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Shadows Over Valeria

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Introduction

In the heart of Valeria, magic is not merely the stuff of legend—it is the breath of the realm, winding unseen through ancient forests, silent mountains, and bustling city streets. For a thousand years, its shimmering currents have blessed the land with abundance while shrouding it in mysteries beyond mortal understanding. Yet, the very power that binds Valeria has always threatened to unravel it, echoing through the annals of history in tales of conquest, unity, and upheaval.

Peace in Valeria, as ever, is a delicate balance. Fragmented realms—each fiercely proud of their heritage and magic—are held together by fragile alliances and the guiding hand of the royal line. But beneath the surface, old grudges fester, noble houses conspire for power, and rumors of unrest creep through the taverns and temples alike. It is a time when even the boldest souls tread lightly, for secrets whisper louder than swords in the corridors of the mighty.

What has lain dormant is now stirring: a prophecy, dismissed as a relic of superstition, has awakened with omens no longer ignored. Once carved into the stones of the High Temple and yet long forgotten, it speaks of shadows rising, of a fate entwined with the blood of kings and the courage of the outcast. Few have seen its warning, and fewer still believe—until, one by one, its portents begin to come to pass.

Into the growing storm step three unlikely companions, their paths converging not by chance but by threads pulled taut by destiny. Prince Aerin, cast out and scorned for a crime he did not commit, wanders far from the gilded halls that once promised him a future. Freya, the healer who guards her miracles as tightly as her secrets, seeks redemption for wounds only she knows remain. Kael, a rogue magician with nothing left but the echo of his own mistakes, tests the boundary between hope and despair at every turn.

As these strangers collide in a land on the brink, their quests for truth and belonging become inseparable from Valeria's own struggle for survival. Each must reckon with loyalties—oaths broken and renewed, alliances forged and tested—and with the ancient power awakening beneath their feet. Political intrigue, potent magic, and ancient enmities entwine, drawing our heroes ever closer to the heart of the prophecy and the shadow lurking behind it.

Let the tale begin, then, under the flickering torchlight of kingdoms and destinies, as both the faithful and the faithless cast their eyes to the gathering darkness. In Valeria, every light breeds its own shadow—and every shadow, a chance for hope.

CHAPTER ONE: Exile and Ember

The biting wind of the Dragon's Tooth Mountains was a constant, unwelcome companion, a stark contrast to the perfumed breezes of the Royal Gardens Aerin once knew. His cloak, a drab, patched affair stolen from a clothesline near a forgotten hamlet, offered little defense against the cold that gnawed at his bones. Two years. Two years since the trumpets had sounded, not in celebration, but in condemnation. Two years since he'd been stripped of his title, his future, and his very name, replaced with the stinging epithet, 'kinslayer.'

He gripped the hilt of the sword strapped to his back, a plain steel blade that felt alien compared to the ornate, jeweled ceremonial weapons he once wielded. This one had earned its scratches and nicks in skirmishes with bandits and the occasional territorial griffin. The rhythmic crunch of snow under his worn boots was the only sound for miles, a monotonous drumbeat to the dirge of his exile. His destination was as uncertain as his next meal, driven only by a vague desire to put more distance between himself and the kingdom that had betrayed him.

Aerin, once Prince Aerin of the Sunstone Throne, now just Aerin, the wanderer, pushed a stray lock of dark hair from his eyes. His features, once refined and youthful, were now sharper, etched with a grim determination and a weariness that belied his twenty years. He'd learned to hunt, to track, to fight without the luxury of training grounds and sparring partners. Survival had become his brutal, unforgiving tutor.

The sun dipped below the jagged peaks, painting the sky in hues of bruised purple and angry orange. Nightfall in the mountains brought not just deeper cold, but a fresh set of dangers: prowling beasts, shifting snows, and the lingering threat of those who might recognize the face of a banished prince, even one so changed by hardship. He needed shelter, and fast.

He spotted a thin curl of smoke rising in the distance, a faint whisper against the darkening sky. Hope, a fragile thing he rarely indulged, flickered within him. It could be a hunter's camp, or a hermit's hovel. It could also be a den of thieves, but at this point, the lure of warmth outweighed the risk. He changed direction, his pace quickening, the promise of a fire a beacon in the encroaching gloom.

The smoke led him to a small, hidden alcove in the mountainside, partially obscured by a cluster of gnarled, snow-laden pines. A rough-hewn lean-to, patched with animal skins and mud, clung precariously to the rock face. A meager fire crackled merrily outside, casting dancing shadows on the snow. And beside it, huddled close for warmth, sat an old man.

The man was wiry, with a tangled beard the color of winter frost and eyes that seemed to hold the weight of forgotten ages. He wore layers of tattered furs and gripped a gnarled staff. He looked up as Aerin approached, his expression unreadable, neither surprised nor alarmed.

"Evening, traveler," the old man's voice was raspy, like dry leaves skittering across stone. "Lost your way, have we?"

Aerin paused a respectful distance away, his hand hovering near his sword hilt out of habit more than immediate threat. "Only temporarily. Saw your smoke. Hope I'm not intruding."

The old man chuckled, a dry, wheezing sound. "Intruding? In these mountains, any company is a blessing, or a curse. Which are you, young man?"

Aerin managed a small, tired smile. "I aim for blessing, but I suppose that's for you to judge. My name is... Aerin." He hesitated, omitting his former title. "May I share your fire?"

"The fire is for all who need it," the old man gestured to the space opposite him. "Sit. You look like you've been chasing a ghost."

Aerin sank onto a fallen log, grateful for the warmth that immediately began to seep into his frozen limbs. He pulled a small, hardened piece of bread from his pouch and offered a portion to the old man. "Thank you. I have some bread, if you'd like."

