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Whispers of the Forgotten Kingdom

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Introduction

Nestled on the edge of dense, whispering woodlands stands the village of Eldergrove—a humble settlement where magic slumbers, and its denizens rarely question the old tales passed down through generations. Dawn breaks gently here, brushing the cottage roofs with gold, and the people rise to greet each day with the same steady rhythms as their ancestors, minds untroubled by the whims of fate or the specters of ages long forgotten.

Elara, a young woman with untamable auburn hair and a gaze marked by fierce curiosity, has always sensed there was more to her world than meets the eye. Orphaned as a child and raised by her kindly but secretive grandmother, she grew up on the quiet outskirts, tending gardens and reading crumbling tomes by candlelight. Still, the hush of the forest and the old stones that twist up from the earth often seemed to murmur her name, promising destinies beyond the village fields.

On the evening of her seventeenth birthday, as a heavy summer storm battered Eldergrove's shutters and drenched the earth, Elara stumbled upon a relic beneath the roots of the ancient heart-tree—a silver amulet, warm to the touch and etched with runes long unseen by mortal eyes. The moment her fingers brushed its cold surface, a chill swept through her bones. Dreams grew restless; shadows shifted at the edge of lantern light. An inexplicable pull began threading her waking hours, leading her to uncover a brittle, dust-laden map hidden among her grandmother's possessions—a map inked with lands no living soul remembered and scrawled with the promise of a kingdom lost to time.

Compelled by the amulet's silent song and the cryptic markings of the map, Elara's tranquil life fractures. Eldergrove is no longer the haven she believed it to be. Whispers carry in the wind, and watchful eyes linger at the market square. Stories of a fallen kingdom resurface, threading through village gossip and festival song, laced with warnings that the old world slumbers just beneath the fragile skin of the new.

As secrets unravel and danger edges ever closer, Elara is thrust from the only home she has ever known, her path lit by the glimmer of truths long buried. With every step into the unknown, she becomes entwined with forces ancient and powerful, as well as newfound friends whose own fates are tied to the awakening of the forgotten kingdom. Elara's choices will echo far beyond the borders of Eldergrove, igniting the first sparks of a journey that will reshape a world—if she has the courage to listen to the whispers and forge her own destiny.

CHAPTER ONE: Shadows in Eldergrove

The aroma of baked bread and damp earth clung to Eldergrove, a comforting scent that usually settled Elara's spirited heart. Not today. A restless energy thrummed beneath her skin, mirroring the storm that had raged last night and still wept in the form of persistent drizzle. The silver amulet, now nestled beneath her tunic, felt like a small, cold weight against her chest, a constant reminder of the strangeness that had begun.

Her grandmother, Lyra, usually moved with the quiet grace of a forest sprite, but this morning her movements were clipped, her gaze distant. Lyra was a woman of few words and many secrets, her face a roadmap of untold stories. Elara had always accepted this, understanding that some things were simply *known* about Lyra, like the way she could soothe a startled faun or coax the most stubborn herbs to bloom. Now, however, the silence between them felt less like peace and more like a barrier.

"You're still wearing it," Lyra observed, her voice barely above a whisper as Elara helped her prepare dried herbs for the market. Her eyes, the color of a winter sky, flickered to the spot where the amulet rested. There was no judgment in her tone, only an ancient knowing that sent a shiver down Elara's spine.

Elara nodded, her fingers unconsciously brushing the cool metal. "I feel... drawn to it. Like it hums just for me." She didn't voice the other part: how the amulet seemed to sharpen her senses, making the mundane world feel subtly altered, vibrant with unseen energies. It was as if a veil had been lifted, revealing a world just beneath the surface.

Lyra merely sighed, a sound like rustling leaves. "Some things are best left undisturbed, child. The past has a way of reaching out, and its grip can be stronger than you imagine." She turned, her back to Elara, and began grinding dried mugwort with a vigor that suggested more than just culinary intent.

Elara watched her, a knot forming in her stomach. Lyra had always spoken in riddles, but this felt different. More urgent. It was the same tone she used when warning Elara away from the Whispering Woods after dusk, or when she'd found Elara poring over an ancient, leather-bound book in the attic, a book Lyra had then promptly spirited away.

