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# Into the Shadow Woods

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## Introduction

Elara Gray had always known there were things about her family—about herself—that set her apart from the quiet folk of Briar Hollow. Their world was one of mud-caked boots, thatched roofs, and whispered tales by firelight, with little desire for adventures that often ended in heartbreak or ruin. Yet stories always found those with listening hearts, and Elara had spent countless evenings perched at her grandmother's knee, absorbing legends of the Shadow Woods with wonder and a tinge of fear.

The village of Briar Hollow clung to the edge of these woods—a rambling storm of branches and shadows that, for generations, had been both a boundary and a warning. No one entered. No one returned. Magic, the old people would caution, lies buried there, thick as mist in the air, and it's best left undisturbed. Under the king's decree, magic had been outlawed for decades—its guardians hunted, its practitioners forced into hiding or worse. But dread of the unknown was an older law than any king could write, and in Briar Hollow, it was obeyed.

Elara's world tilts the night her brother, Callum, succumbs to an illness no apothecary can name—a sickness that leaves him burning with fever, slipping from her grasp like water through her fingers. Her once peaceful home grows heavy with worry and silence. Shadows stretch from the woods, reaching through her window and curling around her dreams, whispering possibilities she should not consider.

But desperation has a way of eroding fear. When an elderly soothsayer, drawn by pity or destiny, arrives with a secret: an ancient artifact, hidden deep within the forbidden forest, might save Callum. Legends claim it can heal any ailment, but it also binds its seeker to the woods' enigmatic magic—a power both wondrous and dangerous in equal measure. Against everything she has been taught, Elara feels a strange resonance when the woods are spoken of, an unnameable pull that tugs at the edges of her soul.

As tendrils of hope entwine with dread, Elara faces an impossible choice: surrender her brother to fate or embrace the secrets stirring within her veins. Magic is perilous. The woods, lethal. But love is enough to quell the sharpest fears, and so Elara prepares to step beyond the safety of the known, ready to challenge the laws that bind her people and the darkness lurking among the trees.

In a land where truth is tangled with myth, her journey will test not only her courage but the very limits of who she is destined to become. The path leads into the Shadow Woods—where destiny and danger wait, cloaked in silence and shadow, for the one brave enough to seek them.

## CHAPTER ONE: Whispers Beneath the Pines

The scent of pine needles and damp earth was a constant companion in Briar Hollow, an aroma that clung to Elara's clothes, permeated her small cottage, and even seemed to settle in the taste of the spring water she drew from the village well. On any other morning, the crisp air would have invigorated her, a subtle promise of a productive day spent tending their small garden or helping her mother dye wool. But today, the familiar scent was a sharp reminder of the encroaching woods, an invisible wall that pressed against the village, always there, always watchful.

Elara, at seventeen, possessed the kind of quiet strength often mistaken for timidity. Her dark hair, usually a tangled mess of braids, was pulled back severely, mirroring the taut line of her jaw. Her eyes, the color of moss after a rain, held a depth that belied her years, a quality inherited, perhaps, from a lineage she knew little about. She moved with an easy grace, honed by years of practical labor, but today, her steps were heavy, each one a testament to the fear that coiled in her gut.

Callum, her younger brother, lay still in their shared room, his breath a ragged whisper that grated against the oppressive silence of the house. He was only twelve, a boy whose laughter usually filled the small cottage, chasing away the shadows. Now, his face was flushed a dangerous crimson, his lips cracked and dry, his usually bright blue eyes clouded with fever. The village apothecary, Master Theron, had shaken his head gravely, muttering about a "wood-fever" but offering no remedy beyond cool compresses and bitter teas that did nothing.

Their mother, Lyra, sat by Callum's bedside, her face etched with a grief that seemed to age her before Elara's eyes. Lyra was a woman of stoic resilience, her hands calloused from endless work, her spirit usually unyielding. But watching her son waste away, a helplessness had settled upon her like a shroud. She barely spoke, her gaze fixed on Callum as if willing him to awaken, to smile, to be her spirited boy again.

Elara knew the unspoken fear that hung in the air: the Shadow Woods. The villagers wouldn't name it directly, but the "wood-fever" was always associated with the forest. It was a superstition, a whispered legend, that anyone who dared stray too close, even just to gather fallen branches from its outer edge, risked drawing the attention of something ancient, something that brought illness and despair. Elara found herself glancing at their small window, framed by the dark pines, a shiver tracing her spine.

She sought refuge in the kitchen, stoking the dying embers in the hearth, the rhythmic crackle of the wood a small comfort against the silent despair. The kettle began to sing, a fragile, hopeful sound in the otherwise quiet house. Elara poured boiling water

over dried chamomile, hoping its soothing aroma might cut through the oppressive atmosphere, if only for a moment. But even the fragrant steam couldn't dispel the image of Callum's pale face from her mind.

A slight draft, unexpected in the tightly built cottage, brushed against her cheek. It carried with it not the familiar scent of pine, but something else—something wild and green, like moss after a rain, with an undertone of sweet decay. It was a scent that made the small hairs on her arms prickle, a strange sense of both alarm and profound familiarity. She looked around, but nothing was amiss. The windows were latched, the door firmly bolted.

