, but he stuck his fingers in his ears, spun around and shouted. 'Lalala, I can't hear you, you're just trying to scare me.'

I held back my laughter. Mum and Dad's umbra would never hurt us, and I was sure that wild ones wouldn't either. They were the smartest, kindest and strongest creatures in the kingdom. Not once did I read anything about them actually being dangerous to people – only to the Reaper King's minions, the reapers. But Miles didn't have to know that.

He was still singing out loud with his fingers in his ears when I flicked him again, earning another hiss.

'Shh, come on. We can't be late to the gate,' I said. He peeked through one eye, grinned, and we were off again.

We raced down the alley, then slowed to a stop, having reached our destination. A big smile spread across my face. A humongous gateway, taller than any house in the city, stood ahead. It was what separated us from the Nightmare Plains, the wild abandoned fields of forests, swamps and a bottomless sea that had taken the lives of many. Home to all the wild umbra.

My heart thumped heavily with each breath. We were so close now.

'You don't think we're gonna see any reapers outside the walls, do you?' Miles asked.

'I doubt it.'

It was true that reapers were the real dangers outside the walls, but an actual reaper hadn't been seen since Mum and Dad made the city liveable again years ago with the other tamers. We had all heard the stories of what happened when the dark first took over our city, Nubis, and the lost city of Astaroth, way before Miles and I were born. First came the black smoke, so thick that it burned your eyes. Then came the reapers. Bony creatures, clad in cloaks, with

teeth like sharks' and eyes like bats', who bowed to the Reaper King, bringer of darkness and nightmares and taker of souls. No one knew – or knows, even now – how the Reaper King's dark powers slipped into our world, making the Nightmare Plains a death sentence for everyone but the tamers, whose umbra protect them.

Mum, Dad and the others were confident the reapers wouldn't try to breach the walls of our city again; if they were going to, then they would have already. Plus, we had tamers who guarded the gates and patrolled the area just in case, but never say never, I guess.

It was said that if the reapers ever took over all six cities, time itself would end. The king would be released from the Spirit Plain and rise once again – and one look at him would cause you to have nightmares forever. He was truly the worst.

'OK,' Miles said as we neared the gates, bringing my thoughts back to our mission. 'But if we do see a reaper, we're running,'

'Deal.'

Just as we planned, it was the hour of switching guards, a slim two-minute window when they would be more focused on changing positions than

their immediate surroundings. The perfect time to sneak past.

I silently watched the men and women dressed in blue uniforms up ahead as they collected their things and walked away from the gate. That was our chance.

I tiptoed forward, checking on Lucas before approaching the small wooden pallet that leant against the wall further down from the giant gate. Just where we had left it.

Beside me, Miles took a deep breath and we bumped fists.

'Ready?' he asked with a small smile. I nodded and took off first.

I leapt over the first barrier, ducking and weaving through signs and stop posts as sounds of the replacement guards' stomping feet got louder. I tripped as the concrete turned to mud but recovered my footing just in time, keeping Lucas secured on my back and staying out of sight. Almost there. My chest heaved as the footsteps echoed closer and I crawled under the final barrier. The cold mud squelched against my knees as I clawed the dirt and my palm slapped the wall. Made it!

Right behind me, Miles came through huffing

and puffing as I slid the pallet, revealing a small gap under the wall. We'd spent ages digging and keeping it hidden during the annual repairs when the tamers were making sure the moon crystals embedded in the walls were still functioning well. Sometimes though, pesky four-eared rabbits and horned beavers would try and dig tunnels, so the tamers always double-checked to make sure there weren't any holes or cracks. But Miles and I had found one, made it bigger, *and* kept it hidden. Ha!

All our secret planning had come to this. We were gonna do it. We were going to see a wild umbra! Miles went under first and, after he called back to tell me it was safe, I unwrapped Lucas from my back and passed him through. Once Miles had him, I took a deep breath and crawled through the hole myself. Freedom!

I'd only ever seen glimpses of the Nightmare Plains from inside the walls of the city, but being *in* it was completely different.

Tall grass stretched out as far as we could see, a darker violet colour than what grew within the walls. It was wild and untamed, and reached all the way up to our knees in some places. No doubt filled with creepy crawlies and who knows what, but nothing was going

to stop me. Once Lucas was secured on my back again, Miles and I slowly trudged on into the Plains, away from the city.

The trees were bare, some with only a few stray silver leaves that shook violently in the wind. Their branches jutted up and down like hooks or crooked fingers, like faceless scarecrows that watched our every move, and I shivered. Creepy wasn't a strong enough word. But we'd come this far and I wasn't going back. Not until I saw a wild umbra.

The moonlight glistened, making my hands glow golden brown, and Lucas's dark, tight curls shone brightly.

'All right, Tanaka, this seems like a good spot,' I said, coming to a stop. 'We don't want to scare them off.'

Miles pulled a face at being called by his surname. I grinned, inspecting the area ahead. If we were too loud, the umbra would run away. The purple bunches of grass reached only to our ankles here, and the sweet flowery smell of the rosy-dill plants with teardrop petals comforted me. Mum's favourite flower. Nan's too.

Something rustled ahead by one of the trees and I squinted my eyes. My pulse raced.

Little horns poked out from the bushes and I gasped.

