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The Shadow of Evernight

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Introduction

In the land of Valeria, where ancient forests whisper secrets and rivers gleam with hidden magic, life flourishes under the watchful gaze of powers half-remembered by most. Settlements dot the emerald landscape, each holding its own story, but none seem as untouched by the world's greater woes as Eldergreen—a tranquil village on the far fringes of known civilization. Here, amid fields of wild heather and overgrown orchards, people live modestly, content within the rhythms of the changing seasons and the gentle magic that quietly pulses through the earth.

Arin—a boy on the cusp of adulthood—has never considered himself special. He is more at home tending the village sheep or wandering beneath the boughs of the Whispering Woods than dabbling in spells or shaping destinies. Raised by his aunt after his parents' mysterious disappearance, Arin possesses a gift for understanding the unspoken language of nature, though he has always resisted calling it magic. In Eldergreen, life is simple, and troubles are few. Yet, even here, tales of days long past—when dragons flew and heroes shaped the fate of kingdoms—linger like a distant thunder.

But whispers of unease have begun to swirl through Valeria once more. Strange omens haunt the night skies: shadows that swirl without wind, dreamers waking with visions of unending twilight. The oldest among Eldergreen's folk recall fragments of a prophecy, one long buried and half-forgotten—a tale that speaks of a time when Evernight will seek to claim the world, casting all beneath a shroud so deep even hope might falter. Few dare to lend credence to such legends, yet Arin's dreams have grown restless, filled with flickering images of darkness chasing light and a cold voice calling him by name.

When fate arrives in Eldergreen, it does so with fire and shattering loss. Arin, thrust from everything he knows, finds himself bearing the weight of a destiny he neither sought nor understands. Guided only by shattered memories and the cryptic words of a dying guardian, he must unravel the mystery of his lineage and the secret order of Nightshapers—the last bulwark against unfolding shadow. Each step draws him deeper into the tangled histories and unfolding dangers of Valeria, where ancient pacts may prove as treacherous as the night.

This journey is no simple quest. Alongside him stands Lyra, a warrior with scars she keeps hidden and loyalties wrapped in riddles. As magic, monsters, and prophecy converge, Arin's world grows both richer and more perilous. Through trial and terror, he and his unlikely companions must learn to trust one another, to embrace the burdens of leadership and history, and to fight for a future that remains uncertain. This

is a tale woven from threads of light and shadow—of hope rekindled when all seems lost, and of the power held in every choice.

Welcome to Valeria, where destinies are forged in darkness and every heart holds the promise of dawn. The shadow of Evernight now stretches across the land, but as long as courage yet burns, the story is not finished. Let us begin.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Whispering Woods

The sun, a benevolent eye in the vast blue, cast long, dappled shadows across the forest floor. Arin, nimble and silent, moved through the Whispering Woods with the ease of a creature born within its depths. His hands, though slender, were calloused from a lifetime of chores in Eldergreen, but here, they were attuned to the rustle of leaves, the subtle sway of branches. A battered leather satchel bounced gently against his hip, holding the day's meager foraging—mostly wild herbs and a few plump berries for his Aunt Elara's evening stew.

He hummed a tuneless melody, a habit picked up from the old woodcutter, Thane, whose cheerful off-key warbling often accompanied his axe blows. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and pine, a comforting aroma that always settled Arin's restless spirit. He wasn't a scholar or a fighter; he was simply Arin, the quiet boy who knew the woods better than he knew most people. Yet, there was a flicker of something more, an unbidden empathy with the ancient trees, a subtle hum in his bones when he pressed his hand to their gnarled trunks.

Today, that hum felt... louder. It was a faint thrumming, a vibration beneath the silence, like a distant tremor. He paused, head cocked, listening. The usual forest sounds—the chirping of unseen birds, the rustle of a squirrel—were there, but beneath them, a low, resonant murmur seemed to pulse. It felt like the woods themselves were holding their breath, a feeling Arin couldn't quite place, but one that prickled the hairs on his arms.

He shrugged it off, attributing it to a vivid imagination. Aunt Elara always said he had too much of one, especially after his parents vanished. He often found himself weaving elaborate tales in his head while minding the sheep, tales of valiant knights and hidden magic, a stark contrast to the mundane reality of his life. But today, the feeling was persistent, urging him deeper, away from the familiar paths.

Curiosity, a trait Arin usually kept in check, tugged at him. He veered off the well-trodden deer trail, pushing through a curtain of ivy and into a section of the woods less frequented by the villagers. Here, the trees grew taller, their branches interlaced like the fingers of ancient giants, allowing only slivers of sunlight to pierce the canopy. The air grew cooler, and the scent of pine deepened, mingling with a faint, metallic tang Arin couldn't identify.

