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Echoes of the Forgotten Jade

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Introduction

Alaric Voss never imagined his life would stretch beyond the boundaries of the quiet valley he called home. The village of Greendale, nestled between towering mountains veiled in ever-misting clouds, had always been a place of peace and ancient silence. Its people spoke in hushed tones of old legends and forgotten halls, their stories drifting on the wind like autumn leaves. For Alaric, those stories were little more than comforting echoes—tales that tethered his world together, but never once touched his reality.

He lived beneath the watchful gaze of his grandmother, a stern yet loving woman whose hands bore the scars of a lifetime spent tending rare herbs and strange relics. Alaric's family was only remarkable for their solitude; both his parents lost to tragedy before his memory could form their faces. What burdened him most was the shadow of questions unanswered—the persistent absence at the heart of his family and the locked trunk beneath his grandmother's bed, never spoken of, never opened.

Everything changed the day the earth beneath his cottage trembled with unnatural force. Amid the tumbling stones and swirling dust, Alaric unearthed an object unlike any other: a fragment of jade, its green depths alive with shifting light and whispered voices. Etched with symbols he did not understand, the artifact pulsed with an energy that seemed to pull at the edges of his thoughts, promising power, knowledge, and danger intertwined.

As Alaric grappled with his curiosity and apprehension, fate wove new threads into his simple life. One evening, a stranger appeared—a woman cloaked in midnight blue, eyes aglow with secrets and sorrow. She called herself Lysandra, and with her arrival, the past and future twisted in on themselves. Lysandra brought word of realms on the brink of collapse, and a prophecy that centered on the jade medallion and Alaric's long-dormant lineage.

Struggling to reconcile the boy he was with the heir he was meant to be, Alaric faced a crossroads from which there would be no return. Torn between the safety of the world he knew and the perilous journey ahead, he sensed that the artifact's call could not be ignored. What began as a whisper in the village soon thundered into destiny—one that would echo through hidden realms, lost kingdoms, and the very fabric of time itself.

CHAPTER ONE: The Whispering Village

The morning mist still clung to the peaks of the Serpent's Teeth mountains, shrouding Greendale in a soft, ethereal glow. Alaric Voss, a lad whose twenty summers had been marked by little more than seasonal harvests and the occasional runaway goat, stretched the kinks from his back as he surveyed the dew-kissed fields. A thin wisp of smoke curled from the chimney of his grandmother's cottage, a familiar signal that breakfast was brewing – probably a hearty oat gruel, as it was every day, but still welcome.

Greendale was a village suspended in time, its rhythms dictated by the sun and the seasons, its knowledge passed down through generations of quiet folk who preferred the company of their crops to the clamor of any distant city. Alaric had inherited this quietude, though a restless spark often flickered in his eyes, hinting at a curiosity that the village could barely contain. His hands, though strong from farm work, also possessed a certain gentleness, a reflection of the books he devoured in the evenings, their pages smelling of old parchment and untold adventures.

His grandmother, Elara, was the village's unofficial loremaster, her mind a veritable library of local flora, ancient remedies, and the whispered histories of the Voss lineage. She was a woman of sharp wit and even sharper eyes, able to discern a lie from a mile off, and a brewing storm even further. Her silver hair was usually tied back in a severe bun, and her dresses, though simple, always seemed to hold the scent of the strange herbs she cultivated in her small, walled garden.

This morning, Elara was already bustling in the kitchen, the clatter of earthenware against stone a comforting sound. Alaric stepped inside, the warmth of the hearth immediately chasing away the morning chill. "Sleep well, lad?" she grunted, without turning from the bubbling pot. Her question was rhetorical; she knew he hadn't, not entirely. The earth tremors of the previous day had unsettled everyone, but Alaric had felt something more.

"As well as the ground allowed," Alaric replied, pouring himself a mug of herbal tea. He watched the steam rise, a fleeting cloud against the rustic beams of the ceiling. The tremor had been more than a mere shake; it had been a deep, resonant rumble, a sound that seemed to originate from the very core of the world, vibrating through his bones in a way that felt both ancient and alarming.

Yesterday's tremor had struck just as he was tending to the ancient apple tree at the edge of their property, its gnarled branches reaching skyward like the arthritic fingers of an old man. The ground had bucked violently, throwing him off his feet. It wasn't a

common occurrence in Greendale, a place usually immune to such geological theatrics.