A small three-horned goat popped its head up, looking at me with its beady blue eyes before it scampered off, and my shoulders slumped. It was just a normal animal, not a being made of shadows and stars. Disappointment washed over me. Silly goat.

Miles sighed.

'It's OK, Miles, I'm sure the next one will be—' I turned my head and froze.

Behind the sparse silver trees, a creature was standing, still and quiet. Its fur shimmered like a million black diamonds, but its wolfish appearance sent a shiver down my spine, even though its floppy ears were rabbit-like. Spikes spread around its neck like a collar. Lucas whimpered against my back, but despite all that, I found myself stepping forward.

'Umbra …' I breathed. My knees threatened to buckle. I wanted to scream with joy, but something stopped me. Its eyes connected with mine and my throat closed up. Its eyes …

They were blood-red.

'I thought all umbra had gold eyes …' Miles whispered.

That's what I had read. All the books said the same. Even Mum and Dad said it.

'You were right about the teeth though,' Miles said, gulping.

My body ran cold, like all the blood had drained away. I shifted Lucas on my back. What *was* this thing?

My gaze didn't move as the wolf-like creature walked out from the trees, never breaking eye contact. A red aura pulsed around it, ever so faintly.

Danger. Danger.

When it opened its mouth a loud roar ripped through the air and I clutched my ears tight, screaming. Lucas cried out behind me. Was this really an umbra?

Miles looked as frightened as I felt but he clenched his jaw and pushed me and Lucas behind him. 'Stay back. Maybe I can tame it,' he said but I shook my head, stumbling as the shadow creature stepped closer.

'Don't!' I yanked him back, my palms sweaty. It took years of training to tame an umbra. The books never mentioned anything like this. I didn't know anything!

The wild hellhound umbra growled again and Lucas wailed, pounding me with his little fists. I sneaked a glance at him and when I looked back, the umbra bared its fangs and I barely held back a scream. I'd never been so scared. The creature's blood-red eyes pierced straight through me, pinning me to the spot. Lucas's



cries got even louder, and invisible sparks zapped from the umbra's mind to mine. I clutched my head and screamed again, feeling it invade like a virus. My knees gave way and I fell to the ground.

'We need to get out of here, Mia!' Miles yelled, clutching his own head.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. The pain kept me on my knees as panic took over and a voice invaded mind.

'I'm starving . . . You're a little small but you'll do.'

The shadow creature licked its lips, stopping just a foot away from me. I mentally shoved the voice out of my mind, blocking it out. As the creature's hot breath engulfed my face, a roar rattled the air behind us and something leapt over our heads. It crashed into the wolf-like umbra and they tumbled across the field.

In a flash, the pain in my head disappeared and I scrambled to my feet, watching as another shadow creature jumped away from the wild umbra, snapping its head back at us.

'Bolt!' I yelled with relief as I recognised the panther-like shape of Dad's umbra.

Bolt's golden eyes shifted to us before facing forward as the wild umbra bared its fangs again. He smacked the wild umbra with his long, rattlesnake-like tail,

leaping in front of us protectively.

'Be careful!' I yelled as the wild one prepared to pounce.

Bolt sprang at the wild umbra again and I gripped my hair, almost yanking it out as they clashed once more. If something happened to Bolt while he was protecting us, it would be all my fault. The hellhound growled. Its blood-red eyes connected with mine once again, and it leapt past Bolt straight for me. I turned around to run when something snatched me backwards. Lucas cried out, the blanket wedged between the umbra's teeth.

'No!' I yelled, yanking the blanket from the beast's sharp fangs. I desperately tried to keep a hold of my brother as the umbra tried to get him.

Pushing the hellhound back, Bolt slashed at it with his claws, earning a cry of pain. Shaking its fur, the shadow wolf shifted its red eyes from Bolt to us, growling low. It gave me one last glare, before dragging its paw against the dirt then turning around and racing away, deep into the plains.

'Mia! Miles!' A voice boomed and I jumped as I turned to see Dad running towards us. His uniform and shoes were muddied and the panic in his face made my stomach twist. Behind him two more adults raced

toward us with their umbra beside them.

'Why aren't you at home? What are you doing outside the gate?'

I raced over and hugged him tight, those red eyes still burning in my head.

'Dad—'

'Mia! Miles! Lucas!' My stomach dropped even lower as Mum ran over to us, her lab coat swinging. 'You could have been killed if it wasn't for Bolt catching your scent!'

She took Lucas from me, clutching him tight, part of the ripped blanket falling to the ground. Beside Mum, a huge shadowy bear with a spiked back looked at us with disappointment in his bright, golden eyes. Spike, Mum's umbra.

'Not only did you put yourself at risk, but your baby brother too!'

I hiccuped. It was true. That thing could have killed us. It could have killed Lucas. I couldn't even move.

'And you, Miles,' Mum said, turning to the boy. 'We are responsible for you now! Why would you put yourself in danger like that?'

He bowed his head. I scrubbed my sleeve against my eyes, sniffing back the tears the best I could. I just

wanted to see a wild umbra . . .

'Sorry Mummy . . .' I whispered.

Gently brushing one of my curls out of my face, Mum brought her eyes to meet mine.

'Promise me you'll never go beyond the walls again without permission,' she said, resting her palm on my cheek. I leaned into it, sniffling.

'I promise.'

After everything that happened, I never wanted to go beyond the walls again.

Umbra weren't amazing at all. They were monsters.