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Introduction

In the divided kingdom of Caldera, where the echoes of ancient quarrels still smolder in every hall, magic is not just a birthright—it is a currency, a weapon, and the very foundation upon which power is built. Here, elemental guilds have ruled for generations: the Arcanists of Air, the Stoneborn of Earth, the Tidecallers of Water, and the Emberforged—the guild of fire, now thought to have vanished into legend. Peace is an uneasy truce, brokered anew each season, for beneath the surface old wounds fester and the thirst for dominance remains unquenched.

Every town, no matter how remote, is shaped by the guilds' influence. On the kingdom's periphery lies a humble village where the fires burn late into the night and steel is wrought with sweat and determination. This is the only world Lira has ever known. As a blacksmith's apprentice, she dreams of one day being recognized by the guild of her small village, earning a mark—or at least a measure—of belonging. Magic, though, is for others. For Lira, it is an unattainable calling, something woven through the bloodlines and closely guarded by those who already have everything.

But even the most deeply rooted guild traditions cannot contain the shifting tides of fate. Across Caldera, tensions sharpen with every passing day. Old enmities abound, and rumors ripple through city and village alike: of shadows moving in the wilds, of lost powers resurfacing, and of secret alliances forming behind closed doors. There are whispers of an ancient artifact, missing for centuries, whose return could tip the scales of power forever. The kingdom stands on the cusp of change—some welcome, most feared.

Unbeknownst to Lira, her quiet life is about to be irreparably transformed. When violence erupts, no one—least of all a blacksmith's apprentice—is prepared for the devastation that follows. In the flames, something dormant awakens within her: a spark of an impossible magic, once thought extinguished, now raging anew. Pursued for a power she does not understand, Lira must flee what home she has left, clutching both her grief and a destiny thrust unfairly into her hands.

As the world around her spirals toward chaos and war, Lira will be confronted by questions with no easy answers: What is the real cost of wielding power? Can allegiance be forged in fire, or only broken? Between the legacy of her ancestors and the uncertainty of her own heart, she must find the courage to choose which embers to nurture—and which to let die.

This is the story of a realm on the brink, a girl marked by fire, and the fragile bonds that can either bring ruin or forge something wholly new. Welcome to Caldera.

Welcome to the forging of destiny.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ashes of Home

The rhythm of the hammer on steel was Lira's world. Clang, hiss, clang. It was a language she understood better than most words, a symphony of purpose that echoed through the small, soot-stained forge of Oakhaven. At sixteen, her arms were already strong, her calloused hands adept at turning raw ore into something useful, something beautiful. Dust motes danced in the shafts of light that pierced the gloom, illuminating the perpetually greasy sheen on her leather apron and the faint smudges of charcoal on her cheek.

"Again, Lira!" Theron, her master and the closest thing she had to a father, boomed over the din. His voice was a gravelly rumble, worn smooth by years of shouting over furnaces. He stood by the anvil, a behemoth of a man whose brawn rivalled the thickest oak. Sweat beaded on his brow, though the forge fire was a comfortable warmth to them both, a living presence that breathed with their efforts.

Lira gripped the tongs, pulling a glowing red bar of iron from the heart of the coals. The heat radiated outwards, a familiar friend. She laid it precisely on the anvil, and with a grunt, brought the heavy hammer down. *Clang!* Sparks flew, miniature constellations erupting against the darkness. The metal shrieked in protest, but yielded, slowly reshaping under her practiced blows. Theron grunted his approval, which was high praise indeed.

Oakhaven wasn't a grand city by any stretch. It was a modest collection of homes nestled in a valley, famous for its rich iron deposits and the skilled smiths who worked them. Their guild, though small, was respected across Caldera for the quality of their blades and tools. Not the flashy, enchanted weaponry of the grand guilds, but sturdy, reliable steel that wouldn't fail you when your life depended on it. Lira longed for the day she'd be formally recognized by them, perhaps even earn a minor mark, a simple etching on her hammer to signify her mastery. It was a quiet dream, but a potent one.

Her own aspirations, however, were tempered by the reality of Caldera. The four great elemental guilds held sway over everything. The Arcanists, with their capricious winds and soaring structures, viewed the world from above. The Stoneborn, rooted deep in the earth, built impregnable fortresses and whispered secrets to the very mountains. The Tidecallers commanded the rivers and oceans, their influence stretching as far as the currents flowed. And the Emberforged... well, they were a legend, a cautionary tale of power too volatile to control, whispered about in hushed tones, almost certainly extinct.

