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Echoes of the Black Vale

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Introduction

Beyond the furthest reaches of the civilized realms lies the Black Vale—a yawning scar upon the land, shrouded for centuries in legend, fear, and silence. Once, stories of its rolling mists and dense, twisted forests filled hearthsides and dreamt nightmares. Now, only the bravest or most desperate dare speak of the Vale, for its name has become a curse, a warning whispered to children and woven into sermons against temptation, magic, and the dangers lurking just beyond the perimeter of lanternlight.

In these dark times, where suspicion is as thick as the fog that clings to the Vale's outermost trees, the kingdom has turned hard and cold against those who differ. Magic, once the wellspring of wonders and hope, is now outlawed, hunted, and hidden. The village of Ashpine, pressed against the indifferent mountains and the cold reach of the Black Vale, is small and unremarkable—save, perhaps, for its healer. Lira, marked since childhood by a power she fears as much as those around her, lives a life of half-light. She eases pain and fever where she can, yet conceals the deeper magic that tingles in her fingertips. Each day is a careful dance, a silent plea that she will not be noticed, reported, or worse.

But peace is a brittle thing, and fear a wind that spreads quickly. When a mortally wounded knight stumbles into Ashpine one storm-ridden night, clutching a blood-soaked map and muttering of nightmares that stir in the Vale, Lira's twilight existence collapses. In the stranger's delirious words flicker echoes of an ancient prophecy—a destiny with roots in Lira's own bloodline, but one she has never dared to claim. The knight's arrival not only ignites suspicion among her wary neighbors but unearths secrets Lira thought safely buried with her mother.

The world beyond Ashpine reveals itself to be much larger—and far more dangerous—than the villagers have ever imagined. With the knight's enigmatic squire and an exiled scholar bearing scars of his own, Lira is forced to flee. Shadows close behind her, not only from the Black Vale itself but from those who would see her kind extinguished. Along the way, allies and adversaries alike gather, bound by tangled webs of fate and necessity. Betrayal lurks in every silence, and trust is a rare and fugitive currency.

As Lira and her reluctant companions journey deeper into the heart of the Black Vale, they confront not only fiends and ancient enchantments, but also the frailties of their own hopes and fears. The Vale's cursed silence is a mirror for all they have lost, all they hunger for, and all they may yet destroy or redeem. The boundaries between light and dark, friend and foe, are not so easily drawn as they once believed.

This is not merely a story of forbidden magic and ancient evil, but of fragile trust, shifting alliances, and the choices that define what it means to be human. The echoes of the Black Vale reach far—through memory and prophecy, through sorrow and the promise of something greater. To enter its shadow is to be changed forever, for here destinies are shaped, and the fate of a kingdom hangs upon the courage—and the heartbreak—of a single outcast healer.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Whispering Borders

The air in Ashpine always carried a faint scent of pine needles and damp earth, a familiar comfort Lira often found herself clinging to. Today, however, there was a sharper edge to it, a premonition of the approaching storm. She stood at the edge of the village, her gaze drawn, as it always was, to the distant, bruised purple of the mountains where the Black Vale was rumored to begin. Even from this distance, an unsettling stillness permeated the air around it, a tangible weight that seemed to swallow sound and light. Most villagers avoided looking that way, busying themselves with chores, their backs resolutely turned to the west. Lira, however, could not help but stare.

Her fingers, calloused from years of grinding herbs and stitching wounds, twitched instinctively. It wasn't a nervous habit, not precisely. It was the subtle thrum beneath her skin, a whisper of power that had been with her since childhood. A gift, her mother had called it, before the kingdom's purges had made such words a death sentence. Now, it felt more like a brand, a constant threat that could erupt at any moment, exposing her to the very real dangers that lay beyond Ashpine's simple fences. She had learned to control it, to suppress the urge to mend a broken bone with a mere touch, to let a fever run its course rather than willing it away. But the instinct remained, a persistent undercurrent in her carefully constructed life.

The village itself was a collection of humble cottages, smoke curling lazily from their chimneys, a narrow stream gurgling through its center. Life here was predictable, hard-won, and insulated from the wider world's troubles – or so its inhabitants believed. They were good, simple people, farmers and weavers, their lives dictated by the rhythm of the seasons. Yet, beneath their quiet routines, suspicion simmered like embers under ash. The King's decree, harsh and unforgiving, had driven magic underground, painting it as a blight, a corruption from which all evil flowed. Healers, even those like Lira who used only traditional remedies, were viewed with a particular wariness. Any unusual success, any unexplained recovery, could bring down the judgment of the Crown's zealous Inquisitors.

Lira knew this intimately. She'd seen what happened to others, heard the hushed tales of villages razed, of families torn apart, all in the name of purity and order. Her own mother, a kind woman whose hands held similar secrets, had vanished years ago, spirited away by fear and whispers. Lira had been left with only fragmented memories, a small, intricate silver medallion, and the echoing knowledge that she, too, carried the forbidden spark. She had learned to blend in, to keep her head down, to let the mundane obscure the miraculous. Her life was a carefully orchestrated performance of normalcy, a charade she played daily for the sake of survival.

A sudden gust of wind, carrying the metallic tang of an approaching storm, whipped around her, tugging at the simple wool cloak she wore. The sky, once a pale blue, was now bruised with violet and grey, a vast, ominous canvas. The scent of pine was replaced by the sharp, earthy smell of rain on dry ground. Villagers scurried, gathering laundry from lines, herding livestock into barns. A child's cry was quickly muffled by a mother's urgent words. Everyone felt the shift in the air, the lowering pressure that pressed down on Ashpine like an invisible hand.

