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Shattered Kingdoms

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Introduction

In the land of Aldoria, legends linger like the morning mist, shrouding truth and myth in equal measure. Once, these rolling hills and ancient forests pulsed with the life and unity of Eldoria—a kingdom as eternal as the stars. But ambition and fear proved stronger than any magic. The realm has splintered, leaving only distant echoes of its former glory, each echo a warlord's claim to power and a wound in the nation's heart.

The collapse began with the vanishing of the Crown of Ages, an artifact forged when dragons soared and the gods whispered to mortals. It was believed to hold the kingdom's soul, imbuing its bearer with the wisdom of centuries. Without it, alliances fractured, and hope fled. Warlords seized their chance, carving Aldoria into jealous territories. Markets once alive with trade now stand silent, roads once safe have become fraught with peril, and villages cower under the shadow of armies and monsters alike.

Life in the quieter duchies carried on in the uncertain peace of obscurity. Among them, the Duchy of Greenvale seemed little more than a forgotten page in the kingdom's story. Here, Arin lived in unremarkable comfort, raised more by the gentle streams and steadfast woods than by any sense of destiny. With distant noble blood and quiet dreams, Arin passed his days tending to meadows and books, believing himself little more than a footnote to history.

But as storm clouds gathered, fate crept ever closer. That peace would be rent asunder by a single night—one of fire and loss. With Greenvale razed and the truth of his birth laid bare by fleeing servants and desperate secrets, Arin steps into a world far larger, and far more dangerous, than any he imagined. Suddenly, he finds himself hunted not for his skills, but for his blood—for he is the last scion of an ancient order, bound by oath to safeguard what once made Eldoria whole.

In his journey, Arin will uncover the shattered truths of his ancestors, confronting choices that plagued them and the temptations that destroyed them. Alongside warriors, outcasts, and those whose allegiance balances between hope and despair, he must navigate treacherous lands and political intrigue to piece together remnants of the lost crown. Whispers of rebellion and redemption echo with every step, urging Arin and his companions forward on a path that may cost them everything—or restore all they hold dear.

Thus begins *Shattered Kingdoms*: an epic of rebellion and redemption in a world where light and darkness dwell not only on the battlefield, but within every heart. The fate of Aldoria is uncertain, but among fractured alliances and haunted legacies, the spark of

unity may yet be kindled anew.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Fractured Realm

The sun, a pale coin in the early morning sky, cast long, distorted shadows across the fields of Greenvale. Arin, his usually tousled brown hair still bearing the marks of sleep, guided his plow through the rich, dark earth, the scent of turned soil a familiar comfort. He worked with a quiet intensity, his movements economical, honed by years of helping his stepfather, Elara's husband, on their modest farm. The rhythm of the work was meditative, a balm against the nagging undercurrent of unease that had settled over Aldoria like a perpetual winter fog.

Greenvale wasn't exactly prosperous, but it was peaceful. Far from the sprawling fortresses and battle-scarred lands of the more powerful warlords, its rolling hills and ancient oak groves offered a deceptive tranquility. Here, life moved at a slower pace, dictated by seasons and harvests rather than skirmishes and sieges. Arin, though technically the son of Duke Kaelen of Greenvale, had been raised by Elara, his mother's former handmaiden, after his parents' sudden deaths. He'd learned more about crop rotation and mending fences than courtly etiquette, a fact he rarely lamented.

His "noble blood," as Elara sometimes, half-jokingly, reminded him, was thin and distant. The duchy was small, its resources meager, and its strategic importance negligible. This obscurity, Arin had always believed, was its greatest protection in a kingdom tearing itself apart. The larger predators ignored Greenvale, too busy squabbling over larger territories and the whispers of the Crown of Ages. The crown, a mythical artifact of immense power, was a dream Arin had heard whispered in tavern tales, a fable, not a tangible threat.

A distant bell from the village of Oakhaven, Greenvale's largest settlement, chimed once, then twice, signaling the approach of noon. Arin wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, his gaze sweeping across the verdant landscape. It was a beautiful sight, one he had often taken for granted. He imagined a life here, simple and good, perhaps marrying a local girl, raising children who would also learn the honest toil of the land.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement caught his eye. A rider, moving with unusual speed, was approaching from the east, kicking up a plume of dust against the horizon. Arin frowned. Travelers were rare in Greenvale, and those who came usually did so with purpose, often ill. He leaned on his plow handle, watching as the horse thundered closer, its rider leaning low in the saddle, urgency etched into every line of their posture.

It was Master Gareth, the village elder and occasional courier for the Duke. Gareth was a man of quiet disposition, known more for his endless patience with children than for his horsemanship. To see him riding with such reckless abandon sent a chill down Arin's spine. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong.

