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The Shadow Heir

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Introduction

Aerithia is a kingdom haunted by silence, and by stories best left unspoken. Amid neatly ordered villages and golden fields, the air tastes always faintly of smoke, tinged with the memory of things burned away. Few living recall the great Sundering—a catastrophe that shattered the order of magic itself and saw the ancient houses of the shadow-wielders cast down, their powers forbidden, their very names scrubbed from the tongues of the living. The victors rewrote the history and reshaped the world, but some stains will not wash away.

Liaen Morth has grown up in the fringe-loved shadow of those ruined legacies. In the hardscrabble enclave where the exiled gather, her days are a litany of small graces and smaller betrayals; she knows each patch of ground by heart, and measures every word against the ears that might be listening. Her family is proud, but weary—marked not only by what they have lost, but by what they must hide. The shadow-draught runs latent in their blood, an inheritance more dangerous than gold.

None feel the weight of that legacy more keenly than Liaen herself. She knows the tales whispered behind closed doors: how once her ancestors could draw darkness itself to blade or barrier, how that power grew too bold, and in the end brought Aerithia to the verge of ruin. But those stories seem like myths, distant and unkind, and Liaen prefers the company of rain-plucked roots and her younger brother's laughter to any talk of destinies. The truth of her heritage hovers at the edge of every silence, patient and cold.

It is only when disaster erupts in her quiet world—a raid, sudden and brutal, razing the thatch and chasing good people into the night—that the old magics stir. In a moment of mortal terror, Liaen reaches into the abyss and brings forth a darkness that should not be, shattering the fragile peace and branding her a hunted thing. The ruling Order, sworn to root out such forbidden gifts, turns their scrutiny on her kin; old friends become strangers, and familiar paths run with peril.

Fleeing beneath a moonless sky, Liaen falls under the wing of a mysterious mentor, one who once bowed to kings and now walks in exile's shoes. His guidance awakens in her not only new facets of magic, but the uncomfortable questions that come with power and choice. As rumors of a hidden war simmer beneath Aerithia's orderly veneer, Liaen is forced to confront what she is, and what she might still become.

In the end, the threads of destiny—a word she has long despised—draw taut around her. The kingdom's future, and the truth behind its ruinous past, will demand more of Liaen than any tale she had ever dared to believe. The path before her is shrouded in

shadow, yet it is her own footsteps that will decide where the light finally falls.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows in the Dust

The sun, a persistent bully even in the early hours, beat down on the Morth homestead, turning the dust of the yard into a shimmering, oppressive blanket. Liaen, her hair already plastered to her neck, wrestled with a stubbornly knotted coil of hemp rope, trying to secure the flapping canvas over the drying herbs. The scent of wild thyme and bitterroot mingled with the ever-present aroma of dry earth and goat, a familiar, if not entirely pleasant, perfume to her days.

“Need a hand, sister?” Kaelen, her younger brother by two years, sauntered out of the small, wattle-and-daub cottage, a half-eaten oat cake in one hand and a mischievous glint in his eye. He was all gangly limbs and boundless energy, a stark contrast to Liaen’s more compact, wary build.

She grunted, tugging harder. “Unless your ‘hand’ involves actual strength and not just offering unsolicited advice, I think I’ve got it.” The rope, sensing her frustration, suddenly loosened, sending her stumbling back into a pile of drying bramble.

Kaelen laughed, a bright, unburdened sound. “Graceful as a newborn calf, Liaen.” He extended a hand, still munching on his cake. “Here, let me.” With surprising ease, he untangled the knot and, with a few practiced twists, secured the canvas taut against the wooden frame. He had a knack for practical things, for making objects obey him. Liaen often envied that quiet competence.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, dusting off her breeches. “You’re getting too good at this. Soon Father will have you fixing the roof instead of me.”

Kaelen grinned. “Someone has to keep this place from falling apart, seeing as our eldest is so busy dreaming of... well, whatever it is you dream of.” He wagged his eyebrows, knowing full well Liaen’s thoughts were rarely of grand adventures or forbidden magics. Her dreams were usually about a full pantry and perhaps a new pair of unbroken boots.

