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The Shadow of the Forgotten Kingdom

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Introduction

Maelis Brenn had always been more comfortable among the yellowed pages of ancient texts than in the bustling company of her peers at the Royal Academy. Even as a child, stories of lost civilizations and fallen kingdoms called to her like a quiet song at midnight, far louder than the drums and laughter of her own age. Her family—longtime keepers of the Academy's vast archives—nurtured her curiosity, allowing Maelis to wander through histories both real and whispered. She found herself drawn, almost inexorably, to the shadows left behind by those who dared to dream worlds into existence only to watch them fade.

It was during one of these wanderings, on a dusky spring afternoon, that Maelis stumbled across a sealed compartment buried deep within the archives. Marked only by a faded sigil no one could decipher, the compartment held a manuscript of indescribable age—its ink nearly vanished and its script unlike any she had encountered in a lifetime of study. The manuscript's brittle parchment whispered of a glorious kingdom, once rising from the misty valleys beyond the known frontiers, and of rulers who commanded power both awe-inspiring and terrifying. It hinted at a tragedy that obliterated not only a kingdom but the very memory of its existence, save for the cryptic verses preserved before her.

Maelis's discovery ignited a fire in her, one that could not be ignored or reasoned away. The manuscript's riddles became her obsession, and sleep grew as fleeting as the legends themselves. Night after night, she labored to decipher its enigmatic passages, assembling fragments of a history deliberately concealed from the world. The more she translated, the more she realized the manuscript was not simply a chronicle of the past—it was a warning. Amidst tales of splendor and ruin, there was mention of a relic: a thing of ancient might, hidden for fear it could remake or destroy entire ages.

The decision to pursue this secret was not without consequence. As whispers of her research reached prying ears, Maelis soon found herself drawn into a web of intrigue and danger. A shadowy figure from her childhood reemerged with a dire warning, casting doubt on friend and foe alike. The world Maelis had studied so deeply began to twist beyond the boundaries of academic comfort, propelling her toward unknown lands and uncertain alliances.

Thus began Maelis Brenn's transformation from scholar to adventurer. Abandoning her quiet life, she would be forced to rely not just on intellect, but on courage, intuition, and the uneasy trust of those drawn into her quest. Together, they would chase the legacy of the forgotten kingdom across lands both legendary and real—a journey

through time, myth, and the frail boundaries between truth and magic.

In tracing the shadow of the forgotten kingdom, Maelis would come to confront not only the mysteries of an ancient world, but the depths of her own heart. The fate of history itself—and perhaps the future—would hinge upon the choices she makes. The adventure beckons, not for the faint-hearted, but for those willing to walk into the twilight, guided only by the hope of uncovering what should never have been forgotten.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Manuscript in the Vault

The air in the restricted section of the Royal Academy archives always tasted of aged paper and forgotten dust, a scent Maelis found infinitely more comforting than the lavender perfumes and polished wood of the scholars' common rooms. Her fingers, accustomed to the delicate dance of turning brittle pages, traced the spine of yet another forgotten tome. Her current project, an analysis of regional trade routes during the Fourth Age of Saros, was proving to be a tedious affair, a mosaic of minor ledgers and unremarkable tariffs. Her mind, however, yearned for something grander, something that crackled with the energy of legend.

She adjusted her spectacles, the dim light from the enchanted globes overhead barely piercing the gloom of the deeper vaults. It was here, in the rarely disturbed lower levels, that the Academy stored its most peculiar acquisitions – items deemed too obscure, too fragile, or perhaps, too inconvenient for general study. These were the things that whispered of different truths, the anomalies that defied easy categorization. Maelis, with her quiet insistence and unparalleled knowledge of the archive's labyrinthine layout, had secured permission for independent research in this hallowed, dust-laden space.

Today, her gaze drifted from a particularly uninspired scroll detailing grain yields to a section of shelves almost entirely obscured by a collapsed pile of ancient, leather-bound chests. The chests themselves were impressive, heavy with age and intricate, though corroded, metalwork. No one had touched them in decades, perhaps even centuries, deemed too much effort to catalogue for their likely contents of dry legal decrees or obscure philosophical treatises. But Maelis felt an itch, a persistent, academic prickle that told her to investigate.

With a grunt, she began to carefully move the chests, one by one, sending plumes of fine dust into the still air. The task was surprisingly strenuous, testing the limits of her slender frame. Beneath the final, heaviest chest, she noticed an anomaly in the stone wall – not a shelf, but a seamless section that seemed out of place, slightly recessed and subtly different in texture from the surrounding masonry. It was almost perfectly disguised, a testament to the skill of its original architect.

She ran her hand over the surface, her fingertips searching for a seam, a latch, anything. There was nothing. Frustration began to bubble, but then, near the bottom corner, her fingers brushed against a faint indentation, a carved symbol almost entirely worn away by time. It was a sigil she had never seen before, not in any of the countless glyphic dictionaries or ancient scripts she had meticulously studied. It was elegant, serpentine, and held a peculiar, almost hypnotic quality.

Driven by an instinct she couldn't explain, Maelis pressed firmly on the sigil. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, with a soft click that resonated unnaturally loud in the silent vault, a section of the wall receded inward, revealing a small, dark compartment. Inside, nestled on a velvet cushion that had long since disintegrated into threads, lay a single, meticulously bound manuscript.

