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The Fractured Realm

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Introduction

The world of Aranthos was once a paradise threaded with threads of living magic, a realm where sorcerers shaped mountains and kings bargained with spirits beneath ancient trees. But those days are spoken of only in stories now, traded in hushed voices at the fireside or etched as cautionary runes on shattered monuments. Power, once a blessing, became a curse—wild, forbidden, and buried beneath centuries of distrust. The great kingdoms, architects of wonder, now lie in ruin, and magic is feared as the harbinger of destruction.

Into this fractured landscape steps Althea—a young woman cloaked in secrets, her magic a dangerous inheritance she has not yet learned to control. In the remote village of Varrow's End, Althea struggles to conceal her abilities, aware that a single misstep will brand her as a threat. The Etherstones, relics of the world's distant glory, have become objects of both reverence and dread. Factions clash in the shadows of collapsed towers, and the line between friend and foe is as mutable as the ether itself.

The scars of ancient wars linger in the very bones of the land, and bitterness festers among its people. Yet hope, elusive as sunrise on a mist-laden moor, shimmers just out of reach. When Althea stumbles upon a prophecy hidden in the wreckage of her ancestors, she is forced onto a path both perilous and profound. Aided by Loras—a bard with secrets as enigmatic as his songs—Althea flees the only home she has ever known, propelled by powers she barely understands.

The journey that unfolds is as much an exploration of Aranthos's lost realms as it is of Althea's own haunted past. Along treacherous roads and through lands twisted by rogue magic, the true cost of power is revealed—not just in wars and rivalries, but in the forging and breaking of trust. Every ally harbors hidden motives, every legend conceals a fragment of truth, and every step forward threatens to unravel the fragile hope Althea so desperately seeks.

In the shadow of lost kingdoms, with darkness rising and ancient enemies awakening, Althea must endure impossible trials and make choices that will echo through ages. Her journey is a tapestry of magic and memory, of impossible bargains and hard-won victories, uniting the fate of the fractured realm with the truth of her own soul. Here begins the saga of a forbidden mage—a tale of battles, betrayals, and the light that endures within even the deepest shadow.

CHAPTER ONE: Embers in the Dust

The scent of drying hay and the distant hum of the mill wheel were the only constants in Althea's world, a world she often felt she observed from behind a thin pane of glass. Varrow's End, nestled in a forgotten valley, was a village clinging to the edges of what was considered civilised, far from the grand ruins that whispered tales of fallen kings. For Althea, it was a cage. Her fingers, perpetually restless, often traced patterns in the dust, an unconscious echo of the forbidden energy that hummed beneath her skin.

Today, the cage felt tighter than usual. The annual Harvest Festival was in full swing, a riot of colour and sound that grated against her carefully constructed composure. Villagers, their faces flushed with cider and cheer, danced around a bonfire, their laughter carrying on the crisp autumn air. Althea preferred the quiet solace of the small cottage she shared with her grandmother, Elara, whose knowing glances were often harder to decipher than any ancient text.

Elara was a woman of sharp wit and even sharper eyes, her face a roadmap of ancient sorrows and unwavering resolve. She had always known about Althea's unique burden, a legacy whispered down through their bloodline like a dangerous secret. "Control it, child," Elara would often murmur, her voice raspy with age and concern. "Or it will control you. And in Aranthos, control is all that keeps you from the pyre."

Althea understood the stakes. Magic, in Varrow's End and countless other settlements across Aranthos, was synonymous with the Sundering – the cataclysm that had shattered the old kingdoms and plunged the world into an age of fear. Stories of mages gone mad, of uncontrolled elemental fury laying waste to entire cities, were the bedtime tales of this fractured realm. Any flicker of the arcane was met with suspicion, then fear, and finally, often, with a torch.

