

The background of the entire image is a detailed, painterly illustration. It depicts a dark, atmospheric forest at night. In the center, a massive, ancient tree with thick, gnarled branches and dense foliage stands as the focal point. The tree's leaves are dark, but there are hints of light filtering through. In the foreground, a man and a woman stand with their backs to the viewer, looking towards the tree. The woman, on the left, is wearing a long, flowing, light-colored dress and holds a glowing, circular magical orb in her right hand. The man, on the right, is wearing a dark, long-sleeved robe and also holds a similar glowing orb in his right hand. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and tree roots, with a soft, ethereal light emanating from the forest floor. The overall color palette is dominated by deep blues, purples, and oranges, creating a mysterious and magical atmosphere.

THE CURSE OF A VELORN

VOLUME I

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Chapter 1: The Whispering Forest

The year was 1507 BC, an era when the realms of magic and mortals coexisted in fragile harmony. In the heart of the great kingdom of Avelorn, nestled between jagged mountains and fertile plains, lay a forest so ancient that even the oldest of songs could not remember its birth. The Whispering Forest, they called it, a place where shadows danced and the wind carried secrets. Villagers whispered of strange occurrences within its depths: trees that spoke in hushed tones, rivers that defied time, and a curse so powerful it had bound the kingdom in fear for centuries.

The forest bordered Eldwyn, a quaint village whose cobblestone streets wound between cottages crowned with thatched roofs. Eldwyn was a place of quiet charm, where the scent of freshly baked bread mingled with the earthy aroma of nearby fields. Children laughed and played in the village square, their voices mingling with the rhythmic clang of the

blacksmith's hammer. The villagers were a close-knit community, bound by shared traditions and an unspoken understanding that the forest was to be avoided.

It was in this village that Lyria grew up, her presence both a blessing and a mystery. With hair like spun gold that seemed to catch the light of the sun, and eyes that shimmered like emerald seas, she was often likened to a figure from the old ballads. Yet, it was her uncanny abilities that set her apart. From the moment she could toddle, Lyria displayed a strange connection to the natural world. Plants thrived in her presence, storms calmed at her whispers, and animals, even the skittish ones, seemed to gravitate toward her.

Her father, Edrin, had raised her alone since her mother's untimely death. A former knight turned blacksmith, Edrin was a man of quiet strength and few words. His hands, roughened from years of wielding both sword and hammer, were always gentle when it came to

his daughter. He seldom spoke of her mother, and when he did, it was with a wistful look that spoke of a love lost too soon. Edrin's protectiveness was matched only by his fear of the forest.

"Stay away from the Whispering Forest," he would say, his voice tinged with an unspoken dread. ***"The forest keeps its own secrets, and those secrets come at a price."***

Lyria had spent much of her childhood yearning for connection. While the other children played together, she often watched from the sidelines, her gifts both a source of wonder and a barrier. The villagers, though not unkind, kept their distance, wary of her abilities. Rumours swirled—that she was touched by the gods, that she was a witch, or that her powers were a harbinger of the forest's curse. These whispers left Lyria with a sense of solitude that even her father's unwavering love could not fully alleviate.

That evening, with dusk descending like a veil of shadows, Lyria's path led her toward the forest. She had resisted its pull for years, but now necessity drove her forward. A child in the village had fallen ill, their fever raging despite every remedy the healer could offer. The herbs she needed grew only at the forest's edge, and though her father had warned her countless times, she could not stand idly by while the child suffered.

The boundary between village and forest was marked by a jagged line of towering oaks, their branches entwined like the hands of silent sentinels. As Lyria stepped beneath their canopy, the air changed. It grew cooler, heavier, as if the forest itself were holding its breath. The whispers began almost immediately.

Lyria... Lyria...

The voice was faint, like a melody carried on the wind. She hesitated, glancing back toward the village. The lights of Eldwyn glimmered faintly in the distance, a reminder of the safety she was leaving behind. But the need was urgent, and her resolve firm. She pressed on, her steps careful and deliberate.

