

The Heart of Shadows

A Romantasy Novel

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Author's Note

Prologue: The Prophecy of Ages Past

In the beginning, when the worlds were young and magic flowed as freely as water, the Elders spoke a prophecy that would echo through the ages. It was inscribed upon the stones of the Hidden Temple, written in silver that would never fade, spoken by mouths long since turned to dust:

*"When the veil grows thin and darkness gathers,
When prince and pauper both lie broken,
There shall come a daughter of two worlds—
Neither wholly here nor wholly there,
Born of shadow's son and starlight's daughter.
She shall be the key to salvation or damnation.
The heart that beats between the realms.
When silver eyes meet eyes of storm,
When love transcends the boundaries of existence,
Then shall the fate of all worlds be sealed."*

No one knew, in those ancient days, that the prophecy spoke not of legend, but of a love story. A love story that would reshape the very foundations of existence itself.

Book One: The Awakening

Chapter One: The Storm's Whisper

The night sky cracked open like a wounded heart, and thunder rolled across the moorlands of Ashenveil with a fury that spoke of ancient forces stirring in the dark. Lady Elowen Ashworth stood at the precipice of Ravenscliff, her ebony cloak whipping about her slender frame like the wings of some dark phoenix, and watched the tempest gather with an intensity that made even the elements themselves seem to pause in recognition.

She was beautiful in the way that winter is beautiful—cold, severe, yet capable of breathtaking elegance. Her skin held the pallor of someone who had spent too many nights in study and sorrow, and her eyes—those extraordinary eyes—reflected the lightning as if she alone could command the very storms themselves. Some whispered she was touched by magic. Others, less charitably, called her a witch.

Elowen cared not one whit for the whispers of provincial nobility. Let them gossip in their velvet drawing rooms while she stood here, on the precipice between worlds, feeling the pulse of the ancient magic that thrummed through the very stones of Ashenveil. The Manor behind her—her inheritance, her burden, her sanctuary—held secrets that had been locked away for generations, and tonight, on this auspicious night when the veil between worlds grew thin, she would finally unlock them.

The letter had arrived three weeks past, carried by a raven whose eyes held more intelligence than any servant in her employ. The seal bore her family crest—a phoenix rising through flame—and the script within was unmistakably her uncle's, though her uncle had been dead these fifteen years.

"My dearest Elowen," the letter began, "if you read these words, then my greatest fears have been realized, and the burden I sought to shield you from must now fall upon your shoulders. Know this: you are not as other women, nor were you meant to be. The magic in your

blood runs deeper than you can possibly imagine. When the Storm Moon rises—when winter's heart beats strongest—you must go to the Withered Garden and speak the incantation inscribed upon the stone. Only then will you understand what you truly are, and what destiny has marked you to become. Forgive me, child. Forgive us all. —Uncle Mordain"

A crack of lightning split the sky directly above her head, and Elowen threw back her face, letting the rain strike her cheeks like tears she could no longer weep. For months she had mourned the life she thought she would have—a proper marriage to some titled gentleman, children, the quiet satisfaction of tending to the estates and maintaining tradition. That was what her parents had wanted. That was what society demanded.

But that Elowen had died the night her parents perished in a fire that made no natural sense. The flames had left everything around their chamber untouched, consuming only them, as though some invisible force had targeted them specifically. She had been seventeen then. Now, at twenty-three, she had spent six years convinced that she had imagined the strangeness of that night, that grief had distorted her memories.

The letter had shattered that fragile self-deception.

"Come then," she whispered to the storm, her voice barely audible above the roar of wind and thunder. "Show me what you will. I am no longer afraid."

But even as she spoke the brave words, her heart hammered against her ribs with a rhythm as violent as the tempest. Fear and anticipation warred within her—fear of what she might discover, anticipation of finally understanding the strange connection she felt to the unseen world, the way plants seemed to bend toward her, the way animals fell silent in her presence, the way mirrors sometimes showed her face slightly different than what others described.