Lira had heard the stories since childhood, tales of fire mages who could melt stone

and summon infernos, a force so destructive that the other guilds had supposedly united to extinguish them entirely. Sometimes, when the forge fire roared particularly fiercely, a shiver would trace its way down her spine. The raw power of flame, even contained, was a primal thing, an unpredictable beast.

Today, though, the only beast Lira was concerned with was the stubborn piece of steel refusing to take the curve she desired. Theron watched her, arms crossed, his gaze like an appraisal of the iron itself. "Think you'll be making legendary swords with that kind of hesitant strike, girl?" he teased, though his tone was fond.

"It's resisting!" Lira retorted, wiping a streak of sweat from her forehead with the back of her wrist. "Like an old mule."

Theron chuckled, a sound like grinding stones. "Then you hit it harder, until it remembers who's master. Steel, like people, needs a firm hand."

She nodded, took a deep breath, and brought the hammer down with renewed force. *Clang!* This time, the metal began to yield. She felt a surge of satisfaction, the quiet triumph of imposing her will on unyielding matter. This was her magic, in a way – the transformation of raw elements through skill and sweat. It wasn't the flashy displays of a Guild mage, but it was real.

Outside the forge, the village was quiet, the usual murmur of life a comforting background hum. Children would soon be released from their lessons, their shrill voices replacing the lowing of cattle and the clatter of carts. Farmers would be returning from the fields, their faces etched with the sun. It was an ordinary day in Oakhaven, a predictable sequence of events that brought a sense of stability in a kingdom perpetually on edge.

Lira knew about the growing tensions, of course. News travelled, even to their quiet valley. Whispers of skirmishes along the borders, of increased patrols from the Arcanists, of Stoneborn mages demanding higher tributes. The truce, it seemed, was fraying at the edges. Theron often grumbled about it over their meagre dinners, shaking his head at the greed of the high Guilds. "They forget the common folk who suffer their games," he'd say, stirring his stew.

She finished shaping the bar, returning it to the coals for another heat. The air in the forge grew thick with the smell of iron and coal smoke, a scent Lira found oddly comforting. She thought of her future: perhaps one day she'd take over Theron's forge, hammer out blades and horseshoes for the rest of her days. It wasn't the grandest ambition, but it was hers. She imagined the respect in people's eyes when they spoke of 'Lira's blades,' a quiet pride settling in her chest.

A sudden, sharp cry from outside shattered the tranquility. It was high-pitched, a

sound of alarm. Lira froze, hammer poised in mid-air. Theron's head snapped up, his eyes narrowing. The rhythmic clang of other hammers in the distance faltered, then ceased entirely.

Then came another sound, one that sent a chill through Lira's bones – a guttural roar, followed by the unmistakable crackle and hiss of uncontrolled fire. Not the contained, purposeful flame of their forge, but something wild, ravenous.

"What in the blazes...?" Theron muttered, dropping his own hammer. He strode to the wide, open doorway of the forge, peering out.

Lira followed, her heart suddenly pounding against her ribs like a trapped bird. What she saw made her blood run cold. Smoke, thick and black, billowed from the direction of the village square, not the gentle drift from a cooking fire, but an angry, choking plume. And beneath it, a terrifying orange glow that intensified even as she watched.

People were screaming now, a terrified chorus that tore through the quiet afternoon. A frantic wave of villagers, faces contorted with fear, streamed past the forge, their cries echoing. "Fire! Run!" "They're attacking!"

"Who?!" Lira choked out, clutching Theron's arm.

He didn't answer. His face was grim, a silent promise of danger. "Stay low, Lira! Get to the back. Hide!" he commanded, his voice tight with urgency. He grabbed a heavy iron poker, its tip still glowing faintly from the forge.

But Lira couldn't move. Her gaze was fixed on the approaching devastation. Figures, shadowy against the inferno, moved with unnatural speed, their forms shimmering with a faint, unnatural aura. They weren't villagers. They were too disciplined, too... deliberate. And the fire, it seemed to follow them, a living entity consuming everything in its path.

One figure detached from the main group, striding directly towards the forge. It was cloaked, the hood pulled low, but Lira could feel the raw power radiating off them, an oppressive weight that stole the air from her lungs. A flicker of orange light pulsed from beneath the cloak, illuminating a gaunt, cruel face for a split second.