Gareth reined in his horse sharply, the animal snorting and pawing at the earth. The elder's face was pale, his usually calm eyes wide with fear. "Arin! You must come quickly! The Duke... he sends for you!" Gareth gasped, struggling to catch his breath.

"What is it, Master Gareth?" Arin asked, his voice steady despite the sudden spike of adrenaline. "What has happened?"

"Soldiers," Gareth managed, his voice barely a whisper. "From the north. Warlord Vorlag's men, or so it's rumored. They're at the castle gates. Demanding entry. And... and there are mages among them."

The mention of mages sent another jolt through Arin. Warlord Vorlag was a brutal expansionist, known for his iron fist and his growing army. But for him to target Greenvale, a duchy with little to offer beyond its peace, seemed inexplicable. And mages? Few warlords could command such potent magic. This wasn't a simple raid.

Arin dropped the plow handle, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs. "My mother... Elara. Is she safe?" he asked, his thoughts immediately turning to her.

Gareth shook his head. "I don't know, Arin. I left as soon as I heard the alarm. The Duke specifically asked for you. Said it was urgent. He's in the castle's inner chambers, with Lady Lyra." Lady Lyra was the Duchess, the Duke's formidable wife.

"I need to get home, see to Elara," Arin said, already turning to retrieve his cloak.

"No!" Gareth cried, his voice regaining some strength. "The Duke's orders were explicit. To the castle, Arin. He said he has something vital to tell you, something that cannot wait. Something about your true heritage." Gareth's gaze flickered, burdened by a secret he was clearly struggling to hold.

Arin hesitated. The Duke was a distant, often aloof figure, rarely interacting with him beyond polite greetings. For him to send for Arin, specifically, and with such urgency, was unprecedented. And the mention of his "true heritage" struck a chord. Elara had always been vague about his birth parents, referring to them only as "good people, taken too soon."

"Alright," Arin conceded, his mind racing. He knew the path to the castle, a winding trail through the hills, offered several shortcuts only locals knew. "Lead the way,

Master Gareth. And pray to the gods we are not too late."

He quickly retrieved his worn leather satchel, containing a few provisions and his favorite book of ancient Aldorian myths. He grabbed a sturdy oak walking stick, more for support on uneven ground than for defense, though he gripped it now with a new sense of purpose.

As they rode, the distant sounds of battle began to drift on the wind—shouts, the clang of steel, and a chilling crackle that Arin instinctively knew was magic. The tranquil fields of Greenvale were being consumed by the very chaos he had always believed lay safely beyond its borders. The illusion of peace was shattering, piece by agonizing piece.

Gareth pushed his horse harder, Arin following closely on his own sturdy farm horse, a beast accustomed to pulling a plow, not fleeing danger. The urgency in Gareth's face deepened with every stride. "Vorlag... he's been gathering power for months," Gareth managed between gasps, the wind whipping his thin grey hair. "Rumors of dark magic, of alliances with forgotten cults. But Greenvale... why us?"

Arin had no answer. The question burned in his mind, along with a growing dread. Warlords didn't waste resources on insignificant duchies unless there was something truly valuable at stake. But what could Greenvale possibly possess that Vorlag, with his vast ambitions, would covet?

As they crested a hill, the castle of Greenvale came into view. It was a modest stronghold, more a fortified manor than a grand fortress, nestled against a backdrop of ancient cliffs. But what greeted them now was a scene of devastation. Smoke billowed from several towers, a stark black plume against the clear blue sky. The outer walls, usually a sturdy grey, were pockmarked and scarred, bearing fresh scorch marks from what could only be powerful magic.

The gates, usually reinforced with thick oak and iron, lay splintered and shattered, flung inwards as if by a giant's hand. Flames licked greedily at the wooden structures within the courtyard, casting an eerie orange glow even in the daylight. The sounds of battle were louder now, a terrifying symphony of screams, steel on steel, and the sickening thud of impact.

Arin's stomach churned. This wasn't a skirmish; it was a massacre. Vorlag's forces hadn't merely arrived to parley or demand tribute. They had come to conquer, to obliterate.

"Gods above," Gareth whispered, pulling his horse to a halt. His face was a mask of horror.

"We have to go in," Arin said, his voice grim. "The Duke is waiting. And Elara..." He couldn't finish the thought. The image of the peaceful village, of his adoptive mother tending her small garden, warred with the inferno before him.

Gareth, though visibly terrified, nodded. He was a man of duty, even in the face of impossible odds. They dismounted at the edge of the tree line, tethering their horses in a thicket. "We'll approach on foot. There might be patrols," Gareth advised, his voice surprisingly steady.

They moved stealthily through the overgrown path, skirting the main road. The air grew heavy with the smell of smoke and fear. Arin clutched his walking stick, his heart hammering against his ribs. He had never faced violence, never even seen a real battle. His life had been one of quiet reflection and honest labor. This was a nightmare ripped from the pages of the very myths he read.