Their enclave, nestled in a forgotten crook of the Ashfall Mountains, was called Oakhaven by its inhabitants, though the ruling Order of the White Sun simply referred to it as ‘The Outskirts.’ It was a collection of rough-hewn dwellings, barely more than a village, populated by those whose lineage was deemed “tainted” by the Sundering – the scattered descendants of the ancient shadow-wielders. They were allowed to exist, but barely, their lives dictated by harsh taxes and stricter rules.

Liaen’s family, the Morths, were among the oldest of these exiled lines, a fact her

father, Elara, carried with both pride and a heavy burden. He spoke often of the 'old ways,' of the 'true magic,' but never within earshot of outsiders, and certainly never in detail. Liaen had learned early that such talk invited scrutiny, and scrutiny invited hardship.

"Dreaming of not having to fix the roof," Liaen retorted, flicking a piece of dust at Kaelen. "Go help Mother with the water, before she sends Father after you with the switch."

Kaelen wisely decided against another retort, finishing his oat cake in a single gulp and darting towards the well. Liaen watched him go, a familiar pang of protectiveness in her chest. Kaelen was sunshine and open smiles, too trusting for their shadowed world. She often felt a silent, self-imposed duty to shield him from the sharper edges of their reality.

She returned to the various tasks of the day: sifting flour, mending a tear in a fishing net, scrubbing the soot from the cooking pots. Life in Oakhaven was a relentless cycle of small labors, each one designed to eke out existence from the unforgiving land. There were no grand markets here, no bustling taverns, no bards singing tales of heroes. Their stories were whispered, their history a private grief.

As the sun climbed higher, painting the sky in fierce hues of orange and gold, a commotion broke out near the edge of the village. A sharp, unfamiliar bark echoed, followed by a human cry. Liaen's heart leaped into her throat. Wolves, perhaps? Though they usually kept to the deeper woods.

Then, a high-pitched scream, undeniably human, split the air, followed by the dull thud of heavy boots on dry earth. Not wolves. Something far worse.

Liaen dropped the pot she was cleaning, the ceramic clattering loudly against the packed dirt. Her mother, Lysa, emerged from the cottage, her face pale, eyes wide with dawning horror. Elara, Liaen's father, appeared beside her, a weathered hunting knife already clutched in his hand. Kaelen, his face stripped of its usual cheer, stood frozen by the well.

"What is it?" Kaelen whispered, his voice thin.

"Stay inside, both of you!" Elara commanded, his voice raw. He pushed Liaen and Lysa back towards the cottage, even as he moved instinctively towards the commotion.

But it was too late. Dark figures, cloaked in the austere white and grey of the Order's enforcers, were already pouring into Oakhaven from every direction, moving with ruthless efficiency. Their faces were grim, their movements precise, like a wave of silent, predatory storm clouds. Liaen recognized the insignia on their cloaks: the

stylized sunburst of the Order of the White Sun, an image that had always filled her with a cold dread.

They weren't here for taxes. They weren't here for questioning. They were here for destruction.

A guttural roar ripped from the throat of one of their neighbors, Old Man Theron, as an enforcer's blunted sword butt connected with his head. Theron crumpled to the ground like a sack of grain. Another enforcer, a woman with a hard, unyielding gaze, kicked open the door of the miller's cottage, her blade drawn. Flames, sudden and angry, erupted from the thatch roof almost immediately.

Fear, cold and sharp, pierced through Liaen. This wasn't a patrol. This was an extermination.

Elara shoved Lysa and Kaelen into the small cottage, blocking the doorway with his body. "Go, Liaen! Get them out the back way! To the root cellar!"

Liaen stared, paralyzed for a moment. "Father, no! You can't—"

"Go!" he roared, his eyes blazing with a fierce, desperate light. "This is our only chance. Protect them, Liaen!" His voice was hoarse with urgency, his gaze imploring.

The sound of splintering wood echoed from the street as more homes were breached. The cries of frightened villagers, the clash of steel, the ominous crackle of fire—all merged into a horrifying symphony of chaos. Liaen didn't argue. She pushed Kaelen and Lysa forward, her hands shaking, her breath catching in her throat.

