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The Forgotten Portals

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Introduction

The land of Alera is a tapestry woven from countless ages, each thread alive with memory, legend, and lore. Its past is not merely chronicled in old tomes or whispered by sagely elders, but traced in the lines of the mountains, carried on the breath of her winds, and reflected in the silent pools of her ancient forests. For as long as stories have been told, the realm has pulsed with the possibility of secrets just out of reach, with legacies waiting patiently beneath the dust of centuries. It is here, amid the mist-shrouded valleys and star-strewn nights of Alera, that echoes of the Forgotten Portals linger.

Eldor, eldest son of the village historian in the quiet hamlet of Mirith, has spent his short life entranced by these echoes. More curious than most and possessed of a mind restless for understanding, he grew up surrounded by scrolls, heirlooms, and the mysteries of a world both beautiful and strange. While others saw only dusty artifacts and half-remembered myths, Eldor sensed patterns—a music connecting the mundane present to awe-inspiring ages past. Yet, such fascinations brought only gentle jests from neighbors and anxious glances from his kin, for Mirith is a village that values peace and certainty over dreams.

The legend that most enflamed Eldor's imagination spoke of the Portals: gateways scattered throughout Alera, rumored to bind the river of time to the fates of mortals. The story was older than the stones of Mirith, and while most dismissed it as fireside fancy, Eldor felt its truth resonate within him. Every chance he had, he poured himself over cryptic texts and faded maps, searching for some hidden grain of reality inside the tale. Still, even he could not have guessed that destiny had marked him, that the past itself was coiling towards his present.

On a night when the moon hung heavy and low, Eldor discovered a relic long hidden in his family's keeping—an ancient map, its ink obscured by age but its significance brilliant to his discerning eyes. Unraveling its secrets would prove no simple task, but the map's very existence hinted at a purpose, a call that could not be ignored. In the pale dawn that followed, Eldor understood that he stood at the threshold of a journey far greater than his small life had ever promised, one that would lead him from the tranquil fields of Mirith to the wild edges of myth itself.

His first steps would be taken alone, but fate—relentless and mysterious—had other designs. Ahead, friendships would be forged and tested through peril and wonder. Shadows would pursue him, forces both envious and terrified of what the Portals could unleash. With courage kindled by love for his home and a yearning for truth, Eldor's path would soon entwine not only with the past, but with the destiny of all Alera.

It all begins with a question as fragile as hope and as profound as time: What lies beyond the threshold of legend, waiting to be remembered? And so, with trembling hands and a heart full of wonder, Eldor sets forth—unaware that the fate of worlds will soon depend on his courage, his choices, and his discovery of the Forgotten Portals.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows over Mirith

The morning sun, usually a cheerful harbinger in Mirith, felt muted, its rays struggling to pierce the unfamiliar pall that had settled over the village. Eldor stood at the window of his small study, a room overflowing with the accumulated history of his family and Alera itself. Scrolls leaned precariously in every corner, ancient maps lay half-unfurled on his worn wooden desk, and the scent of aged parchment mingled with the faint aroma of the morning's herbal tea. Today, however, his focus was not on the familiar comfort of his surroundings, but on the shifting shadows outside.

Mirith was not a place accustomed to shadows, not the metaphorical kind at least. Its inhabitants lived simple lives, dictated by the turning of seasons and the rhythms of the land. Their concerns rarely extended beyond a bountiful harvest or a healthy livestock birth. Yet, in the last few weeks, whispers had begun to ripple through the quiet lanes, hushed conversations that ceased abruptly when Eldor approached. He, with his head perpetually buried in ancient texts, was often oblivious to the immediate present, but even he could feel the subtle shift in the village's collective mood.

It had started with minor anomalies. A shepherd, known for his meticulous flock count, swore he'd lost three lambs to something far larger and quicker than a wolf. Then, a farmer reported an unnerving chill in his fields even on the warmest days, a cold that seemed to sink into the very bones of the earth. These were dismissed by most as vagaries of nature, or the ramblings of old men. But Eldor, trained to see patterns in disparate fragments of information, felt a prickle of unease.

His family, pragmatic and grounded, merely shook their heads at his growing apprehension. His mother, Elara, a woman whose wisdom was rooted in common sense, often reminded him that "a rumbling stomach sounds louder than a distant storm." His father, a historian himself but one more interested in verifiable facts than cryptic portents, merely grunted, immersed in his own research on the lineage of local chieftains. Eldor, however, couldn't shake the feeling that something significant was unfolding, something beyond the usual cycle of village life.