The old man accepted it with a nod, breaking off a piece and chewing slowly. "Name's Borin," he offered, his eyes sharp as he regarded Aerin. "You don't look like a common mountain man. Too clean beneath the grime. Too... regal, if I may say so."

Aerin stiffened, his hand unconsciously reaching for the silver signet ring he still wore under his glove, a foolish memento he couldn't bring himself to discard. "I've traveled far," he said vaguely. "And my former life is behind me."

Borin merely grunted, stirring the embers with his staff. "The past is never truly behind us, lad. It's a shadow that follows, no matter how fast you run. But tonight, it's just fire and bread."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, the only sounds the crackle of the fire and the whisper of the wind through the pines. Aerin found himself relaxing, a rare sensation these days. There was something about Borin's presence that felt ancient and unthreatening.

“What brings you to such desolate parts?” Aerin finally asked, breaking the quiet. “Are you a trapper?”

Borin’s eyes twinkled. “A trapper of truth, perhaps. I watch, I listen. These mountains have secrets older than your kingdom, boy. And sometimes, those secrets whisper to those who care to hear.”

Aerin frowned. “Secrets? What kind of secrets?”

The old man leaned closer, his voice dropping to a low, conspiratorial tone. “Secrets of the earth, of the stars, of the magic that flows through Valeria. It’s been stirring, lately. A restless energy. The old tales, they’re not just stories, you know.”

Aerin had heard snippets of such talk in his travels, hushed whispers of ancient prophecies and forgotten powers. But as a prince, he’d been taught to dismiss them as peasant superstitions, remnants of a less enlightened age. Yet, the conviction in Borin’s voice, combined with the growing unease he’d felt across the land, made him listen.

“What old tales?” Aerin pressed.

“The prophecy of the Shadowed Crown,” Borin said, his gaze fixed on the dancing flames. “It speaks of a time when the balance will break, when a darkness will rise from the heart of Valeria. And of three... three unlikely souls, destined to confront it. A banished prince, a healer with forgotten wisdom, and a magician who has lost his way.”

Aerin felt a cold dread settle in his stomach. A banished prince. The words echoed his own reality with chilling precision. He tried to dismiss it, to rationalize it as coincidence or a desperate old man’s ramblings, but a seed of doubt had been planted.

“And what does this prophecy say these three must do?” Aerin asked, his voice tight.

Borin sighed, a deep, weary sound. “They must find the Ember of Aethel. The heart of Valeria’s magic, said to be hidden in a place of great power. And with it, they must either rekindle the light or see it extinguished forever.”

Aerin scoffed, though the sound lacked conviction. “A children’s tale. There is no such thing as an ‘Ember of Aethel’.”

“Perhaps not in the history books they teach you in your gilded cages,” Borin retorted, a hint of steel in his voice. “But the mountains remember. The magic remembers. And it is awakening. You can feel it, can’t you? The tension in the air, the strange occurrences, the way the animals grow restless.”

Aerin had indeed noticed the increasing frequency of odd magical surges in the wilds, the unusual migrations of beasts, the unsettling quiet that sometimes fell over the deepest forests. He'd attributed it to the unpredictable nature of magic, or perhaps the encroaching influence of powerful mages in distant lands. But Borin's words cast them in a new, ominous light.

"Why tell me this?" Aerin asked, meeting the old man's intense gaze.

Borin's lips quirked into a knowing smile. "Because, young Aerin, some tales are meant to be heard by those who need to hear them. And you, my boy, have a role to play, whether you choose to acknowledge it or not."

The old man's words hung in the cold night air, heavy with unspoken meaning. Aerin wanted to protest, to argue, to deny any connection to a prophecy that sounded like a fever dream. His life was about survival, not destiny. But a part of him, a part that had felt lost and adrift since his banishment, stirred with a strange, unsettling curiosity.

He spent the rest of the night listening to Borin's tales of ancient Valeria, of the raw, untamed magic that once defined the land, and of the prophecies that had guided—or doomed—its rulers. Borin spoke of the First Kings, of the Valerian Pact that bound the realms, and of a shadowy figure, known only as the Veil Weaver, who sought to unravel it all.

As dawn approached, painting the eastern sky in soft pastels, Aerin felt a shift within him. The bitterness of his exile hadn't vanished, but it was now laced with a new purpose, however vague. He was no longer just running *from* his past; he was being pulled *towards* something.

"You should be careful, Borin," Aerin said, rising to his feet. "Speaking of such things... it can be dangerous."

Borin merely shrugged. "Danger is a constant companion in these times, lad. But knowledge... knowledge is power, and sometimes, a shield. Remember what I've told you. Keep your eyes open. And trust your instincts."

Aerin nodded, accepting the wisdom in the old man's words. He felt an inexplicable gratitude towards Borin, not just for the warmth and food, but for the spark of something new he'd ignited within him.

"Where will you go now?" Borin asked, watching him.

Aerin looked out at the vast, snow-covered landscape, the rising sun illuminating the distant peaks. "I... I don't know. Perhaps south. Towards the whispers."

Borin smiled, a slow, knowing expression. "Good. The path ahead is long and fraught with peril, but it is your path nonetheless. The Ember awaits its chosen, Prince."

Aerin flinched at the forgotten title, but Borin's eyes held no malice, only a deep understanding. He turned and began his descent from the alcove, leaving the old man by his dwindling fire. The wind still bit, and the snow still crunched under his boots, but now, the cold didn't feel quite so absolute. A faint ember of hope, or perhaps dread, had been kindled in the depths of his own shadowed heart. He was still Aerin, the exiled, but now he carried a whisper of prophecy, a hint of a destiny he hadn't asked for, but one that might just offer a chance for redemption.

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