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Eclipsed by Shadows

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Introduction

In the unending dusk that blankets the world of Aedryn, hope is a memory tattered and thin. Once, sunlight spilled across meadows and marble towers, carving gold from stone and laughter from lips, but those days are now the substance of children's lullabies and the mutterings of the mad. Now, the world cowers beneath a sullen sky, the sun forever eclipsed by shadow, and the kingdoms that remain are left to scrape meaning from what little light remains. Graywick, a forlorn town hunched on the edge of the forgotten lands, is the kind of place where legends come only to die.

Kael Windthorn never sought destiny among ink and dust. Apprentice to the town's elderly scribe, he found comfort in the order of scrolls and the silence of ancient books. For Kael, the world was measured in quiet moments—an existence sheltered from the withering outside world, where the memory of daylight was already dimming in the minds of the young. Yet whispers clung to the crumbling stones of Graywick: stories of a time before the shadow, of kings and queens, of great betrayals and even greater hopes.

It was in this brittle calm that fate, as it often does, descended with silent urgency. One storm-swept evening, burdened by errands, Kael stumbled upon a locked alcove deep within the library's heart. There, beneath centuries of neglect, he uncovered a tome unlike any he'd ever seen—its binding whispering secrets, its pages heavy with warnings and wonders. In that moment, the world's frail veil of safety was torn open, and Kael glimpsed the vast machinery of history grinding forward toward him.

As dawnless days bled into restless nights, stranger tides began to stir through Graywick and beyond: cloaked envoys haunting the market square, travelers with secrets sewn into their very shadows. Reluctantly, Kael found himself at the fulcrum of an unfolding prophecy—a revelation that the eclipse was no accident, and that the boundaries between kingdoms and kin would soon be tested in ways unimaginable. Allies appeared where least expected: a princess bristling with rebellion, a knight bearing haunted scars, a thief whose nimble fingers kept darker truths at bay.

What began as a scribe's lonely discovery quickly tangled into a web of treacheries and ancient magic, forcing Kael to confront powers as old as the world itself and lies buried deeper than any tomb. Shadows lengthen not only in the sky, but in the hearts of friends and foes alike. And as Kael's journey begins, so too does the world inch inexorably toward either rekindling its light—or being forever eclipsed by the darkness that threatens to consume it.

Within these pages are the accounts of hope's last flicker, of kingdoms forgotten and

betrayals never forgiven. The tale of Kael Windthorn, scribe and reluctant hero, stands as a testament to the strength needed to pierce the deepest shadow—and to the price always paid for the return of light.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Scribe in Shadow

The air in Graywick's Grand Library always tasted of dust and forgotten dreams. For Kael, it was home. He navigated the labyrinthine shelves by instinct, his fingers tracing the worn spines of tomes that predated his great-grandparents. As an apprentice scribe, his days were a comfortable rhythm of cataloging, mending fragile pages, and transcribing decrees for the town's perpetually grim council. The flickering lantern light, casting long, dancing shadows, was the brightest illumination Graywick usually afforded.

His master, Elara, was a woman whose face was a roadmap of wrinkles, each crease a story untold. She believed in the sanctity of knowledge, even knowledge that seemed irrelevant in a world perpetually shrouded in twilight. "The light may be gone, Kael," she'd often rasp, her voice like crumbling parchment, "but truth, if preserved, can still guide us." Kael, then barely more than a boy, would nod, not entirely understanding. How could truth guide anyone when the very sun had abandoned them?

This particular evening, a biting wind howled outside, rattling the ancient windowpanes. It was a wind that carried the scent of distant, dying forests and the chill of the forgotten wastes. Kael was tasked with re-shelving a collection of disused agricultural records, a task as tedious as watching paint dry, even if paint could be seen clearly in Graywick's perpetual gloom. He clutched his lantern tighter, its meager glow barely pushing back the encroaching darkness of the deeper stacks.

He hummed a tuneless melody to himself, a habit he'd picked up from an old travelogue he'd once mended, detailing the joyous festivals of a sun-drenched kingdom now lost to time. The descriptions of vibrant colors and open skies felt like fables. Graywick knew only shades of grey, brown, and the muted blues of twilight. Even the flowers in the town square had adapted, their petals a pale, ghostly white, their scent faint and ethereal.

