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The Shadow Weavers

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Introduction

In the twilight realm of Eryndor, shadows lengthen not just with the setting sun but with each new decree banishing magic from the land. Generations have grown hardened to caution, shaping themselves around the fear that a whispered spell or a flicker of power could spell their ruin. The kingdom, with its soaring citadels and labyrinthine courts, is ruled by those who wield authority—never by those who harbor ancient gifts, for such gifts mean certain death.

In this world of suspicion, Liora has always walked the delicate line her father, Lord Adviser Corwyn, has drawn for them both. As one of the King's closest confidantes, Corwyn possesses influence—but it is a precarious power, riddled with enemies both at court and beyond. Liora's days are filled with protocol and pretense, her nights haunted by dreams she does not understand. Though she knows magic is forbidden, she cannot help but feel its strange pulse somewhere deep within her soul.

The ban on magic is more than law; it is legacy, consequence, and fear rolled into one. Tales of the Shadow Weavers, once whispered around fires in hushed tones, have faded into condemned legend. Yet, it is in legends that the oppressed find hope—or the seeds of rebellion. In the grand halls gilded with secrets, few suspect the daughter of an advisor could be the key to unraveling centuries-old edicts.

That illusion shatters the night a flash of darkness—her own—flares uncontrollably and is witnessed by those whose loyalty is far from assured. As accusations gather and her father's fate tilts uncertainly on the edge, Liora's choices become sharper and more dangerous. The safe confines of courtly life fracture, forcing her into a world of hidden societies, cryptic prophecies, and shifting alliances.

'The Shadow Weavers' begins here, where fear is sharpened into courage and secrets pulse beneath the stone veins of the palace. Liora's journey is not just one of unraveling conspiracy or mastering forbidden power—it is a test of what she will risk for family, for truth, and for the kingdom that both nurtures and threatens her. The darkness is coming, but from its heart, a new kind of light could be born.

CHAPTER ONE: The Shadowed Court

The midday sun, usually a benevolent golden presence, felt like a spotlight of scrutiny on Liora as she navigated the polished marble corridors of the Royal Palace. Each step echoed the unspoken rules of Eryndor: keep your head low, your eyes averted, and your thoughts locked away. For the daughter of Lord Adviser Corwyn, a man whose counsel held the kingdom's fragile peace, these rules were as ingrained as her own heartbeat. Her position, while privileged, was a constant performance, a silent dance around the precipice of disgrace.

Today, the performance felt particularly taxing. A new edict was being drafted, one that would further tighten the net around anyone suspected of dabbling in the arcane. Whispers had reached Liora's ears, tales of increased patrols in the outer villages, of disappearances among the common folk. Her father, a man whose face was usually a mask of calm composure, had returned from his morning meeting with King Theron with a tightness around his lips that spoke volumes of his unease.

Liora, clad in a gown of muted green silk, carried a stack of scrolls filled with economic reports - a mundane but necessary task. She preferred the solitude of the royal library, where the scent of aged parchment and forgotten knowledge offered a brief reprieve from the palace's suffocating atmosphere. Yet, even there, the shadow of the ban on magic lingered, rendering entire sections of ancient texts off-limits, their pages sealed with arcane wards against unauthorized eyes.

As she turned a corner near the King's private chambers, a sudden clamor erupted. A pageboy, no older than twelve, stumbled from a doorway, his face pale with terror, a tray of delicate porcelain shattering at his feet. King Theron's booming voice, usually reserved for council meetings, sliced through the air. "Incompetent fool! Get out of my sight!"

The page, trembling, scrambled to collect the broken shards, his small fingers fumbling. Liora paused, a knot of sympathy tightening in her chest. Such outbursts from the King were rare but always unnerving, signaling a deeper tension beneath the court's glittering facade. She knew better than to intervene, to risk drawing the King's volatile temper herself. But the boy's distress mirrored the unspoken fears that haunted the palace.

