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# Echoes of the Painted Vale

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## Table of Contents

- Introduction
- Chapter 1: Shadows on Canvas
- Chapter 2: The Birthmark's Call
- Chapter 3: Fragments of the Old Tongue
- Chapter 4: Colors Unbound
- Chapter 5: Through Fire and Fog
- Chapter 6: The Thief of Lantern Alley
- Chapter 7: Bonds in Blood and Paint
- Chapter 8: Crossing Splintered Realms
- Chapter 9: Darric's Hounds
- Chapter 10: A Flicker in the Night
- Chapter 11: The Veil Between Worlds
- Chapter 12: The Artists' Sanctuary
- Chapter 13: Lessons in Hidden Light
- Chapter 14: Tinctures of Truth
- Chapter 15: Home of the Forgotten
- Chapter 16: Inheritance of Ash
- Chapter 17: The Betrayer's Stroke
- Chapter 18: Mirror of the Self
- Chapter 19: Vault of Shadows
- Chapter 20: The Slumbering Storm
- Chapter 21: Fire upon the Vale
- Chapter 22: Riven Allegiance
- Chapter 23: Palette of War
- Chapter 24: The Last Painting
- Chapter 25: Echoes and Dawn

## Introduction

In the far-flung settlement of Valenbrook, where the threads of sunrise hang golden on morning mist and the fields unfurl in silent hush, Kaelin lived at the cusp of legend and obscurity. The settlement was small—a cluster of timber homes softened by the worn hands of generations, his own among them, though Kaelin had no lineage to claim. His earliest memory was of painted light pooling under the eaves of a stranger's roof, and the rough wool of a borrowed blanket. He grew up with the hush of unanswered questions shadowing his days, comforted only by the odd birthmark winding beneath his left shoulder: a splash of indigo spirals that none in Valenbrook could explain.

Valenbrook was alive with old tales, whispered at dusk when work was done and the hearths glowed. Most were stories of the Painted Vale, the mythic region that the elders spoke of in reverent tones—a land, they said, of living color and magic, now lost. But in hushed voices, there were warnings, too: of a time when the art-magic, wrought through brush and hue, once threatened the order of kingdoms, and why its practice was now forbidden, snuffed out wherever it lingered. Kaelin listened more closely than most, feeling somehow tethered to those forbidden stories, as though an invisible hand brushed his own with every word.

Life in Valenbrook offered routine but little meaning. Kaelin earned his keep in the fields and at the village workshops, drifting between tasks as the perpetual outsider. The more he tried to find the shape of himself among the villagers, the more he felt the weight of difference. Dreams haunted his sleep: streaks of vivid color swirling behind his eyes, shadowy faces beckoning from panes of splendid stained glass, and the sound of voices not his own. He clung to these dreams, certain they held a key to the emptiness twisting in his chest.

Yet it was not only dreams that set Kaelin apart. He possessed a restlessness, a longing for a truth that lay somewhere beyond the fields and fences of Valenbrook. He had heard the hushed rumors: that somewhere in the lands shattered by ancient war, a remnant of the Painted Vale endured, and with it, the old magic. On cool evenings when the sky pooled with indigo and gold, Kaelin would wander the edge of the forest, fingers brushing bark like a priest at silent prayer—hoping for a sign. He told himself he was searching for belonging, for family, for something lost, but could never quite name what it was.

Fate, as it happened, would decide for him. With an act born of desperation and anger—a moment's flare of impossible color—Kaelin would find his world upended and himself thrust into the heart of a legend he had longed both to touch and to escape. In the days ahead, he would learn that the Painted Vale, the vanished magic, and his

own shrouded origins were interwoven more tightly than any tapestry spun by mortal hands.

This story begins at the threshold of exile and illumination, where Kaelin—unmoored, uncertain, and aching for answers—steps into the domain of old fears and forbidden hopes. The Painted Vale awaits, and through its echoes, Kaelin must forge the truth of who he is, and what he is willing to become.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on Canvas

The air in Valenbrook always thickened before the midday market, laden with the scent of fresh-baked bread, damp earth, and the nervous energy of villagers haggling over prices. Kaelin, for his part, found it mostly stifling. He was meant to be collecting a delivery of tanned hides from old Master Borin, but his feet, as usual, carried him in the opposite direction, toward the worn path that led to the silent edge of the Whisperwood.