Later that morning, as the mist began to lift, Elara made her way through the narrow lanes of Eldergrove, her wicker basket filled with fresh eggs and wild berries. The village square was bustling, as always. Merchants called out their wares, children chased geese, and the rhythmic clang of the blacksmith's hammer echoed through the

morning air. It was a familiar tableau, comforting in its predictability, yet today, Elara felt like an outsider looking in.

She caught a glimpse of Master Borin, the village elder, his usually jovial face etched with concern as he spoke in hushed tones with old Anya, the weaver. Their eyes, though quickly averted, seemed to linger on Elara for a beat too long. A prickle of unease started to spread through her. Was it her imagination, or were more eyes following her than usual?

At the baker's stall, where the aroma of cinnamon rolls always made her forget her troubles, she overheard snippets of conversation. "...strange lights in the old forest..." one woman murmured, clutching a warm loaf to her chest. "...and the birds have been silent near the Standing Stones..." another added, her voice low with superstition. Elara's hand instinctively went to the amulet beneath her tunic. These were not the usual village gossip; they hinted at something deeper, something she now felt intricately linked to.

"Good morning, Elara," said Bran, the baker's son, his hands dusted with flour and a genuine smile on his face. He was a kind, sturdy young man, who had often tried to woo her with offerings of honey cakes and earnest glances. Elara offered a polite smile in return, but her mind was elsewhere.

"Good morning, Bran," she replied, her voice a little distracted. "A busy morning, it seems."

Bran leaned closer, his voice dropping conspiratorially. "There's talk, Elara. Talk of things stirring in the woods. Old tales, you know, but people are worried. Even Father is lighting extra candles in the evenings." He gestured to the forest that loomed beyond the last row of cottages, its treeline dark and foreboding even in the gentle light.

Elara felt a flush rise on her cheeks. She knew the tales. Every child in Eldergrove grew up hearing about the 'Forgotten Kingdom,' a mythical land said to have vanished centuries ago, leaving only scattered ruins and cautionary legends. But until now, they had been just that: legends.

"Just old wives' tales, Bran," she said, trying to sound dismissive, though her heart pounded a little faster. She quickly bought her bread and moved on, eager to escape his well-meaning concern and the increasingly watchful eyes of the villagers. She felt like a deer caught in the open, every movement scrutinized.

As she turned down a less-traveled path towards her grandmother's cottage, the faint scent of woodsmoke mingled with something else—something metallic, like damp iron. She paused, her senses heightened by the amulet, trying to place the unfamiliar odor.

It wasn't from the blacksmith's forge; this was colder, sharper.

A shadow detached itself from the deeper shadows beneath a gnarled oak. Elara's breath caught in her throat. He was tall, cloaked in dark, heavy fabric, his face obscured by a deep hood. He stood perfectly still, watching her. No, not just watching her, *studying* her. His presence radiated a silent, cold intensity that made the hair on her arms prickle.

Panic, cold and sharp, tightened her chest. This was no ordinary villager. The air around him seemed to thicken, pressing in. He didn't move, didn't speak, yet his gaze felt like a physical touch, probing, intrusive. Elara clutched her basket tighter, her knuckles white. Every instinct screamed at her to run.

She forced herself to move, walking faster, her gaze fixed straight ahead. She didn't dare look back, but she could feel his eyes on her, drilling into her back with an unnerving persistence. The metallic scent grew stronger, now mingled with something earthy and old, like disturbed graves.

Only when she reached the familiar gate of her grandmother's cottage, and the dark figure had not followed her into the sunnier patch of garden, did Elara allow herself to draw a ragged breath. She fumbled with the latch, her hands trembling. This was new. This was different from the village whispers and Lyra's cryptic warnings. This was a palpable threat, a shadow that moved with purpose, and it had been watching *her*.

She burst through the door, nearly colliding with Lyra, who was stirring a pot over the hearth. "Grandmother!" Elara gasped, her voice hoarse, her heart still hammering against her ribs. "There was... a man. In the lane. He was watching me."

Lyra turned slowly, her expression unreadable. She looked at Elara, then, with a subtle shift, her gaze dropped to the amulet hidden beneath Elara's tunic. A deep sigh escaped her lips, heavy with resignation. "It begins," she murmured, not to Elara, but to the crackling fire, as if confiding in an old friend. "The past truly has awakened." The quiet life of Eldergrove, Elara realized with a chilling certainty, was over.

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