Before she could continue on her way, a hand clamped onto her arm, and a voice, smooth as polished obsidian, purred in her ear. "Always in the thick of things, aren't we, Liora?" Lady Isolde, the King's estranged cousin and a formidable presence at court, emerged from the same doorway, a venomous smile playing on her lips. Isolde,

with her sharp features and eyes that missed nothing, was a constant rival to Liora's father, perpetually seeking an advantage.

"Lady Isolde," Liora replied, her voice carefully even. She gently but firmly disengaged her arm. "I was merely passing through." Isolde's gaze lingered, sharp and dissecting, before falling to the scattered porcelain. "Careless servants," she murmured, though her tone suggested the real carelessness lay elsewhere. "The King is... agitated today. Matters of state, you understand. Dark tidings from the Northern Marches."

Liora inclined her head, offering a polite but noncommittal response. "I wish him strength in his deliberations." Isolde's smile widened, revealing a flash of teeth. "Indeed. Your father, of course, is indispensable in these trying times. Such a pillar of wisdom. One might even say... irreplaceable." The last word hung in the air, weighted with a subtle, chilling implication. Isolde's compliments always carried a hidden blade.

Liora felt a cold prickle of unease. Isolde's animosity towards Corwyn was no secret. She yearned for her own family to hold the King's ear, to usurp the influence Liora's father had meticulously built. "My father serves the King with unwavering loyalty," Liora stated, her voice firmer than before. Isolde merely laughed, a light, tinkling sound that grated on Liora's nerves. "Loyalty is a fickle mistress, Liora. Easily swayed, easily broken."

With a final, unsettling glance, Isolde swept past, her costly silks rustling, leaving a faint scent of jasmine and menace in her wake. Liora watched her go, a familiar knot of apprehension tightening in her stomach. Isolde's words were a stark reminder of the fragile balance her father maintained, and the constant threat of those who sought to unseat him. In Eryndor's court, a whisper could be more dangerous than a sword.

The brief encounter had delayed her, and Liora quickened her pace, the scrolls feeling heavier in her arms. She needed to deliver them to the royal scribe before the afternoon's council meeting. Her path took her through a rarely used service passage, a shortcut that bypassed the more crowded public areas of the palace. The passage was dim, lit only by the occasional high window, and its stone walls felt damp and ancient.

As she walked, a faint shimmer of light caught her eye. It emanated from a small, almost hidden alcove, a place where forgotten relics and discarded furniture were often stored. Curiosity, a dangerous trait in a world that valued strict adherence to the expected, tugged at her. She hesitated for a moment, then, yielding to the impulse, she stepped into the alcove.

Dust motes danced in the sliver of light, illuminating a collection of disused tapestries, broken candelabras, and a single, ornate wooden chest. The chest was old, its dark wood carved with intricate, unfamiliar symbols that seemed to writhe in the faint light.

It looked out of place, almost... alive. A strange, compelling warmth emanated from it, drawing Liora closer.

Her fingers, almost involuntarily, brushed against the cold metal clasp of the chest. It was locked, but as her skin made contact, a faint tremor ran through her arm, a sensation like distant thunder. The air around her grew thick, heavy with an unseen energy. Liora felt a prickle of alarm, a deep, instinctual warning. This was not merely an old chest. This was... something else.

A sudden, sharp pain flared in her head, as if a needle had pierced her temple. Images, fleeting and disjointed, flashed before her eyes: a robed figure, hands outstretched; a shimmering, shadowy mist coiling around ancient trees; a voice, whispering a language she did not understand yet recognized as profoundly significant. The world around her seemed to blur, the alcove's familiar walls warping and shifting.

Panic, cold and sharp, began to rise. Liora tried to pull her hand away from the chest, but it felt as though an invisible force held her captive. Her breath caught in her throat. This was not the kind of curiosity that could be indulged. This was something forbidden, something dangerous, something that hinted at the very magic her kingdom had outlawed. The chest pulsed with a silent, insistent power.