He walked with his shoulders hunched, not from cold, but from a lifetime of trying to make himself smaller, less noticeable. His clothes, perpetually patched and faded, blended with the dusty road, a stark contrast to the vivid daydreams that often consumed him. Today, it was the shimmer of sunlight through leaves, breaking into a kaleidoscope of emerald and gold, that held his gaze. He imagined it on a canvas, the light shifting, alive. A foolish thought, he knew. Art, true art, was a luxury for nobles, and magic a thing of forgotten, dangerous tales.

A sudden, sharp yell sliced through his reverie. "Kaelin! You idler! Are you deaf?"

He flinched, turning to see the bulky figure of Master Borin emerging from the shadows of his tannery, a leather apron stretched tight across his belly. Borin was a man whose temper flared as quickly as a dropped torch, and Kaelin, being the village orphan and a perpetual daydreamer, was a frequent target.

"Forgive me, Master Borin," Kaelin stammered, the light-dappled visions instantly dissolving. "I was... just stretching my legs."

Borin snorted, a sound like an irritated pig. "Stretching your legs? You'll stretch yourself right out of a meal, boy, if you don't pull your weight! The hides for Lord Darric's men are due by sundown, and you're still dawdling like a moth-brained beetle."

Lord Darric. The name was a chill wind through Valenbrook. He was the local noble, distant and rarely seen, but his presence was felt in every tax levied, every edict passed, and in the sharp-eyed hunters who sometimes rode through, their sigil—a rearing black stallion—etched into their cloaks. He was a man of cold, hard power, and his demands were never questioned.

"I'll fetch them straight away," Kaelin said, trying to infuse his voice with a sincerity he didn't quite feel. His hands, though, twitched with a familiar unease. The hides were not just hides; they were a symbol of Darric's looming authority, his encroaching

shadow over their quiet lives.

He spent the next hour hauling the stiff, reeking bundles, his muscles aching with each trip. The smell of cured leather, usually just a background scent, today seemed to cling to his throat, making him feel vaguely ill. He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, smearing a faint smudge of dark brown onto his cheek.

As the last bundle was stacked on the cart, a rider thundered into the village square. It wasn't one of Darric's usual hunters, but a man in more ornate, though still practical, leather armor, his face set in a scowl. He dismounted with a fluid grace that spoke of long hours in the saddle and even longer ones in combat. His eyes, the color of flint, swept over the villagers, dismissing them with a single glance, until they landed on Master Borin and the stacked hides.

"Are these the hides for Lord Darric?" the man's voice was a low growl, like stones grinding together.

"Indeed, Captain," Borin puffed, bowing far too low. "Finest quality, as always."

The Captain strode over, his gaze inspecting the bundles. Kaelin, trying to be invisible, moved to the edge of the cart. He felt a prickle of unease, a sensation that had become familiar whenever Lord Darric's influence touched Valenbrook directly. The Captain's eyes, however, seemed to snag on something just past the hides, something behind Kaelin.

Then, a sudden, sharp crack rent the air. A small boy, no older than five, had stumbled from a nearby stall, a crudely carved wooden bird clutched in his hand. The bird, painted a vibrant scarlet, lay in two pieces on the cobblestones. The boy's lower lip trembled, and a whimper rose in his throat.

The Captain's flint eyes narrowed. "What is that?" he demanded, pointing at the broken toy. His voice was laced with an inexplicable tension, an edge that went beyond mere annoyance.

The boy's mother, a nervous woman with flour dusting her apron, rushed forward. "Just a toy, Captain. My son's. He's quite fond of it."

"It's painted," the Captain stated, his voice flat. It wasn't a question.

Kaelin felt a strange thrumming beneath his skin, a sensation he couldn't place. He had seen painted toys before; it was common enough, though the colors were always dull, earthy pigments that quickly flaked away. This bird, though, despite its crude carving, had possessed a startling, almost luminous scarlet.

"Aye, just a bit of paint," Borin chimed in, nervously. "Nothing harmful."

But the Captain was already moving. He knelt, picking up the larger piece of the bird. His fingers traced the jagged edge, then the painted surface. A flicker of something, fear or recognition, crossed his face, too quick for Kaelin to decipher. He then crushed the wooden bird in his gloved hand. Splinters of scarlet wood rained down on the cobblestones.

The boy let out a wail, a truly heartbroken sound that echoed in the sudden silence of the market square. His mother gasped, clutching him to her side.

"No frivolous colors," the Captain said, his voice hard. "Not in Lord Darric's lands. Not anymore." He looked up, his gaze sweeping over the gathered villagers, a clear warning in his eyes.

