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Eclipse over Ashenfall

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Introduction

Ashenfall: a realm where light and shadow exist in uneasy truce, and the sun, shrouded by an unending eclipse, sheds only ashen rays over a scarred land. Its forests seethe with restless spirits, its ruins cradle secrets too dangerous to speak, and its people cling to hope in the chill of perpetual dusk. Here, night's dominion has left an indelible mark—not just on stone and soil, but upon the souls of all who endure beneath the shadowed sky.

Amidst this bleak expanse, Seraphina Sable dwells in reluctant obscurity at the edge of the Yewfen—a haunted marsh where nothing dares linger for long. Once hailed as a champion, her name now stirs only whispers, and the deeds that won her legends weigh heavy with regret. Her past, filled with choices both grand and grievous, binds her in self-imposed exile, her blade dulled by years of quiet remorse. The world she once bled for has become distant, its cries for aid drowned by the haunted echoes of her own heart.

But the peace she has so bitterly carved for herself is fragile. In Ashenfall, the growing darkness is more than tyranny of night; it is a call—a harbinger of something stirring beyond the mortal ken. Rumors churn through the towns and wilds alike: the Heart of the Eclipse, a relic thought lost to time and myth, has reemerged. With it comes the promise of unthinkable power, and the threat of total ruin. Those who worship the void hunger for its return, seeking to purge what frail light remains. As the eclipse deepens, so too does the urgency of the realm's plight.

Yet it is not only shadow that stirs. When Rune, a mysterious mage cloaked in prophecy and secrets, seeks out Seraphina in her seclusion, the careful walls she has built begin to crumble. His arrival bears more than just news—it is a summons, a reminder that neither fate nor redemption are easily denied. Seraphina is faced with a decision: to rise and fight once more, or to allow her shame to doom all she once called home.

As a journey of peril and promise unravels, Ashenfall's darkness will test alliances, courage, and the very meaning of redemption. Faced with old ghosts and new foes, Seraphina and her companions must navigate a world awash with sorrow, wonder, and betrayal. There can be no salvation without sacrifice; no dawn, unless one dares to confront the heart of the eclipse.

This is the tale of an ashen kingdom and the souls entwined within it—a quest not just for the fate of a realm, but for the redemption of a single, haunted warrior. In the heart of darkness, beneath the shadow of the eclipse, light blooms only where it is fiercely

fought for.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on the Horizon

The Yewfen was a place of perpetual twilight, even by Ashenfall's gloomy standards. Twisted yew trees, their branches draped with weeping moss, clawed at a sky forever bruised purple and grey. The air itself tasted of damp earth and forgotten things, a metallic tang that clung to the back of the throat. Seraphina Sable lived in a small, solitary cabin nestled deep within this mournful landscape, where the only sounds were the creak of timber in the wind and the mournful croak of unseen marsh dwellers.

Her existence here was a deliberate dulling, a grinding down of the sharp edges of her past. She rose with the muted dawn, the light barely distinguishable from the lingering night, and tended to her meager garden—stubborn, root vegetables that seemed to thrive on sorrow. Her hands, once swift and lethal with a blade, now worked the soil, calloused but no longer primed for war. Each day was a quiet penance, a slow unraveling of the warrior she once was, replaced by something less... dangerous.

A small fire usually crackled in the hearth, its smoke curling lazily from the stone chimney. Inside, the cabin was sparsely furnished, a bed of rough-spun blankets, a sturdy wooden table, and shelves holding a few worn books and dried herbs. No polished armor hung on the walls, no gleaming weapons were proudly displayed. Her sword, *Lament*, lay sheathed beneath the floorboards, its hilt cool and silent, a constant reminder of promises broken and blood spilled.

Today, however, an unfamiliar prickle rode the stale air. It wasn't the usual damp chill of the Yewfen, but something else, a subtle shift in the weave of the world. Seraphina paused, a handful of muddy carrots clutched in her fist, her gaze sweeping the mist-shrouded trees. Nothing. Yet, the sensation persisted, a faint hum beneath her skin that spoke of magic, or perhaps, of trouble. She had learned to trust such instincts; they had saved her life more times than she cared to count.

She finished her gardening, moving with a fluid grace that years of isolation hadn't entirely eroded. Her movements were economical, efficient, remnants of a warrior's training that still clung to her. As she entered the cabin, she caught her reflection in a small, tarnished piece of metal she used as a mirror. Her dark hair, once a wild cascade, was now tamed into a practical braid, streaked with silver at the temples. Her eyes, the color of twilight itself, held a weary depth, but a flicker of the old fire still smoldered within them.

The afternoon passed in the usual rhythm: preparing a simple meal of roasted root vegetables and dried fish, mending a tear in her cloak, sharpening the small hunting

knife she allowed herself. Each task was a meditation, a way to anchor herself in the present and keep the encroaching shadows of memory at bay. But the subtle hum in the air intensified, a low thrumming that felt like a distant heartbeat.

As the ashen sun dipped lower, painting the sky in shades of bruised plum and charcoal, Seraphina sat by the hearth, a cup of bitter herbal tea warming her hands. A gust of wind rattled the single window, and for a fleeting moment, a deeper shadow than usual seemed to cling to the panes. Her hand instinctively reached for the hilt of her hunting knife.