She watched the festival from the edge of the village square, pretending interest in a stall selling carved wooden animals. A knot of nervous energy tightened in her stomach. It wasn't just the overwhelming noise; it was the subtle, undeniable shift in the air, a familiar precursor to the strange occurrences that seemed to follow her like a shadow. A stray dog barked, startling her, and a small, almost imperceptible surge of warmth flared in her palm. She quickly clenched her fist, willing it away.

"Enjoying the festivities, Althea?" A voice, rich and resonant, drifted from behind her.

She turned to see Loras, the itinerant bard, leaning against the sturdy oak of the village well. His instrument, a beautifully carved lute, was slung casually over his shoulder. Loras was a man woven from contradictions: his clothes, though well-

maintained, spoke of long journeys, yet his eyes held an unnerving depth, as if he had seen far more than any travelling musician should. He had arrived in Varrow's End a few months prior, captivating the villagers with his tales and songs, yet Althea found herself drawn to him for reasons she couldn't articulate. He possessed an aura of quiet understanding, a gaze that seemed to penetrate her carefully constructed facade.

"As much as one can enjoy a throng of shouting drunkards," Althea replied, a wry smile touching her lips. She always felt a strange sense of ease around Loras, a respite from the constant vigilance she maintained. It was a dangerous ease, she knew, but a welcome one nonetheless.

Loras chuckled, a low, melodic sound. "Ah, a woman after my own heart. Though I find a certain charm in the unbridled enthusiasm of common folk. It reminds one that joy, even fleeting, still exists in this weary world." He pushed off the well, moving closer. "Still, your disinterest is palpable. Is it the cider that offends, or perhaps the lack of a suitable dance partner?"

Althea shrugged, her gaze drifting back to the bonfire, where sparks flew upwards, momentarily mimicking the forbidden magic within her. "Neither. Just... restless. The air feels...charged."

Loras's eyes, a colour she couldn't quite place - perhaps a storm-grey or a deep forest green - flickered, a hint of something unreadable passing through them. "Charged, you say? An astute observation for a village girl who claims no affinity for the old ways." His tone was light, teasing, but Althea detected an underlying current of seriousness. He knew. Or at least, he suspected.

Before she could form a retort, a sudden gust of wind swept through the square, extinguishing several of the lanterns strung across the stalls. A collective gasp rippled through the crowd, followed by a murmur of unease. The bonfire, however, flared unnaturally, its flames licking higher, casting dancing shadows that seemed to writhe like living things.

Althea felt a prickling sensation on her skin, the familiar surge of energy rising unbidden. Her breath hitched. No, not now. Not here. She instinctively reached out, a desperate, unconscious plea to quell the volatile energy. A small, almost invisible tendril of azure light pulsed from her fingertips, a desperate attempt to contain the wild magic.

She didn't realise anyone had seen it until a sharp cry pierced the growing silence. "Witch!"

The word hung in the air, cold and deadly, silencing the remaining chatter. All eyes turned, not to the unnaturally high flames of the bonfire, but to Althea. Her hand, still

slightly glowing, was visible to everyone. Fear, raw and primal, erupted on the faces of the villagers. The revelry dissolved into a terrified mob.

Old Man Hemlock, the village elder, his face usually etched with a permanent scowl, was now contorted in horror. His gnarled finger, trembling, pointed directly at Althea. "She's one of them! A sorceress!"

The mob surged forward, their faces twisted with ancient prejudice and a fresh wave of terror. Althea felt a dizzying mix of panic and a strange clarity. This was it. The moment she had always dreaded. Elara's warnings echoed in her mind. *Control it, child, or it will control you.* But in this moment of raw fear, control was a distant dream.

Another burst of wind, colder this time, swept through the square, carrying with it the smell of ozone. The bonfire roared, sending embers spiralling into the night sky like angry red stars. Althea felt a powerful, almost irresistible urge to unleash the growing energy within her, to lash out at the fear and hatred surging towards her. It was a tempting, dangerous thought.

