



# Frostforge: Passage One

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy

**Description:** When 18-year-old Thalia Greenspire is sent to the legendary Frostforge Academy to harness arcane powers and tame wild creatures, she never imagined facing a chilling betrayal. In a place where friendships are as mercurial as the shifting snows, and passions burn hotter than fire magic, Thalia must unravel who her real friends and enemies are.

As she fights to survive her perilous first year trials amidst blossoming romances and bitter rivalries, Thalia wonders: will her flame be extinguished? Or will she emerge as unbreakable as ice?

In this magical romantasy series, enter a fantasy world that's unlike anything you've encountered, where thrilling adventure teems with danger and potential. As Fate steers Thalia through enchantment and passion, her quest is marked by surprising turns and enthralling thrills. This tale is sure to ensnare the imagination of both newcomers and seasoned aficionados of fantasy, ensnaring your heart as you find yourself unable to put the book down.

**Total Pages (Source):** 70

## CHAPTER ONE

Thalia Greenspire's eyelids fluttered open to the predawn hush of Verdant Port. The scent of salt and the sweet tang of herbs from her family's adjacent shop wafted through the single room she shared with her mother and younger sister. Sunlight was still at least an hour away, but the soft purple hue of the sky, visible through the gaps between seams in the thin walls, indicated that it would arrive without mercy.

For a moment, Thalia lay still beneath her rough blanket, trying to summon the courage to face the day. It was the day of the Selection – a day she'd been dreading since she was a child and she had first heard tales of Frostforge.

Steeling herself, she rose from her cot with the quiet grace of one accustomed to moving in semidarkness, her feet finding the wooden floor without a sound. The gentle creak of the wooden shutters protested as she nudged them open, breathing in the brine-soaked air that whispered through the gaps in their small, weather-worn home. Though the ocean remained an unseen force beyond the ramshackle buildings, its scent permeated every inch of the coastal town, from the wealthy upper district to the poverty-stricken slums where Thalia had lived her entire life.

Padding across the room, Thalia paused by the tangle of threadbare blankets where her mother and sister lay asleep. For a moment, she traced the lines of worry softened by slumber on her mother's brow, the innocent clutch of Mari's hand around a worn doll's frayed dress. Inhaling deeply, she stored the image in the vault of her heart, then tried to imagine a shell of iron forming around it. She couldn't let herself falter now. The coming day promised anguish beyond anything she'd ever known.

Thalia turned away from her mother and sister toward the door that led into the family's herb shop. Her fingers brushed against the hanging herbs as she stepped behind the counter. The air was thick with the scent of dried lavender and chamomile, mingling with the sharper notes of rosemary and thyme. It was a sanctuary of sorts, this modest nook tethered to their living quarters, a place where she'd ground roots and crushed petals into tinctures that healed minor ailments for sailors and merchants passing through.

She arranged the jars meticulously, as she would have on any other morning. There were over two dozen different varieties of herbs, each label penned in her mother's ornate script. Where their levels ran low, Thalia refilled the supply with the freshly dried leaves and stems that hung from the walls. This restocking was a routine task, but as she completed it, Thalia felt the tension coil tighter within her.

Outside, the day was growing lighter. Dawn was approaching, and with it, the Selection. It loomed at the edges of Thalia's mind like a gathering storm.

Her hands, deft and nimble, danced over the array of herbs laid out before her. Each leaf and stem quivered under her touch as if responding to an unseen energy – a whisper of magic that Thalia alone could hear. She plucked a sprig of rosemary and shredded it into fine pieces with practiced ease. The bits fell into a stone mortar, where she ground them with a pestle, the circular motion releasing small bursts of essence. It had taken years of working with the plants to build her attunement to their faint, delicate magic.

For a few minutes, she managed to lose herself in her task. The rhythmic motion of grinding the herbs, the familiar scent rising from the mortar, and the soft, comforting crackle of the air around her — these were the small rituals that had anchored her to this place.

Perhaps, if she became fully immersed in the work, the recruiters would pass the shop

by without ever calling her name.Perhaps she would slip their records.Perhaps Verdant Port would refuse to relinquish her, and she could stay here, in the quiet comfort of the life she had known, tending to herbs and curing ailments as her mother had before her.

The door to the family's living space creaked open.Thalia turned to see her mother framed in the threshold, the lines on her face deepened by shadows and worry.

Thalia's mother had looked this way — haggard, afraid — since before her husband's death.Life in Verdant Port's poorest district was not easy, particularly with children.But after the ocean took Thalia's father, Celeste Greenspire had been forced to shoulder the weight of the world on her shoulders, a weight that seemed to exact its toll daily.Her dark eyes were sunken, her hair unwashed and shot through with gray.

"Thalia."Her voice was rough with sleep."Any sign of the recruiters yet?"

Thalia paused, the pestle still in her hand.She shook her head mutely, then resumed her grinding, the rhythm a feeble attempt to dispel the growing knot of dread.

"Good," Celeste breathed."When they come, remember not to speak.Stay in the shop and focus on your work.I will talk to them."

"Mother," Thalia said, but Celeste jerked her chin sharply.

"We've discussed this, Thalia.I will do whatever it takes to keep you out of Frostforge.Do you understand me?"

Thalia nodded, but her throat felt tight.She knew as well as her mother did that her fate was uncertain.Once a child came of age, the only way to avoid Selection was to pay a bribe to the recruiters.Thalia's mother had been saving for this moment since before Mari had been born, and still, Thalia worried that the weight of the family's

coin wouldn't be enough to appease the Frostforge representatives. The recruiters were notoriously fickle, and the cost of a bribe varied more than the storm-tossed winds of the archipelago.

Thalia resumed her task, but her fingers continued to tremble with each crush of leaves, an echo of the fear pulsing through her veins. The magic within the plants responded to her touch, intertwining with her own quiet power.

Eventually, the city outside began to come to life. Thalia unlatched the shutters, allowing the first timid rays of dawn to brush against the time-worn counters and shelves of the herb shop. She could feel the world outside stirring, the port town waking with a groan of wood and whisper of canvas. She flipped the sign to 'Open,' her heart thudding like a drum against her ribs. For a moment, she paused to slip her hand in her pocket, to slide a thumb over the metal seams of her father's compass. The brass instrument was the only keepsake she had left of him, and she had carried it with her since the day he'd been lost at sea.

The door creaked on its ancient hinges as the day's first customers shuffled in. Thalia greeted them with a smile that barely touched her eyes, each exchange punctuated by an undercurrent of fear. A murmur caught her ear, snatches of conversation weaving through the air like tendrils of incense smoke.

"Been saving for years, he has," one woman whispered to another, her voice heavy with worry. "To keep his boys safe from those recruiters."

"God help us all," her friend replied, clutching a bunch of dried lavender to her chest as if it were a talisman against the darkness of the day.

Thalia turned away, feigning interest in organizing a row of jars. Her fingers traced over the glass, leaving trails in the fine layer of dust. Most of the residents of Verdant Port spoke of Frostforge this way — as though it were a death sentence. Technically,

it wasn't; the academy had its survivors. But its victims were far more numerous, particularly among the poor whose children were sent to Frostforge not for glory or honor, but by force.

In the rare quiet that followed the morning rush, Thalia slipped into the back room where they kept the surplus stock and found Mari, her sister's small frame almost lost amid sacks of dried herbs and bundled roots. Mari's eyes, wide and brimming with unshed tears, met Thalia's, a question hanging in the silence between them.

"Will Mama be able to —" Mari's voice wavered, the unsaid words curling into a knot in Thalia's stomach.

"Of course," Thalia said, her voice more assured than she felt. "She'll handle everything. Don't worry." The lie tasted bitter on her tongue, but she offered it like a spoonful of honeyed medicine, hoping it would soothe her sister's fears.

Mari nodded, but her hands wrung the hem of her tunic, betraying her doubt. Thalia reached out, brushing a strand of hair from Mari's forehead, her touch lingering. She wished for the power to shield her sister from the truth that clawed at her own heart — that their mother's purse was too light, that hope was a fragile thing, easily shattered.

"Come on," Thalia coaxed. "Come help me with the shop. We're already quite busy today. Mama can add this coin to the bribe."

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Slowly, Mari uncurled her fingers from the fabric of her tunic and gave a hesitant nod. She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand before stepping forward, letting Thalia guide her back into the main room of the shop.

The scent of crushed rosemary and lavender still lingered in the air, mingling with the salt and smoke from the harbor outside. Mari took her place at the counter, hands still trembling slightly as she measured out dried chamomile for an elderly woman with silver-streaked hair. Thalia stood beside her, heart thrumming a nervous rhythm as she counted the coins exchanged. It was never enough.

The soft clink of city guard armor stilled Thalia's hands as she wiped down the counter. The sound was unmistakable — iron plates shifting, boots grinding against the worn cobbles of the street. The quiet murmur of the marketplace outside faltered, a ripple of silence spreading as the figures approached.

Thalia's breath hitched. She'd thought there would be more time.

Mari's fingers curled tightly around the bundle of chamomile, knuckles whitening. The elderly woman before them cast a wary glance at the door, then hurriedly gathered her purchase and bolted for the exit. Thalia and Mari followed in her wake; as they emerged from the shop, so did others up and down the street. The Selection, particularly in the poorer districts, was nothing if not a spectacle — one that chilled the marrow and turned the stomach.

The Verdant Port city guards flanked a procession of recruiters, envoys from Frostforge clad in the academy's frost-silver armor. Thalia shivered, as though the recruiters' mere presence had brought a chill to the district. Perhaps it had. Thalia

knew little of Frostforge's curriculum. The academy's inner workings were a guarded secret, but she knew that the recruits were trained in cryomancy, the magic of manipulating ice and frost. In Verdant Port, winters were warm and summers scorching, the product of the ocean's southern currents. In all of Thalia's eighteen years, the temperature had never dropped low enough to allow for snow. This made Frostforge feel all the more distant and unreal. The idea of a place perpetually bound by cold was almost foreign to her, like a dream she couldn't quite grasp. She could barely imagine the feel of ice at her fingertips, let alone mastering it, bending it to her will. How could someone who had never known the bite of a harsh winter survive in a place where snow was more familiar than sun?

The recruiters stopped their march a few doors down from the Greenspires' shop. Silence descended upon the street.

The lead recruiter, a tall woman with pure white hair and a heavy cloak lined with thick fur, unfurled a scroll with deliberate precision. The parchment crackled like frost beneath her gloved fingers.

"The Southern Kingdoms are in a time of war," she announced, her voice carrying in the still air. "We face unprecedented threats from Isle Warden incursions. To defend our lands, to uphold the balance of magic and steel, Frostforge Academy calls upon the chosen. In accordance with our laws, the following candidates are hereby called to serve."

A murmur rippled through those gathered on the street — fear, anger, resignation. The city guards shifted their stances, adjusting the halberds at their sides as if to remind the crowd of their might.

The recruiter's voice rang out, sharp as the winter winds of the Northern Reaches. "Joren Tidewell."



A cry of protest rose from a woman clutching a young man's arm. He stood rigid, jaw clenched, his face pale. Both of them, Thalia noticed, had the gaunt faces and narrow frames of people who slept hungry.

"If you are called," the woman said, her tone severe, "you are to approach the convoy. If you fail to comply, you will be brought to Frostforge by force. Those who attempt to subvert the war effort will face punishment."

Joren Tidewell exchanged a long glance with his mother, then shuffled forward, shoulders squared despite the tremor in his hands.

"Levi Halloway."

A boy near the front whimpered, shrinking against his father's side. His father — face lined with exhaustion, hands calloused from years of labor — muttered something urgent in his son's ear before pressing a firm hand against his back, urging him forward.

Thalia's pulse pounded in her ears. The space between each name stretched unbearably long, but not long enough.

"Thalia Greenspire."

Mari's fingers dug into her sleeve, her breath a sharp inhale of shock. Their mother was already moving, shoving through the whispering crowd, her face tight with desperation.

"I can pay!" she cried, holding aloft the pouch of coins. "Please — spare my daughter. I can pay!"

Thalia stared at the leather skin that contained her mother's life savings, her thoughts

churning. Unless the recruiters were feeling generous, there wasn't enough money to buy a reprieve from Frostforge. Not enough now; but in a few years, there would be.

Thalia's eyes slid down to Mari, whose lips trembled, tears rolling down her face as she clung to her sister's arm. In six years' time, Mari's name would be on the list for Selection. Six years of scraping coin together would not be enough to guarantee her safety. Not unless their mother had time to build her wealth and a foundation to build it upon.

Not unless someone else bore the burden first.

Her mother's trembling hands offered up the pouch, the coins inside clinking softly. The recruiters stared at her coldly; before they could react, Thalia stepped forward, her fingers closing on her mother's raised wrist.

"Keep it," Thalia whispered, the words barely audible over the drumming of her heart. "For Mari's sake."

"Thalia, no," her mother implored, her eyes brimming with anguish as she thrust the meager offering forward again.

"You need to keep it," Thalia insisted. "If I'm at Frostforge, you'll be able to save more coin. I'll be one less mouth to feed —"

"You think I care about that?" Her mother's voice cracked, raw with distress.

"Listen to me." Thalia locked eyes with her mother. "Mari...she'll need this more when her time comes. You can't save us both, and I won't let you try."

"Thalia—"

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"Please.It's the only way.For Mari."

Her mother's shoulders sagged, her fight ebbing away as if carried off by the same sea breeze that had always breathed promises of distant lands and fortunes never meant for them.She stared at her daughter for a long moment, her lips pressed tightly together as if trying to hold back everything she wished she could say.

"I've failed you," Celeste finally said in a brittle tone, as though she were holding back a sob."It was my duty to protect you – both of you."

"I am of age," Thalia said softly."This is my decision."

Her mother's lips parted as if to argue, but the words never came.Celeste's eyes were wet, though she didn't let the tears fall.Instead, her hands shook as she folded them together, clutching the pouch of coins as if it were the last tether to the life they had built.

"You deserved more than this," she whispered.

Thalia shook her head."You gave me everything you had, and more.I'll never forget that – and nor should you."She took a shuddering breath, then added, "I'm going to come back to you.I promise."

She forced herself to ignore the despair in her mother's eyes, to turn away and face the recruiters.They watched her indifferently, waiting.

Thalia took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the salt-tinged air of her childhood,

the scent of herbs and earth that drifted through the shop's open door behind her. She extricated herself from Mari's grasp – her little sister clung to her with all the strength her small frame could muster, her face a mixture of confusion and fear.

“Don't go,” Mari cried. “Please –”

"I have to, Mari," Thalia whispered, her voice barely steady. She crouched down to her sister's level, her hands cupping Mari's face gently. "I'll come back. I promise. You're going to be okay. Mama and I will make sure of it. You just need to be strong for a little while."

Mari shook her head, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. "I don't want you to go. I don't want you to leave me."

"I'm sorry," Thalia whispered, brushing a strand of hair from Mari's face. "I love you so much. I'll come back. I swear it."

The weight of that vow settled deep within Thalia's chest, a promise she wasn't sure she could keep, but one she couldn't take back. She gently pulled away from her sister and strode toward the recruiters with her head held high. Thalia passed between two city guards, and they moved their halberds aside, letting her pass; she didn't look at them. Her pulse thrummed wildly, her breath coming in short, uneven bursts, but she forced herself to remain strong – or at least, to appear that way to the onlookers, the recruiters, and the other selected students.

Frostforge would demand everything from her. She couldn't afford to look weak, not even as she walked into the jaws of death, the shattered remains of her family in her wake. The fight for survival had begun, and it was a fight she intended to win.

## CHAPTER TWO

Thalia's fingers curled tightly around the cold brass of her father's compass, a small anchor in the storm of her racing thoughts. Her other hand gripped the pouch of medicinal herbs she had in her second pocket. She could smell traces of lavender and chamomile mingling with the briny air, offering some comfort against the gnawing anxiety in her stomach. The dock beneath her boots vibrated with the footsteps of those gathered to witness the recruiters' departure with their selected conscripts. Thalia scanned the throng of onlookers for her family, catching only fleeting glimpses of her mother's worn shawl and Mari's copper curls lost in the sea of bodies.

The ship that would carry them all to Frostforge cut through the harbor waters, its arrival heralded by the creaking of aged wood and the snap of sails. It was a behemoth, its hull scarred from countless battles with the sea. Ropes groaned under tension as the crew prepared for docking, their voices raised in an incomprehensible symphony of orders and calls. Thalia had spent her life amid the hustle of Verdant Port, yet the language of sailors remained foreign to her ears, spoken in a rhythm dictated by wind and wave rather than the cadence of market barter.

The vessel's shadow fell over her, the towering sails blotting out the morning sun. Salt stung her nostrils, mingled with the iron tang of rust bleeding from the ship's metalwork. Seagulls squawked overhead, circling like omens. With each shout from the deck above, Thalia felt the walls of her world expanding and contracting.

A wooden plank fell onto the dock with a resounding crash. The white-haired recruiter stepped onto it with an almost inhuman grace, ascending to the ship's deck. She turned to gesture to the recruits.

"Come," she said, her voice as sharp as the guards' halberds, lowered threateningly toward the small group of recruits. "Or be brought."

Fingers tight around the compass, Thalia ascended the gangplank, each step an

assertion of her resolve. Beneath her, the ship heaved a living breath, planks groaning like old bones. The briny air clung to her lungs, heavy and pungent.

"Watch your step," a recruiter grunted, his hand at her back not guiding so much as propelling her forward. Wood creaked beneath her boots, the ocean's pulse syncing with her own unsteady heartbeat. She stumbled once, twice, catching herself before she could be swallowed by the churning waters below.

On deck, the world tilted anew. Ropes lashed against masts, and sails flapped in impatient anticipation. Below Thalia's feet, the deck shifted and groaned as if the ship itself were alive. She steadied herself against the nearest rail, gripping it until her knuckles blanched. She had lived in the port city her entire life, but had never set foot on a ship. The view from here – the sloping hills of the city, dotted with terracotta roofs and lush greenery that curled around the harbor like a sleeping beast – was familiar and strange all at once. She knew every nook and cranny of Verdant Port, but had never before seen the city from this outside angle.

Her eyes fell to the gathered crowd below. She searched desperately, seeking out two figures; she needed to see them again, to draw as much strength from them as she could. There, amidst the throng, she spotted them: her mother, her body stiff with grief, still clutching the useless sack of coin, and Mari, a wisp of a girl with eyes too large for her thin face. They held each other, their bodies leaning into one another as they strained for one final glimpse.

Thalia's throat tightened; the compass pressed against her palm as a silent testament to the father who had ventured out to sea and never returned. She wasn't just leaving home; she was following in his wake.

Thalia felt the deck lurch beneath her boots as the crew heaved against thick ropes. With a groan of timber and the snap of canvas, the ship pushed away from the dock. She watched the sails billow like the chests of giants, catching the wind and

pulling the vessel out into the harbor.

Tearing her gaze away from the city, Thalia forced herself to take stock of her fellow recruits. She recognized many of them, even if she didn't know them by name. The Selection had taken its toll on the city's slums, and most of the recruits came from the poorer districts, their misfortune reflected in their worn clothes and downcast eyes. Some of them watched the churning waters of the harbor as if they were considering vaulting over the ship's railings and swimming to shore. Thalia could see the calculation in their eyes as they weighed their odds of survival against their chances at Frostforge. The white-haired recruiter stood upon the stern, her relentless stare fixed upon these recruits, as if daring any of them to act on their impulses.

Not all of the recruits were so miserable. A cluster of well-dressed youths from the upper district congregated near the bow, their laughter carrying over the wind and the shouts of the sailors. Their fine cloaks fluttered in the breeze. Some of them had swords at their hips, weapons worth at least a dozen bribes. These were the privileged who had been sent to Frostforge not out of necessity, but due to their families' expectations.

Many of them, Thalia knew, had trained in combat since childhood, their skills honed in private lessons. That would give them an advantage, no doubt — at least in the physical trials — but Thalia wasn't sure that would be enough to carry them through all of the challenges ahead. They were used to luxury,

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Turning her back to the wealthy recruits on the bow, she studied the others who were her true peers. Their eyes darted nervously; hands gripped railing and rope alike as the ship pitched. She wasn't the only one without sea legs.

"Steady there," she muttered to a nearby recruit who stumbled, his face green as the moss that clung to the docks. He nodded gratefully, gripping the rail tighter.

"Never been at sea before?" she asked, the words slicing through the din of orders and flapping sails.

"Can't say I have," he muttered faintly.

"Keep your eyes on the horizon," Thalia advised. Though she was equally unversed in seafaring, she'd heard this tip from her father years ago as the two of them had watched galleons roll into port. "It's supposed to help."

"Supposed to," the recruit echoed skeptically, but he turned his gaze outward all the same.

Verdant Port began to disappear as the ship cut a swift path along the coastline. The jutting peninsula that sheltered the town's harbor now obscured it from view, leaving only wild land to the ship's starboard side and open ocean to port. A knot formed in Thalia's stomach, twisting with every heave of the ship, as if her body mirrored the tumultuous churn of the sea.

Voices wafted towards her from clusters of recruits scattered across the deck. Their tones pitched with anxiety, words eddying around her.



"Isle Wardens don't give a damn about who's on board," one recruit muttered, his face gaunt, eyes shadowed with fear. "They'll sink us for sport if they find us."

"Don't say that; you'll curse us," another chided, though his attempt at bravado did little to disguise the quiver in his voice.

Thalia had heard tales of Isle Wardens, the marauding clans of the archipelago who worshiped ancient gods of the tempest. According to the stories that passed through Verdant Port, the Wardens wielded storms as weapons, conjuring lightning with the flick of a wrist and calling forth winds strong enough to shatter ships. Thalia had never seen them for herself, but plenty of her older neighbors recalled times when Isle Wardens had been bold enough to attack the harbor directly.

"Seems a bit daft to fret over a Warden ambush, doesn't it?" A voice cut over the sound of the waves, higher and clearer than the other murmurs. The words were casual, almost flippant, as if discussing the weather rather than the potential for violent death at sea.

Thalia turned to the speaker, a girl standing with an ease that seemed out of place among the tense recruits. The stranger's grin was as incongruous as her demeanor. She carried herself not with defiance, but with genuine apathy, as though the storm on the horizon didn't concern her in the slightest. Her posture was relaxed, her wrists resting carelessly on the railing.

"Not worth fearing the Wardens when we're more likely to meet our end at Frostforge," the girl continued calmly. She plucked a shard of half-rotten wood from the railing beneath her arms, then tossed it into the waves below. Thalia edged closer to her, the knot of anxiety in her stomach loosening slightly as curiosity took its place.

"Perhaps," Thalia said. "But it doesn't hurt to be prepared for all threats. Isle Wardens

have been known to strike this coast."

The girl shrugged, her movements languid and unhurried."If you say so.I'm Luna Meadows, by the way."

"Thalia Greenspire."