A sound—something between a whisper and a shriek—cut through the storm. Elowen's head snapped toward the sound, her eyes

narrowing. There, at the very edge of the cliff, something moved. Something that might have been a trick of the lightning, or might have been something infinitely more dangerous.

"Who goes there?" she called, her hand instinctively moving to the silver dagger at her belt. It was a small weapon, insufficient against true danger, but it was all she had beyond the untested magic that thrummed in her blood like a second heartbeat.

The shadow coalesced, taking on a more definite form. It was a figure—yes, decidedly a figure—and it was descending toward her along the treacherous cliff path. Despite the violence of the storm, despite the treachery of the terrain, it moved with the fluid grace of a predator.

Elowen's breath caught.

When the figure emerged fully from the rain, she found herself staring at a man—though even that word seemed inadequate to describe the creature before her. He was tall, with the kind of bearing that suggested he had been born in palaces and crowned heads bowed in his presence. His hair was dark as midnight, plastered to a face of such striking beauty that it seemed almost painful to look upon. High cheekbones, a sharp jawline, lips that suggested he might smile if the weight of the world did not press so heavily upon them.

But it was his eyes that stole her breath entirely. They were silver—not pale gray, but actually silver, like polished metal, and they held in their depths the weight of centuries. When he looked at her, Elowen felt as though he could see through skin and bone directly to the very essence of her soul.

"You stand too close to the edge," he said, his voice a low timbre that resonated in her chest. "A single strong gust, and you would fall to your doom."

"Perhaps," Elowen replied, lifting her chin. "Or perhaps I am exactly where I wish to be."

Something that might have been approval flickered across his features. "Bold. Foolish, but bold. Tell me, daughter of

Ashworth—for I can smell your bloodline upon the wind—what brings you to commune with storms in the dead of night?"

"And who, precisely, are you to question me on my own lands?" Elowen countered, though unease was beginning to coil in her stomach. There was something profoundly wrong about this encounter, something that spoke of fated meetings and threads of destiny weaving themselves together.

The man—creature—smiled then, and it was like watching storm clouds part to reveal starlight. "My name is Kael Stormborn, Prince of the Twilight Realm, Heir to the Throne of Eternal Shadows, and your answer, I'm afraid, is far more complicated than either of us has time to explain on a cliff-edge in the heart of a tempest."

He extended his hand toward her, and Elowen could see that his fingers were slightly too long, that his nails possessed an opalescent sheen that no human hand should possess.

"We have perhaps four minutes before the ward-spell that masks your presence fails entirely," Kael continued, his silver eyes scanning the sky as though he could read omens in the clouds. "When it does, they will sense you. They will come for you. And if they take you first..." He did not finish the sentence, but the weight of the unspoken words hung between them like a sword.

"What do you want?" Elowen demanded, though her hand was already reaching toward his.

"What I want," Kael said softly, "is to save your life. And perhaps, if we are both very fortunate, to save my own soul in the process."

Their fingers touched, and the world exploded into light and shadow.

Chapter Two: The Twilight Realm

When sensation returned to Elowen's body, she was no longer standing upon Ravenscliff. Instead, she found herself in a landscape that defied all natural law and logical explanation.

The sky above was neither day nor night, but something impossibly *between*—held in the liminal space of eternal dusk. Purple and silver blended together in clouds that roiled with bioluminescent light, and the stars that hung above were far too close, far too bright, and seemed to pulse with a rhythm that matched the beating of her heart.

Below, the ground was not earth, but something that felt like silk beneath her feet—grass of a substance that was almost liquid, that seemed to glow with soft phosphorescence. Trees grew around them with twisted trunks of silver wood, their leaves like plates of crystal that caught the strange twilight and scattered it into a thousand colors.

"Where is this place?" Elowen breathed, her voice barely audible in the profound silence of this realm. Sound itself seemed different here, softer, as though the very air was cotton between her and the rest of existence.

