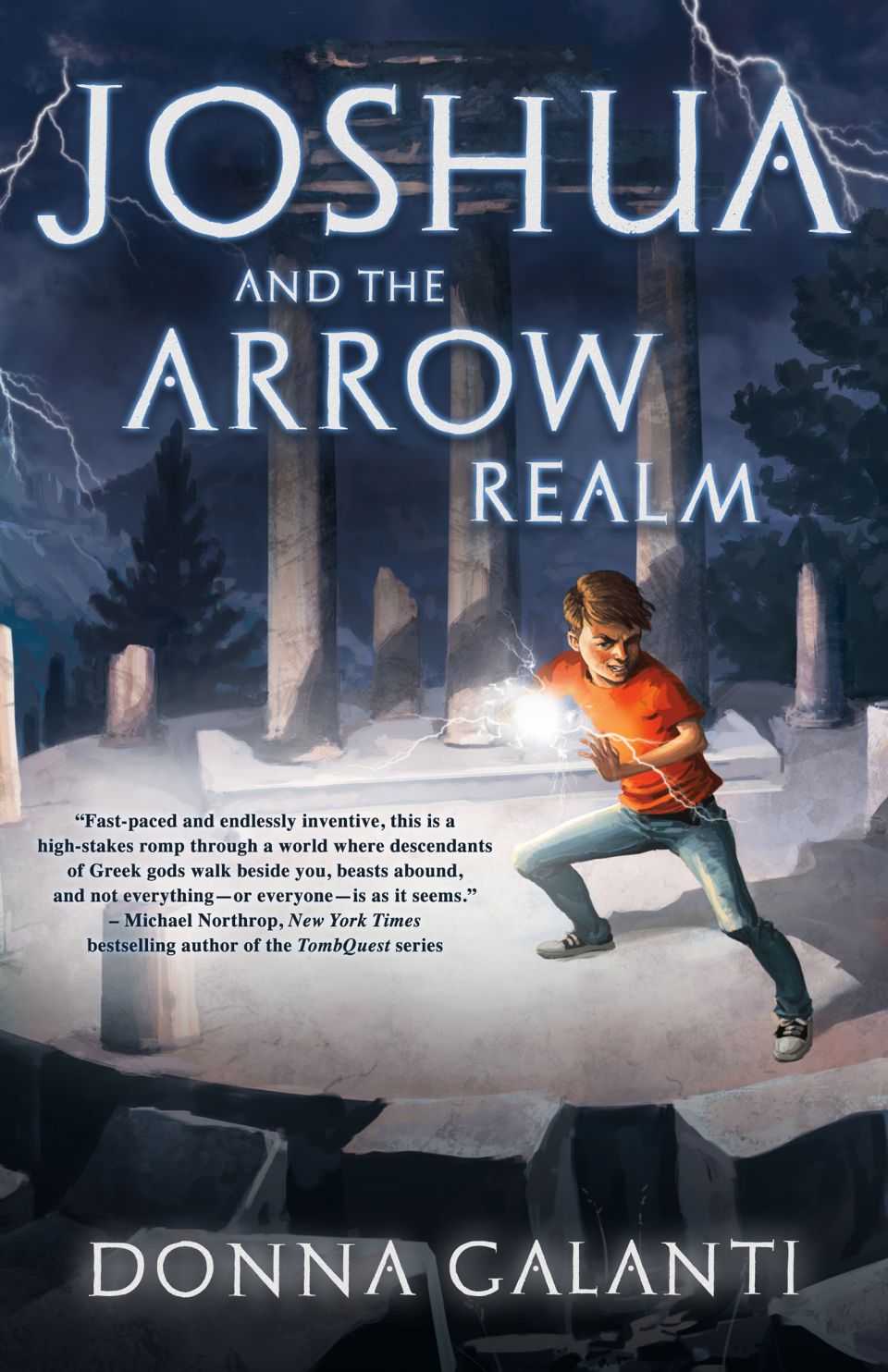
JOSHUA AND THE ARROW REALM



"Fast-paced and endlessly inventive, this is a high-stakes romp through a world where descendants of Greek gods walk beside you, beasts abound, and not everything—or everyone—is as it seems."
– Michael Northrop, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *TombQuest* series

DONNA GALANTI

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To the real Joshua Cooper, as always.