Suddenly, a dull ache bloomed in her palm. Elara glanced down, expecting to see a splinter from the firewood, but there was nothing visible. Yet, the sensation intensified, a thrumming beat beneath her skin, resonating with that elusive, wild scent. It felt as if something was waking, stirring within her, a quiet vibration that made her heart beat a little faster. She clenched her fist, trying to dismiss it as a phantom pain, a trick of her overwrought mind.

Later that afternoon, as the sun dipped towards the west, casting long, skeletal shadows of the pine trees across their yard, Lyra finally spoke, her voice hoarse. "He's not getting better, Elara." The words were simple, yet they carried the weight of a thousand unspoken fears. She looked at Elara, her eyes pleading. "We've tried everything. What else can we do?"

Elara felt the familiar prickle in her palm again, stronger this time, almost an itch that demanded to be scratched. She felt drawn to the window, to the dark expanse of the Shadow Woods that seemed to loom even larger as dusk approached. It was ridiculous, she knew. The woods were forbidden. Magic was a myth, a tale to frighten children. Yet, a desperate whisper began to form in the quiet corners of her mind.

That evening, as the first stars began to pierce the twilight sky, a small, hunched figure appeared at their cottage door. It was Old Miri, the village soothsayer, a woman rarely seen beyond the edges of her dilapidated hut on the outskirts of Briar Hollow. Her hair, the color of bleached straw, escaped in wisps from beneath a faded shawl, and her face was a roadmap of wrinkles, each one a testament to years of watching and knowing.

"I felt a stirring," Old Miri rasped, her voice like dry leaves skittering across stone. Her eyes, startlingly blue in her ancient face, fixed on Elara, not Lyra. "A shift in the weave. The woods... they call." Lyra looked at the old woman with a mixture of fear and irritation. The king's edict against magic had made even consulting a soothsayer a dangerous act, but Miri's eccentricities were often tolerated due to her harmless nature.

Elara, however, felt a strange jolt. Old Miri's words seemed to echo the unsettling sensations she had experienced throughout the day. The wild scent, the ache in her palm, the inexplicable pull towards the woods. It was as if Miri was articulating the very thoughts Elara had been too afraid to voice, thoughts that veered dangerously close to the forbidden.

Old Miri stepped further into the cottage, her gaze sweeping past Lyra and settling on Callum's door. A low hum, like the distant buzzing of bees, seemed to emanate from her. "The wood-fever," she murmured, her eyes still on Elara. "It is not merely an illness of the body, child. It is a summons." Elara's breath caught in her throat. A summons? What could the woods possibly want with Callum?

"What are you talking about, Miri?" Lyra demanded, her voice sharp with a mother's protective fear. "My son is dying. We need a cure, not riddles!"

Old Miri ignored her, her gaze unwavering on Elara. "There are whispers in the ancient boughs, girl. Whispers of a Gray. One who carries the blood of the earth. One who can hear the forest's song." She took a step closer to Elara, her gnarled hand reaching out, palm up. "Show me your hand, child."

Elara hesitated, a flicker of trepidation warring with a sudden, overwhelming curiosity. The ache in her palm intensified, a steady pulse now. She slowly extended her hand, turning her palm upwards for the old woman to see. Miri's faded blue eyes scrutinized it, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Yes," Miri breathed, a strange light in her eyes. "The mark is faint, but it is there. A latent power, awakened by need. By fear." She ran a dry thumb over Elara's skin, tracing a pattern Elara herself couldn't see, but could definitely feel. It was as if Miri was pressing on a bruise, a tender spot that resonated deep within her bones.

Lyra watched, her eyes wide with a dawning horror and confusion. "What mark? What power? Miri, you speak nonsense! There is no magic here. The King forbids it!" Her voice cracked on the last word, the fear of royal reprisal a very real and present danger.

"The King's laws do not govern the woods, nor the ancient bloodlines," Miri retorted, a surprising strength in her voice. "Your son, Lyra, is but a vessel. The fever is a symptom, a consequence of the woods reaching out for its own. For *her*." Miri pointed a trembling finger at Elara, her gaze piercing. "The woods seek you, Elara Gray. And they offer a remedy."

Elara's heart pounded against her ribs. The implications of Miri's words crashed over her like a cold wave. The woods, an ancient place of dread and legend, was calling to

her? And it offered a remedy for Callum? It seemed impossible, a fairytale woven from desperation. Yet, the insistent thrumming in her palm, the wild green scent that now seemed to fill the cottage, told her otherwise.

"An artifact," Miri continued, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Hidden deep within the heart of the Shadow Woods. A relic of forgotten times, imbued with the purest healing magic. It can save him." Her eyes gleamed, a wild, knowing glint. "But the path is fraught with peril, child. And the magic of the woods... it demands a price. A bond."

Elara felt a strange mix of exhilaration and dread. A price? A bond? What did that even mean? But the image of Callum's fevered face flashed in her mind, overriding all fear, all doubt. If there was a chance, any chance at all, she would take it. "What artifact?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper, yet firm with a newfound resolve. "Where is it?"

Miri's lips curved into a thin, knowing smile. "That, young Gray, the woods will show you. For you are of them. You always have been. And now, you must become their daughter, to save your brother, and perhaps, to save them all." The old woman turned, her shawl swirling around her as she moved towards the door. "Listen closely, Elara. The woods whisper your name. Follow the whispers, and you will find your path. And your destiny." With that, Old Miri vanished into the deepening twilight, leaving behind only the lingering scent of wild moss and ancient mystery.

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