"Greenspire, huh?Sounds important."Luna's dark eyes twinkled with mischief, though her attention flitted across the deck like a bird unsure where to alight.

"Hardly.If I were important, I wouldn't be on this ship," Thalia muttered."What about you?Why are you headed to Frostforge?"

"Bad luck," she said cheerfully.

Thalia blinked, surprised."What do you mean?"

"My father is on Verdant Port's council.Or was, until recently.Unfortunately, the recruiters refused to take his bribe this year."Luna shrugged, as though unconcerned by this injustice."A shame.But then again, I get to take a trip to the Northern Reaches at no cost, so it isn't all bad."

Thalia found herself drawn to that odd serenity; it was as if Luna bore none of the invisible chains that weighed down most of the other recruits.While others wrestled with fear or anger over their fate, Luna seemed almost detached, as though the world could throw anything at her, and she would simply shrug it off.It was a strange kind of freedom, one Thalia couldn't quite understand but envied.

The coastline hugged the horizon, a steadfast companion guiding them northward.The ship would stay close to the shore in order to avoid Ice Wardens; most of Verdant Port's ships remained within sight of land, and those that didn't risked

disappearance. The town itself had disappeared into the marrow of the world, leaving behind nothing but the echo of farewell cries in Thalia's ears. She gripped the railing, wood rough beneath her palms, and steadied her breath against the swell of the waves beneath the hull and the unease in her chest. Around her, the sails billowed out like the wings of some great bird, casting shadows that flickered across the deck.

"Careful," Luna said, "you'll wear a groove into the wood if you hold on any tighter."

Thalia offered a wry smile, but didn't relax her grip. "I've never been at sea," she confessed. "I'm not quite used to this."

"Give it time." Luna leaned on the rail, surveying the sea. "You'll find your sea legs sooner than you think."

"Or I'll find myself overboard," Thalia quipped, though the jest did little to dispel the knot of apprehension in her stomach.

"Nonsense. The recruiters would never let you fall overboard. Just look at that woman – she's like a hawk, waiting to swoop down and catch us if we so much as trip." Luna jerked her head in the direction of the white-haired recruiter, chuckling lightly. "As if we'd be allowed to die before we reached Frostforge!"

Thalia stared at Luna, taken aback. She wished she could share that sort of buoyancy; despite their shared circumstances, it seemed that Luna was somehow free of the burden that weighed down Thalia's shoulders.

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“Aren’t you afraid? Worried, at all?” she asked, unable to stop herself.

"About what?" Luna turned toward her, eyebrows raised in mock surprise. "The Wardens? Frostforge?"

"Any of it. All of it."

“Of course.” Luna shrugged. “Fear is as much a part of life as breathing. It reminds us we're alive.”

"Alive and sailing toward death," Thalia replied, her voice more bitter than she'd intended.

"Doesn't that make the reminder all the more valuable?" Luna grinned, and for a moment, Thalia felt the infectious tug of that grin pulling at the corners of her own mouth.

"Maybe for you. I just hope we make it there in one piece."

"Whatever happens, happens," Luna said with a nonchalant flick of her wrist. "Worrying won't change the outcome, will it?"

No. Thalia paused, the weight of Luna's words settling over her. No, worrying wouldn't change anything. She knew that. But still, the fear coiled inside her, tight and unyielding, as the ship plowed northward.

## CHAPTER THREE

The ship sliced through the frigid waters of the fjord, a foreign world of ice and stone unfolding before Thalia's eyes. She gripped the frost-slick railing, her knuckles white with cold and apprehension. Each breath materialized in the air before her, small ghosts that dissipated into the endless white. This cold, vast, unforgiving place would be her home now. For as long as she survived.

The narrow fjord stretched before them like a river carved by giants, its steep walls rising hundreds of feet into the air. Ice clung to the dark rock in crystalline sheets, catching the pale northern light and fracturing it into glittering shards. Thalia pulled her thin cloak tighter around her shoulders, the fabric a poor barrier against the penetrating chill. In Verdant Port, even winter days carried the salt-scented warmth of the southern seas. Here, the air itself seemed hostile, each breath sharp in her lungs like swallowed needles.

"Half of them won't last the year," a voice muttered behind her.

"Aye. It'll be a smaller group on the return trip, that's for certain."

Thalia didn't turn. She'd heard worse during the voyage — whispers from the crew, the casual cruelty of those who knew they wouldn't be the ones facing Frostforge's trials. Instead, she fixed her gaze on the looming mountains beyond the fjord. Somewhere in those peaks, the academy waited. The place that would either forge her into something powerful or break her completely.

The ship's wooden hull groaned against the ice-rimmed dock as sailors secured mooring lines with practiced efficiency. The deck lurched, and Thalia steadied herself against a nearby mast. Ahead, a contingent waited — figures draped in furs so thick they appeared more beast than human. As the gangplank lowered with a dull thud against the wooden dock, she distinguished instructors from guards by their stance alone. The instructors stood with fluid readiness, hands resting on weapons or crossed over their chests, while the guards maintained rigid positions, polearms held at

perfect attention.

Behind them, a smaller group of students observed with predatory intensity — a handful of veterans, fourth-years whose survival marked them as the elite few. Thalia counted just eight of them; she shivered, wondering how many of their classmates had perished.

"Move, recruit!" The order snapped across the deck as a sailor shoved past her, breaking her reverie. "They don't like to be kept waiting."

Thalia shouldered her small pack and joined the shuffling line of recruits disembarking. The moment her boots touched the dock, cold surged through the worn leather soles. The damp wood beneath her feet was rimed with frost that crunched with each step. She bit back a gasp, forcing her face to remain impassive even as the chill burrowed into her bones.

Ahead, a second cluster of recruits stood in orderly formation. These were Northerners; she could tell instantly from their stance, clothing, and their bearing. Where the Southern recruits huddled against the cold, wrapped in layers of inadequate clothes, the Northerners stood tall in fitted garments trimmed with fur, their cheeks flushed with health rather than wind-burn. Their hair was adorned with braids and metal clasps that caught the light, marking clan allegiances that Thalia didn't understand.

At the head of the dock, a broad-shouldered woman with steel-gray braids surveyed them all with undisguised contempt. Her face, weathered by decades of northern storms, bore a latticework of fine scars, battle trophies rather than disfigurements. When she spoke, her voice carried across the dock without effort.

"I am Instructor Linnea. You will address me as such or not at all." Her gaze swept over them like a physical force. "The journey to the academy begins now. Let this

ascent serve as an indicator of what is to come. Those who cannot endure today will have little chance of enduring Frostforge."

She gestured to the caravan waiting beyond the dock, a line of wooden sleds hitched to compact, shaggy-coated ponies whose breath fogged in great plumes. Between the sleds stood more instructors, their fur-lined armor making them appear twice their actual size.

"Recruits' belongings go in the first six sleds," Master Linnea continued. "Supplies in the latter three. We depart in ten minutes."

A flurry of activity followed her pronouncement. Southern recruits scrambled to surrender packs and secure places for their meager belongings, and sailors heaved bags of grain onto the three sleds at the end of the line. Thalia had even less than most of the recruits, too little to place on a sled. She watched the others wearily. Her legs already ached from the days at sea, her body unused to the cold that seemed to drain her strength with each passing moment.

As the chaos of organization swirled around her, Thalia noticed a girl standing apart from the other Southern recruits, her posture regal despite the biting cold. Dark hair cascaded over the shoulders of a fur-lined cloak that had clearly been tailored specifically for her journey north. Thalia recognized her instantly — Brynn Firstborn, a daughter of one of Verdant Port's foremost noble families. Thalia had seen her once, watching from the shadows as Brynn's family made their way through the market square, servants clearing a path before them.

Now, Brynn directed two instructors as they secured her elaborate luggage to one of the supply sleds. Her face was twisted in displeasure.

"This is absurd," she was saying, her voice carrying clearly in the crisp air. "Do you have any idea who my family is? I was promised appropriate accommodations."

The instructor, a weathered man with a face like carved granite, stared at her impassively. "Your name means nothing here, girl. You're a recruit, same as the rest."

"Hardly the same," Brynn scoffed, eyeing the line of other Southern recruits preparing for the march. Her gaze caught on Thalia, lingering on her threadbare cloak and worn boots. "Frostforge is wasting space on half-starved runts while the best families in the South are eager to send their children."



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Heat flushed Thalia's cheeks despite the cold. She knew the type — Southern nobility who viewed those from her district as little more than animate tools, useful when needed, invisible otherwise. Doubtless, Brynn would try to align herself with Northern students at the academy, seeking high standing. Anger rose in her throat, a retort forming on her tongue.

Then she paused. Brynn's opinion of her was meaningless. What mattered was surviving Frostforge and ensuring Mari would never face Selection. Thalia swallowed her pride, turning away from Brynn's contemptuous gaze.

The sleds were loaded, the recruits organized into rough columns. Master Linnea took her position at the front of the caravan, mounting a surefooted northern horse with practiced ease.

"Frostforge awaits," she called, her voice echoing off the ice-clad walls of the fjord. "Those who falter will be left behind. The North does not suffer weakness."

The caravan lurched into motion, ponies snorting as they took the weight of the sleds. Thalia fell into step with the other walking recruits, feeling the first upward incline of the path that would lead them into the mountains. Above them, the sky stretched endlessly blue — a cold, clear beauty that offered no warmth, no comfort. Only the promise of the journey ahead.

Thalia dug her heels into the frost-hardened ground and began to climb.

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The path twisted upward like a serpent, each curve revealing steeper terrain and thinner air. Thalia's lungs burned, her breath coming in ragged gasps that crystallized before her face. Two hours into the climb, and already her legs trembled with each step. The other Southern recruits around her fared no better — faces pale beneath wind-burn, lips blue with cold, bodies hunched against the mountain's hostility.

The Northern recruits moved with practiced ease, their bodies accustomed to the altitude and biting wind. They spoke among themselves in low voices, occasionally glancing back at the struggling Southerners with expressions ranging from amusement to disdain. Thalia forced herself to straighten, unwilling to provide further entertainment.

The mountain path narrowed, forcing the recruits into single file. Sharp rocks jutted through patches of ice, threatening to twist an ankle with every step. Thalia focused on the boots of the recruit ahead of her, using their rhythm to maintain her own pace. One foot, then the other. Do not stop. Do not falter.

But her body betrayed her. The thin air tore at her lungs. Black spots danced at the edges of her vision. Her next step landed wrong — her ankle rolled, sending a spike of pain up her leg. She stumbled, one knee striking the frozen ground as her balance failed.

Not even halfway up the mountain, and already her strength waned. Behind her, other recruits continued their march, faces averted. No one stopped. No one helped her.

"Giving up already? We've barely started the fun part."

A hand appeared in her field of vision — strong, with callused fingers and a small burn scar across the knuckles. Thalia followed the arm up to a face framed by wild black curls partially constrained in a loose tie. The young man offered an easy grin that crinkled the corners of his dark eyes, his hand still extended.

"I'm Roran," he said. "Roran Bright. You look like you could use a friend about now."

Thalia hesitated, pride warring with practicality. Finally, she grasped his hand, allowing him to pull her to her feet. "Thalia Greenspire," she managed between breaths. "And I wasn't giving up."

"Course not." His smile widened. "Just taking a moment to admire the scenery, right?"

Despite herself, Thalia felt the corner of her mouth quirk upward. "Something like that."

Roran fell into step beside her as the path widened slightly. "Not quite like home, is it?" he asked, gesturing to the frozen landscape around them.

"Not exactly," Thalia admitted, her breathing still labored. "Verdant Port isn't known for its mountains or...its ice."

"You're from Verdant Port?" When Thalia nodded, Roran continued, "Thought so. I'm from the Southern Kingdoms too — Amber Coast." He glanced up at the steel-gray sky above them. "Have to say, I'm missing those tropical breezes right about now."

The path grew steeper, cutting back and forth across the mountainside. Thalia's thighs burned with each upward step. The thin air made her dizzy. Around her, other recruits began to falter — one boy collapsed, wheezing, only to be hauled to his feet by an instructor and shoved toward one of the sleds.

"Control your breathing."

The voice came from behind Thalia. She turned to see one of the Northern recruits, a tall young woman with striking features. Her black hair was streaked with red — not the dull copper of a natural redhead, but vivid crimson, deliberate and stark against

the darkness. Part of it was intricately braided along her scalp, the rest flowing free past her shoulders.

"Three shallow breaths, then one deep one," the woman continued, her green eyes assessing Thalia with cool efficiency. "Move with the mountain, not against it. Let your feet find purchase before you shift your weight."

Thalia bristled at being instructed like a child, but the Northern woman had already demonstrated her superior adaptation to the terrain. Pride was a luxury Thalia couldn't afford. She adjusted her breathing as suggested, focusing on her footing.

"Thanks," she managed between breaths. "I'm Thalia."

"Ashe Redwood." The woman nodded curtly. "The altitude sickness passes after a few days. The cold never does." With that, she moved ahead, her stride long and confident.

Roran whistled low. "She's a Northern clan warrior," he murmured. "See the red in her hair? That's the mark of a coming-of-age ritual."

"You know a lot about Northern clans," Thalia observed, still implementing Ashe's breathing technique.

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Roran shrugged. "I've picked up a few things. Best to know who you're dealing with." His easy smile returned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Look ahead — that doesn't look promising, does it?"

The path before them had changed. Instead of the rough-hewn trail they'd followed thus far, they faced a narrow pass carved directly into the mountain face. It was steep, glazed with ice. Wind howled between the cliffs, carrying snow that stung exposed skin like tiny needles.

Master Linnea's voice carried from the front of the line. "Single file. One recruit at a time. A fall here means death — or worse, a burden on the rest of us."

Thalia watched the first recruits attempt the ascent. The Northern students moved with cautious confidence. The Southerners were more hesitant, some crawling on hands and knees when the wind gusted particularly strong.

Her turn came too quickly. Thalia took the first ice-slick step, heart pounding. Three feet ahead of her, the next recruit — Joren Tidewell, another from Verdant Port — suddenly lost his footing. His arms windmilled as he teetered on the edge, a cry escaping his lips. For a horrible moment, he hung suspended between balance and oblivion.

Then, somehow, he caught himself, sprawling forward onto the steps with a painful-sounding thud. Shaking, he continued his climb.

Not a single instructor had moved to help him. They had watched, expressions impassive but analytical. Recording weaknesses. Identifying those unlikely to survive.

Thalia swallowed hard and shuffled forward.

To her surprise, Roran moved to walk beside her, letting her stay closer to the cliff face and further from the sheer drop beside them. He still moved with that easy grace she'd noticed earlier. His footing on the ice was sure, almost as confident as the Northern recruits.

Above them, the mountain loomed, impassive and eternal. Somewhere ahead waited Frostforge, with all its dangers and possibilities. Thalia fixed her eyes on the path before her and climbed.

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Night descended with merciless speed as the caravan crested the final ridge. Thalia's breath stuttered in her chest — partly from exhaustion, partly from the sight that unfurled before her. The last crimson rays of sunset illuminated Frostforge Academy, transforming the stone fortress into a blaze of red against the darkening sky. Built directly into a cliff face on the side of the mountain, it defied both gravity and imagination, a monument to Northern determination and power.

The temperature plummeted with the sun's retreat, cold intensifying until it felt solid, a presence pressing against Thalia's skin. Her thin Southern clothing, already inadequate during the day's climb, now offered virtually no protection. The wind changed character too, no longer merely fierce but actively malevolent, searching for gaps in clothing, stealing warmth with predatory efficiency.

Roran appeared at her side, his own breath clouding the air between them. "There it is," he said softly. "Frostforge."

Thalia could only nod, words frozen in her throat. The academy was a structure both awe-inspiring and terrifying in its brutal majesty. Unlike the graceful spires and ornate

facades of Southern citadels, Frostforge was a testament to function over form, built for survival rather than aesthetics. Yet it possessed its own stark allure.

The main structure had been carved directly into an exposed cliff face, its walls seeming to grow from the mountain itself. No clear boundary existed between natural rock and masoned stone — the two melded together in a seamless integration of architecture and landscape. Massive buttresses of dark granite extended from the cliff, supporting what appeared to be outer courtyards and defense platforms. Iron reinforcements gleamed dully in the fading light, their surfaces rimed with frost that caught the last rays of sunset.

Windows — narrow and defensible — dotted the facade at irregular intervals, some glowing with the warm yellow of lamplight, others dark and watchful as empty eye sockets. Above the rugged structure was a windswept plateau, glittering in the remaining daylight as though sprinkled with ice. Along the ridge were statues with almost human forms, elongated arms and jagged features. As they drew closer, Thalia realized that they were crafted from metal, which glinted strangely in the waning light; closer still, and she realized that they were moving, slowly patrolling the plateau's edge. They were golems — constructs of ice magic and metallurgy.

As they drew closer, Thalia noticed details hidden from their first vantage point. Huge chimneys rose from several points along the structure, belching steam and smoke into the darkening sky. The plumes rose straight up before being torn apart by high-altitude winds, creating an ethereal ceiling of vapor above the academy.

"The Howling Forge," Roran murmured, following her gaze. "Heart of the academy. We'll be in there before long. Might be the only warmth we get."

Before Thalia could respond, Master Linnea's voice cut through the wind. "Keep moving! We need to reach the gates before full dark."

The last light faded from the sky as they approached the massive entrance arch. Torches flared to life along the path — not by human hand, but igniting simultaneously as if responding to the darkness itself. Their flames burned an unnatural blue, casting sharp shadows across the snow-crustrated ground.

Standing beneath the looming facade of Frostforge, Thalia felt smaller than she ever had before. The academy dwarfed her not just physically but spiritually, its age and power pressing down like a tangible weight. This was a place of ancient magic and older secrets, of knowledge preserved and hoarded through centuries of warfare and change.

For the first time since boarding the ship in Verdant Port, Thalia felt something beyond determination or fear. Something that made her breath catch and her heart race with more than just apprehension.

Awe.

This place — this brutal, beautiful fortress of stone and ice — was built to conquer, not to comfort.

There was no warmth here. No welcome.

Only challenge. Only trial.

## CHAPTER FOUR

After filing through the gates and into the frigid corridors of the fortress, the recruits were led down a wide passageway and into Frostforge's main hall.

The immensity of the space stole her breath more effectively than the biting cold that had followed them through the mountains. Smooth stone floors, polished to a mirror



shine, reflected the dancing lights from dozens of blue-flame torches that lined the walls, but above, the ceiling remained in its natural state — a jagged expanse of ice and stone where massive stalactites hung like the teeth of some ancient beast waiting to devour the unwary below.

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Thalia's boots, still caked with snow from their final ascent to the academy, squeaked against the polished floor. The sound seemed obscenely loud in the hushed atmosphere of the hall. Other students filed in behind her, their faces tight with exhaustion and anxiety.

A thin wisp of vapor accompanied each breath she took. Despite being sheltered from the howling winds outside, the temperature inside barely qualified as warm. The cold here was different from anything she'd known in Verdant Port; it wasn't the temporary chill of sea winds but something older and more permanent, as if the very stones of the mountain held memories of ancient winters.

"It's magnificent," Luna whispered.

Thalia glanced at her new companion. Luna's eyes were wide and darting, taking in every detail of the room with exaggerated wonder. She spun in a small circle, nearly colliding with the students behind them, who glared and stepped around the pair.

"Come on," Thalia said, gently guiding Luna by the elbow. "We're blocking the way."

They moved deeper into the hall, which Thalia now recognized as some kind of dining area. Long tables of dark, polished wood stretched in neat rows across the cavern floor, each adorned with iron candelabras holding more of the strange blue flames. At the far end, a raised platform dominated the space, clearly meant for instructors or announcements.

As the first-years found places to stand along the perimeter, Thalia became increasingly aware of the whispered conversations floating through the frigid

air. Unlike the open wonder she felt, many of the other recruits seemed engaged in urgent, hushed exchanges.

"Did you hear about the trials?"

"My cousin came here three years ago. Haven't heard from him since."

"Stay away from the Northern recruits — they always stick together."

Luna suddenly chuckled beside her, the sound incongruously light amid the tension.

"What's funny?" Thalia asked, keeping her voice low.

Luna's smile twisted into something almost cunning before reverting to her usual vacant expression. "Oh, just watching everyone scramble like mice in a cage. See that group over there?" She nodded toward three students huddled near a column. "The tall one's trying to convince the others she has connections to the instructors. She doesn't. And those two —" Luna pointed to a pair of recruits who stood rigidly by the wall, "— they've already decided they're enemies. Haven't spoken a word, but their bodies say everything."

Thalia blinked in surprise, following Luna's gaze. Sure enough, the two students Luna had indicated were pointedly not looking at each other, their shoulders angled away, hands tense at their sides.

"How did you —"

"People forget to watch their bodies when they're worried about their words," Luna said, her voice suddenly clearer and more focused than Thalia had ever heard it. "Everyone here is already picking sides, forming alliances." She sniffled again, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand in a gesture that seemed almost

deliberately childish.

Thalia studied Luna with new eyes. The girl's apparently random movements suddenly seemed less like distraction and more like cover — a way to observe without being observed in return. It was clever, Thalia realized. Who would suspect this bumbling, forgetful girl of paying attention?

Before she could pursue this revelation further, a hush fell over the cavern. All eyes turned toward the raised platform, where a tall figure had appeared as if materializing from the shadows themselves.

A woman stood at the edge, her imposing silhouette backlit by a row of blue flames. Thalia had heard her name in stories of the academy — this could only be Instructor Maven. Even from a distance, the legendary scar across her face was visible, a jagged line that cut through her right eye socket, covered by a polished metal plate. Around her neck hung what Thalia now recognized as a glacier bear's claw, massive and yellowed with age.

"Silence," Maven commanded, though the word was hardly necessary. The hall had already fallen into a stillness so complete that Thalia could hear the faint crackle of the flames.

"Welcome to Frostforge Academy." Maven's voice carried effortlessly across the space, sharp and clear as breaking ice. "You stand within walls that have witnessed generations of recruits come and go. Some left as master mages, warriors, and leaders. Many more left in boxes — or not at all."

A visible shudder passed through the assembled students. Thalia felt her own spine stiffen at the casual mention of death.

"I am Instructor Maven, Master of Combat and Survival. I will oversee your physical

training and preparation for war."She paced along the platform's edge, her single amber eye scanning the crowd with predatory intensity."Let me be clear: Frostforge does not nurture.You will not be tended or cared for here.Frostforge refines through pressure and eliminates through trial."

Maven paused, allowing her words to settle like frost on the students' skin.

"Look to your left.Look to your right."Many students did so automatically, including Thalia, who found herself meeting Luna's suddenly solemn gaze, then that of Joren Tidewell, her old neighbor from the slums of Verdant Port.She'd never been close with Joren, but in this place, so far from what she knew, his eyes were somewhat familiar."By year's end, at least one of you will be gone.The weak have no place here.The unprepared have no future here."