The previous night's discovery had only intensified this nascent dread. The ancient map, a family heirloom Eldor had almost given up hope of ever understanding, had yielded a breakthrough. Not a full decoding, not yet, but enough to confirm his wildest theories: it was indeed a guide, a star chart interwoven with geographical markers, hinting at the existence of the Forgotten Portals. The very thought sent shivers down his spine, a mixture of exhilaration and a profound sense of responsibility.

He traced the faded lines on the map now, the parchment brittle and delicate beneath

his fingertips. The ink, though centuries old, still held a faint shimmer when caught by the light, as if imbued with some lingering magic. He had spent countless hours over it in the past, deciphering fragmented symbols and translating archaic scripts, only to be met with frustrating dead ends. But last night, driven by an uncharacteristic impulse, he had combined it with a rare astronomical chart he'd acquired from a traveling merchant, and suddenly, the constellations aligned, literally.

The map was not merely a guide to physical locations, but a temporal one as well. It spoke of cycles, of celestial alignments that activated certain pathways. The Portals, it implied, were not always accessible, but rather opened and closed with the turning of cosmic gears. This revelation was monumental, and it underscored the urgency of his quest. If the Portals were indeed real, their power was immense, capable of altering the fabric of time and destiny. Such power could not be left undiscovered, nor, more importantly, unprotected.

A sudden rap on his door startled him from his reverie. It was his younger sister, Lyra, her face usually bright with youthful energy, now creased with concern. "Eldor," she began, her voice barely a whisper, "there are strangers in Mirith."

Eldor's heart hammered against his ribs. He had been so engrossed in his discovery, so focused on the ancient past, that he had overlooked the encroaching present. Strangers in Mirith were rare, and usually heralded by the village crier. But Lyra's tone suggested something more ominous, something unannounced. He followed her out of his study and into the main room, where his parents were already standing by the front door, their faces grim.

Indeed, three figures stood in the village square, their presence a stark contrast to the familiar surroundings. They were cloaked in dark, heavy fabrics, even on this mild morning, and their faces were obscured by deep hoods. Their stillness was unnerving, an unnatural calm amidst the usual bustle of Mirith's morning preparations. They weren't talking, merely observing, their gazes sweeping over the villagers with an intensity that made spines prickle.

"They arrived just before dawn," his father said, his voice low. "Didn't speak to anyone, just... stood there."

"They're not merchants," Elara added, a hand unconsciously reaching for a heavy iron poker by the hearth. Mirith was a peaceful village, but its people were not entirely naive. They knew when something felt wrong. These strangers felt profoundly wrong.

Eldor felt a cold knot tighten in his stomach. The timing was too coincidental. Just as he was on the verge of confirming the existence of the Forgotten Portals, these ominous figures appeared in their secluded village. His historian's mind, always seeking connections, immediately began to forge a link. Were they seekers of the

Portals as well? Or something worse?

He pushed past his parents, feeling an instinctive pull towards the unknown. He needed to see them closer, to glean some hint of their purpose. As he stepped out onto the cobbled path, the air grew noticeably colder, a sharp, unnatural chill that bit at his exposed skin. The strangers, as if sensing his emergence, slowly turned their hooded heads in his direction.

There was no discernible expression on their faces, only the deep shadow cast by their hoods. Yet, Eldor felt an unnerving weight of scrutiny, as if invisible eyes were probing his very soul. He stood his ground, a historian's curiosity battling a primal fear. He had faced skepticism, mockery, and the endless frustration of ancient riddles, but this was different. This was a palpable threat, a shadow reaching for the light.

One of the cloaked figures, taller than the others, took a single, deliberate step forward. The movement was fluid, almost predatory. A hush fell over the entire square, the usual sounds of chickens clucking and distant hammers striking metal suddenly absent. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath. Eldor felt a shiver run down his spine, not just from the cold, but from a profound sense of foreboding. He knew, with an certainty that defied logic, that his peaceful life in Mirith was over. The game had begun, and he, unwittingly, was now a player. The ancient map tucked secretly in his satchel suddenly felt less like a key to knowledge and more like a beacon, drawing forces he could barely comprehend.

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