The forest seemed alive around her. Shadows shifted at the corners of her vision, and the rustle of leaves carried an unnatural rhythm. She found the herbs quickly, their star-shaped leaves glowing faintly in the twilight. Yet, as she knelt to gather them, the whispers grew louder, more insistent.

Lyria... leave...

Her heart quickened. The wind picked up, carrying with it a scent of something burning. She stood, clutching the herbs tightly, her gaze

scanning the darkened trees. That's when she saw it—a pair of eyes gleaming like embers in the distance.

The creature stepped into view, its form monstrous and wreathed in shadow. Its body seemed to ripple and shift, as though it were made of smoke and flame. Lyria's breath caught, and for a moment, she was frozen.

It moved toward her, its steps slow but deliberate, the ground beneath it smouldering with each step. Panic surged through her, and she turned to run, the branches clawing at her as she fled deeper into the forest. Her pulse thundered in her ears, drowning out the whispers that now screamed warnings.

She tripped over a gnarled root, falling hard onto the forest floor. The herbs scattered from her hands as she scrambled to her feet, her palms scraped and bleeding. The creature's growl rumbled through the air, vibrating in her

chest. It was closer now, its heat singeing the edges of her courage.

Just as it lunged, a sharp light split the darkness. Silver and precise, it cleaved through the shadows, forcing the creature to recoil. Lyria's wide eyes found the source of the light: a man standing at the edge of the clearing. His black cloak billowed like a shadow given form, and his silver eyes locked onto hers with an intensity that froze her where she stood.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his tone edged with irritation as he strode forward, blade in hand. The weapon shimmered; its surface etched with runes that glowed faintly in the dim light.

"I needed herbs," she managed, her voice trembling. ***"A child in the village is sick."***

The man's gaze flicked to the creature, now circling them like a predator biding its time. He

sighed, muttering something under his breath. ***“Foolish,”*** he said. ***“You should not have come. The forest is dangerous enough by day. At dusk, it belongs to them.”***

“Them?” she asked, her voice barely audible.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he drew his blade higher, the runes flaring brighter. ***“Stay behind me.”***

The beast lunged again; claws extended like scythes. The man met it head-on, his movements fluid and precise. The clash of blade against shadow echoed through the clearing, the force of each strike sending shockwaves that rattled the trees. Lyria watched, her breath caught in her throat, as the man’s silver eyes never wavered, his focus absolute.

The creature roared, its form shifting as it tried to flank him. With a swift motion, the man

sidestepped, his blade slicing through the beast's limb. Shadowy ichor spilled onto the ground, hissing as it dissolved into nothingness. The creature howled, its glowing eyes filled with fury and pain.

"Leave, now!" the man barked, his voice cutting through the chaos. ***"This is no place for you."***

But Lyria couldn't move, her legs rooted to the spot. The forest seemed alive with tension, the air thick with magic and fear. She saw the man falter for a brief moment, the beast's claws grazing his shoulder. Blood bloomed against his dark cloak, but he didn't falter. Instead, he pressed forward, his blade glowing brighter as he drove it into the creature's chest.

With a deafening roar, the beast shuddered and collapsed, its body dissolving into ash that scattered on the wind. The man stood over its remains, his chest heaving as he turned to face her.

“You should not be here,” he said again, his tone softer but no less firm. ***“The forest is not kind to those who wander where they do not belong.”***

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He hesitated, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer than seemed necessary. ***“A warning,”*** he said finally. ***“Heed it.”***

Before she could respond, he turned and disappeared into the shadows, leaving her alone in the clearing. Her heart still raced, her mind swirling with questions. She gathered the scattered herbs with trembling hands, her thoughts consumed by the man with the silver eyes and the creature that had nearly claimed her life.

As she made her way back to the village, she couldn't shake the feeling that her encounter was only the beginning—a prelude to something far greater and far more dangerous than she could imagine.