Thalia swallowed hard, fighting to maintain her composure.She hadn't expected warmth, but the naked hostility in Maven's welcome chilled her more than the mountain air ever could.

"Resources at Frostforge are precious," Maven continued."Food, warmth, instruction — all must be earned.Those who cannot contribute will find themselves without these necessities.It is not cruelty; it is preparation for the realities of magic in the Northern Reaches."

As she spoke, Maven's eye seemed to find Thalia in the crowd.For a brief, unsettling moment, their gazes locked, and Thalia felt exposed, as if Maven could see straight through to the desperation that had driven her to this place.The instructor's lips curled into the barest suggestion of a smile — not one of welcome, but of challenge.

"Tomorrow, your formal instruction begins.Tonight, you will be shown to your quarters.You would do well to rest while you can."

With that, Maven stepped back, and a group of older students emerged from side doors around the cavern. They moved with purpose, dividing the new recruits into smaller groups and directing them toward various exits.

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A tall girl with ice-blue eyes approached Thalia and Luna. "First-years, female, East Wing," she announced without preamble. "Follow me."

They were led through a series of corridors carved directly into the mountain stone. Unlike the grand entrance hall, these passages were utilitarian, with only occasional blue-flame torches to light the way. The temperature dropped with each turn, until Thalia found herself wrapping her arms around her body for warmth.

"Here," their guide finally said, stopping before a wooden door with a simple iron latch. "Three to a room. You're the first assigned here."

The door swung open to reveal a chamber that could only be described as functional at best. Three narrow cots were pushed against the walls, each with a thin mattress and a gray pelt. A small desk and stool sat beneath the room's only light source — another blue-flame torch set in a wall bracket. No windows, no decorations, no source of heat beyond body warmth and the furs that lined the beds.

Thalia stepped inside, her heart sinking. This would be her home for the foreseeable future. The door closed behind her with a heavy thud that echoed her mood.

She had just begun to unpack her meager belongings when the door opened again. Ashe Redwood entered, her tall frame ducking slightly to clear the low doorway. Behind her came Luna, who immediately bounced to the farthest cot and claimed it by dropping onto the thin mattress.

"Looks like we're roommates," Ashe said, her expression unreadable. The red streaks in her black hair caught the blue light, giving her an otherworldly appearance.

"I'm glad," Thalia admitted honestly. "At least it's someone I know."

"We don't know each other. Not yet," Ashe replied, but there was no real edge to her words. She moved to the remaining cot and set down her pack — significantly more substantial than Thalia's own.

Luna was already rummaging through her belongings, muttering under her breath. "Cold, cold, cold," she whispered, almost like a chant.

Thalia exchanged a glance with Ashe, who raised an eyebrow but said nothing. The northern girl methodically unpacked, her movements efficient and practiced. She pulled out additional layers of clothing and what appeared to be fur-lined boots — luxuries by Thalia's standards.

"Is it always this cold?" Thalia asked, trying to keep her teeth from chattering. The chill was seeping into her bones now that they weren't moving.

"This is warm by northern standards," Ashe replied. "It will get colder when winter comes." She paused in her unpacking to study Thalia's thin cloak and worn boots. "You didn't bring proper gear."

It wasn't a question, but Thalia answered anyway. "We don't have winters like this in Verdant Port."

"You'll freeze before the first month is out," Ashe stated matter-of-factly.

"I'll manage," Thalia said, more defiantly than she felt.

Ashe considered her for a moment, then nodded once — not agreement, exactly, but acknowledgment. "We all do what we must to survive."



An awkward silence fell over the room; Thalia cleared her throat. If she was going to be living in such close proximity to Ashe, it seemed wise to get to know her. "What brought you here?"

"I chose Frostforge over the alternative." Her tone made it clear she wouldn't elaborate further, but she added, "Some prisons are more obvious than others."

The cryptic response only deepened Thalia's curiosity. What could possibly be worse than a place where students were openly told they might die? But she respected the boundary Ashe had drawn and dropped the subject.

As night settled fully over the academy, the three girls prepared for bed in silence. The only comfort was the knowledge that she wasn't facing this cold, forbidding place entirely alone. Even so, as Thalia pulled the warm pelt over herself, she couldn't help but think of home — of her mother's kitchen filled with the scent of herbs, her sister Mari's laughter, the humid southern air that had sometimes felt oppressive but now seemed like a distant luxury.

She had never gone to sleep cold in Verdant Port. Poor as they were, there had always been enough warmth. Here, the chill crawled beneath her blanket and into her bones, a constant reminder of just how far she had traveled from everything familiar.

Sleep, when it finally came, was light and troubled, haunted by Maven's words and the unspoken question that hung in the frigid air: who among them wouldn't survive to see the year's end?

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A sharp cry pierced the darkness, jolting Thalia from her shallow sleep. For a disorienting moment, she thought she was back in Verdant Port, waking to the sound of gulls and the shouts of fishmongers. But the biting cold against her face and the

unfamiliar hardness of the cot beneath her quickly snapped her back to reality — Frostforge Academy, where even the night held no peace. More shouting erupted from the hallway, words muffled but tone unmistakably hostile. Thalia threw off her pelt, the cold air hitting her like a physical blow as she fumbled for her boots in the darkness.

"What's happening?" she whispered, though she wasn't sure if her roommates were awake to hear.

A rustling came from Ashe's cot, followed by the quiet sound of feet hitting the stone floor. "Trouble," came the northern girl's terse reply. In the dim blue light from their single torch, Thalia could make out Ashe's silhouette as she moved toward the door with practiced stealth.

Luna remained a motionless lump beneath her blankets, either genuinely asleep or choosing not to involve herself. Given what Thalia had observed of her earlier, either seemed equally possible.

Another shout, this one clear enough to make out words: "—told you to shut up!"

Ashe glanced back at Thalia, who had now managed to pull on her boots. Without needing to speak, they moved together toward the door. Ashe eased it open, the iron hinges protesting with a low groan that was thankfully masked by the commotion outside.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

The hallway was dimly lit by the same blue-flame torches spaced at irregular intervals along the stone walls. The cold was even more pronounced here, and Thalia's breath fogged before her face as she peered out. Several other students had also emerged from their rooms, sleepy-eyed and confused, forming a loose semicircle around the source of the disturbance.

In the center of the gathering stood Brynn Firstborn, her dark hair wild around her face, eyes flashing with fury. She was dressed in a nightshirt that looked significantly warmer than anything Thalia owned, but her feet were bare against the stone floor. Either her anger was keeping her warm, or she was too furious to notice the cold.

Across from her, backed against the wall beside an open doorway, was a girl Thalia vaguely recognized from their journey to the academy — slight of build with light brown skin and close-cropped black hair. The girl's eyes were wide with a mixture of fear and defiance.

"I said I was sorry," the girl protested, her accent marking her as clearly from the southernmost provinces. "I can't control what I say in my sleep!"

"Sorry doesn't help when your constant muttering keeps me awake all night," Brynn snapped, taking another step toward the girl. "How am I supposed to excel here if I can't even get proper rest? Because some market-district nobody can't shut up?"

The girl flinched at the insult but didn't back down further. "I'm not from the market district," she said, chin lifting slightly. "My father is a shipwright in —"

"I don't care if your father builds boats for the king himself," Brynn cut her off. "You're still Southern gutter trash who doesn't belong here."

A ripple of whispers passed through the onlookers. Thalia felt a surge of indignation on the girl's behalf. The hypocrisy was staggering — Brynn herself was from the South, though clearly from a far wealthier background than most.

"You're a Southerner, too," the roommate retorted, finding courage. "Does that make you gutter trash?"

Brynn's face contorted with rage. She lunged forward, grabbing the front of the girl's nightshirt and slamming her back against the wall. The solid thud of body against stone echoed in the corridor.

"I earned my place here," Brynn hissed, her face inches from her roommate's. "I volunteered to be here. I've trained harder than anyone, even the most well-prepared Northerner." She released the girl with a shove. "But you? You'll be dead before midwinter. The Reaches will freeze your blood right in your veins."

The hallway had gone deadly quiet. No one moved to intervene, not even the older students who had poked their heads out to observe the commotion. Thalia realized with a sinking feeling that this was how things worked at Frostforge — conflicts were left to resolve themselves, no matter how ugly.

"You should watch your back," Brynn continued, her voice dropping to a menacing whisper that nonetheless carried in the silent corridor. "And if you talk in your sleep again, I'll make sure you never wake up."

The girl's eyes widened, but she remained silent.

Brynn wasn't finished. She stepped back, her posture relaxing into something almost

casual, which somehow made her next words even more chilling. "When you die — and you will die here—I'll gladly take the furs from your bunk. Maybe even your boots, if they're not too poorly made." Her gaze swept across the gathered students. "That goes for all of you slum-dweller weaklings. You're just resources waiting to be redistributed."

Thalia stiffened as Brynn's gaze met hers. The noble girl's lip curled.

Brynn's roommate finally found her voice again. "You're insane," she whispered.

"No," Brynn replied with terrifying calm. "I'm a survivor. There's a difference." She turned on her heel and stalked back toward her room, pausing at the threshold to deliver one final warning. "Find somewhere else to sleep, or learn to keep quiet. Those are your options."

With that, she disappeared inside, slamming the door.

For a moment, no one moved. Then, gradually, the other students began retreating to their rooms, conversations resuming in hushed whispers. Brynn's roommate remained against the wall, her face a mask of anger and humiliation. No one offered her help or comfort. Eventually, she too disappeared, not back into her shared room with Brynn but further down the hallway, presumably seeking alternative sleeping arrangements for the night.

Thalia stood frozen, the implications of what she'd just witnessed sinking into her bones more deeply than the cold. Maven's warnings hadn't been exaggerations or intimidation tactics. Death was a real possibility here, and some students, like Brynn, seemed to be counting on it.

"Come on," Ashe murmured, gently tugging at Thalia's elbow. "This isn't our business."

Numbly, Thalia allowed herself to be guided back into their room. Luna was sitting up now, her blanket wrapped around her shoulders, eyes alert in the dim light.

"Sounds like Brynn Firstborn is making friends already," Luna commented.

Ashe closed the door with a quiet click. "I know her type. We have them in the Reaches as well. A piece of work," she muttered, returning to her cot. "Born with a silver spoon but acts like she clawed her way up from nothing."

Thalia climbed back into her own bed and pulled the thin blanket around herself. The cold felt even more penetrating now, as if Brynn's threats had somehow lowered the temperature further.

Sleep eluded Thalia. She lay awake, staring at the stone ceiling, replaying Brynn's words in her mind. When you die — and you will die here — I'll gladly take the furs from your bunk.

She had known Frostforge would be dangerous. She had prepared herself for hardship, for challenging training, even for the possibility of failure. But the casual cruelty she'd just witnessed, the way the other students had watched without intervention, the clear expectation that some of them wouldn't survive was a different kind of danger than she had imagined.

In Verdant Port, poverty had been her enemy. She had expected that struggle to take a different shape here, but it seemed that her social status had traveled with her to Frostforge and taken on new dimensions.

Thalia curled tighter beneath her blanket, trying to conserve what little warmth she could. She thought of her mother and sister, safe in their small home near the market district. They would be warm tonight. They would be safe. That had been the point of her coming here — to ensure their safety, their future. And, if she could, she would

return to them in one piece.

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She would not become another resource to be "redistributed." She would survive, no matter what Frostforge threw at her.

Even if that included Brynn Firstborn.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Thalia woke to the sound of her teeth chattering. The dormitory air bit at her exposed face as her muscles convulsed in tiny spasms. Each breath was a painful reminder that Frostforge Academy had been built for those accustomed to the North's bitter embrace. She curled tighter beneath the furs that lined her cot. Her fingers, stiff and aching, clutched the edges of the pelts close to her chin while she blinked at the frost patterns etched across the stone ceiling above her bed.

"You're awake." Ashe's voice carried from across the room, matter-of-fact and already fully alert. "You've been shivering all night."

Thalia pushed herself up on one elbow, wincing as her skin met the frigid air. Her breath billowed before her face in clouds that dissipated toward the high ceiling. "Do they not believe in fires here?" she asked, her voice still rough with sleep. "Couldn't there be a furnace in each dormitory – for warmth?"

"Cryomancy is our strongest weapon," Ashe replied, already dressed in multiple layers. She moved with the confidence of someone born to this climate, her red-streaked black hair neatly braided along the sides of her head. "Northern magic thrives in the cold, as do we."



Thalia bit back a retort. In Verdant Port, the morning air carried salt and spice from the harbor markets, warm and inviting even in the winter months. On a cold morning, her mother would be stoking the small hearth in their herb shop, Mari curled beside it, sorting dried flowers for the day's remedies. The thought sent a pang through her chest, sharper than the bitter chill that stung her lungs with each inhale.

"Here." Ashe approached, holding out several folded garments. "Put these on beneath your uniform. Layer thin fabrics rather than one thick one; it traps the heat better."

Thalia accepted the clothes, surprised at Ashe's kindness. "I... thank you."

Ashe shrugged. "It's no trouble."

"None of your fellow Northerners seem to be keen on helping us adjust," Thalia commented. As soon as she'd said the words, she regretted them. She didn't want to be rude to Ashe when her roommate had been helpful.

"Survival isn't a competition," Ashe said simply. "The elements kill enough of us."

From the third bed, Luna sat up suddenly, her short dreadlocks swinging with the motion. Her hair was adorned with tiny metal beads that caught the wan light filtering through the narrow window. Her eyes, normally darting about as if chasing invisible butterflies, were oddly focused on the frost-rimed glass.

"The glass has faces," she announced, her voice dreamy yet somehow precise. "Seventeen distinct patterns that repeat across the academy. I counted." She yawned, seeming not to notice the frigid temperature that made Thalia's lungs ache with each inhale.

Thalia exchanged a glance with Ashe, who raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Luna's peculiarities had already become familiar during their journey to Frostforge.

"Aren't you cold?" Thalia asked, watching as Luna slid from beneath her covers, wearing only a thin night shift.

Luna blinked at her, then down at her bare arms where goosebumps should have risen. "Oh," she said as if noticing the temperature for the first time. "I suppose I am." She reached for her clothes and began dressing, humming tunelessly.

Thalia dressed quickly, grateful for Ashe's advice. The layered garments beneath her uniform — a severe, high-collared tunic of slate-gray wool with matching trousers — did indeed trap heat against her skin. She tied back her thick black hair, tucking stray strands behind her ears as she tried to calm the flutter of nerves in her stomach.

Today would determine everything. First impressions meant survival at Frostforge, according to every whispered story that had reached Verdant Port. The North broke those who couldn't keep up.

"What classes do you think they'll start us with?" Thalia asked, trying to sound casual as she laced her boots.

"There are four classes at Frostforge," Ashe replied, checking the edge of a small knife before slipping it into her boot. "Cryomancy, combat, metallurgy, and beast-bonding. They'll sort us into groups at breakfast. Personally, I'm hoping to begin with combat — that's always been my strength."

"Your strength?" Thalia echoed, a new worry surfacing. It sounded as though Ashe had already been introduced to these subjects; Thalia had never so much as held a blade, aside from the short knives she'd used to cut stems in the herb shop. What if she was found lacking before she'd even begun?

"Don't fret so loud," Luna said suddenly, her dark eyes fixing on Thalia with unexpected clarity. "They're not looking for what you know. They're looking for what

you might become."She smiled, the expression transforming her face from vacant to knowing in an instant."Or what might kill you in the attempt."

The walk to the dining hall led them through corridors carved directly into the mountain, the stone polished to a glossy sheen by generations of footsteps.Thalia tried not to gape at the enormity of it all — the vaulted ceilings that disappeared into shadow, the intricate ice formations that served as both decoration and light source, refracting the pale morning sun into shimmering patterns across the walls.

Students streamed from dormitories along the passage, their faces set in masks of determination or fear, sometimes both.Thalia noticed the divide immediately — Northern students moved with confidence, their bodies already accustomed to the cold, while Southerners hunched and shivered, clustered together like sailors bracing against a storm.

"Remember," Ashe murmured as they approached the massive iron-bound doors of the dining hall, "sit up straight, eat quickly, and speak only when spoken to.The instructors watch everything."

The dining hall stretched before them, a cavernous space dominated by long tables of dark wood polished to a mirror finish.Enormous windows of thick, bubble-filled glass lined the far wall, offering glimpses of the jagged mountain peaks beyond, their summits disappearing into low-hanging clouds the color of bruises.

Thalia followed Ashe to a table already half filled with students.The benches were hard, the table bare of any ornamentation — utilitarian, like everything else at Frostforge.Servants moved silently among the tables, placing bowls of steaming porridge and plates of dark bread before each person.Thalia found herself staring at the retreating back of the girl who had brought her porridge, wondering whether she had taken this job willingly, or if her servitude was punishment for a past failure.

The porridge was bland but hot, specked with dried berries that burst with unexpected tartness against her tongue. Thalia ate mechanically, her attention divided between the food warming her from within and the faces around her. Luna sat beside her, stirring patterns into her porridge without eating, her eyes tracking the movements of the servers with unusual intensity.

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Across the hall, Thalia spotted Brynn holding court among a group of students, her aristocratic features animated as she spoke. Even here, social hierarchies formed like frost on glass, predictable and inexorable. Brynn caught Thalia watching and narrowed her eyes, mouth curling in disdain before deliberately turning away.

"Ignore her," Ashe said, following Thalia's gaze. "Ignore all of them. Everyone's all bark until we learn to bite."

Thalia nodded, but couldn't help the knot of resentment that formed beneath her ribs. While Thalia had come to Frostforge out of necessity to save her family, Brynn had volunteered. She had trained for this, just as many Northern students had, sharpened by the privileges her high status had afforded her. The injustice of it burned.

A sudden hush fell over the hall as the main doors swung open with a groan of ancient hinges. Instructors filed in, their uniforms darker and adorned with symbols Thalia didn't recognize. Emblems of rank or achievement, perhaps. Instructor Maven strode at their head, her single amber eye sweeping the room with predatory focus. The glacier bear claw hung at her throat, gleaming dully against her scarred skin.

"First-years," Maven's voice carried without effort, silencing even the whispers that had persisted after their entrance. "You will now be divided into your initial training groups. When your name is called, proceed to your assigned instructor."

The sorting began, names echoing against stone walls. Northern names, Southern names, called out with equal indifference. Thalia's palms grew damp as she waited,

watching students rise and gather in clusters around stern-faced teachers.

"If I call your name, you shall proceed to Instructor Varik. You will begin your education with cryomancy." Maven paused, then barked, "Greenspire!"

Thalia stood, legs suddenly unsteady. Across the room, a wiry man with a face like weathered granite nodded once in her direction. As she moved toward him, she heard Maven's voice again, like ice breaking. "Bright!" Roran, his wild black curls tied back, moved to join Thalia, his easy smile a contrast to the grim faces around him.

The group grew — twelve students in all, a mix of Northern and Southern recruits. Varik observed them with eyes the pale blue of a winter sky, revealing nothing of his thoughts.

"Follow me," he said finally, turning away. "I'll show you to the classroom. In the future, you are expected to navigate these halls on your own, and keep your own schedule."

They filed out of the hall, Thalia's stomach clenching with each step. Cryomancy — ice magic. Of all the disciplines to start with, they'd assigned her to the one that seemed the most arcane, the most impossible.

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The chamber for cryomancy instruction wasn't a chamber at all, but rather a semi-circular ledge carved into the mountainside, open to the elements on one side. Wind howled across the space, carrying crystals of ice that stung Thalia's cheeks like tiny needles. The stone beneath her feet reflected the pale blue sky overhead and gave the unsettling impression of standing on frozen water. Thalia flexed her toes inside her boots, willing feeling back into them as she tried to focus on Instructor Varik rather than the thousand-foot drop just yards away, unprotected by even the suggestion of a

guardrail.

Varik stood at the center of the ledge, seemingly unaffected by the biting cold. His wiry frame belied a stillness that spoke of controlled power. Frost had accumulated in his close-cropped beard, turning the dark hair white at the edges. Most striking were his hands, mottled with white patches of frostbite.

"Cryomancy," he began, his voice thin but carrying easily over the wind, "is the discipline of transforming states of matter through the extraction of heat. In short, it is the art of manipulating ice." He surveyed the huddled students, his pale eyes lingering on each face in turn. "The Northern Reaches did not conquer the cold — we became its conduit. Those who cannot do the same will not survive this academy."

Thalia wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the layers Ashe had given her compress beneath the pressure. Even with the extra clothing, cold seeped into her bones, making concentration difficult. She glanced at the Northern students, noting their relaxed postures, their untroubled breathing. This was merely normal weather to them, not the enemy it was to her Southern blood.

"Control," Varik continued, raising one frostbitten hand, "precision, and resilience. These are the foundations of ice magic, qualities most of you lack entirely." His gaze settled on the Southern students, his disdain unmistakable. "Mistakes in cryomancy result in death — yours, or someone else's."

He turned and approached a stone pedestal at the edge of the platform. Upon it sat a wooden chest, its dark surface etched with runes that seemed to shimmer as he opened the lid. From within, he removed pairs of white gloves, thin yet strangely substantial, each embroidered with complex symbols in silver thread.

"These are frost gloves," Varik announced, beginning to distribute them among the students. "The most crucial tool for any cryomancer. They serve two essential

functions. First, they focus the latent magic within you, allowing it to be channeled with greater precision. Second, they protect your extremities from your own magic. Ice has no loyalty — it will freeze your fingers as readily as it will your enemy's."

Thalia accepted her pair with unsteady hands. The material felt cool to the touch, supple yet resilient. She turned them over, studying the intricate patterns of runes that spiraled across the palms and fingertips.

"These symbols," Varik explained, holding up a glove for all to see, "are not decorative. They are precise magical formulas developed over centuries, designed to harness the energy of cold itself." His gaze hardened. "These gloves are irreplaceable. Lose them, damage them, or attempt to modify them, and you will face consequences of your own making."

Thalia slid the gloves on carefully. They fit perfectly, as if tailored to her hands, the fabric molding to each finger without restricting movement. A subtle tingling sensation spread across her palms, like the first touch of numbness before true cold set in.

"The first exercise in cryomancy is the creation of an ice shard," Varik continued, stepping to the center of the platform. He extended his gloved hand, palm up. "Observe."

The air above his palm shimmered, moisture visibly gathering from the surrounding atmosphere. Varik twisted his fingers with a gesture so subtle Thalia almost missed it. The moisture condensed, crystallized, and elongated into a perfect shard of ice, six inches long and tapering to a lethal point. It hovered above his palm, rotating slowly, catching the light in facets.

"The process requires three steps," he explained, the shard continuing to spin above his hand. "First, gather moisture from the air around you. Second, extract the heat from



that moisture, transforming it to ice. Third, shape the ice according to your will." With another slight gesture, the shard changed form, becoming wider, flatter. "This is the foundation of all cryomantic constructions."

He closed his fist suddenly, and the ice shard shattered into fine powder that dispersed on the wind.