Then, a sound. Not the usual groan of a settling tree or the cry of a marsh bird. This was a deliberate tread, heavy and purposeful, approaching through the sodden ground of the Yewfen. One set of footsteps, steady and unhurried. Too confident for a lost traveler, too direct for an animal.

Seraphina extinguished the small lamp, plunging the cabin into near darkness, save for the faint glow of the embers. She moved silently to the window, peering through a gap in the worn curtains. The figure emerging from the swirling mist was tall, cloaked in deep, almost starless fabric that seemed to absorb the meager light. They moved with an otherworldly grace, their silhouette impossibly sharp against the shifting grey.

A mage. She felt the subtle ripple of arcane energy now, stronger, more defined. It prickled her skin, a sensation both familiar and unwelcome. She had dealt with mages before, both allies and enemies, and they rarely brought good tidings to a warrior trying to forget her past.

The figure stopped at the edge of her small, overgrown yard, a few paces from the cabin door. Even through the mist, she could sense the intensity of their gaze, directed squarely at her humble dwelling. A moment of silence stretched, broken only by the distant croak of a bullfrog.

Then, a voice, deep and resonant, cut through the stillness. It carried no aggression, no threat, but rather an ancient weariness, like stones worn smooth by centuries of flowing water. "Seraphina Sable. I know you are there."

Seraphina remained unmoving, her hand now firmly on the hilt of her hunting knife, her muscles tensed. She knew this voice, or at least, the type of voice. One that spoke with the weight of prophecy and untold knowledge. She had hoped to avoid such encounters for the rest of her days.

"There is no one here by that name," she replied, her own voice a low murmur, barely audible even to herself. It was a futile denial, she knew. If this mage had found her in the Yewfen, they knew exactly who she was.

A soft sigh, carried on the damp air. "The Yewfen cannot hide you from what is coming, Seraphina. Nor can it erase what you once were." The mage took a slow, deliberate step closer. "My name is Rune. And I need your help."

Seraphina's grip tightened on the knife. "My help is not for sale, nor is it freely given. I am done with that life." She had no intention of being drawn back into the world's turmoil, not after all she had lost, all she had done. The silence of her self-imposed exile was a fragile peace, purchased at a terrible cost.

"The Heart of the Eclipse has resurfaced," Rune stated, his voice unwavering, as if he hadn't heard her rejection. The words struck Seraphina like a physical blow. The Heart of the Eclipse. A myth, a legend, a whispered horror from the darkest corners of Ashenfall's history. It was the stuff of bedtime stories meant to scare children, not a reality that could intrude upon her quiet sorrow.

"Impossible," she breathed, the word a desperate plea more than a statement of fact.

"Not impossible," Rune corrected, his tone calm, almost mournful. "And with it, the shadows it draws have grown bolder. Already, ancient evils stir, eager to claim its power. If it falls into the wrong hands, Ashenfall will not merely be eclipsed; it will be consumed."

Seraphina closed her eyes, a wave of cold dread washing over her. The Heart of the Eclipse. She remembered the old tales, the prophecies of total darkness, of a world plunged into an eternal night from which there would be no dawn. It was the very reason she had embraced her warrior's path in the first place, to prevent such a cataclysm. And it was the reason she had failed.

"There are others," she finally said, her voice strained. "Other warriors. Stronger. Less... burdened."

Rune took another step, now standing directly before her cabin door, a dark silhouette against the deepening gloom. "Perhaps. But none with your unique connection to the eclipse, Seraphina. And none with your will to fight for what is lost." He paused, and Seraphina could feel the weight of his gaze, even through the wooden door. "The past does not define the future. Only your choices do."

The words hung in the air, a challenge, a subtle taunt. *Your choices*. It was a cruel reminder of the very reason she had fled to the Yewfen, the reason she bore the name 'Sable' as a mark of shame. Every choice she had made had led to this desolate solitude.

Seraphina remained silent, wrestling with the warring impulses within her. The desire

to remain hidden, to cling to the fragile peace of her exile, was strong. But the name, 'Heart of the Eclipse,' echoed in her mind, a clarion call to a duty she had thought long buried. The world had suffered enough.

"What makes you think I still possess the will to fight?" she asked, her voice low, a raw edge to it she hadn't heard in years. "What makes you think I haven't lost everything that once made me a warrior?"

Rune's response was immediate, confident. "Because the shadow of the eclipse has deepened, not just over Ashenfall, but within you. And only one who understands the darkness can truly command it." He extended a hand, palm open, though Seraphina could only vaguely discern the gesture in the gloom. "Come, Seraphina Sable. The world needs its champion, now more than ever. And you, I suspect, need a purpose to rekindle the flame within."

The words hung in the air, a gauntlet thrown. Seraphina's gaze drifted to the floorboards beneath her feet, where Lament lay hidden. The cold steel felt impossibly far away, yet also, inexplicably close. A tremor ran through her, a mixture of fear and something else - a spark, long dormant, now struggling to ignite. The Yewfen had given her quiet, but it had also given her endless regret. Perhaps Rune was right. Perhaps the only way to truly find peace was to face the shadows one last time.

With a heavy sigh that felt like it carried the weight of years, Seraphina slowly, deliberately, moved towards the door. The sound of her footsteps, usually silent, now seemed thunderous in the oppressive quiet. She reached for the latch, her fingers brushing the cold metal. The choice was hers. And for the first time in a very long time, the path ahead, though perilous, was clear.

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