"Theron, no!" Lira cried, pulling at his arm. He was a smith, strong as an ox, but he was no mage. He couldn't fight this.

But Theron didn't heed her. He stood his ground, poker held aloft, a lone sentinel against an encroaching nightmare. "You will not harm my village!" he roared, a futile challenge against the overwhelming force.

The cloaked figure raised a hand. Flames erupted from their palm, a torrent of pure, unbridled fire that swallowed Theron whole. He didn't even have time to scream. The heat washed over Lira, searing her skin, even from the doorway. She stumbled back, a choked gasp escaping her lips, her eyes wide with horror as her world ignited. The air crackled with malevolent energy, the smell of burning wood and flesh assaulting her senses.

Terror, cold and absolute, seized her. The forge, her sanctuary, was no longer safe. The roaring flames consumed the wooden beams, turning the familiar workspace into a raging inferno. Lira scrambled, driven by an instinct she didn't know she possessed. Theron's words echoed in her ears: *"Get to the back. Hide!"*

She dove towards a narrow opening at the rear of the forge, a small access tunnel used for storing extra coal and scrap metal. Her lungs burned with smoke, her eyes stung with tears, but she pushed through the pain, crawling on hands and knees as debris rained down around her. The roar of the fire was deafening, the screams of the villagers slowly fading into the crackle and hiss of the conflagration.

The tunnel was dark, cramped, and filled with the acrid smell of burnt earth. She pushed through a pile of discarded tools, sharp edges scraping against her skin, not even noticing. All she could think of was escape, survival. She pushed and pushed, until suddenly, the tunnel opened out into a small, overgrown gully behind the smithy.

Scrambling out, Lira looked back. Oakhaven was a pyre. Flames leaped towards the heavens, painting the evening sky a sickening orange-red. The familiar shape of homes, the market square, the old oak tree – all gone, consumed by the voracious fire. Theron... The thought was a raw, aching wound in her chest. He was gone. Everything was gone.

Tears streamed down her soot-stained cheeks, carving clean paths through the grime. But even as despair threatened to overwhelm her, a survival instinct, cold and sharp, took hold. She couldn't stay. She couldn't do anything here but die.

She turned and ran, blindly, stumbling through the undergrowth, away from the roaring inferno that had once been her home. The sounds of destruction faded behind her, replaced by the frantic beating of her own heart and the ragged sound of her breathing. She didn't know where she was going, only that she had to keep moving. Away from the ashes. Away from the death.

As she ran, her foot caught on something in the dark. She pitched forward, tumbling down a short incline, landing with a jarring thud at the bottom. Her head struck something hard, and for a moment, the world spun, stars exploding behind her eyes. Dazed, she pushed herself up, her hand reaching out to steady herself, and brushed

against something cold and smooth.

It was a small, ornate chest, half-buried in the damp earth, its surface intricately carved with symbols she didn't recognize. It pulsed with a faint, almost imperceptible warmth, a strange counterpoint to the chill of the night air. Curiosity, a desperate distraction from the agony in her heart, compelled her. With trembling hands, Lira dug around it, unearthing the forgotten relic. It was surprisingly heavy.

As her fingers traced the ancient carvings, a sudden, blinding flash of light erupted from within the chest. It wasn't a gentle glow, but a fierce, white-hot burst that forced Lira to recoil, crying out. A searing heat surged through her arm, then her entire body, a sensation both excruciating and exhilarating, like being plunged into the heart of a forge fire. She gasped, doubling over, as a profound, ancient power, dormant for centuries, roared to life within her. The air around her shimmered, vibrating with an unseen energy.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the searing intensity receded, leaving behind a profound thrumming sensation deep within her bones. The light faded, and the chest lay open, empty, its purpose seemingly fulfilled. Lira stared at her hands, trembling, feeling... different. Her skin tingled, and a faint warmth lingered in her palms. It was as if something had been irrevocably altered, forged anew within her.

She looked back at the sky, still painted with the angry orange of Oakhaven's destruction. The chest, whatever it was, had given her something. A strange, terrifying gift in the midst of utter devastation. As the distant wails of despair faded into the night, Lira knew one thing with chilling certainty: her life, and perhaps the fate of Caldera itself, had just been irrevocably changed. And she had no idea what to do next.

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