"Position yourselves with adequate space between you, and begin."

The students spread across the platform, each claiming a space to practice. Thalia found herself between a tall Northern boy with a shock of white-blond hair and a Southern girl whose dark complexion had taken on an unhealthy grayish tinge in the cold. Across the platform, she spotted Roran, already extending his gloved hand with a look of intense concentration.

Thalia mimicked the stance she'd seen Varik take, palm up, fingers slightly curled. She closed her eyes briefly, trying to sense the moisture in the air around her as he'd described. In Verdant Port, she'd developed a knack for sensing the subtle energies in herbs and plants, but this was different — the magic felt foreign, hostile even, slipping away from her mental grasp like fish through nets.

Opening her eyes, she saw several Northern students had already produced ice shards of varying sizes and quality. The white-blond boy beside her held a near-perfect replica of Varik's demonstration, his expression one of bored competence. Even some of the Southerners were managing small, crude formations that at least held their shape; Roran, in particular, had found moderate success. His shard drew an approving nod from Varik as the instructor passed by his station.

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Determination hardened in Thalia's chest. Focusing intently, she reached out with her senses again, this time imagining the moisture as tiny motes floating in the air. She began to draw them toward her palm, the frost gloves humming with energy against her skin.

The moisture gathered, a small cloud condensing above her hand. Excitement fluttered in her stomach; it was working. Now came the second step: extracting heat. Thalia frowned, unsure how exactly to accomplish this. She thought of the biting cold around her, trying to channel that sensation into the gathered moisture.

Nothing happened. The tiny cloud hovered, refusing to solidify. Frustration built inside her, along with the acute awareness of time passing, of Varik's potential disappointment, of failing where others succeeded. She pushed harder, willing the magic to obey, forcing her energy through the gloves and into the suspended water droplets.

Too much. She realized her mistake an instant too late. The magic surged, wild and uncontrolled. The moisture froze instantly, but instead of forming a single shard, it crystallized in a chaotic, splintered mass. Before she could react, the unstable formation shattered outward, sending dozens of jagged ice fragments flying in all directions.

A cry of pain cut through the wind's howl. The white-blond Northern boy beside her staggered backward, hand pressed to his cheek where blood welled between his fingers.

"You stupid Southern imbecile!" he snarled, lowering his hand to reveal a deep gash

along his cheekbone. Blood streamed freely down his face, dripping from his jaw. "You could have taken my eye!"

The platform fell silent as all practice halted; everyone turned to stare. Thalia stood frozen in horror, the frost gloves suddenly heavy on her trembling hands.

Varik materialized beside them, his movement so swift Thalia hadn't seen him cross the distance. He examined the boy's wound with clinical detachment.

"Infirmary," he said curtly. "It will need stitching."

The injured student shot Thalia a venomous glare before stalking toward the archway leading back into the mountain, one hand still pressed to his bleeding face.

Varik turned to Thalia, his pale eyes chips of ice. "This," he addressed the entire class, though his gaze never left her face, "is precisely the lack of control I warned you about. Magic is not emotion — it is discipline. It is mathematics and physics given form. Your ignorance nearly cost a fellow student his eye, and could have cost him his life had the shard struck elsewhere."

Shame burned through Thalia, hotter than any fire. "I didn't mean —"

"Intent is irrelevant," Varik cut her off. "Results are what matter at Frostforge. The elements do not care about your intentions, only your mastery." He turned away, effectively dismissing her. "Continue practicing. With greater care."

Thalia remained motionless, acutely aware of the whispers around her, the sidelong glances, the Northern students edging subtly away as if her failure might be contagious. Her gloved hands hung uselessly at her sides, the earlier tingling sensation now feeling like an accusation.

"Mind if I join you?" Roran's voice broke through her spiral of shame. He stood beside her, curly black hair escaping its tie to frame his face, his smile easy despite the tension hanging in the air.

"Why would you want to?" Thalia asked, her voice barely audible.

Roran shrugged, positioning himself where the injured student had stood. "Kellen has needed someone to deflate his ego since we arrived. Though perhaps not quite so literally." A hint of humor crept into his voice.

Despite everything, Thalia felt the corner of her mouth twitch upward. "I don't know what happened. The magic just...twisted."

"It does that," Roran said, extending his hand palm-up. Above it hovered a small but perfectly formed ice shard. "Especially when you're trying too hard."

Thalia stared at his creation with poorly concealed envy. "You're Southern. How are you doing that already?"

The question came out more accusatory than she'd intended, but Roran seemed unfazed. With a flick of his wrist, he dissolved his ice shard back into the air.

"My father was a merchant," he explained, his voice dropping slightly. "We traveled the coast, sometimes as far north as the trading outposts in Reaches Edge. I used to sneak out to watch the Northern mages work while he negotiated prices." A shadow crossed his face, brief but unmistakable. "Before the raids took everything."

"Isle Wardens?"

He nodded, his jaw tight.

"I'm sorry," she said simply. She'd never witnessed an Isle Warden raid, but her mother was old enough to remember the last time the marauders had struck Verdant Port; Celeste had always spoken of them in hushed, fearful tones.

Roran shook off the memory visibly, his smile returning. "Ancient history. Why are you here? Same reason as most of us Southerners? Couldn't afford the bribe?"

Thalia nodded, oddly comforted by his directness. "My mother could barely scrape together enough for one bribe. I have a younger sister." She twisted her gloved fingers together, the runes catching the light. "I volunteered so she wouldn't have to when her time comes."

Roran studied her with newfound respect. "That's quite noble," he said, no trace of mockery in his tone. "Most people come to Frostforge running from something. Not many come running toward something worse to protect others."

His words warmed something inside her, a small flame kindled against the pervasive cold. For the first time since arriving, Thalia felt seen — not as a Southern outsider, not as a charity case, but as someone who had made a difficult choice for the right reasons.

"Try again," Roran suggested, nodding toward her hands. "But this time, don't force it. The cold is already here — you just need to guide it, not create it."

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Thalia hesitantly raised her hand again, palm up as before. This time, she focused not on gathering magic but on feeling the cold that already surrounded her, the natural energy of this harsh place. The moisture came more easily now, gathering above her palm in a small, swirling cloud.

Instead of pushing, she imagined drawing heat away slowly, like pulling a thread from fabric. The cloud began to crystallize at its edges, frost patterns forming and spreading inward. Her heart quickened, but she forced herself to maintain the steady pace, remembering the disaster of her previous attempt.

The ice refused to form a perfect shard, instead coalescing into a lumpy, misshapen mass that hovered unsteadily above her palm. It was crude, barely recognizable as intentional magic, but it was solid ice.

"See?" Roran grinned. "Progress."

The rest of the lesson passed in concentrated effort. Thalia didn't attempt another shard, instead practicing the basic steps of moisture gathering and controlled freezing over and over, building confidence in tiny increments. By the time Varik called an end to the session, her hands ached within the gloves and her forehead was damp with sweat despite the cold.

As they filed back toward the archway at the chamber's entrance, Brynn shouldered roughly past Thalia, clutching a perfect ice shard in her gloved hand like a trophy.

"Pathetic," she muttered, loud enough for those nearby to hear. "Just like every other slum dweller who ends up here. You're going to make the Southern Kingdoms look

even worse than they already do."

Thalia stiffened, a retort rising to her lips, but Roran's hand on her arm stopped her.

"Not worth it," he murmured. "Save your energy for the magic, not the politics."

Thalia swallowed the sharp reply that burned on her tongue. Brynn wanted a reaction — wanted proof that her words had landed like a blade between Thalia's ribs. Instead, Thalia forced her shoulders to relax, her breath steady.

Roran gave her arm a quick squeeze before letting go. "Come on," he said, nodding toward the exit. "I heard a rumor we've got metallurgy next — and that it's warm down in the forges."

Thalia let herself be guided away, but Brynn's words clung to her like frostbite, seeping into the cracks of her resolve. She already knew she was behind — her struggle with ice magic had made that painfully clear — but hearing it spoken aloud, so casually dismissed, was a different kind of wound.

## CHAPTER SIX

Thalia followed the steep, winding staircase deeper into the earth, each step taking her further from the bitter cold of Frostforge's upper levels. The air grew steadily warmer, carrying hints of coal smoke and hot metal that intensified with every turn of the spiral. Her fingertips brushed against the rough-hewn wall for balance, the stone transitioning from ice-slick to dry to faintly warm beneath her touch. By the time she reached the bottom, perspiration had begun to bead along her hairline, a foreign sensation after days of relentless cold. This was the true heart of Frostforge — the place that had given the academy its name.

She paused at the threshold, momentarily overwhelmed. The forge sprawled before

her, a vast cavern carved directly into the bedrock beneath the academy. Dozens of furnaces blazed along the perimeter, their fires casting dancing shadows across the walls and filling the space with oppressive heat. The ceiling soared high above, disappearing into darkness save for occasional glints where metal fixtures caught the light. Between the furnaces stood row upon row of stone workbenches, each bearing anvils, hammers, and assorted tools she couldn't begin to name.

The noise struck her next. Metal rang against metal in irregular percussion as hammers fell on anvils. Bellows wheezed and sighed, coaxing flames higher. Instructions were shouted over the din, barely audible. And beneath it all ran a continuous, almost subliminal hum that Thalia felt more than heard, vibrating through the stone floor and into her bones.

"First-years, gather here!" A woman's voice cut through the chaos, authoritative and sharp.

Thalia spotted the other new students clustered near the entrance and hurried to join them, conscious of her lateness. She squeezed between Luna and a boy she didn't recognize, offering an apologetic smile to the instructor who stood before them with arms crossed.

"I am Instructor Wolfe," the woman announced, her voice carrying without apparent effort. She was tall, with sinewy arms exposed by her sleeveless leather apron. Her hair was pulled back in a severe knot, revealing a face lined by years of heat and concentration. Burns marked her forearms like badges of honor. "Welcome to the Howling Forge. Some of you will flourish here; most will not. That is the nature of metallurgy."

Thalia shifted uncomfortably, remembering her disastrous performance in cryomancy. Another discipline in which to fail spectacularly.



"Contrary to what you might believe," Instructor Wolfe continued, "smithing is not merely pounding hot metal into submission. There is magic in this work — ancient magic that predates even that of the Isle Wardens."

She moved to a nearby workbench where a small ingot glowed orange in a bed of coals. With practiced ease, she lifted it with tongs and set it on an anvil.

"Watch carefully," she instructed, taking up a hammer. "The metal speaks to those who listen. It tells you where it wishes to bend, how it yearns to be shaped."

As Wolfe's hammer struck the ingot, Thalia noticed a subtle shift in the air — a ripple of energy that reminded her of working with particularly potent healing herbs in her mother's shop. The instructor's movements became fluid, almost musical, as the metal stretched and curved under her guidance.

"Metal remembers," Wolfe explained between strikes. "It holds the essence of the earth from which it came. The ores beneath Frostforge are particularly potent — infused with the same magic that powers our cryomancy and other disciplines of elemental power."

Within minutes, she had transformed the formless ingot into the shape of a blade, with a sharp edge that seemed impossible for the crude tools she'd used.

"Today, you will become acquainted with the most basic element of our craft: iron." She gestured to waiting assistants, who began distributing tongs and other tools. "Your task is simple: shape a hook. Nothing elaborate, nothing fancy. Just a functional hook that could hang a coat or a pot." Her eyes swept over them. "The purpose is not the product but the process. Feel the metal. Listen to it. Begin to understand its nature."

The students dispersed to assigned workbenches. Thalia found herself at a station near

the back wall, where the heat was most intense. Sweat now ran freely down her back, a welcome respite from the cold. She took up the unfamiliar tongs, surprised by their weight, and waited nervously.

An older student approached with a metal rod clamped in heavy tongs, its end glowing a vivid orange-red. "Hold your tongs ready," he instructed tersely.

Thalia obeyed, and he transferred a small strip of the heated iron to her tool. She nearly dropped it, startled by the immediacy of the heat that radiated through the metal handles into her palms.

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"Don't waste time," he advised before moving on. "Work it while it's hot."

Thalia turned to her anvil, suddenly alone with the glowing metal and no clear idea how to proceed. Around her, hammers were already ringing as other students began their work. She placed the strip on the anvil and took up the small hammer provided, then hesitated, afraid of ruining her first attempt before it had even begun.

The moment the heated iron touched the anvil, something unexpected happened. A sensation — familiar yet unique — tingled up her arms. It was the same awareness she'd felt when sorting herbs for her mother's remedies, the intuitive understanding of which plants held power and how they might work together. But this was stronger, more insistent.

The iron seemed to pulse with its own heartbeat. Currents of energy spiraled through it — not uniform but concentrated in veins, like the medicinal essence in particular stems or roots of plants. Thalia stared, transfixed, momentarily forgetting where she was.

Without conscious decision, her hammer struck where the energy seemed strongest. The metal yielded with surprising willingness, folding exactly as she'd intended. She struck again, guided by the flowing patterns she sensed rather than by any plan or technique.

Lost in concentration, Thalia didn't register the approaching footsteps until a shadow fell across her work. She startled violently, dropping both tongs and hammer with a clatter. The iron strip — now bent into the beginning of a curve — skittered across the anvil, its glow already fading from orange to dull red.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

The voice was male, low and rough, as if rarely used. Thalia looked up into the face of a student at least a year her senior. He wasn't particularly tall, but something about his presence made him seem larger, a gravity that commanded attention. His dark hair was cropped close at the sides, longer on top, and his pale skin was flushed from the forge's heat. But it was his eyes that held her — an intense blue that seemed almost unnaturally bright against his sooty face.

"I — it's fine," she managed, flustered by the interruption and the loss of her focus. "I was just...concentrating."

"You felt it, didn't you?" he asked, ignoring her discomfort. "The currents in the metal."

Thalia blinked in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I watched you." He gestured to her abandoned work. "Most first-years attack the metal, trying to bend it through force alone. You were following its lead."

"I..." Thalia hesitated, unsure whether admitting to sensing something others might not was wise. "I just felt something similar to what I used to feel with herbs back home."

The intensity of his gaze didn't waver. "It's the same principle. Life energy, magical current — it exists in different forms throughout nature." He picked up her fallen tongs and offered them back. "I'm Kaine. Kaine Ember."

"Thalia Greenspire," she replied, accepting the tongs with a nod of thanks. "Are you an assistant for this class?"

Something like amusement flickered across his features, brief and gone. "No. Second-year. But I spend most of my free time here." He gestured around the forge. "The instructors let me work on my own projects."

That explained his presence, but not his interest in her novice attempt at metalworking. "Is that usual? For second-years to have such freedom?"

"No." He didn't elaborate.

An awkward silence fell between them, filled by the constant background noise of the forge. Thalia was acutely aware of her cooling iron, the opportunity to shape it slipping away with each passing second. Yet she found herself reluctant to dismiss this unexpected interaction.

"You mentioned currents in the metal," she ventured. "Is that related to why we're learning this? I mean, what does metallurgy have to do with surviving in the Frozen Reaches?"

Kaine studied her for a moment, as if deciding how much to say. "Veins of magical ore run deep beneath Frostforge; it's the reason this location was chosen." He gestured to the distant walls of the cavern. "Different types of ore are associated with different magical properties, and as such, have different uses. Weapons and tools crafted with these ores are imbued with the natural magic of the metals. And beyond that, we can harness cryomancy to forge ice-metal. The combination of fire and ice is powerful."

"That's why we're here," Thalia realized. "Not just to learn to survive the cold, but to harness it. To use what's in this place."

Kaine nodded, a hint of approval in his expression. "Most don't make the connection so quickly." He glanced at her cooling iron. "You should reheat that before it's too late."

"How do you know so much about this?" Thalia asked, curiosity overcoming caution. "As only a second-year."

Something like a smile touched his lips. "I've spent a lot of time in this forge," he said simply.

Before she could press further, he turned and walked away, moving between the workbenches with the confidence of someone who belonged in this sweltering domain. He stopped at a station across the room and picked up a crude, blackened blade with tongs, thrusting it into a nearby furnace with practiced ease.

Thalia watched, momentarily forgetting her own task, as he withdrew the glowing blade and returned to his anvil. His movements were economical, precise, each hammer blow falling exactly where intended. There was something mesmerizing about the efficiency of his work, the way the metal seemed to flow rather than yield beneath his hammer.

Remembering herself, Thalia hurriedly gathered her own abandoned piece and moved to the nearest furnace. She thrust it into the coals as she'd seen Kaine do, careful to use the tongs properly. The heat blasted her face, forcing her to squint and turn aside until her eyes adjusted.

When she withdrew the iron, glowing orange again, she returned to her anvil with renewed determination. This time, she consciously reached out with her senses, seeking the currents she'd felt before. They were there, weaker now but still present, guiding her hammer as she bent the metal into a simple but functional hook shape.

It wasn't pretty — not compared to Instructor Wolfe's demonstration, and certainly not compared to whatever Kaine was creating across the room. But it was a hook, recognizably so, and she'd made it by working with the metal rather than against it.

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As she set down her hammer, satisfied with her first attempt, she felt eyes on her. Looking up, she met Kaine's gaze across the forge. He gave her a slight nod, almost imperceptible, before returning to his own work. The acknowledgment left her with an unexpected warmth that had nothing to do with the heat of the forge.

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Thalia emerged from the underground forge aching in places she didn't know could ache. Her shoulders burned from holding the heavy hammer, her wrists throbbed from manipulating the tongs, and the small of her back protested after hours of hunching over the anvil. The sweat had dried on her skin, leaving behind a gritty residue of coal dust and metal filings that made her itch. But there was a satisfaction beneath the discomfort — her hook had been deemed "functional" by Instructor Wolfe, which was apparently high praise for a first attempt. Her stomach growled audibly as she trudged up the final steps with Luna and Ashe, the three of them united in their singular focus: dinner.

"I think my arms might fall off before we reach the dining hall," Luna complained, her typically animated face slack with exhaustion. "All of the classes are brutal, but metallurgy...."

"Northern children start hammer work at eight," Ashe said, though her stoicism was undercut by the way she flexed her fingers as if they pained her. The red streaks in her black hair had come partially loose from their braids, giving her a wild, untamed appearance. "Builds strength for winter survival."

"Well, Southern children don't," Thalia said, rubbing her shoulder. "Though it's

similar to pounding herbs with a mortar and pestle."She'd thought her hands were strong from years working in her mother's shop, but the forge had proven her wrong.

Their footsteps echoed against stone as they climbed higher, the air growing colder with each level. The transition from the forge's sweltering heat to Frostforge's perpetual chill made Thalia's skin prickle with goosebumps. She found herself grateful for the cold now; it soothed her overheated muscles, though she knew the relief was temporary.

"At least we're alive," Luna said, rubbing at a spot of soot on her cheek and only succeeding in smearing it further. "That's more than Instructor Maven predicted."

"The day's not over yet," Ashe reminded them, but there was the faintest hint of humor in her voice.

They reached the main corridor that led to the dining hall, the distant clatter of plates and hum of voices promising respite. Thalia's mouth watered at the thought of food, any food, even the bland porridge that seemed to be a staple of Frostforge meals. The warmth of the forge had burned through her reserves, leaving her hollow and light-headed.

A figure stepped directly into their path, forcing the three of them to halt abruptly. The newcomer was female, perhaps a year or two older, her posture radiating confidence that bordered on arrogance. She wore her uniform with practiced precision, not a wrinkle or smudge to be seen despite the late hour. Her black hair was pulled back in a tight, elegant knot that emphasized the sharp angles of her face. But it was her eyes that captured Thalia's attention — pale silver-gray, like frost on metal, and just as cold.

"Senna," Ashe said, her tone neutral but her posture subtly shifting. Thalia hadn't known Ashe long enough to read all her cues, but this one was clear: caution.



The girl — Senna — didn't acknowledge Ashe. Her frost-gray eyes fixed on Thalia instead, studying her with an intensity that felt like a physical weight. "You. Greenspire. I need to speak with you." Senna's gaze flicked dismissively to Luna and Ashe. "Privately."

Luna's eyes widened slightly, her seemingly perpetual distraction vanishing as she glanced between Thalia and Senna with sudden sharp focus. "We were just heading to dinner," she said, her usual dreamy tone hardening at the edges.

"This won't take long," Senna replied, still not looking at her. "You two go ahead."

Ashe's green eyes narrowed. She looked to Thalia, a silent question in her expression: Do you want us to stay?

Thalia hesitated. The hunger gnawing at her stomach warred with curiosity about what this stranger could possibly want with her. The girl clearly knew her name, while Thalia only knew her as Senna from Ashe's terse acknowledgment. Her instincts urged caution, but there was also the awareness that making enemies at Frostforge was dangerous. Better to hear what Senna wanted.

"Go on," Thalia told her roommates with what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Save me a seat. I'll be right there."

Luna looked unconvinced, but Ashe gently touched her elbow. "We'll see you inside," Ashe said, guiding Luna toward the dining hall.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Senna took Thalia's arm in a grip that was just shy of painful, steering her toward an alcove off the main corridor. The small space was lit by a single blue-flamed lamp that cast eerie shadows across their faces. Away from the traffic of students heading to dinner, the alcove was unnervingly quiet, the stone walls muffling the distant sounds of the dining hall.

"I don't believe we've been properly introduced," Thalia said, extracting her arm from Senna's grasp with deliberate care. "You seem to know who I am, but—"

"I know all the first-years," Senna interrupted. Her voice was controlled, precise, each word carefully shaped before delivery. "Especially those from the South. It's my responsibility."

"Your responsibility?" Thalia echoed, confusion temporarily overriding her hunger and discomfort.

Senna's lips curved in what might have been a smile if it had reached her eyes. "I was in the forge this afternoon," she said, ignoring Thalia's question. "I saw you talking with Kaine Ember."

The non sequitur caught Thalia off-guard. "Yes," she admitted, unsure why this warranted a private conversation. "He gave me some advice about metalworking. What of it?"

"Did he?" Senna leaned closer, her pale eyes scanning Thalia's face as if searching for a lie. The scent of something sharp and wintergreen emanated from her — not unpleasant, but somehow aggressive in its intensity. "And did you find his advice...helpful?"

Thalia took a half-step back, uncomfortable with the intrusion into her space. "I don't see how that's any of your concern," she said.

"I'm warning you, as your senior — as someone who understands this place — to stay away from Kaine Ember."

"Why?" Thalia asked, a shiver running up her spine as she recalled the intensity of Kaine's blue eyes, the controlled power in his movements as he worked the forge.

"Because he's dangerous," Senna said, her eyes never leaving Thalia's face. "Bad news for anyone looking to survive Frostforge."

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Despite her unease, Thalia found herself bristling at the other girl's tone. "You don't strike me as someone concerned with my survival," she observed.

Senna shrugged one shoulder. "Do you know why he's here, greenhorn? Why a Northern boy with natural talent for metalwork would be sent to Frostforge rather than a proper apprenticeship?"

Thalia remained silent, unwilling to admit her ignorance but unable to fabricate an answer.

