

ADVENTURES IN OCULUS
THE SPIDER WITCH'S CURSE

by
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PROLOGUE

BEFORE OCULUS EXISTED, THERE WAS NOTHING. An endless void stretched in every direction, empty and silent.

In the heart of that emptiness stood Aurelian, a wizard of immense power, holding a vial of liquid that glowed like captured sunlight. He poured it carefully across the void. Where the liquid fell, mountains rose, rivers curved and sparkled, forests unfolded, and creatures of every kind drew breath for the first time. The magic liquid carried the essence of life, and Oculus bloomed under Aurelian's careful hand.

At his side stood another wizard, a pupil and friend. He watched silently, his eyes alight with wonder and ambition. He was brilliant, eager to learn, and he believed he could one day surpass Aurelian. That belief, though not yet tested, planted the first seeds of pride.

Together they observed the world they shaped, a place of balance and beauty, with a radiant capital at its center, its towers reflecting the light and its gardens flowing like living rivers. Oculus thrived under Aurelian's guidance, perfect and alive.

In time, that pride would grow. The pupil would gather others who shared his desire for greatness. They would transform into dragons through their magic and challenge Aurelian and the good wizards. Their defeat would cast them into exile, far from the capital they once helped shape.

For now, however, Oculus was new, alive, and untouched by darkness. And many thousands of years later, in a quiet room far from the world of magic, a boy named Dominic played. He did not yet know that a spark

of ancient magic stirred within him, a spark that had always been part of Oculus itself. One day, it would call him home.

ONE

RAIN TAPPED STEADILY AGAINST DOMINIC'S BEDROOM window, drumming a soft rhythm that made staying inside feel like the perfect choice. The faint scent of wet earth drifted through the slightly open window, mixing with the familiar smells of his room: crayons, pencil shavings, and the plastic scent of countless Lego bricks. Dominic was a boy like no other, with a mind that stretched farther than the clouds gathering outside his window, and he had discovered that rainy afternoons were ideal for building kingdoms.

His room was a perfect storm of organized chaos. Books about dragons, aliens, and fantastical machines leaned at odd angles on the shelves. Art supplies covered his desk in colorful disarray. Scattered across the hardwood floor was evidence of his morning's work, a grand Lego castle that had grown from a simple idea into something magnificent.

The castle stretched across half his floor, complete with spiraling towers, a working drawbridge, and battlements where tiny plastic knights stood guard. Dominic knelt beside his creation, wearing his favorite black All-Star high-tops, a red sweater over a gray t-shirt, and jeans that had collected a fine dusting of Lego fragments. His dark hair fell across his forehead as he carefully positioned the final stone on the highest tower.

Leonard, his loyal companion, lay nearby with his chin resting on his paws. Though small in stature, Leonard had the distinctive features of a wolf: pointed ears that seemed to catch every sound, an intelligent muzzle, and alert golden eyes that held an almost human understanding. His thick,

silver-gray coat caught the afternoon light, and his bright green collar jingled softly whenever he shifted to get a better view of Dominic's progress. Every few minutes, Leonard's tail would thump against the floor, but it was the way his expressive eyes followed every detail of the castle's construction that made it seem like he truly understood the architectural masterpiece taking shape.

"What do you think, Leonard?" Dominic asked, sitting back on his heels to admire his work. "Ready to defend the kingdom from dragon attacks?"

Leonard lifted his head, his golden eyes seeming to process the question with remarkable intelligence, and he gave a small bark that sounded almost like agreement.

The sound of footsteps in the hallway interrupted their planning session. The bedroom door opened with a soft creak, and Rebecca peeked inside, clutching a thick sketchbook against her chest. At eleven years old, she had the same warm brown eyes and dark hair as Dominic, and in the shifting afternoon light, they looked remarkably similar, almost like twins. Her hair was always tucked behind her ears and usually bore smudges of pencil marks or paint. As his only sibling, she was both his closest companion and an occasional source of creative chaos.

"Can I come in?" she asked, though she was already stepping carefully around a scattered pile of Lego pieces. "I finished something, and I want to show you."

Dominic glanced at the "No Sisters Allowed" sign hanging on his door, a relic from when he was eight and thought sisters were nothing but trouble. Now, at eleven, he had learned that Rebecca was actually pretty good company. She was the only person he trusted not to accidentally demolish his creations, and her artistic eye often helped him see his projects in new ways.

"Sure," he said, scooting over to make room on the floor. "But watch out for the..."

"I know, I know. Watch the castle," Rebecca said with a grin. She settled cross-legged beside him, careful not to disturb even the smallest Lego piece. Leonard immediately padded over to greet her, his wolf-like ears perked forward and his tail wagging as he nudged her elbow with his nose. There was something almost protective in the way he positioned himself between Rebecca and the scattered castle pieces.

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“Hi, Leonard,” she whispered, scratching behind his ears. Then she opened her sketchbook with the reverence of someone unveiling a masterpiece. “Look at this.”

