**O N E**

This is not my story to tell.

But neither is it a story I deserve.

Because my hands are tainted with the blood of those that should not have died and the memories of those I once loved. Even if I stand in the light, I am not good. I am not a hero.

But in a world created by lies and vengeance, secrets that people keep "for the greater good”, how could anybody be a hero? This world is not good. There are no heroes.

This is a world where lives are traded like coins, where last words spoken are not ones of love, where one person’s legacy threw cities into flame--where black is white and good is bad and thrones are lined with chains and prisons are filled with keys. Only fables tell of countries built by peace and virtue. But that is not here. At least, not before.

Now you ask me, what world is like this?

And I say, what world isn’t?

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**A L V A R A**

The evening air drifted with the faint scent of holiday candles. It was a clear night with an effulgent eye of the moon hanging like a theatre prop against a lonely ink sky. A fresh breeze tickled the trees. Below the hills, a snow-showered village was painted in light. It was the new year, and even in such troubled times, families were celebrating.

Alvara stumbled across the cobblestone streets, lamps glimmering in her presence. Her breath made tired clouds that melted away into the darkness. In one hand she held tight a tattered cloak, closed against the billowing wind. In the other floated a small sphere of bright light.

How far had she travelled? Before the Incident, she had never ventured beyond the stream bordering her forest home. It was strange to think that just after a year her feet had taken her more than halfway up the continent--trudging through silent ghost towns and skirting militia forts. She still faintly remembered her surprised reaction when she first saw snow. Now that was pretty much all she saw.

But that didn’t matter. She had to find it. She had to find him.

Her sore footsteps led her to a building with a sunken roof: WELBURY INN: Breakfast, Bar and Inn. It was in better shape than the ramshackled places she had stayed in on her journey north. The smell of warm bread blew over her as the door opened, and she walked in, extinguishing her glowing orb.

"What kinda lonely soul pays ol’ Thorn a visit this time of year? Surely this’s the worst time to be off on a journey," a rough voice rumbled from behind a counter. Embers of a fireplace crackled in a corner, the only other witness in the empty room.

"Just traveling through," she said. "Are there any rooms open?"

The owner of the voice turned around, revealing a portly man around the age of sixty. He had a large, frazzled beard that could’ve made up for his bald head and then some. The barman eyed her for a moment before saying, "How many nights?"

“One. I'm heading out tomorrow. Do you take money--"

"Ten copper.”

Surprised, she fumbled for the coins. Most of Mageia had resorted to bartering now; money was near worthless.

The barman stuffed the coins into his pockets with a grunt. "Up the stairs, third room from the end on the right. Breakfast's at six.” He wiped his palms with a towel, conjured up some fire in his hands to relight the fireplace, then slid the key across the countertop.

Alvara thanked him and ascended the stairs to find her room. It wasn't anything royal, occupied by a pathetic bed, a small night desk,  and a washbasin, but it was still better than nothing. Most towns didn’t even have an inn now. Her bag slid off her shoulder, and she collapsed on the mattress. All she hoped for now was a dreamless sleep.

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**T E E T E R**

Frost clung to leaves like bitter dew. The ground crunched with every step. Teeter shifted her bag up her shoulder, a makeshift backpack sewn out of a potato sack, and exhaled a white cloud into the air. She took a moment to watch it disappear before continuing. *This is how it’s like to be Seth,* she thought with a flicker of triumph. Poor Edan must be panicking, finding both his little brother *and* sister gone now. But he shan’t fear. *I am different from Seth!* Seth toiled in delinquency, but Teeter was out for justice.

The guy had been morphing into a Seeker ever since their mom’s death orphaned them, talking poop like “I’m gonna find the Orb of Tides!” and doing nothing to help his siblings. He kept poofing, coming back, poofing, coming back, until finally he seemed gone for good. For “the Orb of Tides,” Teeter bet. Even Edan, in all his protectiveness, cursed Seth’s name and declared no one ever find him. But Teeter would bring Seth back, oh yes. No matter how much Edan opposed.

She just had to run off, the way Seth did. Her destination? Thorn, the village where they had grown up. Then the Incident hit, and they moved into the woods, but that was a story Teeter would rather not think about. What mattered was that it was the closest town, and that she was almost there.

When her boots finally touched the cobblestone path, she dropped her bag in surprise.