Senna's lips curved into a genuine smile this time, satisfied by Thalia's silence. "He spent five years in prison for killing his own father."

Thalia stared, unable to form a coherent response. Her mind replayed her interaction with Kaine — his quiet intensity, his knowledge of the forge, his careful movements. Nothing had suggested a murderer.

"That's not..." she started, then faltered. Not what? Not possible? Not relevant? She had no basis to deny it.

"Not what you expected?" Senna supplied, her smile widening. She shook her head, almost pitying. "He beat his own father to death when he was sixteen. Used a hammer — not unlike the ones we were working with today."

Thalia's stomach twisted, hunger forgotten. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I saw the way you looked at him," Senna said, her voice softening to

something almost kind, though her eyes remained cold."That fascination.I've seen it before, in other girls.He has that effect — something about the intensity, the danger."Her expression hardened again."But he's a killer, plain and simple."

Thalia thought of the way Kaine had watched her across the forge, the subtle nod of approval he'd given her work.Had she imagined the connection between them?Misread everything about their interaction?

"I appreciate the warning," she said finally, keeping her voice steady with effort."But I should join my friends for dinner."

Senna stepped aside, giving Thalia clear passage back to the main corridor."Of course," she said pleasantly, as if they'd been discussing nothing more significant than the weather."But remember what I said.Some mistakes at Frostforge can't be undone.Kaine Ember is one of them."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The last student had left the forge nearly an hour ago, yet Thalia couldn't bring herself to follow.She stood in the doorway of her dormitory, fingers tracing the rough grain of the wooden frame as she gazed down the torchlit corridor toward the metallurgy wing.The day's lessons had ended, but the pull of the forge remained — a persistent tug that whispered promises of discovery.Her roommates had settled in for the evening, Luna already nose-deep in a textbook, Ashe quietly sharpening a hunting knife.Neither of them looked up as Thalia slipped back out, her footsteps light against the stone floor as she made her decision.

After hours, Frostforge was a different creature entirely.The usual clamor of students had faded, leaving behind an eerie quiet punctuated only by the distant moan of wind against the academy's ancient walls.Thalia moved with purpose, staying close to the shadows that pooled in the corners of each corridor.Instructor Maven had made it

abundantly clear that first-years were not permitted in the workshops without supervision, but the rules felt trivial compared to the questions burning in Thalia's mind.

The metallurgy wing was darker than the main halls, illuminated only by the faint glow emanating from beneath the heavy oak door of the forge. Thalia paused, listening for any signs of movement within. Silence. She pressed her palm against the door, feeling the warmth radiating through the wood before pushing it open.

Heat embraced her immediately — not the blistering intensity of a working forge, but the lingering warmth of dying embers, like the embrace of her mother's kitchen back in Verdant Port. The massive forge at the center of the room glowed a deep, sullen red, casting long shadows across the stone floor. Tools hung in precise arrangements on the walls, gleaming dully in the low light. The scent of hot metal and coal dust filled her lungs, oddly comforting despite its harshness.

Thalia moved deeper into the room, her fingers trailing over the worn surfaces of the workbenches. During class, these spaces had been crowded with students jostling for position, the air filled with the sound of hammers and bellows. Now, she had it all to herself—the rare luxury of solitude in an academy where privacy was scarce.

At the far end of the room, a smaller forge still burned with enough heat for her purposes. Thalia approached it cautiously, remembering Instructor Maven's stern warnings about the dangers of improper handling. She selected a pair of thick leather gloves from a nearby rack, the interior still warm from their previous user. They were too large for her hands, the fingers extending well past her own, but they would serve their purpose.

The tongs felt heavy and awkward in her grip as she used them to extract a small piece of iron from a container of raw materials. Her first day's lesson had been rudimentary—merely heating and cooling simple pieces to understand the metal's

basic properties—but Thalia had sensed something more. A current, similar to what she'd felt in the herbs she'd handled in her mother's shop, but stronger, more defined.

She maneuvered the metal into the forge, watching as the dull gray began to transform, first to a deep cherry red, then to a bright, dangerous orange. Sweat beaded on her forehead, sliding down the curve of her cheek as she focused on the task. When the metal reached the proper temperature, she withdrew it carefully, transferring it to the anvil.

The hammer felt natural in her hand, its weight an extension of her arm rather than a burden. Thalia struck the metal tentatively at first, each impact sending a shower of sparks dancing across the anvil's surface. But as she continued, something shifted in her awareness. There it was again — that current of energy she'd sensed during class, but now, without the distraction of other students, she could focus on it properly.

It wasn't just heat flowing through the metal. It was magic, raw and untamed, coursing through the iron like blood through veins. Each strike of her hammer redirected the flow, concentrating it in some areas, dispersing it in others. Thalia paused, studying the half-formed shape before her. She hadn't been consciously trying to create anything specific, yet the metal had begun to take on the rough outline of a blade, similar to the one Kaine had been crafting during their lesson.

Kaine. The thought of him brought a strange flutter to her stomach. He'd barely spoken to her directly, yet she'd felt his eyes on her throughout the class, watching her work with an intensity that left her both unnerved and intrigued.

Pushing the thought aside, Thalia returned her attention to the metal. She struck again, focusing on the flow of energy through the material. With each blow, she began to understand that the shape wasn't merely aesthetic. It was functional, guiding the natural magic of the metal into specific channels.

"The Southern recruits never cease to surprise me."

The voice, deep and unexpected, sent Thalia's hammer clattering to the floor. She spun around, heart pounding in her chest, to find Kaine Ember leaning against a stone pillar. How long he'd been standing there, watching her work, she couldn't tell.

In the dim light of the forge, his features seemed even more severe — all sharp angles and shadows. His cropped dark hair absorbed the light rather than reflected it, and his pale blue eyes studied her with an unreadable expression. Unlike the other Northern students, who wore their disdain for Southerners openly, Kaine's face betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

"I — I was just..." Thalia began, suddenly aware that she was breaking at least three academy rules.

"Experimenting," he finished for her, pushing away from the pillar. He moved with the fluid grace of someone entirely comfortable in his own skin, approaching the anvil where her work lay cooling. "Don't stop on my account."



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Thalia hesitated, acutely conscious of his proximity, as she bent to retrieve the fallen hammer. The metal had already begun to cool, its glow fading from orange to red.

"It needs to be reheated," she said, reaching for the tongs.

"Not necessarily." Kaine closed the distance between them and extended his hand for the hammer. "May I?"

After a moment's hesitation, Thalia handed it over, watching as his large, calloused fingers closed around the handle with practiced ease. He positioned himself before the anvil, studying her work with a critical eye.

"You were working on a blade," he observed, not a question but a statement. "Basic, but the edge placement shows promise."

Without waiting for a response, he began to work the metal. His movements were nothing like Thalia's tentative strikes. Each blow was precise, calculated, the hammer dancing across the surface of the metal with a hypnotic rhythm that spoke of years of practice. The metal responded to his touch, the magical currents shifting and realigning with each impact.

"Every strike matters," he said, his voice low but clear above the sound of the hammer. "You're not just shaping the metal; you're guiding the magic within it. The ore's natural properties become more pronounced the more you understand how to work with it."

Thalia watched, transfixed, as the rough outline of her blade transformed under

Kaine's skilled hands. The edge grew sharper, the spine thicker, the entire piece taking on a balanced, lethal elegance that she couldn't have achieved on her own.

"You see how the curve channels the energy?" he asked, pausing to let her observe the glowing lines of magic that now flowed visibly through the metal. "A straight blade disperses power evenly, but a curve like this —" he traced a finger in the air above the metal, careful not to touch it, " — concentrates it at the point of impact."

Thalia nodded, her eyes tracking the movement of his hands as he resumed his work. "How do you know all this?" she asked, unable to contain her curiosity. "It feels like you've been doing it for years."

Kaine's rhythm faltered, just slightly, before he resumed his steady pace. "I have," he said simply. "I trained in smithing at sixteen. That was five years ago."

"I thought all first-year students were eighteen." The words were out before Thalia could consider their implication, that Kaine had been otherwise occupied during that two-year gap between coming of age and coming to Frostforge. The rumors Senna had shared hovered at the edge of Thalia's thoughts, persistent and unsettling.

Kaine set the hammer down, the sound of metal against metal strangely final in the quiet forge. He stepped back from the anvil, his expression closing like a door being shut. "There are exceptions," he said, his voice cooler now.

She knew she should leave the subject alone; good sense dictated that she thank Kaine for the demonstration and retreat to the safety of her dormitory. But the question burned in her throat, demanding voice.

"Is it true what they say about you?" The words hung between them, heavy as the hammer on the anvil. "About what happened...before you came here?"

The silence that followed stretched taut as wire. Kaine's eyes, so pale they seemed to absorb the forge's glow rather than reflect it, fixed on her face. For a moment, Thalia thought he might simply walk away without answering.

"What exactly do they say about me, Thalia Greenspire?" His use of her full name sent a chill down her spine, despite the forge's warmth.

Thalia swallowed, suddenly aware of how alone they were in the vast, shadowy forge. "Senna said —" she began, her voice smaller than she intended.

"Ah. Senna." The corner of Kaine's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Of course."

"I don't know what to believe," Thalia admitted. "She said you spent five years in prison. That you killed your father."

The words fell between them like stones into still water, sending ripples of tension through the air. Kaine's face remained impassive, but something flickered in his eyes — a flash of something dark and pained before his expression hardened once more.

He turned away, his broad shoulders stiff beneath the rough fabric of his tunic. "You shouldn't stay here too long," he said, his voice sharper now, edged like the blade they'd been crafting. "Maven checks the forges before midnight."

Without another word or backward glance, he moved toward the door, his footsteps echoing against the stone floor. Thalia remained motionless, the heat of the forge pressing against her skin as she watched him go. He hadn't confirmed the rumor. But he hadn't denied it either; somehow, that silence felt more damning than any confession.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The glacial river cut through the landscape like a vein of clear crystal, deceptively beautiful from a distance. Up close, Thalia could see the true nature of the churning water — violent currents that smashed against jagged black rocks, sending plumes of freezing spray into the air. She pulled her academy-issued cloak tighter around her shoulders, the fabric offering little protection against the biting wind that carried the river's chill. First-years clustered along the shore, their expressions mirroring her own unspoken thought: Survival class was about to earn its reputation as Frostforge's deadliest course.

Instructor Maven strode along the riverbank, her boots crunching on the gravel. The legendary eye patch gleamed in the weak sunlight, the blackened metal polished to mirror-like perfection. The glacier bear claw hanging from her neck swayed with each step, a constant reminder of the story whispered through the academy's halls; according to the rumors, she'd killed the beast with her bare hands after it had taken her eye.

"Listen up, recruits!" Maven's voice cut through the roar of the water without effort. "Today, you're going to learn how to navigate the Frostspine Rapids. The water's running high from recent storms, which means it's perfect for your first lesson."

Perfect for drowning, Thalia thought, eyeing the churning white water.

"This is not a game." Maven's single amber eye swept over the gathered students. "The survival course has the highest casualty rate of any class at Frostforge. Do you know why?" She didn't wait for an answer. "Because the cold doesn't care if you live or die. Neither do I. Out here, you either adapt or you perish."

A shiver ran down Thalia's spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

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"Each team will navigate a raft through these rapids to the fjord at the river's end."Maven gestured downstream."Some of you will need rescue, but if you are strong, you'll make it through on your own."

Luna, standing a few paces from Thalia, raised her hand."Instructor, don't we get a demonstration first?Or at least some instruction?"

Maven's laugh was as sharp as the rocks in the river."You think the Isle Wardens will give you a demonstration before they try to kill you?"She pointed to a row of rough-hewn wooden rafts pulled up on the shore."Four to a raft.Teams will be assigned now."

Thalia waited, breath held, as Maven read names from her clipboard.For once, luck was with her and she found herself assigned with Roran.Her relief at seeing his familiar face was momentarily eclipsed by her curiosity about their other teammates: Levi, a quiet boy from Verdant Port who rarely spoke in class, and a girl named Rose she recognized from the dining hall but had never officially met.

"Hey," Rose said, extending a gloved hand as they gathered near their assigned raft.Her pale blonde hair was pulled back in a severe braid, and her gray eyes held a determined glint."Rose Frostfield.From the Reaches.I'm hoping one of you Southerners has been on a raft before.Where I come from, the water never thaws."

"I haven't, but I've seen plenty of vessels in the harbor."Thalia shook her hand."Thalia Greenspire."

"The herb girl," Rose said, nodding."I've heard you're good in metallurgy."

Before Thalia could respond, Roran joined them, his wild black curls barely contained in a loose knot at the nape of his neck. "So we're river-mates, huh?" His easy smile broke some of the tension. "Anyone ever rafted before? Or been on any sort of boat?"

Levi stepped up beside them, completing their quartet. "My father took me paddling once," he offered, his voice so soft Thalia had to lean in to hear it over the river's roar. He was shorter than Roran but broader across the shoulders, with a serious face and light brown hair cut close to his scalp.

"That's something, at least," Roran said, clapping Levi on the shoulder.

"What about you?" Thalia asked.

"My father was a merchant," Roran replied. "I've spent plenty of time on the water."

Maven's whistle pierced the air. "Gear up! Vests are in the supply crates. Anyone who ditches their vest will fail this course and the next three. Anyone who loses their paddle gets no replacement. You sink, you swim. You fall behind, you stay behind."

The team gathered their equipment — thick life vests that smelled of mildew and wooden paddles worn smooth from use. Thalia pulled the vest over her head, cinching the straps tight. The added bulk felt reassuring, though she doubted how much protection it would truly offer against the frigid water.

"Shall we?" Roran gestured toward their raft. The wooden craft looked far too flimsy for what lay ahead — nothing more than roughly hewn logs lashed together, with crude crossbeams for seats.

Together, they dragged the raft to the river's edge. The wood scraped against the rocky shore, the sound grating against Thalia's already frayed nerves. The moment the raft

hit the water, the current tugged at it hungrily.

"Everyone in, quick," Roran directed, steadying the craft. "Levi at the front, Rose and Thalia in the middle, I'll take the back."

Thalia climbed aboard, her boots slipping slightly on the wet wood. The raft dipped beneath her weight, and for a sickening moment, she thought it might flip. She found her balance and settled onto the crossbeam, gripping her paddle with white knuckles.

Once all four were aboard, the current immediately caught them, pulling them away from shore. The raft spun lazily once, twice, before Roran's paddle bit into the water, steadying their course.

"Everyone paddle!" he called. "We need to build momentum before the first drop!"

Thalia dug her paddle into the icy water, feeling the resistance as she pulled. The cold bit into her hands despite her gloves, numbing her fingers. Ahead, she could see where the relatively calm water gave way to white froth as the river narrowed and dropped.

"Forward strong, three strokes!" Roran commanded from the back.

They complied, the raft picking up speed.

"Now starboard only — sorry, that's the right side. Thalia and me!"

Thalia responded, surprised by the authority in Roran's voice. Her arms strained as she pulled the paddle through the water, helping to angle the raft toward the center of the approaching rapids.

The first drop came suddenly. The raft tipped forward, and Thalia's stomach lurched as they plunged. Cold spray drenched her face. The raft bucked beneath them, and she

clung to her seat with one hand, paddle with the other.

"Keep paddling!" Roran shouted over the water's roar. "Left side now!"

Rose and Levi dug in, and the raft veered away from a half-submerged boulder that would have shattered their craft. Thalia's heart hammered against her ribs, but she couldn't deny the exhilaration that came with each successful maneuver.

Roran called directions continuously, his voice somehow carrying over the chaos. Under his guidance, they slalomed through obstacles that sent other rafts spinning. Twice, they passed teams who had capsized, their members struggling in the frigid current. Maven's assistants, posted along the shores, threw ropes to the floundering students.

"Hard left ahead!" Roran warned. "There's a drop and then a sharp turn!"



“How do you know that?” Rose yelled, her voice strained with effort.

How does she know that? The river wound past an outcropping of rock, obscuring the route ahead; it was as if Roran had somehow sensed the direction of the water. Thalia stole a glance at Roran as she paddled. His face was alive with focus, eyes scanning the rapids with practiced precision. His curls had come loose from their knot, whipping around his face in the wind, but he seemed not to notice. He moved with the raft as though he and the craft were one entity, his body instinctively shifting to counter each movement of the frothing water.

They hit the drop he'd warned about, and the world went briefly vertical. Thalia's paddle lost contact with the water as they fell, her stomach rising into her throat. Then they crashed back down, water sluicing over the raft's edge, drenching them all.

"Hard to port! I mean, left! Hard on the left!" Roran shouted.

Thalia and Rose responded, driving their paddles deep into the churning water. The raft began to turn, but not quickly enough. A massive rock loomed directly in their path, the water splitting around it in twin torrents of white foam.

"We're not going to make it!" Rose cried.

Roran shifted his weight dramatically to the rear corner of the raft, using his body as a counterbalance. At the same time, he thrust his paddle into the water at a precise angle. The combined effect swung the raft around with startling efficiency, missing the rock by a handspan.

"Keep paddling!"he urged, already repositioning himself."Strong strokes!"

They shot through the next series of rapids with remarkable control, Roran calling commands with increasing complexity."Cross draw on the right!Sweep left!Pivot turn coming up!"

When they finally emerged into the calmer waters of the fjord, Thalia let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.Her arms trembled with exertion, and her clothing clung to her skin, soaked through with icy water.But they had made it, their raft intact.

"That was..."she began, turning to Roran.

"Amazing!"Rose finished, laughing with relief."Where did you learn to navigate waters like that?"

Roran shrugged, his easy smile returning now that the danger had passed."Just got a feel for it, I guess."

Levi said nothing, but Thalia caught him studying Roran with an unreadable expression.

They paddled to the shore of the fjord, joining the handful of teams that had successfully completed the course.The stark beauty of the landscape stretched before them — towering cliffs framing the placid waters of the fjord, which opened to the distant sea.Behind them, the river continued to churn and roar, disgorging more rafts into the relative safety of the deep waters.

Not all had fared as well as Thalia's team.One raft arrived with only three paddlers, and another was being towed by Maven's assistants.A few students stumbled ashore alone, having swum the final distance after their rafts were destroyed.

Maven appeared along the shoreline, stride purposeful as always. She surveyed the bedraggled students with her single eye, expression unchanged.

"Congratulations on not dying," she announced when the last of the rafts had arrived or been accounted for. "Unfortunately, your task isn't complete."

A collective groan rose from the group. What more could Maven possibly demand after such an ordeal?

"Soldiers don't complain," Maven snapped. "You brought these rafts down, now you'll carry them back up. Along the river's edge. Back to where we started."

Thalia stared at the steep, rocky path that wound along the riverside back to their starting point. It had to be at least two miles, all uphill, over treacherous terrain.

"Teams of four, same as before," Maven instructed. "You finish last, you do an extra lap tomorrow." She blew her whistle. "Begin."

With resigned sighs, Thalia's team hoisted their raft overhead. The waterlogged wood was even heavier than it had been when it was dry, and the awkward shape made it difficult to balance. Thalia's muscles screamed in protest as they began the arduous journey upriver.

The path was narrow and uneven, forcing them to walk single file in places, the raft precariously balanced between them. Roran took the lead, setting a steady pace that kept them moving without exhausting them completely.

They had covered perhaps half a mile when shouts erupted behind them. Thalia craned her neck to see a team struggling with their raft, a girl having slipped on loose rocks.

"Hold here," Roran said, carefully extracting himself from beneath the raft. "I'll be right back."

Grateful for the respite, Thalia, Levi, and Rose lowered their burden to the ground. Thalia massaged her aching shoulders, watching as Roran ran back to assist the fallen team.

"He's good with the water," Levi said quietly, eyes fixed on Roran's retreating form.

Thalia nodded. "He saved us from crashing back there."

"Didn't you think it was strange?" Levi's voice dropped even lower, forcing Thalia and Rose to lean in. "The way he handled the raft?"

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"Strange how?" Rose asked, wringing water from her braid.

Levi glanced over his shoulder, ensuring Roran was still out of earshot. "His maneuver near the rocks – I'm pretty sure that's an Isle Warden technique."

"What are you talking about?"

"My father was in the Coastal Guard," Levi explained, his eyes grave. "Isle Wardens stir the currents with their tempests, then cut through the storm-churned waters while their enemies flounder. It's how they slip past port defenses." He nodded in Roran's direction. "What he did back there — that's not something a merchant's son should know."

Thalia opened her mouth to defend Roran, then closed it. She recalled his precise commands, the unfamiliar terminology, the way he'd read the water as if he'd been born to it.

"But he hates the Isle Wardens," Rose interjected. "Everyone knows he lost family in a raid."

"So he says," Levi replied.

They fell silent as Roran jogged back to them, slightly winded but smiling. "They're sorted now. Shall we continue?"

As they hoisted the raft once more, Thalia found herself studying Roran's profile, searching for...what? Deception? Danger? She thought of his easy smile, his

encouraging words during her failed cryomancy attempts, the natural leadership he'd displayed today.

The raft felt heavier on her shoulders as they continued upriver, and not just from the physical exertion. The seed of doubt Levi had planted took root, growing with each step, each glance at Roran's confident form leading the way.

Who are you really? And what are you doing at Frostforge?

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Thalia fell onto her bed with such force that the thin mattress protested beneath her weight. Every muscle in her body screamed — from her shoulders carrying the waterlogged raft for miles, to her palms rubbed raw from paddling, to her legs that trembled even now from the uphill trek. The dormitory's stone walls held the day's chill, unmoved by the weak sunlight filtering through the narrow window. She closed her eyes, allowing herself a moment of complete stillness, her wet hair splayed across the pillow like spilled ink.

The silence of the room pressed against her ears after hours filled with the roar of rapids and Maven's cutting commands. Luna and Ashe were absent, likely still in their own classes, or perhaps in the dining hall if they'd been fortunate enough to finish early. Thalia envied them the luxury of food and rest, her own stomach a hollow pit beneath her aching ribs.

She raised a hand to push damp strands of hair from her face, wincing as her muscles protested the simple movement. Her fingertips were wrinkled from prolonged exposure to the icy water, the skin around her nails split in places where she'd gripped the paddle with desperate strength. Salt crystals had formed along her forearms where the fjord water had dried — a reminder that the glacial river eventually met the unforgiving sea, just as all the students at Frostforge would eventually face the Isle

Wardens.

The Isle Wardens. Roran. The memory of Levi's words sent a fresh wave of unease through her exhausted body.

An Isle Warden technique. That's not something a merchant's son should know.

She pushed the thought away, too tired to unravel that particular knot now. Too tired to do anything but lie here and—

Thalia's eyes snapped to the ancient clock mounted on the wall near the door. The brass hands showed fourteen minutes past the hour. Cryomancy began at half past.

"No," she groaned, the word muffled by her pillow. Her body begged her to stay horizontal, to surrender to the exhaustion that had settled into her bones like frost on a window pane.