"Hurry!" she urged, fumbling with the latch of the back door. It squeaked open, revealing the small, overgrown path that led to their hidden root cellar—a place they used for storing dried meats and herbs, but also as a last-resort hideout.

As Kaelen and Lysa scrambled down the rough-hewn steps into the dark earth, Liaen glanced back. Elara stood silhouetted in the doorway, his silhouette stark against the encroaching smoke and the ominous gleam of the enforcers' armor. He was already facing two of them, his hunting knife a glint of defiance against their imposing blades.

"Father!" Liaen cried, a desperate, strangled sound.

One of the enforcers, a hulking figure, lunged. Elara parried, a desperate, wild movement, but his small knife was no match for the reach and power of the Order's steel. The other enforcer moved, a blur of grey, circling behind him.

Liaen felt a surge of raw, untamed fury. No. Not her father. Not like this.

A strange, cold pressure bloomed in the pit of her stomach, a sensation she'd never felt before. It wasn't just anger; it was something deeper, a chilling emptiness that seemed to yearn for release. She squeezed her eyes shut for a fraction of a second, her mind screaming *no, no, no*.

When she opened them, the world seemed to warp around her. The bright sunlight that had been so oppressive just moments before seemed to dim, receding from the edges of her vision. The shadows around her—the long, distorted shapes cast by the cottage, the gnarled oak tree, even her own body—seemed to deepen, to coalesce, to gain a strange, living density.

Her vision narrowed, focusing on the enforcer about to strike her father. In that moment of intense, desperate will, something *moved* within her. It was like pulling on a heavy cloak, but the cloak was made of pure, concentrated darkness. It flowed from her, not visible to the eye perhaps, but felt—a wave of suffocating cold that washed over the enforcer, chilling him to the bone.

The hulking enforcer hesitated, a flicker of confusion crossing his face. He stumbled, his movements jerky, as if suddenly blind in the bright afternoon. He looked around wildly, his weapon wavering. The other enforcer, sensing something amiss, paused his attack on Elara, his head cocked, searching.

Elara, seeing his momentary advantage, surged forward with a desperate strength, slashing at the hulking enforcer's arm. The blade connected, drawing a cry of pain.

The brief distraction, the sudden, unnatural chill, was enough. Liaen felt the strange, dark energy recede, leaving her shaking, cold, and utterly disoriented. She stumbled back, hitting the rough wall of the cottage, her breath coming in ragged gasps. What had she just done? What was that?

"Liaen! Get down here!" Lysa's voice, sharp with terror, echoed from the root cellar.

The enforcers had recovered, their surprise replaced by a grim determination. They were closing in on Elara again, their movements more cautious now, but no less deadly.

"Go!" Elara bellowed again, seeing her still standing, still exposed. "Now!"

With a last, wrenching look at her father, Liaen plunged into the darkness of the root cellar, scrambling down the rough steps. Kaelen clutched her hand, his small fingers trembling violently. Lysa pulled them both into the furthest corner, her body shielding them, her eyes wide with unutterable fear.

Above them, the sounds of the raid intensified. More shouts, more crashes, the unmistakable roar of an uncontrolled fire taking hold. Then, the sickening thud of a body hitting the ground, followed by a triumphant, chilling cry from one of the enforcers.

Liaen's breath hitched. No. It couldn't be. Her father...

A heavy tread sounded above, directly over their heads. The trapdoor to the root cellar creaked ominously. Liaen squeezed her eyes shut, pulling Kaelen closer. The air in the small, confined space grew heavy with the smell of damp earth and their shared terror.

The footsteps paused. Then, a voice, cold and devoid of emotion, filtered through the wooden planks. "Empty. Search the other dwellings. They won't get far."

The footsteps receded, the creak of the trapdoor fading into the general clamor of destruction outside. Liaen held her breath, not daring to move, not daring to believe. They were safe. For now. But the image of her father, standing defiant against the enforcers, his face etched with grim determination, burned behind her eyelids. And the strange, cold power that had surged through her... what was it? A trick of the light? A desperate delusion? Or something far more terrible, something that had been dormant in her blood, now terrifyingly awakened?

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