… and when the Olympian heirs at long last act with goodness in their hearts, an Oracle will arise to restore their full power and shut down the Lightning Road forevermore …

JOSHUA AND THE ARROW REALM

Chapter One

"On your mark. Get set. Go!" We hurtled down the crusty ice-covered slope under a midnight moon. Charlie raced the faster sled, but I knew every dip and bump of this hill. I veered toward a ramp I'd made the day before he arrived from France and launched off it. He yelled a French curse at me and I laughed, now in the lead. The trees and creek disappeared. The fort Finn and I built last summer, before we got kidnapped to another world, was a white blob. I zoomed past it, picking up speed, and headed for the frozen pond at the bottom of the hill, wishing Finn were here with us too, but he was visiting his grandparents for winter break.

The star-studded sky hung over us, and the full moon reflected off the glittering snow before dashing behind rolling clouds. Light sleet slapped my cheeks. I skidded left and flipped over. Charlie grinned at me as he passed, his long legs trailing off the back of his sled. He rocketed

to the pond, spraying my face with snow. "*Au revoir,* Joshua!"

His black hair and red scarf flew up, a splash of color in the white tundra. I threw myself on my sled and raced after him. He was going to win! It was okay. I wanted to make every minute fun for Charlie because he was in a rough spot. His American dad got some fancy job in Boston and the whole family was moving here, but Charlie's younger brother and mom stayed behind in France for a few months to pack the house. For now, Charlie had to deal with his dad, a new school, and a new country. At least his dad thought it'd be good for him to hang with his one American friend over winter break since they just moved here. If Charlie needed cheering, he came to the right place. He was like a brother and brothers let each other win, didn't they?

A faint rumble groaned through the whistling wind.

Boom!

Thunder ripped the sky overhead.

Charlie reached the frozen pond, spinning across it. "Woohoo! I win! You Americans can't beat us at speed!"

Lightning flashed. It zinged across the pine trees like brilliant sunlight. A seed of terror flickered inside me.

Boom! Boom!

Another flash scorched the sky.

Charlie's smile fell to a frown as he raced across the ice, peering up into the swirling clouds.

We both knew what lightning could do.

Suddenly, sneaking outside for a moonlit sled ride before Bo Chez got home from his monthly poker game didn't seem so smart.

The sleet turned to snow. Icicles flew off trees like glass splinters, shattering on the hard snow. As I shot

toward the pond, a tree on the edge moved. Its branches swayed in the swirling snow.

It wasn't a tree, but a girl! She stumbled through the mad flurry, arms outstretched.

"Charlie, look!"

Gusts snatched the words away as my sled hit the ice and careened out of control on the bumpy surface. The girl staggered and fell onto the pond. I twisted my sled away to avoid hitting her and smashed right into Charlie. With a yelp, he pulled me up, and we clumped toward the girl. We lifted her up, half dragging her back up the hill to the house in the pelting snow and sleet.

"Who is she?" Charlie yelled.

"No idea," I yelled back.

He said more, but his words were lost in the wind.

My lungs burned with the cold and effort. There was only one reason someone would appear with lightning—to steal us. This girl might appear like a waif unprepared for a storm but I couldn't trust that's all she was.

I considered leaving her out in the storm, but the inevitable guilt and wanting answers won out. Charlie wrenched the back door to the kitchen open, and we hauled Mystery Girl inside. The wind pummeled us with angry flakes as I pushed the door shut, leaving the arctic freeze behind. The girl slumped in our arms, and I lowered her down on a chair.

"Watch her," I said, ripping off my gloves and hat. "And call Bo Chez!" I threw him the cordless phone and pointed at my grandfather's cell phone number on the fridge. Charlie nodded with a startled look as I ran into the dining room to grab Bo Chez's lightning orb from the case over the fireplace. It was the one weapon we'd kept from Nostos that worked on Earth. I'd used it before

to take the Child Collector down. I'd do it again.

My hands shook as they had almost five months ago when I'd taken the orb for the first time without knowing its power but needing it to help rescue my kidnapped friend, Finn. This time, I understood its power. It glowed blue in my shaking hand. I squeezed it hard then shoved it in my front snow pants pocket. Suddenly, I remembered Apollo's flute and Leandro's bow—gifts from my friends when I left the Lost Realm—and pulled them out from the cabinet of the built-in bookcase. They might come in handy too. I blew on the flute. A squeal piped out. I still had no enchanting musical power with it here on Earth, but the world of Nostos was another thing. I ran back into the kitchen with my stash.