With a supreme effort, Thalia pushed herself upright. The room tilted sickeningly before settling back into place. Her wet clothing clung to her skin, a constant, uncomfortable reminder of the ordeal she'd just survived. She had only moments to change and gather her supplies; if she wasn't punctual, she'd run afoul of the instructors, who always emphasized prompt arrival and militant bearing.

On unsteady legs, Thalia crossed to the wardrobe she shared with Luna. Their few belongings hung side by side — Luna's carefully pressed coats, Thalia's more modest collection of clothing, much of it secondhand. She peeled off her sodden outer layers, exchanging them for the dry uniform required for indoor classes: a high-collared shirt and fitted pants.

The clock's hands moved relentlessly forward. Thalia gathered her cryomancy textbook and notebook, shoving them into her leather satchel. All she needed now

were her frost gloves, the specialized equipment necessary for manipulating ice magic without frostbite.

The gloves lay on the small table beside her bed where she'd left them after the first disastrous lesson two days prior. Even now, the memory of her failure stung. Only Roran's encouragement after class, and her newly discovered talent for metallurgy, had prevented her from sinking into complete despair.

She reached for the gloves, noting absently that they seemed slightly out of position from where she'd placed them. Perhaps Luna had bumped the table while retrieving something of her own. Thalia picked them up, prepared to tug them on and rush to class; then she stopped, her breath catching in her throat.

Something wasn't right.

As she turned them over in her hands, she noticed anomalies that sent a chill through her veins. The stitching along the right palm — normally tight and uniform — had been loosened, the thread fraying in places where it remained intact. Small punctures dotted the thumb and forefinger of the left glove.

These weren't the marks of normal wear and tear, and the gloves had been brand new when Varik had handed them out.

She examined the gloves more closely, turning them inside out to reveal further damage. The interior lining, embedded with runic symbols that helped channel cryomantic energy, had been scratched in key places. The runes for "protection" and "conduct" were partially obscured, their delicate lines interrupted.

"Who would..." she whispered to the empty room, the words dying on her lips as implications cascaded through her mind.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

Damaged gloves wouldn't just make cryomancy more difficult — they could be dangerous. Without proper protection, ice magic could backfire, freezing the caster's own flesh. In extreme cases, it could cause permanent nerve damage or worse. Someone had set a trap, knowing that Thalia would put on these gloves and attempt to cast.

Her gaze swept the dormitory, suddenly seeing the familiar space through a lens of suspicion. Who had access to their room? Luna and Ashe, of course. But the dormitory doors at Frostforge weren't locked during daylight hours; any student could have slipped in while classes were in session. She tried to recall if she'd mentioned her struggles with cryomancy publicly. Had she made herself a target by revealing weakness?

The clock's hands moved inexorably toward the half-hour mark. In ten minutes, Varik would call the roll. Missing class could result in punishment, and punishment could be deadly.

But using these gloves would be more than just risky — it would be foolish.

Thalia gently placed the damaged gloves back on the table, her mind racing through options. She could report the sabotage to her instructors, but without proof of who had done it, what would that accomplish? It might even make her appear weak, unable to handle the cutthroat competition of Frostforge. Or worse, they might think she'd damaged the gloves herself as an excuse for her poor performance. Varik had warned them specifically to keep their gloves in good condition.

Or she could attempt to repair the gloves enough to get through today's lesson, then

find a more permanent solution.

Thalia reached for her satchel, fingers fumbling past her textbooks to the small leather pouch tucked in the bottom. The familiar weight of her herbal kit provided a moment of comfort — a connection to her mother's shop, to the life she'd left behind in Verdant Port. She withdrew a needle and thread intended for binding medicinal sachets, along with a small vial of resin she used for sealing plant specimens.

Seven minutes remained before class.

With trembling fingers, Thalia began emergency repairs on the gloves. She couldn't fix everything. The runic damage in particular was beyond her skill, but she might be able to reinforce the structural elements enough to prevent immediate injury. The needle flashed in the dim light as she worked, securing loose threads and reinforcing weakened seams. The resin, sticky and aromatic, sealed the punctures in the left glove, though she knew the fix was temporary at best.

As she worked, Thalia's mind returned to the question that burned like ice in her veins: Who had done this?

She remembered Levi's suspicious glances at Roran during their river journey. She thought of Brynn's open hostility toward the poorer Southern students. She recalled the warning from Senna about Kaine — a murderer, if the rumor was to be believed.

The list of potential enemies seemed to grow with each passing day at Frostforge. She had come here thinking her greatest challenge would be surviving the rigorous training, mastering magical disciplines that were foreign to her. Now, she realized that the other students might pose a more immediate threat.

Thalia secured the final stitch as the clock's hand touched the twenty-five-minute mark. Five minutes to reach the Cryomancy chamber on the academy's eastern

wing. She pulled on the repaired gloves, feeling the rough patches where her hasty mending had altered the once-perfect fit. They would have to do.

She slung her satchel over her shoulder, wincing as the weight pressed against muscles already strained to their limit. The revelation of sabotage had momentarily overshadowed her physical exhaustion, but as she hurried from the dormitory, each step sent fresh pain through her overworked body.

Thalia paused at the doorway, glancing back at the room that should have been a sanctuary. The afternoon sunlight caught motes of dust hanging in the air, turning them to floating embers that danced in the draft from the open door.

Someone had entered this space — her space — with the intention of causing her harm.

## CHAPTER NINE

Thalia woke to a familiar enemy, the cold. It slid beneath her pelt blanket with icy fingers, probing her skin like a curious child discovering a new toy. Her breath billowed before her face in thick white clouds, each exhalation a reminder that winter had truly arrived at Frostforge. She curled tighter, drawing her knees to her chest, but the chill had already seeped into her bones, making her joints ache and her teeth chatter. Outside the narrow window, snow piled against the glass like a silent warning. This was only the beginning.

With stiff movements, Thalia forced herself to sit up. She glanced over at Luna, who seemed to still be asleep, buried beneath a mountain of furs. Thalia moved to rise, to rouse her roommate; the moment her feet touched the cold ground, she gasped, a shudder running through her body.

"Southern blood truly is thinner," came Ashe's voice from across the room. The

Northern girl was already dressed, her movements fluid and unbothered by the temperature that left Thalia rigid.

"I'm fine," Thalia replied, the lie betrayed by the violent trembling of her hands. Her fingers felt like wooden pegs, refusing to bend properly as she reached for her boots.

"You don't look fine. You look like you might shatter if someone taps you."

Thalia forced a smile that felt more like a grimace. "In Verdant Port, winter means wearing a shawl in the evenings and lighting a small fire for tea." She closed her eyes, summoning the memory of her mother's herb shop, where winter brought sailors seeking remedies for chapped skin and minor frostbite from northern voyages. The worst cold she'd ever experienced had been a brief sea squall that blew through the port, sending temperatures plummeting for two days. Two days — not months.

"You can't compare this to anything you've known before," Ashe said, surprisingly gentle as she approached Thalia's bed. "The Northern Reaches don't just have winter — they are winter."

Thalia nodded, her teeth still chattering. She'd spent her nights dreaming of Verdant Port's salt-tinged breezes and sun-warmed stones. Each morning brought fresh disappointment as she opened her eyes to Frostforge's merciless grip.

"You're wasting energy."

"Wasting energy?" Thalia asked, unable to suppress the tremor in her voice.

"Fighting the cold." Ashe stood, demonstrating with her own body. "Watch how I move. Slow, deliberate. Each motion with purpose." She walked across the room, her steps measured. "Southerners rush around, thinking movement creates warmth. It does — temporarily. But it also depletes your strength faster, leaving you vulnerable when

your body can't sustain the effort."

Thalia observed Ashe's careful movements, noting how her roommate seemed to glide rather than hurry, conserving energy with each step. "I never thought of it that way."

"Of course not. You've never needed to." Ashe returned, extending her hand. "I'll show you."

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Reluctantly, Thalia took Ashe's hand. The Northern girl positioned herself behind Thalia, placing her hands on Thalia's shoulders.

"First, your breathing. Cold air burns your lungs because you're gasping it in like you're drowning. Breathe from your belly, not your chest. Slow and deep." Ashe's hand moved to Thalia's abdomen, applying gentle pressure. "From here. In through your nose, hold for three counts, then release through barely-parted lips. The air warms before it hits your lungs."

Thalia followed Ashe's instructions, surprised when the burning sensation in her chest began to subside. The room remained freezing, but somehow the cold felt less invasive.

"Good," Ashe continued. "Now, movement. Your muscles are tensed against the cold, which actually makes you colder. Relax your shoulders."

"If I relax, I'll shake even more," Thalia protested.

"No, you won't. The shaking comes from fighting." Ashe guided Thalia's shoulders down from where they'd been hunched around her ears. "Let your arms hang loose. Don't clench your fists — it restricts blood flow."

Thalia attempted to follow the instructions, feeling awkward and exposed. Yet there was undeniable relief as her cramped muscles released their tension.

"Now walk with me," Ashe instructed, stepping toward the door. "Match my pace. Each step deliberate, heel to toe. Don't bounce or hurry."

Together they crossed the small dormitory, Thalia mimicking Ashe's measured stride. By her third pass across the room, she noticed the strangest sensation — she was still cold, but the panic that had accompanied the cold was diminishing. Her body, previously rigid with resistance, began to move more fluidly.

"There's one more technique," Ashe said, guiding Thalia back to her bed. "If you're ever caught in a snowstorm, or if your body temperature drops too low, this position can save your life." She sat on the bed, demonstrating by drawing her knees to her chest and crossing her arms over them, tucking her hands into her armpits. "This protects your vital organs and major blood vessels. Your body heat circulates instead of escaping. The academy teaches a different method, but this one comes from my clan. It's kept people alive through blizzards that would freeze a standing man solid."

Thalia copied the position, immediately feeling the difference as her own body heat reflected back to her core. "This is...much better," she admitted, looking up at Ashe with genuine gratitude. "Why are you helping me?"

Ashe stood, her expression returning to its usual stoicism. "I'm not heartless. And watching you shiver like a newborn pup was becoming irritating." But there was a softness in her eyes that belied her gruff words.

Luna finally emerged from her blanket cocoon. "Breakfast soon," she announced, reaching for her boots. "Maybe they'll have porridge again. With honey, if we're lucky."

"Thank you," Thalia said to Ashe as they prepared to leave. "Really."

Ashe merely shrugged, but Thalia caught the hint of a smile. It was strange to discover this kindness beneath Ashe's warrior exterior — the same girl who had seemed so intimidating on their first day had just spent half an hour teaching Thalia how to survive the cold.

As they headed to the dining hall, Thalia walked between her roommates, practicing Ashe's measured gait and breathing technique. The corridors of Frostforge remained as frigid as ever, but for the first time since arriving, Thalia didn't feel like the cold would kill her before her training did. She'd found allies among the stone and ice, people who, despite their differences, might help her survive this place.

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The cryomancy classroom echoed with the soft hissing of frost meeting metal as twenty pairs of students bent over their workstations. Morning light filtered through high, narrow windows, carrying little warmth but illuminating the cloud of crystallized breath that hung above them like a miniature weather system. Thalia and Luna's assigned blade — a simple, unadorned dagger with a leather-wrapped hilt — lay on the stone table, its surface gleaming dully in the weak sunlight. Beside Thalia, Luna hummed tunelessly, her eyes not on their shared blade but scanning the room with deliberate, sweeping movements.

"Today's exercise is elementary," Instructor Varik announced, his voice cutting through the chill air like the blades they were meant to enchant. Unlike the imposing figure of Instructor Maven, Varik was lean and precise, with fingers that reminded Thalia of icicles — long, thin, and potentially lethal. "Create a rime over the entirety of your blade. The frost must be even and controlled. Too thick, and the blade becomes brittle. Too thin, and the enchantment fails to take hold."

Thalia flexed her fingers inside her damaged frost gloves, willing warmth into them. The techniques Ashe had taught her that morning had helped her survive the walk to the training hall, but cryomancy required fine control — impossible with numb fingers.

"Begin," Varik commanded, and the room filled with the soft susurrations of students calling frost to their blades.



"Should we take turns, or try together?" Thalia asked Luna, who had yet to even glance at their blade.

Luna's fingers twisted one of her beaded dreadlocks, her eyes fixed on something across the room. "Hmm? Oh. You start."

Thalia sighed and focused on their assignment. Placing her gloved hands on either side of the blade — not touching it, but hovering just above — she drew a slow breath through her nose, just as she'd been taught. Cryomancy felt counterintuitive to her; in herbalism, her mother had taught her to channel warmth into plants to extract their essences. Here, she needed to do the opposite: pull heat away from the metal, creating cold.

Her first attempt produced only a sad little patch of frost near the blade's tip, which quickly melted.

"Draw from deeper," Luna murmured, though her eyes remained elsewhere. "Not from your hands. From your core."

Thalia tried again, closing her eyes to better concentrate. This time, she imagined the cold as a living thing inside her, gathered it from her belly where her breath pooled, and directed it through her arms toward the blade. A thin layer of white appeared along the edge, spreading like lichen across stone.

A small victory, but short-lived. As she attempted to extend the frost toward the hilt, her right glove slipped, the tear widening just enough to break her concentration. The frost retreated, melting back into beads of moisture on the metal.

"Luna," Thalia hissed, frustration mounting. "Could you help instead of — what are you even looking at?"

Luna didn't respond. Her usually unfocused expression had sharpened into something intent and calculating. Her eyes were narrowed, darting between different student pairs, lingering in particular on a table to their right where two Southern boys worked.

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Thalia recognized them vaguely — Emir, tall and reed-thin with close-cropped hair, and Joren, shorter with a perpetual worried furrow between his brows. Both had struggled in previous lessons, their Southern upbringing leaving them as disadvantaged as Thalia when it came to ice magic.

"Luna," Thalia tried again, but her roommate held up one finger in a silent command to wait, her eyes never leaving the other students.

With a sigh, Thalia returned to their blade. The tear in her glove had worsened, a thread now hanging loose where her clumsy repair was coming undone. She'd need to find a better solution soon, or request replacement gloves — though she'd heard the waiting list for new equipment was long, with priority given to older students. Plus, putting in such a request, she would risk punishment.

She was contemplating how to adjust her grip to compensate for the tear when Luna suddenly stiffened beside her, her spine going rigid.

A sharp crack split the air — a sound like lake ice breaking underfoot in early spring. Thalia's head snapped up as she heard gasps of dismay from Emir and Joren. Their blade had not just frosted over; it had frozen solid, crystalline fractures spider-webbing across its surface.

Then, with a sound like shattering glass, the blade exploded.

Deadly shards sprayed outward, glittering in the pale morning light like diamond splinters. Emir and Joren dropped to the floor with twin yelps of terror. One razor-edged fragment sliced through the air where Joren's head had been moments before,

catching the shoulder of his cloak and pinning it to the wooden workbench behind him before embedding itself in the grain of the wood.

The room fell silent. Twenty pairs of eyes fixed on the Southern boys sprawled on the stone floor, their faces drained of color, breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps as they realized how close they'd come to death. The fragment that had pierced Joren's cloak quivered slightly, still vibrating from the force of impact.

Then came the heavy tread of boots, deliberate and measured, as Instructor Varik crossed to their table. His face was composed, but a muscle jumped in his jaw, betraying his fury.

"Explain," he demanded, voice so quiet it was more terrifying than a shout.

Joren looked up, his eyes wide with shock. "I — we —"

"We were following the instructions," Emir cut in, finding his voice first. "Just like you said. Draw from our core, channel it through —"

"Following instructions?" Varik repeated, each word precisely enunciated. "Was I unclear when I specified 'even' and 'controlled'?" He gestured at the fragments of blade scattered across the floor and workbench. "Does this look controlled to you?"

Neither boy answered.

"Southern weakness," someone muttered from across the room — not quietly enough.

Varik's head turned sharply. "Silence," he commanded, before returning his attention to the cowering students. "You nearly killed yourselves and potentially others with your carelessness. When ice magic goes wrong, people lose limbs — or lives."

He bent down, picking up a blade fragment with his bare fingers, unconcerned by its razor edge. "You poured too much power into the blade without proper structure. You created brittle ice, not binding frost." His eyes swept over the rest of the class. "A lesson for all of you. Cryomancy requires precision above all else. Too little power, and nothing happens. Too much..." He let the fragment drop, where it shattered further against the stone floor.

Thalia's hands trembled. She leaned closer to Luna, keeping her voice low. "You knew something was going to happen, didn't you?"

"I didn't know," Luna murmured, almost under her breath. "I suspected, and happened to be watching at the right time."

Thalia wasn't sure what to make of that, but she couldn't discuss it further in the middle of class. She turned her attention to the untouched blade before her. "I'm not sure I should continue. What if I make the same mistake?"

Luna didn't respond immediately. She was staring at the remains of the shattered blade, her expression unreadable, somewhere between calculation and concern. Then, slowly, her eyes tracked toward where Brynn stood with her partner, their blade already covered in a perfect, even layer of frost.

"Luna?" Thalia prompted.

"Hmm?" Luna blinked, as if coming back from somewhere far away. "Oh. You won't make that mistake."

"How can you be sure?"

Luna's smile was thin and didn't reach her eyes. "Because you respect the cold. Now, try again. I'll help this time."

But Thalia's confidence had evaporated like morning mist. She placed her hands on either side of the blade, trying to center herself, but the image of that shard slicing through Joren's cloak kept flashing before her eyes. Her fingers shook visibly, the tremors having nothing to do with the cold and everything to do with fear.

When she attempted to channel frost again, the power that had flowed so promisingly earlier now stuttered and stalled. A few pathetic crystals formed on the blade's edge, only to melt immediately.

"I can't," Thalia whispered, frustration making her throat tight.

Luna finally turned her full attention to their workspace. "You're trying too hard now. Earlier, you were scared of not having enough power. Now you're scared of having too much." She reached out, placing her small hand over Thalia's. "The secret is balance."

But balance felt impossible to achieve. Thalia's mind kept replaying the crack of the shattering blade, imagining those deadly shards flying toward her own face instead of Joren's. Each time she gathered cold energy from her core, panic seized her, and she released it before it could properly form.

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The frost refused to spread, retreating from the metal almost as quickly as she could summon it. It was like trying to paint a masterpiece with water on hot stone — any progress evaporated before it could take shape.

"Breathe," Luna instructed, her voice surprisingly firm. "Like Ashe taught you this morning."

Thalia looked up, startled. "I thought you were asleep for that."

Luna's smile was mysterious. "I notice things. Now breathe. In through your nose, hold, out through your lips. Find your center."

Thalia obeyed, drawing air deep into her lungs and holding it, feeling the cold burn and then normalize. As she exhaled slowly, some of her panic receded. She tried once more, placing her damaged gloves on either side of the blade, summoning cold not from fear but from the quiet core of herself where winter had begun to take root.

The cold was a living thing at Frostforge, a relentless adversary that demanded respect and yielded only to those with the strength to command it. And in this moment, Thalia felt anything but strong.

## CHAPTER TEN

The dining hall at Frostforge Academy stretched before Thalia like a battlefield dressed as a banquet. Wooden tables, scarred with years of knife marks and frost burns, filled the cavernous space while the high windows let in thin streams of waning daylight that did little to warm the perpetually chilled air. Thalia hunched over

her tray, eyeing the gray mound of what the servers had claimed was venison stew — though she'd yet to discover actual meat beneath the congealed surface. Across from her, Luna poked at her meal with the distracted air of someone who'd forgotten food's purpose, her gaze drifting around the room in that unfocused way Thalia had recognized as carefully practiced.

They'd claimed the farthest corner of the hall, a spot that had become their unofficial territory over the past weeks. It offered the twin advantages of a wall at their backs and a clear view of the entire room — not that Luna ever seemed to be watching. At least, not obviously.

A group of Northern students passed by, their trays piled high with extra portions. One of them — a stocky boy with a shock of white-blond hair — cast a dismissive glance at Thalia's half-eaten meal. The corners of his mouth twitched into a smirk before he moved on.

"They still get better food," Thalia muttered, pushing a gelatinous chunk to the edge of her bowl. "I swear the cooks serve us the scraps."

Luna didn't respond. Her spoon hovered over her forgotten stew as her eyes fixed on a point across the room. Thalia followed her gaze to where Instructor Maven stood, conferring with another teacher, their heads bent close together.

"It's strange," Luna said abruptly, her voice sharper than her usual dreamy tone.

Thalia was startled, her spoon clattering against the edge of her bowl. "What's strange?"

"That blade." Luna's eyes, suddenly clear and focused, flicked back to Thalia. "In cryomancy class yesterday. The way it shattered." She lowered her voice though no one sat within earshot. "It didn't strike me as...accidental."



A chill that had nothing to do with Frostforge's perpetual cold slithered down Thalia's spine. The memory flashed before her: the frozen blade fracturing, deadly shards flying toward Joren and Emir — both Southern students like herself. She'd assumed it was poor craftsmanship or bad luck.

"You think it was deliberate?" Thalia breathed, leaning forward.

Luna's eyes darted around the room again with unmistakable purpose. "The trajectory," she said, making a sharp gesture with her fingers. "The shards didn't scatter randomly. They shot in one direction." She tilted her head. "Only in Joren and Emir's direction."

Thalia set down her spoon, appetite vanishing entirely. "But who would —" She stopped herself, the answer obvious. Several Northerners made no secret of their disdain for Southern students. The hierarchy at Frostforge mirrored the wider world's power structures, with those from the ice-bound Reaches looking down on those from the warmer regions.

Luna shrugged, but the gesture lacked her usual airy dismissiveness. "Who benefits if there are fewer Southern students to compete with?" she asked, eyes dropping back to her untouched food. "Or perhaps someone simply enjoys causing harm."

The dining hall suddenly felt colder. Thalia scanned the crowded tables, seeing potential threats where she'd only seen fellow struggling students before. Her hand moved unconsciously to her pocket, fingers brushing against the frayed edge of her frost gloves.

After a moment of hesitation, Thalia reached into her cloak and withdrew the gloves. She placed them on the table between their trays, the stitching along the sides visibly unraveled — just enough to compromise their insulating properties without being immediately noticeable.

"I found these like this," she said quietly. "After the survival exercise."

Luna's gaze sharpened, transforming her face from vague to predatory in an instant. She picked up one glove, examining the damage with clinical precision, and her finger traced the separated threads.

"This wasn't an accident," Luna said, her voice flat. "Someone knew exactly how much damage to do. Enough to make the gloves fail during intensive cryomancy, but not so much that you'd notice immediately."

Thalia's throat tightened. "I thought I was being paranoid."

"Paranoia at Frostforge is just good sense." Luna returned the glove, her movements deliberate and controlled. "You should be careful who you trust." She glanced around the hall again, this time making no effort to disguise her vigilance. "Not everyone sees Frostforge as an ordeal to survive. Some students are here for glory. They see the academy as a competition, and in a sense, they're right. This place is designed to weed out the weak. If most of us won't survive, and you're looking to boost your own chances... well, why not thin the herd? Not to mention the fact that better class rankings correlate directly to better placements in the war effort."

