

## Whispers of the hollow sun

Soft shafts of afternoon light filtered through the cracked stained-glass windows of Creswick's oldest library. The air was heavy with the scent of aged paper and forgotten stories. Linnet Hawkins moved between towering shelves, her fingers grazing the spines of dusty volumes. The library seemed to hum with a quiet, almost ominous energy—as if the ancient books themselves knew the secrets they contained.

She stopped before a shelf tucked away in the back corner, near a forgotten row of leather-bound texts. There, half-buried beneath the weight of history, was a worn book. It called to her in a way she couldn't ignore.

Linnet reached for it, the leather cover cracked and embossed with a faded symbol: a sun half-hidden behind jagged cliffs. The title was no longer readable, but the book seemed to hum with energy. As her fingers brushed the cover, the whisper of forgotten stories filled the silence. She opened the book carefully, the pages rustling with the weight of secrets too old for most to remember.

It spoke of the Hollow Sun—a place lost to time and legend. A cursed temple hidden deep within a canyon where shadows twisted and time bent. The very idea of it chilled her, but Linnet felt a pull, an irresistible urge to uncover its truths.

"You shouldn't come here too often. It's bad for you," a voice broke through her thoughts. Linnet didn't need to look up to know it was Liam. His protective nature often felt like a shackle, but she knew he meant well.

She glanced at him, her expression unwavering. "There's more to it than fear," she said, meeting his gaze. "This book—it's proof that something's waiting. Something no one remembers."

Liam sighed, his voice low. "And people who go looking for what's buried don't come back. The Hollow Sun is a curse, Linnet. We've both heard the stories."

"But what if it's not a curse?" Linnet pressed, her pulse quickening. "What if it's a warning? Something meant to be understood?"

Liam's eyes darkened, his brow furrowing as he stepped closer, his concern palpable. "Some warnings are better left unheeded."

With a soft thud, Linnet closed the book. She felt its weight—a burden and a promise, all in one. "Maybe it's time to find out."

Later, as she made her way through the market, the weight of the book pressed against her side, its secrets gnawing at her thoughts. Her focus was so intense she barely noticed the cobblestone beneath her foot. She tripped, falling forward, only to be caught by a pair of strong arms.

"Careful there," said a voice rougher than Liam's but no less magnetic. It was Ash Harrington.

Ash, a local legend of sorts, had lived through more near-death experiences than most people would care to remember. His cocky grin was almost as dangerous as his reputation. As he helped her steady herself, his dark eyes flashed with amusement, yet there was something unreadable beneath his charming smile.

Linnet took a steady breath, her cheeks flushing. "I'm leaving tonight," she said, pulling a map from her satchel. "To find the Hollow Sun."

Ash raised an eyebrow, a grin tugging at his lips. "You're serious?"

Linnet nodded, her resolve firm. "The Hollow Sun isn't just a legend. It's a place where the past is buried, but there's something there—something waiting for the right person to find it. I need someone who knows this land. Someone who can handle what's out there." She paused, then added, "But not to hold my hand."

Ash's smirk widened, his arms folding. "Not the hand-holding type, huh? You're braver than most, bookworm."

"Maybe," Linnet said, her voice steady. "But I'd rather not die alone."

For a split second, Ash's grin faltered, and something deeper—real—flashed in his eyes. He sighed, a glint of reluctant admiration crossing his face. "Alright, I'm in. But I'm not your babysitter."

Linnet caught her breath. "Good. I need someone who knows how to survive."

With a wink, Ash turned and walked away, leaving behind a trail of dust and a growing sense of anticipation. Linnet straightened, clutching the book against her chest. This was it.

By nightfall, the three of them—Linnet, Liam, and Ash—slipped through the quiet streets of Creswick. The full moon hung low, its silver light casting long shadows over the town. The world seemed still, as if holding its breath.

They reached the temple's entrance, the stone pillars etched with sun symbols, their cracks filled with centuries of dust. Linnet could feel the weight of the place pressing in on her. Every step deeper into the canyon felt like stepping into history itself.

Then, the ground trembled.

Before Linnet could react, the floor beneath her buckled, and she was falling, plummeting into darkness. Ash's arm shot out, grabbing her wrist just in time, but even his strength couldn't stop the inevitable. An iron gate slammed shut behind them with a deafening crash.

"Linnet!" Ash's voice echoed, but the gate between them was too thick, too final.

Linnet looked up, her heart sinking as a shadow stepped from the gloom. Liam. His face was twisted in a cold, cruel smile.

"You didn't think I'd let you take the treasure so easily, did you?" Liam's voice was laced with malice. "I needed you here. You hold the key. The only one who can break the curse."

Linnet's stomach dropped. "You... you trapped us?"

Liam's eyes glittered darkly. "There's something inside me—something in my bloodline. A curse. Only a girl of your blood can free me. But if the ritual fails..." His lips curled into a bitter laugh. "We all die."

The air thickened with tension. Ash's jaw clenched, his fury rising as Liam's body began to shift. His skin darkened, muscles bulging and twisting into a monstrous form. His face contorted into something unrecognizable—fueled by rage and desperation.

Ash moved forward, his fists clenched. "Let her go, Liam."

Liam's grin was twisted with madness. "Too late for that."

The battle exploded in a blur of violence. Ash moved like a shadow, his speed barely enough to dodge the brutal swipes of the beast Liam had become. The temple shook with every impact, every blow.

Linnet watched in horror as Ash took the brunt of the fight, blood spilling from his wounds, his strength fading. Then, in a desperate move, Ash grabbed a massive stone pillar, swinging it with all his might. The impact crushed Liam's monstrous form to the ground. But Ash didn't stop—he brought the stone down again, and again, until with a final sickening crack, Liam collapsed, his monstrous body unmoving.

The temple fell silent.

Ash staggered back, blood dripping from his side. Linnet rushed to his side, her hands trembling. "Ash, hold on."

"I'm fine," he rasped, trying to steady his breath. "Just... just need a minute."

Linnet's heart raced, but there was no time. The ritual. The book. Midnight was near.

With trembling hands, she opened the book and began to chant, the ancient words filling the chamber with a rising light. The air around them shimmered, the temple groaning as if it were awakening from a centuries-long slumber.

The light poured from the book, flooding the room, washing away the darkness. Slowly, Ash's wounds began to heal, the blood slowing, the pain fading.

As the final words left her lips, the temple seemed to exhale, the curse unravelling in the light of dawn. The air was still.

Ash, his breath more steady, reached out, touching Linnet's arm. "Guess we make a good team," he said, his grin a little weaker now but no less real.

Linnet smiled back, her heart still racing. The Hollow Sun's secrets had been sealed once more—for now. But as she looked at Ash, something inside her shifted. She had found what she was looking for—and it was far more complicated than treasure.