As they neared the shattered gates, they saw bodies—guards in Greenvale livery, twisted into unnatural shapes, their eyes staring blankly at the sky. A few of Vorlag's soldiers, clad in dark, spike-adorned armor, moved amongst them, ensuring no one stirred, their expressions grim and efficient. One of them kicked a fallen guard, confirming his death with a cruel laugh.

Arin felt a surge of cold fury. This was his home. These were his people.

Gareth pulled him back into the cover of the trees, a hand clamping down on Arin's arm. "Not yet, Arin. We must be smart. The Duke needs you alive."

They found a less guarded entrance near the castle's kitchens, a narrow service passage usually used by tradesmen. It was choked with smoke, but the path seemed clear. As they crept inside, the sounds of fighting intensified, echoing down the stone corridors. The castle, once a symbol of Greenvale's quiet resilience, was now a tomb.

Arin's boots crunched on fallen masonry and shattered glass. The air was thick with dust and the acrid smell of burnt wood and something else... something coppery and metallic. Blood.

They navigated a labyrinth of passages, following the faint sounds of struggle, trying to avoid the main courtyards. Gareth knew the castle layout intimately, having served its previous Duke for decades. His knowledge proved invaluable as they skirted a patrol of Vorlag's soldiers, their heavy boots thudding ominously down a nearby hall.

Finally, they reached a hidden staircase that led directly to the Duke's private chambers. The door at the top of the stairs was ajar, light spilling out into the darkened passage. Arin felt a flicker of hope, swiftly extinguished by the muffled

sounds of frantic voices and a woman's sharp cry.

He pushed the door open cautiously, Gareth close behind him. The sight that greeted them was etched into Arin's memory forever. The Duke's study, usually a sanctuary of books and maps, was a shambles. Furniture was overturned, scrolls scattered, and a heavy oak desk lay split in two.

Duke Kaelen, a portly man whose quiet dignity usually masked a sharp mind, lay slumped against a shattered bookshelf, a crimson stain spreading across his tunic. Lady Lyra knelt beside him, her hands pressed against his wound, her face streaked with tears and soot.

Standing over them, his back to Arin, was a figure of imposing height. He wore black plate armor, intricately etched with sinister runes, and carried a greatsword that gleamed dully in the flickering torchlight. His voice, when he spoke, was a low, resonant growl. "Where is it, Kaelen? You cannot hide it from me forever. The whispers have been clear."

Arin recognized the voice instantly from the rumors. Warlord Vorlag. He was here, in Greenvale, in the Duke's private chambers. And he was searching for something.

"I will never tell you, demon," Duke Kaelen gasped, his voice weak but defiant. "It is not for the likes of you to wield."

Vorlag chuckled, a chilling, humorless sound. "Fool. Your loyalty will only buy you a quicker death." He raised his sword, its tip glinting menacingly.

"No!" Lady Lyra screamed, throwing herself over the Duke.

"Stop!" Arin roared, stepping fully into the room, his walking stick now held like a weapon, though he knew it was a futile gesture against such power.

Vorlag spun, his helmeted gaze falling on Arin. Even through the steel, Arin could feel the weight of his malevolent stare. "Another pest?" Vorlag sneered, his gaze sweeping over Arin's simple clothes. "Greenvale truly scrapes the bottom of the barrel for its defenders."

"Arin," Duke Kaelen rasped, pushing Lady Lyra away weakly, his eyes fixed on Arin with a desperate urgency. "You... you must listen. The blood of Eldoria... it flows in you. The truth... hidden in the crypts... beneath the old oak... the last guardian..." His voice faded, a shudder passing through his body.

"What nonsense is this?" Vorlag scoffed, taking a step towards Arin. "Crypts? Guardians? You cling to outdated myths, old man."

"The Crown... it needs protecting," Kaelen whispered, his eyes fluttering. "Find the shards... unite them... you are the only one left." He looked directly at Arin, a profound and terrible understanding passing between them, a transfer of a burden Arin didn't even comprehend.

Then, with a final, shuddering breath, Duke Kaelen went limp.

"No!" Lady Lyra wailed, clutching her dead husband.

Vorlag simply shrugged, unaffected. "Pathetic. It seems your Duke has chosen silence over cooperation." He turned his full attention to Arin, his greatsword now pointed squarely at the young man. "And as for you, boy... you heard too much. And you bear a striking resemblance to a certain Kaelen of ancient lineage. Coincidence? I think not."

Before Arin could react, a blinding flash of light erupted from Vorlag's gauntleted hand, streaking towards him. Arin instinctively threw up his walking stick, a futile shield against such force. He felt a searing pain, a force like a battering ram striking his chest, and then darkness claimed him.

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