Thalia studied Luna, bemused. Since their arrival, Luna had maintained her distracted, harmless persona so consistently that even Thalia — who shared a room with her — sometimes wondered if there was anything beneath the act. But moments like this revealed glimpses of someone else entirely: observant, calculating, sharp.

"What about you, then?" Thalia asked. "Whenever you're around other people, you act like you don't care about any of this. Like you're just...drifting along. But I know that's not true."

She expected Luna to deflect with her usual vacant smile or nonsensical

comment. Instead, annoyance flickered across Luna's face — brief but unmistakable.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

"You're not as slow as the others, are you?" Luna said. Her eyes held a challenge, but beneath it, Thalia caught a glimpse of something like relief, as if maintaining her facade had become exhausting. She leaned forward, close enough that her next words required barely any sound. "I told you that my father was a councilor in Verdant Port. A respected position, until he started questioning the recruiters."

Thalia remained perfectly still, afraid that any movement might cause Luna to retreat back behind her mask.

"He insisted that the council and city guard should do more to protect our youth," Luna continued, her dark eyes never leaving Thalia's face. "He said that collaborating with Frostforge made us complicit in their methods." A bitter smile touched her lips. "That didn't go over well with those who profit from sending us here."

A cool draft swept through the hall, causing the candles to flicker and sending shadows dancing across Luna's face. For a moment, she looked much older than her eighteen years.

"My Selection was a punishment. It was meant to fit the 'crime.' My father could've easily afforded a bribe. I was never meant to come here, but the recruiters refused to take his money." Luna's voice remained steady, but her fingers curled into a tight fist on the table. "Everyone on the council knew it was meant as a death sentence. A message to others who might speak out."

The implications staggered Thalia. She'd volunteered for Frostforge to protect her sister, knowing the risks. But Luna had been sent here as punishment for her father's dissent — a political sacrifice.

"I'm sorry," Thalia whispered, the words utterly inadequate.

Luna's expression hardened. "I don't need pity." She straightened, shoulders squaring beneath her academy uniform. "I don't intend to die here, Thalia. I plan to survive Frostforge and return to my father."

The determination in her voice rang with conviction — not the desperate hope of most first-years, but the cold certainty of someone executing a plan.

"And while I'm here," Luna added, lowering her voice again, "I intend to learn everything I can. When I return to Verdant Port, I'll make sure my father has evidence of exactly what happens at Frostforge. Information that can be used against the recruiters."

Thalia's mind raced. Luna's words could be interpreted as treason against the academy — the kind of talk that would earn severe punishment if overheard. Yet she'd chosen to share this with Thalia.

"Why tell me this?" Thalia asked, wary despite her growing trust in Luna.

Luna's gaze became calculating once more, assessing Thalia with the precision of a master jeweler evaluating a gem. "Because you're observant. Because you notice things." A ghost of a smile touched her lips. "And because you didn't come here to become one of them."

The unspoken question hung between them: Are you with me?

Thalia thought of her mother and sister back in Verdant Port, of the tampered gloves in front of her, of the shattered blade that had nearly killed two Southern students. The hierarchy at Frostforge wasn't just unfair — it was deadly. And students like her were expendable in ways the Northern-born weren't.

"We should be careful," Thalia said finally, neither accepting nor rejecting Luna's implicit offer of alliance. "These walls have ears."

Luna nodded, seemingly satisfied with this cautious response. She picked up her spoon and resumed poking at her food, her demeanor shifting seamlessly back into distracted disinterest. Only the newfound awareness between them suggested their conversation had happened at all.

Thalia returned her gloves to her pocket, mind churning with possibilities. Luna had revealed herself as both a potential ally and someone with her own agenda. Could Thalia trust her? Not entirely, perhaps. But in a place like Frostforge, where death stalked the hallways disguised as "training accidents," having someone watching her back might make the difference between survival and becoming another statistic.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thalia wiped the sweat from her brow, the heat from dozens of forges washing over her in suffocating waves as she weaved between workstations toward her assigned spot. Her hands trembled slightly — not from fear of the flames, but from nerves. She'd entered the Howling Forge expecting to find Instructor Wolfe and, instead, came face-to-face with Maven. Today, the first-year students were to face an evaluation of their metallurgy skills.

The massive chamber stretched before her, a cavernous space carved directly into the mountain's heart. Thick stone pillars held aloft a ceiling lost to shadows while uneven walls glistened with moisture that somehow survived the intense heat. Rows of forges lined the central pathway, each one a small stone hearth with an adjacent anvil and water barrel. Overhead, metal hoods captured most of the smoke, funneling it through a complex system of vents that gave the forge its haunting, wind-like moan.

Thalia spotted Luna three stations ahead, her small frame almost comical next to the

imposing forge, though the determined set of her shoulders told a different story than her usual distracted facade. Roran was further down, already examining his tools with practiced hands that betrayed his merchant background—always checking quality, always assessing value. Thalia allowed herself a moment to watch him, remembering his encouragement during her disastrous first cryomancy lesson, before forcing her attention back to the task at hand.

Instructor Maven stood at the chamber's center, her single amber eye sweeping over the assembled students like a predator assessing which prey to strike first.

"First-years," Maven's voice cut through the nervous chatter like a blade through flesh. "Today, you will demonstrate whether you deserve the resources Frostforge spends to keep you alive."

The chamber fell silent save for the persistent moan of the vents and the hungry crackle of flames. Maven paced a slow circle, her footsteps echoing with deliberate heaviness.

"You will forge a simple dagger," she continued, "with a blade that holds an edge and a hilt that won't snap in your hand. Once forged, you will imbue it with a basic frost spell — the same one you've been failing at for the past two weeks."

A few nervous laughs rippled through the group, quickly extinguished by Maven's glare.

"When struck against armor or shield, your frost-imbued blade should spread ice from the point of impact." She demonstrated with a swift stabbing motion. "The blade must remain intact after three such strikes. Those whose blades shatter" — her eye fixed momentarily on Thalia — "will be given additional night watch shifts, so that they might have time to reflect on the root causes of their failure."

The threat hung in the air. Night watches at Frostforge meant standing guard in the bitter cold atop the academy's highest towers, where the wind cut like glass and frostbite claimed fingers and toes within minutes.

"You have two hours. Begin."



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Students scattered to their assigned forges, panic evident in their hurried movements. Thalia made her way to station fourteen, marked with a tarnished copper plate. As she approached, she noted the small pile of iron ore beside each forge — a standard issue for first-year metallurgy projects. But her mind raced back to her late-night experiments, the ones she had conducted when sleep evaded her and the forge room stood empty.

Iron became brittle in extreme cold — that was basic metallurgy. But copper...copper maintained flexibility at lower temperatures. A copper blade would bend before it would break when imbued with frost magic. It wouldn't hold as sharp an edge, but it would survive the test.

Around her, students were already heating their iron, the clang of hammers beginning to fill the chamber. Thalia hesitated, then walked past her assigned iron ore to the storage shelves at the back wall. She ran her fingers over the ore samples, feeling their potential as her mother had taught her to sense herbs. Each metal had its own signature, its own...song, almost. Iron sang of strength but stubbornness. Copper whispered of flexibility.

She selected a chunk of copper ore, feeling the weight of it in her palm. As she turned back toward her forge, she caught Brynn's gaze from across the room. The Southern noble's eyes narrowed, her perfectly composed features twisting into something ugly for just a moment before she returned her attention to her own work.

Thalia set the copper beside her forge, aware that her choice had drawn curious glances. To her left, a boy with sand-colored hair leaned over.

"That's not iron," he whispered, stating the obvious with a mixture of confusion and concern.

"It's copper," Thalia replied, not looking up as she began arranging her tools.

"But we haven't worked with copper yet."

Thalia shrugged. She didn't elaborate on her choice of metal, focusing instead on the unlit coals in her forge. She knelt, struck flint to steel, and nursed the resulting spark into a small flame that began licking at the coals.

As the fire slowly spread, casting an orange glow across her face, Thalia noticed something unusual — a thin crack in the stone at the right side of her forge. Within the fissure, a strange silvery ore caught the light, reflecting it back with unusual brightness. She wouldn't have noticed it if not for the tingling of the ore's resonance at the edge of her senses.

She leaned closer. She'd never seen this ore before, but it resonated with a strange, unstable energy — like a plucked string vibrating at a discordant note. Something about it felt wrong, dangerous.

The coals were now fully ignited, their heat intensifying. The silvery ore began to gleam more brightly, and Thalia could sense its volatility reaching a critical point. Without hesitation, she lunged for the water bucket at the edge of her station, hefted it with both hands, and dumped its contents over her carefully prepared fire.

A loud hiss filled the air as steam billowed upward. The sudden action drew startled looks from nearby students, their expressions shifting from surprise to confusion to disdain. Thalia stood panting, water dripping from her hands, her forge now a smoking, soggy mess of black coals.

"Greenspire!"Maven's voice cracked across the chamber like a whip.The instructor stalked toward her, fury evident in every step."What in the frozen hells do you think you're doing?"

Thalia swallowed hard, acutely aware of every eye in the room turning toward her."There's something in my forge, Instructor.A silver ore in the crack of the stone —"

"Excuses already?"Maven cut her off, looming over Thalia with her considerable height."If you're trying to fail this evaluation, there are less disruptive ways to do it."

"No, I'm serious."Thalia pointed to the crack."It's some kind of volatile ore.It was reacting to the heat."

Maven's face darkened."Are you suggesting that I assigned you a defective forge, recruit?"

"No, I —" Thalia hesitated, then steeled herself."I think someone put it there deliberately."

A ripple of whispers swept through the nearby students.Maven's single eye narrowed to a dangerous slit.

"A serious accusation."Her voice lowered to a dangerous pitch."Show me this...dangerous ore."

Thalia reached for a small chisel from her tool set, then leaned into the furnace.The coals were still hot, steaming gently.She carefully worked the chisel into the crack, prying out small, silvery fragments that she deposited on a flat piece of slate.

Maven examined the material, her expression unreadable.Then, without warning, she

picked up a fragment with her bare fingers.

"Magnesium ore," she stated flatly. Her eye flicked back to Thalia, suspicion clear in her gaze. "And how would a first-year from Verdant Port recognize magnesium ore on sight?"

Thalia's throat went dry. "I didn't recognize it exactly. I sensed it was volatile. Unstable."

"Sensed?" Maven repeated, skepticism dripping from the word.

"Yes. I can...feel the properties of materials sometimes." Thalia swallowed. "The magnesium felt wrong. Dangerous."

Maven studied her for a long, uncomfortable moment. "Magnesium burns with an extremely bright white flame when heated sufficiently. It can cause blindness if you look directly at it." Her voice hardened. "And it's not part of our standard first-year curriculum. So tell me, Greenspire, how did it end up in your forge?"

The accusation hung in the air between them. Thalia felt a flash of indignation rise in her chest.

"I didn't put it there," she said, meeting Maven's gaze directly despite the tremor in her voice. "Why would I sabotage my own evaluation?"

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Maven's lip curled. "Your experimentation with copper instead of the assigned iron already shows a dangerous tendency to ignore instructions. If you're trying to impress me with your knowledge of exotic materials, you've failed. This kind of reckless behavior gets people killed at Frostforge."

She straightened, addressing the room at large. "Back to work! The sun waits for no one." Then, to Thalia: "Clean this mess, restart your forge, and proceed with the assigned materials. Any further disruptions will result in immediate failure."

Maven stalked away, leaving Thalia standing over her ruined forge, her face burning with a mixture of anger and embarrassment. First, someone had tampered with her frost gloves. And now this — magnesium planted in her forge that could have blinded her when it ignited.

Someone was targeting her specifically. But who? And why?

Thalia worked quickly, replacing the soaked coals with fresh ones from the communal bin, her mind racing. By the time she had rekindled her fire, most students were already hammering their heated metal into shape. She was falling behind, but she refused to abandon her copper experiment. If she was right, it might save her from Maven's night watch punishment when they tested the frost enchantments. If she was wrong... well. She wasn't wrong.

As she placed her copper ore into the now properly-burning forge, she sensed a presence beside her and turned to find Kaine Ember watching her work. Her heart skipped — partly from surprise, partly from something else she didn't want to examine too closely.

"What are you doing down here during the exam?" she asked, trying to keep her voice neutral despite her racing pulse. The second-year student cut an imposing figure, his broad shoulders and height making him seem older than his years. The forge light caught the sharp planes of his face, casting shadows that emphasized his perpetual scowl.

"I'm always in the Howling Forge," he replied, his deep voice barely audible over the surrounding noise. "Even when it's in use for classes."

Thalia raised an eyebrow, turning her copper ore with metal tongs. "Do you ever attend your other classes?"

A corner of his mouth twitched — not quite a smile, but close. "Sometimes. When I feel like it."

"How have you not been punished for truancy yet?" The question slipped out before she could stop it.

His almost-smile vanished. "I have been. Punishments have a way of...rolling off me."

The words sent a chill through her despite the forge's heat. Thalia's mouth went dry as she focused intently on her heating copper, hoping he would leave.

"What do you want?" she finally asked when it became clear he wasn't moving on.

To her surprise, his expression softened slightly. "You did well recognizing the magnesium."

Thalia glanced up, searching his face for mockery but finding none. "I didn't exactly recognize it. I just sensed it was dangerous."

"You sensed its volatility?" There was genuine curiosity in his voice.

She nodded cautiously. "It felt...wrong. Like it was waiting to explode."

"That's exactly what it would have done," Kaine confirmed. "When exposed to flame, magnesium burns with an extremely bright white light. It's difficult to extinguish — water makes it burn hotter in some cases. It could have blinded you, or worse." He paused, studying her with an intensity that made her skin prickle. "You've made yourself an enemy."

Thalia exhaled sharply through her nose. "It seems so," she muttered. "I just wish I knew who it was."

Kaine didn't reply for a long moment. When he did, he didn't offer any suggestions or join her in speculation. "Well done," he said simply.

"Thank you." It felt strange to accept his praise. All she'd accomplished was a narrow avoidance of disaster.

Kaine nodded once, then turned and walked back to the workbench in the far corner where she now noticed an elegant blade lying in progress, intricate patterns half-etched into its surface.

Thalia returned her attention to her forge, extracting her now glowing copper with tongs and transferring it to her anvil. But as she raised her hammer for the first strike, she felt a prickling sensation on the back of her neck — the unmistakable feeling of being watched.

She glanced over her shoulder, scanning the room until her eyes met Brynn's. The Southerner stood at her forge, hands paused mid-task, her gaze fixed on Thalia with open hostility. When Thalia caught her staring, Brynn didn't look away or pretend to

be doing something else. Instead, her lips curved into a cold smile before she deliberately returned to her work.

Thalia turned back to her own task, bringing the hammer down on her cooling copper with more force than necessary. The metal yielded under her strike, beginning to flatten into what would eventually become a blade. Her mind raced with questions as she worked. Was it Brynn who had sabotaged her forge?

The copper began to take shape beneath her hammer, and Thalia forced herself to focus on the task at hand. She would forge this blade, imbue it with frost magic, and pass Maven's test. And then she would find out who was trying to hurt her before they got another chance.

She struck the copper again, the ring of metal against metal joining the chorus of the Howling Forge, determination hardening in her like steel being tempered in flame.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Thalia stood before Instructor Maven, her copper short sword balanced across her palms like an offering. The blade gleamed in the forge's light, its surface etched with delicate frost patterns that caught and refracted the glow of nearby furnaces. Her heart hammered against her ribs, but her hands remained steady. Hours of relentless work — measuring, melting, molding, cooling — all culminating in this moment of judgment. And she knew, despite the sabotage attempt with the magnesium ore, that she had created something exceptional.



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The examination hall hummed with nervous energy. Around her, other first-years fidgeted beside their forging stations, their completed weapons displayed with varying degrees of confidence.

"Copper," Maven said, her voice carrying across the silent room. Not a question, but an observation weighted with skepticism. "You continued with copper, despite my instruction."

Thalia swallowed and nodded. Wordlessly, Maven extended her hand, and Thalia carefully transferred the weapon, hilt first.

The short sword wasn't ornate or complicated in design. Instead, its beauty lay in its functionality; the copper gleamed with an almost liquid warmth, the blade balanced perfectly despite the unusual material choice. Along its length ran a thin layer of frost. For Thalia, that simple ice magic had been the most difficult part.

Maven tested the weight first, her calloused hand adjusting its grip on the leather-wrapped handle. She raised an eyebrow, evidently surprised by the balance. With practiced efficiency, she ran a thumb along the edge, nodding slightly at its sharpness.

"Explain your intent," Maven demanded, eyes never leaving the blade.

Thalia straightened her shoulders, her voice clear despite her dry throat. "I thought copper would remain more ductile than iron once the rime was applied."

A murmur rippled through the gathered students. Maven's lips pressed into a thin line. "I was going to allow you to demonstrate your sword's strength by striking a

shield.”She nodded toward a circular shield of wood and iron, resting against the wall.“But as you’ve been so bold as to experiment with the materials, I think you ought to face a more significant challenge.”

She held out the blade, and Thalia reached for the hilt.As Maven handed the sword back, their fingers brushed momentarily, and Thalia felt a spike of cold energy — Maven testing her, seeing if she'd flinch.She didn't.

Then Maven’s hand fell to the blade at her hip.She drew it in a sweeping motion, and Thalia drew an unsteady breath.Maven’s broadsword gleamed with the same strange, silvery hue as the golems that patrolled the edge of the Crystalline Training Grounds — and the deadly scrapyards of the Golem Fields in the valley beyond.

This was no ordinary metal.

Maven brandished the sword, her chin raised.“This blade,” she said, “is forged of ice-steel.The creation of ice-metal is a more advanced technique than the one you used today.If your blade shatters when it meets mine, Greenspire, you will have failed this examination.”

Taking three steps back, Thalia centered herself, her fingers tightening around the hilt of her sword.She could feel the weight of every gaze upon her, the unspoken challenge in Maven’s stance.The instructor’s ice-steel blade gleamed with an unnatural sheen, the cold radiating from it in visible wisps.

Thalia swallowed hard.She had no illusions; Maven’s sword was superior in both craftsmanship and material.But she wasn’t just being tested on her forging skills.This was about her resilience, her ability to think under pressure.

She adjusted her stance, grounding her feet in the frost-covered floor.A deep breath steadied her pulse.

Maven wasted no time. She surged forward, striking with a measured but undeniable force, testing Thalia rather than outright overwhelming her. Thalia brought her blade up to meet the blow, copper edge flashing —

The impact rang out like a bell struck in the cold. A jarring vibration rattled up Thalia's arms, numbing her fingers. She gritted her teeth, feeling the strain in the metal. A hairline crack splintered near the base of her blade, faint but unmistakable.

Maven's eyes flicked to the flaw. She saw it.

Thalia's pulse pounded as Maven shifted her grip, preparing to finish it. The instructor stepped in, her broadsword a blur of ice and steel as she swung with precise, unyielding force. Thalia twisted her sword in desperation such that Maven's ice-steel blade met the sharp edge rather than the flat side. The force sent her staggering, but the blade held.

Slowly, Maven lowered her weapon, grudging approval in her gaze. The crack in Thalia's blade hadn't spread. It was damaged, but still intact.

Maven's eye flickered toward where Kaine stood among the second-years, observing from the sidelines. His expression revealed nothing, arms crossed over his broad chest, his pale blue eyes intense but unreadable.

"Well done," Maven said, the words clipped. "You've managed to smith a suitable weapon despite your foolishness with the magnesium ore."

Relief flooded through Thalia, her shoulders relaxing a fraction until Maven continued.

"I did notice you speaking with Ember during your examination period," Maven added, her voice pitched to carry. "No doubt he offered you some additional advice."

Thalia's mouth opened to protest, but Maven cut her off with a raised hand.

"Your aptitude for metallurgy, regardless of its source, should be developed." She straightened, addressing the entire class now. "As a reward for your good work, Greenspire, you will be permitted extra forge time in the mornings. Ember will mentor you."

The pronouncement fell like a stone into still water. Thalia glanced at Kaine, whose expression had shifted from neutral to something darker — not anger, exactly, but a tightness around his eyes that suggested he was as surprised by this arrangement as she was.

"Thank you, Instructor," Thalia managed, though the words tasted strange on her tongue. This wasn't a reward — at least, not entirely. There was punishment woven into it, both for her alleged reliance on Kaine's help and for Kaine himself, being saddled with a first-year student.

Maven nodded curtly. "Begin tomorrow, before breakfast. Don't waste this opportunity."

As Maven moved on to the next student, Thalia risked another glance at Kaine. This time, he met her eyes directly. Something passed between them — not quite understanding, but acknowledgment, perhaps. His expression remained severe, but he gave her the slightest nod before turning away.

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The meaning was clear enough. He would honor Maven's instruction, whatever his personal feelings about it.

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The Howling Forge earned its name honestly. Wind rushed through the mountain's natural ventilation shafts, creating an eerie, constant moan that mingled with the hiss of cooling metal and the rhythmic clang of hammers. Thalia arrived as the first bell echoed through Frostforge's stone corridors, her breath forming small clouds in the pre-dawn chill. Despite the early hour, the forge already radiated heat from its central furnaces, where a few dedicated smiths worked on personal projects. In the furthest corner, partially hidden by shadows and steam, stood Kaine Ember. His tall frame bent over an anvil, each strike of his hammer sending sparks cascading to the stone floor like falling stars. Thalia hesitated at the entrance, the weight of yesterday's examination and Maven's "reward" sitting heavy on her shoulders.

She'd barely slept, her mind racing between pride in her copper blade and anxiety about working with Kaine. The man who, according to Senna, had killed his own father. The Northern outcast, whose abilities clearly exceeded those of a typical second-year student. The enigma who now looked up, hammer paused mid-strike, and fixed those intense blue eyes directly on her.

Thalia straightened her spine and crossed the forge floor, dodging around carts laden with raw ore. The heat intensified with each step, sweat already beginning to bead along her hairline despite the mountain's perpetual chill.

"You're punctual," Kaine said as she approached, his deep voice barely audible above

the forge's ambient noise. Not a greeting, exactly, but not the hostility she'd half-expected either.

"Instructor Maven made it clear this was an opportunity I shouldn't waste," Thalia replied, aiming for professional detachment while her nerves jangled beneath her skin.

To her surprise, the corner of Kaine's mouth twitched upward — not quite a smile, but something adjacent to it. "Maven's 'opportunities' usually come with hidden costs. But in this case..." He set his hammer down, wiping his hands on a cloth tucked into his leather apron. "You've got a good eye. Let's see if you can put it to better use."

The unexpected approval caught Thalia off-guard. She blinked, trying to reconcile this gruffly encouraging Kaine with the dangerous figure of Senna's warnings. Before she could respond, he gestured toward an unoccupied workstation nearby.