Lira pulled her cloak tighter, her gaze still fixed on the mountains. There was something else in the wind today, something beyond the usual chill of an approaching storm. A faint, almost imperceptible tremor, deep within the earth, seemed to hum through the soles of her worn boots. It was the kind of tremor that spoke of ancient things stirring, of forgotten sleep disturbed. She dismissed it as her imagination, a product of her own anxiety and the pervasive tales of the Black Vale that had filled her childhood. Yet, the unease persisted, a prickle at the back of her neck.

The first heavy drops of rain splattered against the dusty path, kicking up small clouds of red earth. Lira turned back towards the village, her small cottage a beacon of mundane reassurance. She had a poultice to prepare for old Elara's aching joints, and young Finn's cough had worsened. Ordinary tasks, ordinary ailments. She clung to them, to the quiet rhythm of a healer's life, as if they could somehow ward off the growing unease.

But as she reached the first few houses, a commotion erupted near the main road. Shouts, sharp and urgent, cut through the rising wind. Lira instinctively quickened her pace, a knot forming in her stomach. Such disturbances were rare in Ashpine. Had someone been hurt? Had a wolf strayed too close to the village? Her healer's instincts, honed by years of practice, immediately took over, pushing aside the deeper, more unsettling premonitions.

When she arrived, a small crowd had gathered, huddled under the eaves of the general store. Their faces were etched with a mixture of fear and morbid curiosity. Pushing through the cluster of villagers, Lira saw him. A man, dressed in what had once been fine, plate armor, lay slumped against the wooden post of the old water pump. His chainmail was twisted and rent, his gauntlets scored with deep gouges, and a dark, sticky stain blossomed across his chest, seeping into the dirt beneath him. Even from a distance, Lira could see the ragged, open wound, a gruesome testament to some brutal encounter.

He was clearly a knight, though no colors or crests were visible on his ruined surcoat. His face, visible beneath the dented rim of his helmet, was pale and drawn, streaked with blood and grime. His eyes, though unfocused, flickered with an almost manic intensity. One hand, still encased in a gauntlet, clutched something tightly to his chest

- a roll of parchment, perhaps, or a folded cloth. He coughed, a wet, rattling sound, and a fresh gush of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

"He's... he's from the Vale," someone whispered, the words barely audible above the rising wind, but potent enough to send a ripple of dread through the onlookers. The mere mention of the cursed land was enough to stiffen spines and drain color from faces. "He's been cursed."

Lira ignored them, her gaze fixed on the knight. His breathing was shallow, his pulse, even from here, looked weak. He was dying, and quickly. She knelt beside him, unmindful of the rain now starting to fall in earnest, soaking her cloak and chilling her to the bone. Her hands, usually so steady, trembled slightly as she reached for his wrist, searching for a pulse. It was faint, thready, a dying ember.

"Help him, Lira!" old Elara wailed from the edge of the crowd, her voice laced with fear. "He's a good man, he looks like a good man!"

A younger man, gruff and suspicious, interjected, "He's been in the Vale! Who knows what he carries? What curses? Let the gods take him, Lira. It's safer for us all." His words were met with murmurs of agreement from others, their fear outweighing their pity.

Lira ignored them, her attention solely on the knight. She gently tried to ease the gauntlet from his hand, to better assess his condition. As she did, his grip on the object he held tightened, a surge of adrenaline momentarily giving him strength. His eyes snapped open, locking onto hers, and in their depths, Lira saw not madness, but a desperate, urgent plea.

His lips moved, dry and cracked, and a raspy whisper escaped them, barely audible above the drumming rain. "The... the Vale... it stirs. The seals... broken... she comes..." He coughed again, a violent, agonizing spasm that left him gasping for breath, his strength rapidly fading. His grip on the object loosened fractionally.

Lira's heart hammered against her ribs. *The Vale stirs*. It was not just a myth, not just a warning whispered in dark corners. It was real, and it was here. The knight's words, though broken, sent a shiver of ice through her veins. He spoke of something ancient, something that had been sealed away. And then, the chilling addition: *she comes*. Who? What was coming?

With a final, desperate effort, the knight pushed the object he clutched into her hand. It was not parchment, but a piece of thick, stained leather, worn and creased, clearly a map. As it touched her palm, Lira felt a jolt, a familiar warmth that had nothing to do with the knight's fevered body. It was the same feeling that resonated from the small silver medallion she wore beneath her tunic, the one that had been her mother's. A

faint, almost imperceptible hum resonated between the two objects, a silent connection.

Before Lira could examine the map more closely, before she could ask another question, the knight's eyes glazed over. His breath hitched, a single, shuddering sigh escaped his lips, and then his body went slack against the pump. The knight was dead.

Silence descended upon the village square, broken only by the relentless drumming of the rain. The crowd, which had been murmuring and arguing moments before, now stood transfixed, their faces pale with a new, deeper fear. Lira knelt beside the dead knight, the heavy, water-stained map clutched in her hand. It felt impossibly heavy, laden with the weight of unknown dangers and ancient secrets.

Then, a harsh voice cut through the stunned silence. It was Thomas, the gruff man who had warned against helping the knight. His eyes, narrowed with suspicion, darted from the dead man to Lira, then to the map she held.

"What's that, Lira?" he demanded, his voice laced with accusation. "What did that... *thing*... give you?"

His words were like a stone thrown into a still pond, sending ripples of unease through the crowd. All eyes turned to Lira, their gazes no longer simply fearful, but scrutinizing. The fear of the Vale was one thing; the fear of magic, of anything out of the ordinary, was quite another. And Lira, the quiet healer with the unusual eyes and the whispered past, was suddenly very much out of the ordinary in their eyes. The carefully constructed normalcy of her life in Ashpine had just shattered, along with the dying breath of the stranger. The whispers had begun. And this time, they were about her.

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