He walked for what felt like an hour, the forest growing progressively quieter. Even the birds seemed to have abandoned this stretch. The ground underfoot became softer, covered in a thick carpet of moss. Then he saw it—a shimmering, ethereal glow

emanating from a clearing ahead. It wasn't the harsh glare of a fire, but a soft, pulsing light, like a trapped aurora.

Arin's breath hitched. He had never seen anything like it. His rational mind screamed at him to turn back, to ignore the strange phenomenon. But the inexplicable thrumming in his bones had intensified, drawing him forward with an irresistible pull. He approached cautiously, stepping lightly on the moss, his heart thudding against his ribs.

The clearing was circular, ringed by ancient oaks whose branches twisted into grotesque, watchful shapes. In the center, a pedestal of rough, dark stone stood, intricately carved with symbols Arin didn't recognize. And upon it, bathed in the otherworldly glow, rested a tome. It wasn't a book like any he had ever seen. Its cover was of a dark, polished wood, inlaid with silver symbols that mirrored those on the pedestal. The pages, visible through a slight opening, seemed to radiate the faint light.

As Arin stepped into the clearing, the glow intensified, pulsing in rhythm with the thrumming in his chest. A faint whispering sound filled the air, like a thousand voices speaking in unison, yet just beyond comprehension. He felt a surge of energy, warm and strange, course through him. It wasn't unpleasant, but it was profoundly unsettling.

He moved closer, drawn by an invisible thread. The air around the book crackled with an almost palpable energy. He reached out a hesitant hand, his fingers trembling. As his fingertips brushed the tome's dark cover, a jolt, sharp and swift, coursed through his entire body. He cried out, not in pain, but in sheer surprise, stumbling backward.

The book, as if waking, flared with an intense burst of light that momentarily blinded Arin. When his vision cleared, the tome was open. Its pages, once radiating a soft glow, now pulsed with a vibrant, emerald energy. Intricate, swirling patterns of light danced across the ancient script, which Arin still couldn't understand, yet somehow, felt familiar.

Before he could process what was happening, the air around the pedestal began to shimmer, not unlike the heat haze above a summer field, but colder, more profound. The metallic tang in the air intensified, growing sharper, almost acrid. Arin felt a sudden, inexplicable dread. This wasn't the gentle, comforting magic of the woods he sometimes felt; this was something raw, powerful, and terrifying.

A shadow detached itself from the deeper gloom beneath the oaks. It was a formless thing at first, a ripple in the perception of light, but it coalesced rapidly, taking on a vaguely humanoid shape. It was tall, impossibly lean, and cloaked in an inky blackness that seemed to absorb all light around it. Two pinpricks of crimson glowed where eyes should be.

Fear, cold and absolute, seized Arin. This was no forest beast, no trick of the light. This was a creature born of shadow, a thing of nightmares. He wanted to run, to scream, but his feet felt rooted to the mossy ground. The whispers in the air grew louder, no longer just a murmur, but a chorus of harsh, guttural sounds that seemed to claw at the edges of his sanity.

The shadow creature advanced, its movements fluid and unnatural. A low, sibilant hiss escaped it, a sound that seemed to scrape against his very soul. Arin, in a desperate, unthinking act of self-preservation, raised his hands. He didn't know why, didn't know what he was doing. It was an instinct, raw and untamed.

From his outstretched hands, a burst of emerald light erupted, mirroring the glow from the tome. It wasn't a gentle flicker, but a concentrated blast of raw energy, a vibrant green lance of power that shot directly at the advancing shadow. The light struck the creature with an audible *shriek*—a sound that tore through the quiet woods, laced with pain and fury.

The shadow recoiled, twisting and writhing as if burned. The pinprick eyes flared with an infernal glow. It staggered backward, dissolving slightly at the edges, its form momentarily less solid. Arin stared, utterly dumbfounded. He had done that. He, Arin, the quiet boy from Eldergreen, had just conjured magic. Forbidden magic, the old tales whispered of.

His heart pounded, a frantic drum against his ribs. The fear was still there, a cold knot in his stomach, but mixed with it was a dizzying rush of exhilaration, a terrifying sense of power. The energy still hummed through his veins, warm and alive. He felt connected to something vast and ancient, something beyond his understanding.

The shadow creature, though wounded, was not defeated. It reformed, its crimson eyes fixed on Arin with renewed malice. It let out another hiss, a promise of swift vengeance. But before it could advance again, a new presence made itself known. A figure emerged from the deep woods, moving with a speed and grace that startled Arin.