Kaelin's blood ran cold. *Frivolous colors*? It was more than just a toy. It was about *control*, about suppressing even the smallest expression of something vibrant. He felt a surge of hot anger, a feeling he rarely indulged. It boiled beneath his ribs, a pressure building behind his eyes.

He remembered the elders' whispers about the forbidden art, about the dangers of true color-magic. He had always dismissed it as old wives' tales, but seeing the Captain's chilling reaction, seeing the terror in the mother's eyes, a cold dread began to creep in.

Without thinking, Kaelin stepped forward, his fists clenched. "It was just a toy!" he heard himself blurt out, the words ripped from him before he could consider the consequence. "What harm could a little color do?"

The Captain's head snapped towards him, his flint eyes narrowing into slits. His gaze was like ice, dissecting Kaelin, seeing past his patched clothes, past his hunched shoulders. "And who are you, boy, to question a decree from Lord Darric?"

Kaelin felt a sudden, inexplicable tremor run through his arm, the one with the birthmark. It was a familiar sensation, a faint echo of the dreams he often had, but sharper, more insistent. A strange warmth spread from his shoulder, down his arm, into his fingertips. He felt a distinct urge, a peculiar need, to reach out, to *do* something.

"He's just a simple orphan, Captain," Borin interjected quickly, his face pale. "He means no disrespect. He's just... a bit slow."

"Slow, is he?" The Captain's voice was a low growl. He took a step closer to Kaelin, his

hand resting on the hilt of his sword. "Or perhaps he harbors an unhealthy fondness for the forbidden."

Kaelin felt a wave of dizziness, the market square seeming to tilt around him. The air shimmered, not with heat, but with something else, something invisible yet palpable. His vision seemed to sharpen, details around him becoming impossibly vivid: the rough texture of the Captain's leather armor, the individual dust motes dancing in the sunlight, the subtle, muted tones of the village buildings. And then, he saw it.

It was faint at first, like a breath on glass. A wisp of color, a vibrant, impossible blue, swirled around the Captain's hand as it rested on his sword. It was not a reflection, not a trick of the light. It was *there*, emanating from him, or perhaps, from Kaelin's own eyes.

Then, a sudden, blinding flash. Not from the sun, but from Kaelin's own hand.

It was a burst of brilliant, shimmering indigo, the exact shade of his birthmark, only brighter, more alive than anything Kaelin had ever witnessed. It wasn't a solid object, but a wave, a pulse of pure color that seemed to leap from his fingertips, arcing through the air.

The indigo light struck the Captain's hand. There was no sound, no impact, but the effect was immediate and startling. The Captain gasped, his eyes widening in a mixture of shock and pain. He stumbled back, clutching his hand, his face contorted. The faint blue aura around him, which Kaelin had only just perceived, flared briefly, then dissolved.

Silence descended upon the market square, a silence heavier than any before. The villagers stared, their faces a mixture of awe and terror. Kaelin stared at his own hand, then at the Captain, who was now staring at him, not with anger, but with something far more dangerous: a chilling, profound recognition.

"Magic," the Captain whispered, his voice hoarse, his eyes fixed on Kaelin's hand as if it held a viper. "Forbidden magic."

Kaelin felt a tremor of fear, cold and stark, slice through him. He hadn't meant to. He didn't even know how. The indigo light had simply *happened*. But the word had been spoken, and in Valenbrook, under Lord Darri's shadow, 'forbidden magic' was a death sentence.

The Captain recovered quickly, his pain replaced by a chilling resolve. He drew his sword, the metallic rasp echoing unnaturally loud in the silence. The blade, dull silver, glinted in the midday sun. "Seize him!" he roared, his voice regaining its authority. "Seize the boy! He has committed a grave offense against the Crown and against Lord

Darric!"

Panic seized Kaelin. He didn't wait. He didn't think. He simply ran. His feet pounded on the cobblestones, carrying him blindly past the frozen villagers, past the abandoned market stalls, and towards the only refuge he knew: the wild, untamed embrace of the Whisperwood. He didn't know where he was going, only that he had to escape the Captain's wrath, escape the word 'magic' that now hung like a shroud over his existence. As he fled, a single thought echoed in the chambers of his mind, clear and terrifying: his life in Valenbrook, such as it was, was over. And the indigo birthmark on his shoulder thrummed with a new, insistent warmth.

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