It was unlike any book Maelis had ever encountered. Its covers were crafted from a dark, incredibly smooth material she couldn't identify, feeling less like leather or wood and more like polished obsidian. The pages themselves, when she gently coaxed the binding open, were not parchment, but a remarkably thin, flexible substance that shimmered faintly in the dim light. The script, though faded, was undeniably intricate, flowing in elegant, unbroken lines across the pages like a silent river.

Hours melted away as Maelis sat on the dusty floor, the manuscript balanced carefully on her lap, a portable light source illuminating the strange script. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a drumbeat of pure exhilaration. This was it, the discovery she had always dreamed of, a relic from a time before recorded history. The script was an archaic dialect of Old Sarosian, but interwoven with glyphs she couldn't place, symbols that seemed to thrum with a faint, residual energy.

The initial passages were dense, poetic, speaking of "the Children of the Sun," and "the Veiled City of Aethel." Vague mentions of "celestial architects" and "earth-bound magic" teased her with tantalizing glimpses of a world she had only imagined. It was a lyrical history, not a dry chronicle, recounting the rise of a kingdom of unparalleled beauty and power, born from the very fabric of myth. Its people, the text suggested, were not merely mortals, but beings touched by something divine.

As the evening deepened and the archive staff began their nightly rounds, Maelis knew she couldn't leave the manuscript unattended. This was too important, too extraordinary. She gently closed the covers, feeling a faint tremor of excitement run through the strange material. She carefully placed it in her satchel, the smooth surface cold against her skin even through the canvas. Her mind reeled with possibilities, with questions that demanded answers. Who were these "Children of the Sun"? Why had their kingdom been forgotten? And what unspeakable power had they wielded?

The next few days blurred into a solitary pursuit. Maelis sequestered herself in her private study, the manuscript spread open on her desk, surrounded by stacks of reference books, dictionaries, and linguistic charts. She painstakingly transcribed what she could, translating the archaic Sarosian, and sketching out the unfamiliar glyphs, trying to find a pattern, a key. The cryptic nature of the text was both maddening and thrilling. It was less a straightforward narrative and more a collection of poetic fragments, prophecies, and veiled warnings.

She discovered references to a time of "great flourishing" when Aethel, the "Heart of the World," stood as a beacon of knowledge and artistry. The inhabitants were described as possessing abilities that blurred the line between magic and natural law, able to manipulate elements, conjure illusions, and even glimpse the threads of fate. They lived in harmony with mythical beasts and spirits of the land, their cities built not just by stone and mortar, but by intention and will.

But intermingled with these glorious descriptions were hints of a growing shadow, a "Discord within the Light." The text spoke of a schism, a divergence in belief, and a powerful "Whisperer" who sought to twist the kingdom's inherent power for darker ends. The language became more frantic, the phrases less coherent, as if the original scribe had been writing under duress or in great haste. Maelis felt a chill creep up her spine as she read of a "Great Sundering," a cataclysm that "tore the sky and swallowed the earth."

One passage, in particular, seized her attention, its meaning clearer than most: "When the Star of Aethel dims, and the Threads of Time unravel, then shall the Heart of the World be lost, its essence scattered, save for the Echo, held within the Serpent's Eye. Let not the Shadow claim it, lest the world be remade in Darkness." The "Serpent's Eye." The "Echo." These were not mere poetic flourishes; they felt like tangible clues, references to something real, something powerful.

Maelis spent a full night poring over the phrase "Serpent's Eye." It appeared again and again in fragmented verses, always associated with the kingdom's downfall and a warning against its recovery by malevolent forces. She scoured historical texts for any mention of a serpent-related relic, a legendary jewel, or a place called the Serpent's Eye. Nothing. It was as if this entire civilization, this magnificent kingdom, had been systematically erased from every known record.

The lack of any corroborating evidence only solidified her conviction that the manuscript was genuine, and profoundly significant. If such a kingdom existed, and vanished so utterly, then the forces behind its disappearance must have been immense, and perhaps, still active. The chilling thought settled in her mind: the concealment of this history was not an accident; it was a deliberate act, a secret fiercely guarded.

The more she deciphered, the more urgent the warnings became. The "Echo" - the relic - was portrayed as a fragment of Aethel's core power, capable of rebuilding what was lost, or, in the wrong hands, unraveling the very fabric of reality. The manuscript was not just a historical account; it was a plea from a forgotten past, a desperate attempt to warn future generations of a danger that lingered, dormant, waiting.

Maelis felt the weight of it, the colossal responsibility of being the one to unearth this

forgotten truth. Her life as a quiet academic, immersed in the safe confines of dusty books, was irrevocably changed. The parchment on her desk was more than just ink and paper; it was a whisper across millennia, a call to adventure she couldn't refuse. The Royal Academy, with its stringent rules and carefully curated knowledge, would never sanction such an unconventional pursuit. This was a journey she would have to embark on alone, at least for now. She knew, with a certainty that both thrilled and terrified her, that the "Serpent's Eye" was not merely a symbol, but a tangible object, a key to a world that desperately needed to be remembered. And she, Maelis Brenn, was destined to find it.

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