Just as the first villager, a burly farmer named Gareth, lunged forward with a pitchfork raised, Loras moved with unexpected speed. He stepped in front of Althea, his lute held like a shield, his presence a sudden, unyielding wall between her and the mob. His eyes, no longer merely observing, blazed with an intensity Althea had never seen.

"Back!" Loras's voice, usually so melodic, cracked like a whip. "There is nothing to fear here but your own superstitions!"

Gareth hesitated, momentarily startled by the bard's sudden intervention. But the fear of magic was a deep-seated rot in Aranthos, not easily swayed by a musician's words. More villagers pressed forward, their shouts growing louder, fueled by panic. "Burn the witch! Burn her!"

Althea felt the ground beneath her tremble. It wasn't the earth, but the raw power within her, responding to the escalating tension, threatening to erupt. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to contain it, to force it back down, but it was like trying to hold back a surging river with bare hands.

"Althea, we need to go. Now!" Loras's voice was urgent, cutting through the din. He grabbed her arm, his grip surprisingly strong, pulling her towards the narrow alleyway that led out of the village square, away from the roaring bonfire and the enraged villagers.

Althea stumbled, her legs feeling like lead. The sheer force of the magic thrumming through her made her head spin. As they reached the mouth of the alley, a stray spark

from the bonfire, imbued with her uncontrolled magic, shot towards a nearby thatched roof, igniting it in a sickeningly swift burst of flame.

A collective scream of horror erupted from the villagers. The sight of the burning roof, undoubtedly fueled by her power, solidified their accusations. There was no turning back now. The peaceful life she had carefully constructed in Varrow's End, a life of quiet anonymity, was reduced to ashes in a single, terrifying moment.

Loras didn't hesitate. He pulled her deeper into the alley, weaving through the chaotic shouts and the flickering shadows. Althea risked a glance back. Old Man Hemlock, his face a mask of furious righteousness, was shouting orders, organising a pursuit. The flames from the roof cast an ominous glow on their faces, turning them into monstrous caricatures.

"Run, Althea! Don't look back!" Loras commanded, his voice strained but firm.

Her lungs burned, her legs ached, but the surge of adrenaline, coupled with the lingering magic, propelled her forward. She could hear the pounding of feet behind them, the angry shouts of the mob growing closer. They were hunting her. For a moment, a wave of despair threatened to engulf her, but then Elara's face flashed in her mind - her grandmother's unwavering strength, her quiet sacrifices to keep Althea safe. She couldn't give up.

They burst out of the alley and into the darker, less frequented paths that skirted the edge of Varrow's End. The woods loomed ahead, a dark, welcoming maw in the moonless night. Althea dared to believe they might escape. Just as that sliver of hope ignited, a sharp thud sounded behind them, and Loras cried out.

She spun around to see him stumbling, a rough-hewn hunting spear protruding from his leg. He gritted his teeth, his face pale, but he didn't fall. He gripped her hand tighter. "Keep moving! I'll... I'll slow them down."

"No!" Althea protested, her voice raw with panic. She couldn't leave him. He had protected her, stood between her and the mob. He was the only one who didn't look at her with fear or hatred.

"There's no time!" Loras insisted, pushing her forward with his uninjured hand. "Go! Find Elara! Tell her... tell her I tried." His eyes, despite the pain, held a desperate plea.

Althea hesitated, torn between loyalty and the instinct for self-preservation. But the footsteps were getting closer, and she knew that if she stayed, they would both be caught. With a fresh surge of anguish and a heavy heart, she turned and fled into the dark embrace of the woods, the shouts of the villagers and Loras's pained grunt fading behind her. She didn't know where she was going, only that she had to keep moving.

The world she knew was gone, replaced by the chilling reality of a fugitive, hunted for a power she barely understood. And somewhere, in the deepening shadows, a bard with a mysterious past lay wounded, his fate uncertain, all because he had dared to defend a girl with forbidden magic.

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