"The Twilight Realm," Kael said, and she realized he was still holding her hand. She should pull away. She should be afraid. Instead, she found herself surprisingly reluctant to break contact. "It is the space between your world and the places where true magic dwells. Most humans never see it. Their perception is too limited, their minds too rigid to comprehend what their eyes would show them."

"And I?" Elowen asked.

"You are not most humans," Kael said, finally releasing her hand. She felt the loss of that contact like a physical pain. "You are half-Fae, though you clearly did not know it. Your mother was of the Twilight Court, though she took on human form to bear you. It was a sacrifice—it cost her greatly, and in the end, it cost her life. The bond

between your worlds was always meant to destroy her."

Elowen's mind reeled. "My mother—she was not—that's impossible. She was the Duchess of Ashworth, and her lineage traced back to—"

"—to a woman who appeared one spring with no history, no family, and no past," Kael interrupted gently. "Did you never think it strange that your father, despite his considerable charm, seemed almost unable to resist her? That she seemed to know things before they happened? That on certain nights, when the veil was thin, your nurse swore she saw wings—"

"No," Elowen said sharply, but even as she denied it, she remembered. She remembered her mother standing before the full moon with an expression of such longing that it had broken her young heart. She remembered asking why mama always smelled of starlight and rain, no matter how much perfume she wore.

She sank down onto the glowing grass, her legs suddenly unable to support her. "If what you say is true, then I... I am not human?"

"You are," Kael said, settling beside her with the grace of a cat. "But you are also more. Your human blood and your Fae blood are at war within you, Elowen. It is why you have always felt caught between worlds. It is why you saw things others could not, felt things others could not. It is why you nearly burned down half of Ashvendale when you were only nine years old because a boy taunted you."

Elowen's head snapped toward him. "How could you possibly—"

"I have been watching you for some time," Kael said, and there was a note of something like pain in his voice. "Ever since I came of age and was allowed to walk the paths between worlds. I have watched you grow from a confused child into a woman of remarkable grace and power. I have watched you grieve for parents you could not understand, struggle with abilities you could not explain, and suppress the very essence of what you are in order to survive in a world that would call you a witch and burn you for it."

"Why?" Elowen whispered. "Why would you watch me?"

Kael rose to his feet, moving toward one of the crystal trees. His hand reached out to touch a leaf, and where his fingers brushed it, the crystal chimed like a bell, the sound pure and achingly beautiful.

"Because I am bound by a prophecy," he said quietly, "and that prophecy speaks of a woman born of both worlds, who will either be the salvation of both realms or their destruction. A woman who will tame the untamed magic that dwells in the wild places. A woman who will either stand at my side or bring about my ruin." He turned to look at her, and his silver eyes reflected an ancient sorrow. "I have spent five years wondering which it would be. Now, I am beginning to suspect the answer."

"Which is?" Elowen asked, standing on legs that felt like water.

"I do not know," Kael said. "But it terrifies me more than any enemy ever has."

Before Elowen could respond, a chime sounded through the Twilight Realm—not musical like the crystal leaves, but harsh, warning. Kael's entire body went rigid.

"We have stayed too long," he said, reaching for her hand once more. "They have found your scent."

"Who is 'they'?" Elowen demanded.

"The Dark Court of the Twilight Realm," Kael said grimly. "They serve my brother, who would use your power to overthrow me and rule both realms under shadow and cruelty. They will hunt you now, Elowen. They will never stop hunting you."

Another chime, closer now.

"Come," Kael said, and pulled her back into the strange twilight, back toward a path she could only half-see, a path that seemed to lead downward, ever downward, into depths where even the strange glowing plants began to thin.

And behind them, Elowen heard the sound of hoofbeats—not the hoofbeats of earthly horses, but the sound of creatures that belonged to nightmares, pursuing them through the darkness with inexorable purpose.