The drawing took Dominic’s breath away. Rebecca had sketched a magnificent dragon perched atop a castle tower, its wings spread wide against a stormy sky. As Dominic looked closer, he noticed something odd: the castle in her drawing was not just inspired by his Lego creation. It was far more elaborate; with architectural details he had never built. The dragon itself seemed to be staring directly out of the page with an almost knowing expression. She had used colored pencils to bring the creature to life, with emerald and gold scales that seemed to shimmer on the paper and ancient, wise eyes that held secrets.

“Rebecca, this is incredible,” Dominic said, though something about the drawing made him feel strangely emotional in a way he could not quite explain. “But where did you get the ideas for all these extra details? The tower windows, the dragon’s expression. It is like you have actually seen this place before.”

Rebecca blinked, looking down at her drawing with a momentarily distant expression, as if she were trying to remember something just out of reach. “I... I am not sure. Sometimes I dream about places like this, and when I wake up, I can remember exactly how they looked. Does that sound weird?”

Rebecca’s face lit up with pride. “I have been practicing shading techniques from that art book Mom got me. And I used your castle as inspiration. I hope you do not mind. I have been watching you build it, and it is so detailed and perfect.”

“Mind? Are you kidding? This is amazing. Look how you captured the texture of the tower stones. They look exactly like real stone blocks, not plastic bricks.”

Excited by his praise, Rebecca leaned forward to point out details in her drawing. “See, I made the dragon’s claws grip the tower stones like this, and I added tiny windows with light glowing inside, as if people live there.”

Her elbow accidentally bumped the base of the main tower. Three carefully placed bricks came loose and tumbled to the floor with soft plastic clicks that sounded unusually loud in the quiet room.

“Oh no!” Rebecca gasped, her hand flying to cover her mouth. Her eyes went wide with horror. “Dominic, I am so sorry. I did not mean to. I was just trying to show you.”

For a brief moment, Dominic felt that familiar flash of frustration. He had spent three days perfecting this castle, planning every detail, making sure each piece fit exactly where it belonged. Those three bricks represented hours of careful work.

But then he looked at Rebecca’s face, genuinely distressed, not careless or dismissive, and the annoyance melted away like ice in warm sunlight.

“Hey, it is okay,” he said gently, reaching for the fallen pieces. “It is just three bricks. Besides, I was starting to think this tower might be a little too tall anyway. It was making the whole castle look unbalanced.”

“Really?” Rebecca asked, relief flooding her voice. “You are not mad?”

“Really. Actually, you know what? You have such a good eye for art. Maybe you can help me figure out the right height for this tower. What do you think it should look like?”

Rebecca studied the castle with the serious concentration of a professional architect. “Well, if you made it about three bricks shorter, it would match the proportions of the tower in my drawing better, and that might look more realistic.”

“Perfect. Here, help me rebuild it your way.”

They worked together for the next several minutes, Rebecca holding pieces steady while Dominic carefully reconstructed the connection points. Leonard supervised the operation from nearby, occasionally sniffing at stray Lego pieces that had rolled under the desk, his collar jingling softly each time he moved.

The bedroom door opened again, and their mother appeared carrying a small wooden tray with two steaming mugs and a plate of cookies. Luciana Martinez had striking blue eyes that seemed to hold depths of unspoken knowledge, and she possessed an almost magical ability to know exactly when hot chocolate and snacks were needed.

“Thought you two might want something warm on such a dreary afternoon,” she said, setting the tray down on Dominic’s desk and moving a stack of comic books to make room. “How is the castle coming along?”

“Dominic finished the whole thing this morning,” Rebecca said proudly, accepting a mug of hot chocolate that smelled like cinnamon and vanilla. “And I drew it. Want to see?”

“Of course I do, sweetheart.” Mom settled onto the edge of Dominic’s bed, smoothing her jeans as she accepted the sketchbook. Her face softened as she studied Rebecca’s drawing, but Dominic caught something else in her expression, a flicker of recognition that was quickly masked, followed by what looked almost like longing.

“Oh, Rebecca,” she said quietly, her voice catching slightly, “this is extraordinary. You have captured details that are so vivid, so real.” Her fingers trembled almost imperceptibly as she traced the dragon’s outline. “Where do these images come from, sweetheart? These dreams you mentioned?”

Mom studied the drawing for a long moment, her fingers now gripping the sketchbook more tightly. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper. “He told stories about dragons and far-off kingdoms, brave knights and magical portals, talking animals, and enchanted forests. But sometimes, I think they were not just stories at all.”

Dominic found himself studying the wardrobe with new interest. Until now, it had just been furniture: a place to hang his good clothes and store seasonal items he rarely needed. But hearing about Great-Grandfather’s stories made him notice details he had overlooked before. The carved vines seemed to twist and spiral in patterns that looked almost alive in the shifting afternoon light.

“Did Great-Grandfather actually go to these places?” Dominic asked, studying his mother’s face carefully. “The way you are talking about them, it sounds like you think they might be real.”