There was a time when Thorn hummed, as such small a town couldn't create much bustle, but even then the painted rooftops glowed green like the forest it was named after, and windows were kept open through the night because the air was just that nice. Though, for all Teeter knew, the present Thorn had every other door locked shut, its streets littered with radical fliers as termites wasted away at the rotting wooden walls.

But, no; the town had changed. A sweet tang mingled with the air, and she felt something warmer than the snow beneath her feet. At a corner, a man was playing the fiddle as a crowd clapped along, and just on the next street a gang of kids was playing kickball with a stuffed bag. Sparklers replaced the lanterns, and laughter replaced the cries.

Peaceful times were rare, and celebration was a treat few could truly enjoy. But here the townspeople were, making cheer for New Year’s Eve outside of their weathered homes.

Teeter felt her chest bloat. This was what she wanted: for her family to rejoice like that again.

She turned her back on the villagers and headed to the inn she knew so well. The door was pushed open, and a sweet, cozy smell filled her nose with warmth. A man with a frazzled beard greeted her with clouted tankards from behind a bar. "Welcome," he started, then nearly dropped his mug. "By Regia, if it isn’t Teeter! Whatcha doin’, showing up after all these years? Aren’t ya nearly twelve now? Your family doin’ well?”

"Mr. Welbury­­--” His bear arms suffocated her tiny self and she continued in a squeak. "We’re okay. You?"

"Quite busy, actually." he said. Then he added, “A strange maiden was here just a bit ago. Before her, there was a southern girl--y’know, the ones with blue hair."

"You've got another one," Teeter said, shaking her arms free from the hug. “Just me, for the night. I’m running an errand, don’t ask." She tossed over a dozen clattering coins.

“Whatever ya say.” He pocketed them, passing her a copper object. “Your key. Up the second floor, third room from the end. Ya remember the schedule?"

“Thanks, and yep.” Teeter turned to clamber up the stairs, tossing a “good night” behind her.

She reached the hallway, expecting the same familiarity she found with the first floor. And most of it was--the patterned rug, the dark wooden walls--but something off the corner of her vision wasn’t.

Teeter whipped her head around. A shadow flitted across the wall, shrouding her eyes. She didn’t even have time to scream; she scrambled down the hall, slammed her key into a door and jiggled it. “Open, stupid door, open!” It wouldn’t.

Heart pounding, the girl booted the door with a swift kick.

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**A L V A R A**

*Thwunk, thwunk, thwunk.*

Alvara shot out of the covers. Her door rattled; somebody was beating it, preceding each blow with a muted growl.

*Why did I choose such a cheery village?* She tiptoed to her bow and nocked an arrow, gritting. *The happy ones are the suspicious ones!*

She poised herself to kick. One foot struck the door, swinging the entire thing from its hinges. The panel smacked the floor, and Alvara leaped atop the wood, bow in hand, arrow pointed. Out squeaked a timid yelp.

Alvara lowered her bow; it was just a little girl. She stared up with horrified lime eyes, cheeks pale under a dapple of freckles. When she shook, a crop of brown pigtails shivered with her. “I--uh--you--what are you doing here?”

Alvara's mouth twitched. “What’s a kid like you doing?”

“I saw a ghost--or something like it that was black and shadowy, and I dunno how but it was right there! Right there, you see?”

“No, and I thought I was about to be ambushed by someone in the middle of the night.”

“Fine. Sorry. But I really saw something!”

“What in the name of Regia’s charmer is goin’ on?” The stairs creaked as the barman stormed towards them. “It sounds like horns babbling up here!” Then his eyes caught the door and he stopped himself. A dark smile shadowed his face. “Teeter...have ya forgotten in time to respect my precious property and my precious customers?” He swung an arm around Alvara’s shoulders.

“It wasn’t me!” The girl, Teeter, pointed. “It’s that-­­-that Copperlocks!”

“Copperlocks?” The man turned to his “precious” customer. Alvara stared down at her copper hair, cheeks warm at the sudden nickname. For a moment, the barman was silent. Then he said, “Oh, dearest apologies, precious customer! That door wasn’t the freshest of the batch--­­” he turned to the small girl to hiss, “­­--don’t blame my precious customers­­!” and then, turning back to Alvara with a smile, “­Please don't take it personally; that girl can't control herself.”