When the dust had settled and the ringing in his ears subsided, Alaric had noticed something peculiar. The tremor had dislodged a section of the old drystone wall that bordered their orchard, revealing a small, dark crevice beneath. Driven by an impulse he couldn't quite explain, he had knelt, peering into the gloom.

That's when he'd seen it. Not gleaming gold or sparkling silver, but a dull, almost unassuming green, half-buried in the soil. He'd reached in, his fingers brushing against something cool and smooth. With a gentle tug, he extracted it. It was a shard of jade, roughly the size of his palm, exquisitely carved with intricate, swirling patterns that seemed to shift and writhe in the dim light.

He'd kept it quiet, tucked away in the deepest pocket of his tunic. The shard pulsed with a faint, internal light, a soft glow that seemed to mimic his own heartbeat. When he held it, he felt a strange sense of belonging, as if the artifact had been waiting for him. It was a sensation both thrilling and deeply unsettling, promising answers to questions he hadn't even consciously formed.

Now, as Elara placed a bowl of steaming gruel before him, Alaric felt the weight of the jade against his chest, a secret companion. He stirred his breakfast, the aroma of oats and honey doing little to distract him from the insistent thrumming beneath his tunic. He knew he couldn't keep this from Elara for long; she had a way of knowing things, of seeing through the unspoken.

"You're distracted, Alaric," Elara observed, her voice softer now. She pulled out a stool opposite him, her gaze piercing. "More than the usual teenage brooding. Did the earth take a piece of your mind yesterday?"

Alaric hesitated, tracing patterns in his gruel with a spoon. "No, Grandmother. It... it might have given me something instead." He reached into his tunic, pulling out the jade fragment. Its soft green light seemed to brighten slightly in the morning sun streaming through the window, casting a faint, luminous sheen over his hand.

Elara's eyes widened, a flicker of something he couldn't decipher – fear? recognition? – crossing her face. She reached out a trembling hand, her fingers hovering inches from the jade. "By the Ancients," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Where did you find this, boy?"

Alaric explained, recounting the tremor, the dislodged stones, and the almost magnetic pull that had led him to the artifact. He watched her face as he spoke, searching for any clue, any hint of understanding. Her expression was a complex tapestry of emotions, each thread tightly woven.

When he finished, Elara took a deep breath, her gaze fixed on the jade. "This... this is no ordinary stone, Alaric. It bears the mark of our ancestors, a symbol I haven't seen outside of the old tapestries in the abandoned manor. It's a fragment, you say?"

"Yes, Grandmother. It feels... like it's part of something larger." He felt a thrill run through him at her words. This wasn't just a pretty stone; it was a link to their past, perhaps to the very 'forgotten halls' the villagers spoke of in hushed tones.

Elara nodded slowly, her brow furrowed in thought. "It is. A fragment of the Jade Medallion, whispered about in tales that predate even my own grandparents. A medallion said to grant passage between realms, to seal and unseal pathways of power." Her voice was laced with a reverence that bordered on dread.

"Realms? Pathways of power?" Alaric asked, his heart quickening. The old stories suddenly felt very real, very close.

Elara finally took the jade from his hand. Its glow seemed to intensify in her grasp, casting intricate shadows on her aged skin. "Yes, Alaric. Our family... the Voss line... we were once guardians of such things. But that was long ago, before the great Silence fell, before Greendale became merely Greendale, a forgotten corner of the world." She paused, her eyes distant, lost in a memory. "Your parents... they knew some of this. They sought answers, just as this artifact now seeks you."

A heavy silence descended, broken only by the crackle of the fire. The locked trunk beneath her bed, the questions about his parents' mysterious demise – suddenly, a thousand fragments of his life seemed to click into place, forming a dizzying, terrifying picture. He wasn't just Alaric, the farm boy; he was Alaric Voss, heir to a forgotten legacy.

"Grandmother, what does this mean?" he finally asked, his voice barely a whisper. The familiar walls of his home suddenly felt too small, too confining.

Elara met his gaze, her eyes filled with a new resolve, a steely glint he hadn't seen in years. "It means, my boy, that the world you know is about to become much, much larger. And it means that the true purpose of the Voss family... the purpose that was thought lost... is awakening once more." She held the jade fragment aloft, its green light pulsing steadily, as if in agreement. "This is only the beginning."

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