He reached the back of the section, a seldom-visited corner where the air was colder and the silence thicker. Here, the shelves were packed with forgotten ledgers, their leather bindings cracked and brittle. As he slid a particularly heavy volume onto its designated spot, his hand brushed against something rough, hidden behind the row of books. It wasn't wood, nor was it stone. It felt like... fabric?

Curiosity, a trait Kael usually kept well-dampened, sparked. He pulled the thick ledger back out, revealing a narrow gap. Behind it, almost perfectly camouflaged against the dark wood of the wall, was a small, ornate wooden door. It was no bigger than his outstretched hand, and so dark that it blended seamlessly with its surroundings. He

ran his fingers over its surface, tracing patterns that felt both ancient and alien. There was no visible handle, no keyhole, nothing to suggest how it might open.

He tried pushing, pulling, even pressing various spots on its surface, but the door remained stubbornly shut. A faint shimmer, almost imperceptible, seemed to emanate from its center, like moonlight on dark water. Kael's brow furrowed. He'd worked in this library for years, exploring every nook and cranny. How had he never seen this before? It was nestled so perfectly, so deliberately hidden, that it seemed to mock his years of diligent service.

A chill, unrelated to the wind outside, snaked its way up his spine. This wasn't just a forgotten alcove; it was a secret, purposefully concealed. He knelt, bringing his lantern closer. The light caught on a tiny, almost invisible etching along the door's edge: a symbol he'd never seen, a stylized sun with jagged rays, encircled by a serpent devouring its tail. It seemed to pulse faintly under his gaze, a phantom heartbeat in the silence.

He reached out, his finger hovering over the symbol. A sudden, sharp pain flared in his palm as if he'd touched a live coal. He recoiled, sucking in a breath, and saw a faint red mark bloom on his skin, mirroring the symbol on the door. It faded almost instantly, leaving only a lingering tingle. Kael stared at his hand, then back at the door, a mix of apprehension and fascination swirling within him. This was no ordinary door, and this was no ordinary mark.

He glanced around, half-expecting Elara to appear, her spectacles glinting, demanding to know what he was doing rummaging in the restricted stacks. But the library was silent save for the relentless moan of the wind and the distant creaks of the old building settling. He was alone. A tremor of excitement, forbidden and thrilling, coursed through him. This was something new, something that defied the predictable monotony of Graywick.

Driven by an impulse he couldn't quite explain, Kael reached out again, this time pressing his entire palm against the door where the symbol had been. The pain returned, sharper, and a faint hum vibrated through the wood. He gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to pull away. The shimmer intensified, and then, with a soft click that resonated in the profound quiet, the small door swung inward, revealing not another room, but a narrow, unlit passage.

A gust of air, stale and cold, sighed out from the opening, carrying with it a scent Kael couldn't place - ancient dust, something metallic, and a faint, sweet aroma like forgotten incense. His heart hammered against his ribs. What lay beyond this hidden threshold? Was this a secret passage for forgotten lovers, a hidden treasury, or something far more unsettling? His scribe's mind, accustomed to logical explanations, struggled to reconcile this discovery with the prosaic reality of Graywick.

He peered into the darkness, his lantern's beam swallowed almost immediately. The passage seemed to descend, a narrow tunnel carved out of the earth or stone, disappearing into an unknown depth. A shiver, not of cold but of pure, unadulterated fear, ran down his spine. Yet, the same surge of curiosity that had led him this far refused to be silenced. This wasn't merely a hole in the wall; it felt like a gateway.

Elara's voice, a ghost of her usual pronouncements, echoed in his mind: "Truth, if preserved, can still guide us." Perhaps this was a truth, long preserved, now stirring awake. He took a hesitant step forward, his boot scuffing against the dusty floor of the library. The decision weighed heavily on him. To turn back would be to return to the predictable, comforting tedium of his life. To go forward... well, to go forward was to step into the unknown.

He looked back at the rows of familiar books, their silent wisdom offering no counsel. He was Kael Windthorn, an apprentice scribe, not an adventurer. Yet, the faint, shimmering symbol on the door seemed to beckon, a silent promise of something more. With a deep breath, Kael raised his lantern, illuminating the first few feet of the clandestine passage, and stepped through the tiny, secret door, leaving the comfort of the library behind. His world, he realized, was about to become far less predictable.

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