Mom’s expression became guarded, and she glanced quickly at Leonard, who was watching the conversation with those unnaturally intelligent eyes. For just a moment, it seemed she and Leonard shared some kind of understanding.

“There are many things in this world that we do not fully understand,” she said finally, her voice heavy with unspoken knowledge. “And sometimes, the people we love most are connected to places and stories in ways we never expected.”

She looked directly at Rebecca as she spoke, and for just an instant, her composure cracked. Dominic saw raw pain flash across her face: the kind of grief that comes from losing something precious and being unable to do anything about it.

Leonard, who had been dozing peacefully beside the rebuilt castle, suddenly lifted his head with sharp alertness. His pointed ears stood at full attention, and his golden eyes focused intently on the wardrobe with an expression that seemed far too knowing for an ordinary dog. The intelligence in his gaze was unmistakable. This was not the simple curiosity of a pet hearing a strange noise; it was something much deeper.

Leonard stared at the wooden doors with the intensity of someone recognizing something important. His head tilted not in confusion but in what looked almost like remembrance. His small body remained perfectly still, but his eyes held a complexity of emotions that seemed impossible for an animal to express.

After several long seconds, Leonard made a soft whining sound. It was not puzzled or distressed, but almost wistful, like he was remembering something from long ago.

"What is it, boy?" Dominic asked, following Leonard's gaze to the wardrobe. "Do you hear something?"

Leonard continued to stare at the wooden doors, his tail still, his compact, wolf-like body tense with an awareness that seemed almost human. Then, as if making a conscious decision, he shook himself from nose to tail, gave a small huff, and settled back down onto the floor. But Dominic noticed that even as Leonard pretended to relax, his intelligent golden eyes remained fixed on the wardrobe, watching and waiting.

"Animals sense things we cannot even imagine," Mom said softly, her voice carrying an undertone of deep concern as she watched Leonard's behavior. She glanced at the wardrobe with what looked like barely controlled fear, then quickly moved to collect the empty mugs with hands that shook slightly.

"I will be downstairs," she said, her words coming faster now. "I have some important family documents to review. Dominic, Rebecca, promise me you will stay here in this room, and if anything seems strange or unusual, you will come find me immediately. Do you understand?"

There was an urgency in her voice that made both children look up in surprise.

"We will, Mom," Dominic promised, though he was already mentally designing a second tower that would perfectly balance the one Rebecca had helped him fix.

After their mother left, Rebecca returned to her sketchbook, carefully adding tiny details to her dragon's scales with colored pencils. Dominic went back to fine-tuning his castle's defenses, but he found himself glancing frequently at Leonard. The dog appeared completely normal now, his tail occasionally wagging, watching their every move with his usual interested expression, but that moment of intense focus on the wardrobe had been distinctly odd.

"Rebecca," Dominic said after a while, his voice thoughtful, "did Leonard seem strange to you just now?"

"Strange how?" she asked, looking up from her drawing, though for a brief moment, her expression seemed distant, almost translucent in the gray afternoon light, as if she were not quite fully present in the room.

"I do not know exactly. The way he was staring at the wardrobe, like he recognized something important. And that sound he made. It was almost like he was trying to communicate something specific."

Rebecca blinked, and suddenly she seemed completely solid and present again. "You know, sometimes I get the strangest feeling that Leonard understands far more than we realize. And sometimes..." She paused, touching her forehead as if trying to remember something. "Sometimes I feel like I am supposed to be somewhere else. Isn't that weird?"

"Yeah, you are probably right," Dominic agreed, but something about Leonard's behavior continued to nag at the back of his mind like an unsolved puzzle.

The rain continued its gentle percussion against the window, and the room settled into the comfortable quiet that comes with a peaceful afternoon. Rebecca sketched with focused concentration, adding layers of color and shadow to her dragon. Dominic carefully adjusted the positioning of his castle's defensive walls, moving tiny knights to more strategic positions. Leonard dozed in a patch of gray light, his breathing deep and even.

It was the kind of ordinary afternoon that felt perfect in its simplicity, the three of them together in the cozy warmth of the room while the rain painted patterns on the window and the outside world seemed far away and unimportant.

None of them noticed that the carved vines on the wardrobe doors seemed to catch and hold the shifting light in ways that did not quite follow the natural patterns of afternoon shadows. None of them saw that the darkness between the wooden panels had grown just a little deeper than it

should have been, or that the brass hinges had begun to gleam with a light that had nothing to do with the gray day outside.

Outside, the rain began to slow to a gentle patter, and the first hints of evening crept across the cloudy sky. But inside Dominic's room, surrounded by Lego castles and artwork, hot chocolate warmth, and the gentle sound of Leonard's breathing, everything felt safe and normal and exactly as it should be.

For now, that was enough.

But sometimes, when you are not paying attention, the most extraordinary adventures begin with the most ordinary moments. And sometimes, the difference between a regular afternoon and the start of something magical is nothing more than a dog's curious stare and the whisper of old stories carried on rainy air.