This newcomer was cloaked in forest greens and browns, a hood obscuring their face. In one hand, they wielded a staff, gnarled and seemingly crafted from living wood, its tip glowing with a soft, protective amber light. The air around them seemed to ripple, a faint barrier of shimmering energy.

"Stand back, boy!" a voice, gruff and weathered, commanded. It was an old man, his face etched with the wisdom of years, his eyes sharp and knowing. He wore simple leather armor beneath his cloak, and a pendant, a stylized moon and star, hung from his neck. Arin recognized the symbol from dusty carvings in the Eldergreen village

hall, though he'd never known its true meaning.

The old man raised his staff, and the amber light intensified, forming a protective shield around Arin. The shadow creature hesitated, its form flickering, its malice palpable. It recognized the magic, the power of this newcomer. It recognized, Arin dimly realized, a guardian.

"You meddle where you do not belong, shade," the old man intoned, his voice resonating with ancient authority. "The Lightshaper's ward stands."

The shadow creature hissed again, a sound of pure hatred. It lunged, not at Arin, but at the old man, a blur of darkness attempting to bypass the amber shield. But the old man was quicker than his age suggested. He swung his staff, not as a weapon, but as a conduit. A wave of golden energy erupted, pushing the shadow back with considerable force.

The creature wailed, a sound that seemed to tear at the fabric of reality itself. It recoiled violently, its form shrinking, distorting. With a final, furious hiss, it dissipated, melting back into the deeper shadows of the woods, leaving behind only the acrid scent and a profound chill.

Silence descended upon the clearing, broken only by Arin's ragged breathing and the distant murmur of the truly Whispering Woods. The emerald glow from the tome had softened, but it remained open on the pedestal. Arin turned to the old man, his mind reeling.

"Who... what was that?" Arin stammered, his voice barely a whisper. "And... what did I do?"

The old man lowered his staff, his gaze, though weary, held a surprising intensity as he looked at Arin. He removed his hood, revealing a mane of silver hair and a kind, but stern, face. His eyes, the color of warm honey, seemed to see right through Arin, into the very core of his being.

"That, boy," the old man said, his voice softer now, "was a Night's Herald. A harbinger of Evernight. And what you did... you wielded a power few are born with. A power long dormant, now awakened." He gestured towards the open tome. "The Book of Eldrin. It chose you."

Arin stared, dumbfounded. The Book of Eldrin? Night's Herald? His head swam with the sudden influx of impossible information. He was just Arin, a village boy. He couldn't wield magic. He couldn't be chosen by an ancient, glowing book.

"I don't understand," Arin finally managed, shaking his head. "I'm not a mage. I've

never... I've never done anything like that before."

The old man smiled faintly, a sad, knowing expression. "Perhaps not consciously, Arin. But the spark was always within you. Your parents... they were of a special lineage. And the Night's Heralds, they have been searching for someone like you for a very long time."

Arin flinched at the mention of his parents. He had only ever known they were gone, vanished without a trace when he was a toddler. Aunt Elara rarely spoke of them, and when she did, it was with a distant sadness.

"My parents?" Arin asked, a new surge of questions rising in his chest. "What do you mean?"

The old man stepped closer, his gaze softening. "They were guardians, Arin. Part of an ancient order known as the Nightshapers. Protectors of Valeria, against the very darkness you just glimpsed." He paused, his eyes sweeping over the clearing. "It seems the prophecy is indeed unfolding. The shadow of Evernight stirs once more, and its Heralds seek to pave its way."

He extended a hand, surprisingly strong, to Arin. "My name is Kael. And it seems, Arin, our paths are now irrevocably intertwined. You are in danger, boy. Grave danger. And Eldergreen... it will not be safe for long."

A cold dread settled back into Arin's stomach, replacing the earlier rush of adrenaline. Eldergreen. His home. Aunt Elara. The thought of those serene fields and peaceful cottages being threatened by the shadowy horror he had just witnessed sent a shiver down his spine. The quiet life he knew, the one he had always taken for granted, was gone. Torn away by a sudden, violent eruption of magic and a chilling revelation of his own unknown past.

Kael's words echoed in his mind: *The prophecy is unfolding. The shadow of Evernight stirs.* Arin looked at the glowing tome, then back at Kael, whose face was grim but determined. The gentle magic of the Whispering Woods now seemed to hum with an urgent, desperate plea. His simple life had ended, not with a whimper, but with a blinding flash of emerald light.

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