Then, without warning, a tendril of inky blackness, so deep it seemed to absorb the light around it, unfurled from her fingertips. It was not a shadow cast by the dim light; it was a living, breathing darkness, emanating directly from her, coiling and swirling in the confined space of the alcove. Liora gasped, her eyes wide with terror and a strange, undeniable fascination.

The shadow danced, obeying some unseen command, then lashed out, a whip of darkness striking the stone wall. A deep gouge appeared where it hit, as if carved by a physical force. The air crackled with raw energy, and the light from the high window seemed to dim, swallowed by the sudden, expanding gloom. Liora felt a surge of exhilaration, terrifying and potent, coursing through her veins.

But the exhilaration was quickly overshadowed by a growing dread. This was her. This terrifying, beautiful, forbidden power was hers. She had always dismissed the strange tingling sensations, the flashes of intuition, the vivid dreams, as mere imagination. Now, it was undeniable. She was a Shadow Weaver. The very thing her kingdom feared and hunted.

A sudden sound, the clatter of armor approaching the passage, jolted Liora back to a terrifying reality. A guard patrol. If they saw this... if they saw *her*... She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating with an desperation she'd never known. The shadow, as if sensing her terror, recoiled, retracting back into her fingers, leaving only a faint chill

and a lingering scent of ozone. The alcove returned to its dusty, innocuous state.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat of fear. Liora snatched her hand from the chest, forcing herself to breathe, to appear calm. Her hands were shaking. She pressed them against the rough stone wall, trying to ground herself, to deny what had just happened. The scrolls, forgotten, had fallen to the floor. She knelt, fumbling to retrieve them, her gaze darting to the entrance of the alcove.

Just as she straightened, a figure filled the narrow opening. Ser Kaelen, Captain of the Royal Guard, his face grim beneath his polished helm. His gaze swept over the alcove, pausing briefly on Liora, then the unmarred stone wall, before settling back on her. "Lady Liora," he said, his voice flat, devoid of its usual respectful tone. "What are you doing in this disused passage?"

Liora's mind raced, trying to formulate a plausible excuse. Her voice, when it came, was a little shaky. "Captain Kaelen. I... I was merely taking a shortcut to the royal scribe's office. I seem to have dropped my scrolls." She gestured weakly to the recovered parchments, hoping her forced casualness wasn't too transparent.

Kaelen's eyes, keen and unblinking, narrowed slightly. He stepped into the alcove, his armored boots crunching on something small. He bent down, and Liora's blood ran cold. He picked up a fragment of the ornate carving from the chest - a small, sharp piece that had apparently broken off during her accidental display of power.

He examined it for a long, agonizing moment, his brow furrowed. Liora held her breath, convinced he knew, convinced he could see the lingering residue of her forbidden magic. The silence stretched, thick with unspoken suspicion. Then, Kaelen looked up, his gaze sweeping over the chest, the broken fragment, and finally, Liora's pale face.

"This... carving," he said slowly, his voice laced with an unfamiliar edge. "It is peculiar. Old. And rather out of place, wouldn't you agree, Lady Liora?" He held out the fragment. Liora's hand trembled as she took it, the cold wood pressing against her palm. She forced herself to meet his gaze. "Perhaps a discarded relic from the old wing, Captain. I wouldn't know."

Kaelen said nothing, but his eyes held a knowing glint that sent a shiver down Liora's spine. He wasn't convinced. She could feel his suspicion, a tangible weight in the air. He turned slowly, casting another lingering glance at the chest before speaking again. "Return to your duties, Lady Liora. And perhaps choose a more... direct path next time. For your own safety."

The implied threat hung in the air, cold and clear. He turned and strode out of the alcove, his armor clanking, leaving Liora alone once more. She leaned against the cold

stone, trembling, the chest's strange warmth still a phantom sensation in her palm. The small wooden fragment felt like a brand. Ser Kaelen had seen something, or suspected something. The precarious balance of her life, and her father's, had just been irrevocably shattered. Her secret, a terrifying truth she hadn't even known she possessed, was now a dangerous weapon, waiting to be unleashed, or to destroy her.

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