"It went right to voicemail," Charlie said in a shaky voice, placing the phone down. "*Mon Dieu*! What now?" He looked from me to the girl, who sat with her chin on her chest. I glanced at the stove clock: *9:42 p.m.* Bo Chez would be home by ten o'clock, and he was never late. He'd be in the car right now. Sometimes, he'd forget to take his phone off silent after playing cards. He'd be here soon. Now, we faced more trouble than just disobeying his orders not to go outside.

Thunder grumbled and stopped. A brief flare of lightning cut across the backyard. Were more strangers coming? I shoved aside the kitchen curtains and scanned the whiteout. The tops of the pine trees poked through the storm until a wall of snow shrouded them. A howl shrieked around the house. The predicted storm had hit early. The weather was always on my radar.

I listened for the sound of breaking glass from an unwelcome intruder but heard only the scratch of sleet on the kitchen windows and the steady tick-tock of the

clock. First, I had to know who this girl was and why she came here.

9:45 p.m. Be early, Bo Chez!

"What do we do?" Charlie said.

Taking a deep breath and clutching the orb, I turned back to the girl.

She remained still with her head down. Charlie nudged her shoulder. With a gasp, she looked at us, her fierce expression making me step back. In the soft light over the sink, her long, wet hair appeared the color of dirty dishwater. A thick blade of hair escaped its wooden ponytail clasp and slashed down the side of her face. Her eyes shone like big emerald stones and were fixed on me. She gripped my arm, cold fingers pressing into my wrist.

"Hey!" Charlie tried to un-wrap her fingers but she held on.

"It's okay," I said, pretty sure by now she wasn't a threat.

The girl looked older than me by five years, about seventeen, and as skinny as Charlie. She was dressed in snug pants and a tunic made of animal skin that fell above laced-up, fur-rimmed boots. Her right leg twitched, revealing the top of a knife glinting from a leg holder with a handle wrapped in an oily rag.

The girl shook her dripping hair, and a tangy smell of dying leaves and wet leather lifted from her. She leaned forward. Her suede satchel slid off her shoulder and down the arm of her baggy coat lined with buttons made from birch bark cut into ragged squares. A closer look at her lopsided clothes made me think they'd been cut from a crude pattern and unskillfully sewn with crooked black stitches.

One thing was certain. She wasn't from Earth.

Chapter Two

The wind batted at the windows trying to get in with the snow. I turned on the floor lamp by Bo Chez's corner rocker.

"Joshua." The girl's voice cut like rough timber.

She knew my name!

"Who are you?" I said.

She leaned closer, and her fingers eased off me. Drops of sweat ran down my back as the furnace kicked on, warm air clanking through the vents. I waited for her to speak.

9:50 p.m.

Drip. Drip.

The soft melting of snow from our clothes cut through the rise and fall of the wailing wind. I followed Charlie's lead and ripped off my heavy jacket but left the liner on, tugging my snow pants over my jeans and boots. I slung the bow across my chest and stuffed the flute and orb

in my jean pockets. A shiver ran across my chest even though the kitchen was warm.

I stepped closer to her. "Who are you?" I repeated.

"Ash." It came out a rasp.

"Like ashes from a fire?" Charlie said.

"No. The tree." She squeezed her throat. "Got water? I sucked in pine needles when I left home."

Where was home?

Charlie raised his eyebrows at me and I nodded. He filled a glass, hesitated, then placed it in her hands.

"Where'd you come from?" I said.

She pointed up as she gulped down the water.

I wanted an answer but didn't want the truth. "The Lightning Road?"

She stared at me with her bright green eyes and nodded.

I pulled out a kitchen chair out next to her and sat down. She seemed more an escaped prisoner than a bad guy. The fear of being kidnapped back to Nostos as a slave to the heirs of the Greek gods in the Lost Realm clamped me like a vise. Yet … she didn't seem like a Child Collector here to steal and sell us at auction. Could she have escaped from Nostos to get back home to Earth, like my mother had done?

"Why are you here?" I said.

She sat up straighter, color coming back into her pale cheeks. "For King Apollo."

It took a moment for it to register. The King Apollo I knew died, but his son, who became king—and my friend, Sam, was alive.

"You mean Sam? What's happened to him?" I stood up fast, knocking my chair over.

"Queen Artemis kidnapped him."