Teeter groaned. “That's not the point, Mr. Welbury! There was something here.”

“What do ya mean?”

Alvara crossed her arms. “She thinks she saw a ghost and tried breaking in my door on accident.”

Mr. Welbury seemed to consider this for a moment. “Is that so, Precious Copperlocks? Well, I assure ya this place isn’t haunted, and neither did anyone ghastly book a room tonight.”

“Thank you, that’s good to know. So, about the door...”

“Wait,” Teeter said, “You don't believe me either, Mister?”

Mr. Welbury rubbed his forehead. “Look, how about this? I’ll give Precious Copperlocks a change of rooms for now, and you two can settle the door issue tomorrow over breakfast. Teeter,” he shook his head, “go to bed now. Me and you’ll have a chat about this ghost thing later, okay?”

“But...” Teeter clenched her teeth. “Okay, fine. Tomorrow! You will--you both will--believe me.” With a muffled humph, the girl drove her key into her proper door and shut it taut. Once silence settled the hallway again, Mr. Welbury turned back to Alvara.

“I apologize for her behavior. She’s the daughter of an ol’ friend of mine, and I’m afraid she’s quite callow.” He paused. “Your name’s not Copperlocks, is it?”

She watched his face as she answered, “It's Alvara.”

Mr. Welbury appeared amused, though Alvara wasn’t sure why. He chuckled and said, “Then here's your key, Precious Alvara,” he said, pointing to her room, “and make sure to be there tomorrow morning.”

“If it’s about the door, I can pay for it right now.”

“Ah, but it really isn't about the door, is it?” He gave her a long look.

*What?* She froze, and her teeth sank into her lip. “I’m sorry, but I need to go to bed.” She grabbed the rucksack and strided past him.

“You think about what ya wanna say tomorrow. Six o’clock, be there!”

She shut the door.

When the quiet showed that Mr. Welbury had left, Alvara slid down to a crouch, pressing both hands to her temples. *He can’t know anything just because he sounds like it. Just like how that girl--Teeter--couldn’t have seen a ghost just because she thinks it. They’re mad.* She pulled herself up. *This cheery village is full of mad people!*

By the time Alvara reached the bed, she had decided that she’d attend the breakfast meeting. She’d clarify everything, fix the door, and leave them no need to remember her. Such happenings were the ones she had to watch out for; they were the little things that destroyed the final goal. The reason for all her wandering, the reason for all her secrecy...

Shaking the thought from her head, Alvara snaked a hand into the pocket of her bag and drew out a small, golden pendant. A colorful butterfly charm was twisted in its own tangles, facets reflecting burnished sunset under the candlelight--her dead mother’s. *Dead because she was stupid enough to leave the forest right after the Incident.*

It was exactly what it was called: an occurrence, a happenstance, and what the destroyed government once labeled “an accident”. Nobody believed that now, even if they wanted to.

But it wasn’t politics people were interested in. It was what caused the Incident in the first place--a set of five powerful weapons, created by a secret team of elemental masters. They were rumored to be able to level mountains and split seas. Instead, all they did was backfire, kill their makers, then disappear without a trace.

Someone had stolen them. At least, that was what everyone said. The public had factionalized about the fate of  the “Great Weapons” by that time, and their disappearance tore the deteriorating government apart. Civil wars raged. Cities were destroyed. Nobles fled their mansions and most turned up dead months later. Nobody ever did find the Weapons to quell the chaos.

Those were the words her father had spoken. It had felt like some distant dream back then, an absurd dystopian novel fetched for a low price at a nearby market. Then her mother died, and reality set in.

Alvara flipped over on the bed, heart stiff. Everyone died one day; it just happened to be her mother’s time. Such grief was a weakness.

She sighed. How long had it been since the Incident?A year? Maybe more? She never bothered to remember the date, and she didn’t care. What she did remember was the note, so perfectly arranged with the beautiful bow she now carried. *“Find the Orb,”* it had said. The Orb of Tides--the Great Weapon that ruled the oceans. She hadn’t seen a trace of her father since then.

*Don’t think about it. You’ve already wasted too much time doing that.* Alvara squeezed her eyes shut. *Just sleep.* And it worked.

She dozed off in the glow of the candlelight, copper hair splayed across her face.

Then the light blew out.