"*Mon Dieu*!" Charlie shot me a look as if I knew what we should do.

9:55 p.m. Bo Chez, we need you!

Thoughts flew through my head with what could've happened. We'd left the world of Nostos with the plan for Sam, the new King Apollo, to end corruption in his Lost Realm kingdom, stop Zeus from plundering Earth, and shut down the Lightning Road to Earth forever.

Ash stood, her lips pinched together. "You have to leave with me. Now."

Charlie shook his head like crazy.

"My world depends on it," Ash said in a rising voice. "And your future—the future of all kids."

She wrenched me toward her. The bottom button of her shirt popped open, revealing her waist—and her belt.

"A Child Collector's belt!" Charlie and I both said, jumping back. She folded her palms together, knelt before us, and bowed her head.

"She's not here to hurt us," I said.

"Why? Because she's praying to us like we're Greek gods?" Charlie said, darting his eyes from her to me and back again.

I nodded, hoping I was right. "Where'd you get that belt?"

She raised her arms, clenched a fist, and pulled a hand back as if shooting an arrow.

My stomach trembled inside. It could be only one person. "Say his name," I said, my voice cracking.

She pressed her palms together again and staring into my eyes with those intense green ones, said quietly, "Leandro. He sent me here to bring you back."

Hearing his name jolted me back to a time when I'd blindly trusted Leandro in any event. He'd risked his

life many times to help us rescue my friend, Finn, in the Lost Realm last summer while leading me to believe he was a traitor in order to beat the evil Ancient Immortal, Hekate. He got me, Finn, Charlie, and Bo Chez back home. He'd believed in me when I hadn't.

The wind moaned around the house.

9:59 p.m. Any second!

"Charlie, our friends are in trouble. We've got to go with her!"

His eyes widened as he shook his head frantically. "You've done enough. We've done enough. It's their world. Let them figure it out. *S'il vous plaît*."

"What if they don't figure it out?"

His eyes screwed up. "Then they don't. It's out of our hands." He looked away. Maybe he was right but our friends were asking for our help. How could we do nothing?

Ash stood up with her hand held out. "We need to leave."

Charlie put his hand up. "Wait a minute, *Tree Girl*." He turned to me. "What if she stole Leandro's belt," his voice dropped to a whisper, "and did something to him?"

"What about the Takers? Hekate? The power mill? The hydriads?"

"What about them?" He threw his hands up.

"Leandro and Apollo saved us from all of them."

Charlie sighed. He was in.

Ash put her fists to her waist, waiting for my decision. She looked out of place in our farmhouse kitchen with her animal-skin clothes and belt of colored squares that transported her between worlds. But she had Leandro's belt. She came to us from the Lightning Road on his orders. She wasn't stealing us away, and my friend Apollo

needed help. The decision was clear.

10:01 p.m. Bo Chez, where are you?

Lights flashed in the driveway. Finally!

"Got to tell Bo Chez!" I said.

Ash caught my hand as I bolted out of the kitchen for the front door. "No time."

"*Oui*, we have to tell Bo Chez first!" Charlie said.

"No!" She pulled me back in the kitchen.

I tore away from her. "We can all come with—"

She jerked me back. "No! I can take only one. You!"

"Why?" Then I remembered the Child Collector only transported one of us at a time. It's why he came back again and again to the same spot—to steal more kids.

"Too dangerous," she said. "No room. More might fall off the road!"

"You can't take him without me," Charlie said dragging me back by my shirt.

I stopped him. "Wait! If Apollo's in danger and Leandro sent her to ask for our help, maybe Leandro's in danger too!"

"*D'accord*! But see what your grandfather says!"

Charlie pulled me closer to the front door. Ash stomped her feet and pulled me back in the kitchen. I swayed back and forth between their tug-of-war until she shoved Charlie away and pressed the buttons on her belt.

Click. Jangle. Tap-tap. "I'm home, boys. It's a monster out there!"

"Bo Chez!"

My words were lost when the back door flew open with the raging blizzard. Ash clasped me to her chest as the wind swept up in a funnel, sucking us away.

The last I saw of home was Charlie lunging for me,

yelling *"Attendez!"* and Bo Chez's wide eyes as he ran into the kitchen.

"Patrok!" the girl exclaimed.

Bo Chez reached out to stop us.

Too late.

Charlie, me, and this mystery girl blasted away on a river of fire down the Lightning Road to another world—and another adventure.