"You're working on a spear tip today," he said, moving to a shelf stocked with metal ingots. He selected a small copper bar and handed it to her. "Similar principles to your sword, but with a narrower focus point for the magic."

Thalia accepted the copper, its weight familiar and comforting in her palm. "I've never made a spear before."

"Then you'll learn something new." Kaine nodded toward the station. "Set up your fire first. Too hot and the copper will become too malleable for precise rune work. Too cool and it won't take the enchantment properly."

Following his instruction, Thalia adjusted the forge's heat, feeling for the right temperature with an instinct that had served her well in her mother's herb shop. Heat and cold were just different forms of energy, after all, and she'd always had a knack for sensing a proper balance.

They worked in silence initially, the space between them filled only with the forge's persistent howl and the sounds of metalworking. Thalia maneuvered the copper through the flames, watching as it changed from solid to malleable, its color shifting from penny-bright to sunset orange. The quiet felt heavy at first, charged with unasked questions and unstated judgments.

But as minutes stretched into an hour, something shifted. The silence transformed, becoming almost companionable — a shared focus on craft that required no words. Thalia found herself relaxing into the rhythm of the work, her movements becoming more fluid, more confident.

Kaine observed more than he instructed, stepping in only when necessary. When she began hammering the heated copper into shape, he moved closer, his voice low near her ear.

"You're striking too tentatively," he said, not unkindly. "Copper remembers every hesitation. Strike with purpose." He demonstrated, his muscled arm bringing the hammer down in a controlled arc that somehow managed to be both powerful and precise.

Thalia nodded, adjusting her stance. Her next strike rang true, the copper responding to her more decisive blow.

"Better," Kaine said, and though his expression remained serious, there was approval in his tone. He turned away, his focus shifting to a half-finished iron knife on his workbench. "Many smiths see the material as passive, a vessel to be filled." His hands moved with surprising delicacy for their size, fingers tracing patterns that left faint luminous trails in the air. "But metal — especially copper — already has its own energy. You don't need to dominate it. You can collaborate with it. That is how ice-metal is made."

Thalia watched, fascinated, as he thrust the knife back into the furnace, heating it until it glowed. He removed the metal and tugged a frost glove onto one hand, then leaned in close enough that the radiant orange of the molten blade was reflected in his eyes. Thalia felt the familiar chill of cryomancy as Kaine laid a gloved finger directly on the flat of the blade; she winced, expecting the glove to burn, but it didn't. There was a hissing sound, and steam rose from Kaine's fingertip as he slid it gently down the length of the knife. Where other students channeled ice magic in harsh, jagged bursts, Kaine's approach was almost...respectful. He coaxed rather than commanded, his magic weaving through the metal's malleable molecular structure like water finding its natural path downhill.

"May I?" she asked, gesturing toward her own work.

Kaine nodded, stepping back to give her space.

Thalia closed her eyes briefly, centering herself. She placed her hands on either side of the copper spear tip, not quite touching it, feeling for the inherent energy Kaine had described. At first, there was nothing — then a faint vibration, a hum just below the threshold of hearing. She could imagine sending ice magic along the ready conduits within the metal.

"Each metal has a different energy signature," she murmured, almost to herself.

"You're a quick study," Kaine said, his voice carrying a note of genuine surprise. "Most Southerners take months to grasp this concept, if they ever do."

Thalia felt a flush of pride warm her cheeks. "It reminds me of working with herbs back home. Each plant has its own...personality, I guess. You can't make valerian act like ginseng, no matter how much you might want it to."

Kaine's expression shifted slightly, something like curiosity flickering across his



usually guarded features.

Together, they worked through the final stages of forging the spear tip — cooling, tempering, etching. The concentration required was intense, sweat dripping down Thalia's back despite the mountain's perpetual chill. When at last the spear tip was complete, Kaine stepped back.

"You've earned a break," he said, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "The cooling phase needs time anyway."

They moved away from the active furnaces, retreating to a quieter corner of the forge where several unused furnaces stood cold and dark. Here, the Howling Forge's namesake wind was more noticeable, whistling through ventilation shafts carved into the mountain stone. Thalia leaned against one of the cold furnaces, grateful for its cool surface against her back. She pushed damp strands of hair from her forehead, exhaling slowly.

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"Thank you," she said after a moment. "For actually teaching me, not just tolerating Maven's arrangement."

Kaine shrugged, his broad shoulders rising and falling beneath his soot-stained tunic. "You have genuine talent. It would be wasteful not to develop it." He paused, then added more quietly, "And it's...refreshing to work with someone who approaches metal as a collaborator, not a conqueror."

Thalia was about to respond when something caught her eye — an anomaly in the stone wall behind the unused furnaces. In the shifting shadows cast by distant fires, she noticed faint indentations in the rock face, partially obscured by years of soot and grime.

"What's that?" she asked, pushing away from the furnace and moving closer to the wall.

Kaine turned, following her gaze. "What's what?"

Thalia reached out, her fingers brushing against the rough stone. As she touched the surface, something strange happened — a faint tingle ran up her arm, like the subtle magical current she'd just been learning to detect in metal. She drew back, startled, then looked more closely.

"There are carvings here," she said, excitement quickening her voice. "Under all this soot."

Kaine frowned, stepping closer. "That section should be solid bedrock. Part of the

mountain itself."

"Well, someone carved into it." Thalia found a relatively clean cloth and began gently wiping away the accumulated grime. Kaine hesitated only a moment before joining her, his larger hands making quicker work of clearing the surface.

As layers of soot fell away, an intricate network of symbols began emerging — spiraling patterns interwoven with what appeared to be ancient cryomancy runes. Some were familiar from basic spell craft classes, but others Thalia had never seen before. The symbols radiated outward from a central point, forming a complex mandala of ice magic etched deep into the living stone.

"These look like cryomancy symbols," Thalia said, recognizing similarities in certain recurring patterns. "Like the ones on frost gloves."

Kaine nodded slowly, his expression intent. "Some of them, yes. Traditional Northern runic structures for enhancing ice magic." His fingers traced over one particular symbol — a vertical line bisected by three horizontal dashes. "But this...I've never seen this configuration before. And this one here —" he pointed to a spiral surrounded by what looked like jagged lightning bolts, "— this isn't Northern at all."

As they leaned toward the carvings, Thalia found herself becoming acutely aware of Kaine's proximity — the heat radiating from his body, the controlled strength in his movements, the surprising gentleness in hands that could hammer metal into submission.

"What do you think they mean?" Thalia asked, trying to focus on the carvings rather than her sudden awareness of him. "A message of some kind?"

Kaine nodded, his shoulder brushing against hers as he leaned in to examine a particularly intricate section of the carving. "Could be. It looks like written language,

but I've never seen runes quite like these."

"A mystery, then," she murmured.

He turned toward her, and suddenly the space between them seemed charged with more than just academic curiosity. The heat of the distant forges made their closeness feel even more intense, sweat glistening on Kaine's throat, his pale blue eyes reflecting the ambient firelight.

Thalia found herself unable to look away. The man before her, dangerous by reputation, an outcast by circumstance, had shown her nothing but respect and gentleness. His usual severity had softened into something more complex, more human, his eyes searching hers with an intensity that made her breath catch.

Kaine leaned closer, the movement so slight it might have been unconscious. Their faces were inches apart now. Thalia felt her heart racing, not from fear but from a different kind of anticipation. Her eyes fluttered closed, the world narrowing to the diminishing space between them, the heat of his breath against her lips.

"What exactly is going on here?"

The sharp voice sliced through the moment like a blade of ice. Thalia's eyes snapped open as she and Kaine quickly stepped apart. In the archway leading to their secluded corner stood Senna Drake, her silver-gray eyes narrowed to frosty slits, her posture rigid with barely contained fury.

Heat flooded Thalia's cheeks, embarrassment mingling with a strange sense of loss. Kaine's expression had instantly reverted to its usual guarded neutrality, though a muscle ticked in his jaw.

"Research," he said flatly, gesturing toward the uncovered carvings. "Greenspire

noticed something unusual in the stonework."

Senna's gaze flicked to the wall, then back to Thalia, clearly unconvinced. The Northern girl's pale skin seemed to carry its own chill, her beauty as sharp and dangerous as the ice daggers she crafted with such precision in combat classes.

"How fortunate that you two found time for...exploration," Senna said coldly. She didn't move from her position, forcing them to remain awkwardly separated by her presence. "However, I came with news that might interest you more than graffiti, Kaine."

Kaine crossed his arms. "What news?"

Senna's expression remained glacial, but something like grim satisfaction flickered in her eyes. "The Wardens have been busy. Three supply caravans ambushed in the past week alone." She directed her next words specifically to Thalia, her tone sounding almost pleased. "The academy's cut off. No new shipments of Southern herbs or food supplies will be reaching us for the foreseeable future."

Thalia felt her stomach drop. Without supplies from the South, especially food and medicine...

"The administration has called an emergency assembly," Senna continued, her eyes never leaving Thalia's face. "All students are required to attend. Now."

As Senna turned to leave, she cast one final, poisonous glance over her shoulder, her gaze lingering on the small space that had so recently separated Thalia and Kaine's lips.

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"Better hurry," she said. "I hear they're discussing rationing. And in times of scarcity, we Northerners have always had very clear ideas about who deserves priority."

The threat in her words couldn't have been clearer if she'd drawn a blade.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Murmurs rippled through the main hall of Frostforge, rising like steam from the sea of bundled students gathered for dinner and confirmation of the rumors that had spread like frost on a winter morning: that Isle Wardens had cut off their supply lines. Thalia pressed her back against one of the massive stone pillars, its cold seeping through her academy uniform as she scanned the anxious faces. Students huddled in tight clusters, their breath forming small clouds in the perpetually chilled air of the hall, each group passing theories and fears between them like contraband.

"Thalia!" Luna's voice cut through the din, unnaturally bright against the somber mood. She wove through the crowd with surprising agility for someone who typically appeared so scattered. "There you are! Everyone's talking about the supply lines. Do you think they'll cancel the cryomancy practical tomorrow? I forgot to finish my ice lattice design."

Even now, Luna maintained her ditzy facade, though Thalia knew better. She'd glimpsed those calculating eyes when Luna thought no one was watching — the daughter of a dissident councilor playing the fool to gather information unseen.

"I doubt Maven would cancel anything over mere survival concerns," Thalia said, trying to match Luna's light tone despite the knot in her stomach. "If anything, she'll

probably make it harder.'Combat conditions,'" she said, mimicking Maven's brusque tone.

A shadow fell across them as Ashe appeared, her tall frame imposing even among the Northern students. The red streaks in her black hair seemed to catch what little light filtered through the high windows, like embers trapped in obsidian.

"They're saying we might be cut off for weeks," Ashe said without preamble, her green eyes sharp as she surveyed the hall. "The Western passage is already frozen over, and if the Isle Wardens have blocked the Jagged Strait..." She left the sentence unfinished, but her meaning was clear.

Thalia felt her chest tighten. "How bad could it get? Frostforge must have reserves, right?"

Luna shrugged, her apparent nonchalance too perfect to be genuine. "The academy's stood for centuries. I'm sure they have contingencies."

But Ashe's jaw tightened, the tendons in her neck standing out like cords. "I've seen what winter isolation does to settlements in the Reaches. Five years ago, a village three days' ride from my clan's territory was cut off by a three-week blizzard. They ran out of food. By the time paths cleared enough for aid to reach them, seventeen were dead — mostly children and elders."

The cold in Thalia's bones seemed to intensify. She reached into her pocket, fingers finding the worn edges of her father's compass. The metal was cool against her skin, its familiar weight grounding her as she traced the engraved constellation on its cover. She thought of her mother and Mari back in Verdant Port. However bad things might get at Frostforge, at least they had stocks of preserved food. Her family had often lived day to day on whatever they could earn or trade.

"The food shortage is concerning," Thalia said quietly, "but we're being trained to survive, right? Isn't that what this place is all about?" The words sounded hollow even to her own ears.

"The real problem isn't running out of supplies."

Thalia startled at Roran's voice. He'd approached so quietly she hadn't noticed him, unusual for someone typically so animated. His normally warm face was taut, his eyes narrowed.

"It's the fact that the Isle Wardens have been increasing their raids," he continued, tension coiling in his words. "They're becoming bolder. And we don't know if we'll be able to hold them off if they get any closer."

A chill ran down Thalia's spine. She'd never heard that edge in Roran's voice before — the hatred sharpening his words like a whetstone on steel. His hands were clenched at his sides, knuckles white.

Beside Thalia, Ashe nodded. "In the North, we have a saying. When the wolves grow bold enough to approach the fire, it means they're desperate. Isle Wardens don't take risks unless they're driven to it."

"What do they want?" Thalia asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why now?"

Before Roran could answer, a hush fell over the hall like a blanket of snow. The sea of students parted as Instructor Maven strode through the main entrance, her tall figure casting a long shadow across the flagstones. The metal plate covering her missing eye gleamed in the torchlight, reflecting pinpricks of flame that made it seem as though a star had been imprisoned in the darkness where her eye had been.

"Enough," Maven's voice cut through the whispers like a blade through ice, leaving



silence in its wake."You will not panic.You will not crumble under pressure.The Isle Wardens think they can threaten Frostforge, but this is not the first time we've been isolated.It will not be the last."

Thalia exchanged glances with Luna and Ashe.Maven's words were confident, but Thalia could see the tight line of her mouth, the subtle tension in her shoulders.The instructor was concerned, even if she wouldn't show it openly.

"As for the supply situation," Maven continued, her voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling, "we will begin rationing immediately.Each student will receive reduced portions starting tomorrow morning.Some of you will be assigned to assist in gathering additional resources — hunting parties, ice fishing teams, foraging groups."

Murmurs rose once more, but quieted instantly when Maven's eye narrowed.

"If necessary, we will send a team to Winterhearth Haven to secure additional supplies.The journey is dangerous, especially with increased Warden activity, but we have skilled navigators among our ranks."

Winterhearth Haven was the nearest settlement to Frostforge.Thalia hadn't yet been, but she knew that in the warmer months, students were often rewarded for performance with short stays in the village, hearty meals at one of its inns.If Frostforge was cut off from the rest of the world, Winterhearth was likely their lifeline.A place where news, supplies, and the rare comfort of civilization could still reach them.

"There will be no panic," Maven declared, scanning the faces before her."We will be prepared.We will remain steadfast.This is not merely a challenge — it is an opportunity to prove yourselves worthy."

Her gaze swept the crowd, and Thalia felt herself stiffen as that amber eye seemed to

pause on her. Did it linger a moment longer? Was there calculation in that look, or simply coincidence?

"Now, back to your schedules," Maven barked, her tone sharp and dismissive. "We don't have time for idle chatter."

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With Maven's announcement over, most of the students shuffled to take their seats for dinner, but Thalia slipped out of the hall unnoticed. She felt pulled by an invisible current toward the Howling Forge. She told herself it was the ancient sigils that drew her — the mystery of forgotten symbols etched into stone by unknown hands — but the rapid beat of her heart suggested another truth. The memory of Kaine's face, inches from hers, heat radiating between them before Senna's interruption, lingered in her mind like an unfinished spell. Thalia quickened her pace, boots echoing against the stone corridor as shadows lengthened around her, the day's fading light barely penetrating the narrow windows cut into the thick walls.

As Thalia pushed open the heavy iron door, she was met with unusual silence. No hammers struck anvils, no bellows pumped air into hungry flames, no instructors barked orders. The forges stood cold and dark, tools hung in perfect order on the walls, the usual frantic energy replaced by stillness.

Thalia hesitated in the doorway. With everyone at dinner or preparing for tomorrow's duties, she had the vast chamber to herself. The emptiness made the space seem larger, more imposing, the high ceiling disappearing into shadows untouched by the few lanterns that remained lit along the walls.

She moved with purpose toward the far corner where the unused furnace stood, its exterior blackened with the soot of fires long extinguished. Behind it lay their discovery — ancient symbols carved into the stone foundation of Frostforge itself, predating the academy by centuries if Kaine's assessment was correct.

Kaine. Her stomach tightened at the thought of him. She should be wary of his reputation, of the rumors that swirled around him like smoke.

Thalia knelt beside the furnace, running her fingers over the grooves of the symbols. They seemed to pulse with a faint warmth that defied the perpetual chill of Frostforge, though she couldn't tell if it was an actual magical property or merely her imagination. The markings formed interlocking patterns — circles intersecting with jagged lines, spirals feeding into what looked like stylized waves.

"What were you trying to say?" she whispered to the unknown carvers, tracing one particular symbol that resembled a flame encased in ice. It reminded her of the sensation she'd felt when working metal for the first time—that paradoxical moment when fire transformed solid into liquid, when destruction enabled creation.

Her fingertips tingled as they passed over the markings, a subtle vibration like the hum of magic preparing to manifest. Was this what had drawn her to metallurgy so instinctively? Some ancient connection between her innate abilities and these forgotten techniques?

The sound of a throat clearing shattered her concentration.

Thalia spun around, heart lurching into her throat. She'd been so absorbed in the symbols that she hadn't heard the door open, hadn't sensed another presence until it announced itself.

Senna stood ten paces away, her straight black hair falling like a curtain around her sharp features. In the dim light of the forge, her silver-gray eyes seemed to gather what little illumination there was and reflect it back with cold intensity. She wore the standard academy clothing, but somehow made the utilitarian garments look like battle armor — every line crisp, every edge precise.

"I thought I told you to stay away from Kaine Ember." Senna's voice cut through the silence, each word shaped like an icicle — beautiful, cold, and potentially lethal.

Thalia froze, her pulse quickening at the unveiled threat. She straightened slowly, trying to mask the unease creeping up her spine, but found herself unable to form a response.

Senna advanced with measured steps, her movements fluid and controlled as she closed the distance between them. Unlike Thalia, who had grown up in Verdant Port's chaotic streets, learning to fight with desperate, scrappy movements, Senna moved with the precision of someone trained in formal combat from birth. A predator who knew exactly how much force was required to subdue her prey.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear enough," Senna continued, her voice dropping lower, almost conversational. "My warning wasn't a suggestion, Greenspire. It was a demand."

Something in her tone — the absolute certainty that Thalia would comply — sparked a flicker of defiance through Thalia's fear.

"Kaine is helping me with my forge work," she managed, her voice steadier than she felt. "Instructor Maven assigned him as my mentor."

A cold smile curved Senna's lips, never reaching her eyes. "And you think that gives you special privileges? That it makes you...important?" She laughed, the sound devoid of humor. "You're not the first Southern girl to bat her eyelashes at Kaine. The novelty will wear off. It always does."

The accusation stung, partly because it reduced whatever connection she'd felt with Kaine to something trivial, and partly because it wasn't entirely untrue. There had been attraction in that moment before Senna interrupted them — a pull that went beyond academic interest.

"I'm not interested in —"

"Save it," Senna cut her off, closing the distance between them until she stood close enough that Thalia could see the tiny flecks of blue in her silver irises. "I don't care what you think you're doing. I'm telling you what you will do, which is to keep your distance."

Understanding dawned on Thalia like ice water down her back. Senna hadn't been warning her away from Kaine as some twisted favor. She was staking a claim. Marking territory. Kaine wasn't someone Senna was protecting; he was something she believed she owned.

"Kaine doesn't belong to you," Thalia said, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Senna's expression hardened, the temperature in the already cold forge seeming to drop several degrees. "You know nothing about Kaine, about what he's been through, about what binds us together." She leaned closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Did he tell you about his father? About what really happened that night?"

Thalia's heart hammered against her ribs. The rumor... what if she's just making up lies? Trying to keep others away from Kaine. Perhaps there was no truth to it at all.

"No," she said aloud. "He didn't."

"Of course not." Senna's smile was razor-thin. "Because you're nothing to him. A diversion. A temporary project. I've stood by him when everyone else believed the worst. I've earned my place."

"This isn't about —"

"Let me be perfectly clear," Senna hissed, her composure cracking just enough to reveal the rage beneath. "Kaine is off-limits. To you. To any other pathetic first-year

who thinks they can climb the ranks on their backs. Know your place, Southerner. It's at the bottom."

She reached out suddenly, fingers brushing against the compass that Thalia had tied with a leather cord around her neck — her father's compass, her most precious possession. Thalia jerked back instinctively, a surge of protective anger flaring through her.

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"Things get lost at Frostforge all the time," Senna said, her voice deceptively soft. "Gloves. Tools. Trinkets from home. Sometimes people, too. Everything has consequences here. Remember that."

Before Thalia could respond, Senna turned and walked away, her footsteps echoing in the empty forge. The heavy door swung shut behind her with a definitive thud, leaving Thalia alone once more in the silence.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The great hall of Frostforge lay hushed in the pale morning light, a stark contrast to the boisterous energy that had filled it during Thalia's first weeks at the academy. Frost-laced windows filtered the weak winter sun into ghostly beams that illuminated rising steam from bowls of unseasoned potatoes — their third such breakfast this week. Thalia stared at her meager portion, mapping the constellation of salt crystals sprinkled across the bland surface, her stomach's protests almost audible in the unnatural quiet.

She glanced up, surveying the hall through strands of black hair that had escaped their tie. Where once students had mingled freely, clear divisions split the long tables: Northern students clustered near the hearths, their postures rigid and voices low, while Southerners huddled together at the opposite end, shoulders hunched against the perpetual chill. The middle ground between them stretched empty and uninviting, a no-man's land that grew wider each day.

Thalia's spoon scraped against her wooden bowl, the sound unnaturally loud. She winced, drawing several sharp glances from nearby students whose conversations



faltered briefly before resuming in even more hushed tones. Two weeks into the supply shortages, and already the academy felt transformed—hallways once filled with the competitive but mostly good-natured chatter of first-years learning their craft now echoed with whispered accusations and the occasional heated argument, quickly silenced by patrolling instructors.

Thalia scooped the last bit of potato into her mouth. The bland starch sat heavy on her tongue, but she chewed dutifully. Food was food, and she'd grown up on far worse in Verdant Port's slums.

A fit of coughing drew her attention to a second-year student being led from the hall, her face flushed with fever despite the room's chill. The winter fever had started among the kitchen staff before spreading to the upper-year dormitories. Now even first-years were falling ill, their bodies weakened by diminishing rations and the relentless cold.

Thalia touched the small pouch of herbs at her waist, a habit that had become a ritual since she'd begun helping in the infirmary. The meager collection — mostly alpine mint and silverleaf scraped from rocky outcroppings during her rare free hours — was barely enough to ease symptoms, nowhere near enough to cure. But it was something, a small defense against the helplessness that threatened to overwhelm her.

"You'll wear a hole in that pouch if you keep fiddling with it," came a voice behind her, startling Thalia from her thoughts.

Ashe slid onto the bench beside her, setting down her own bowl of potatoes with a grimace. The Northern girl's red-streaked black hair was pulled back more severely than usual, highlighting the sharp angles of her face and the dark circles beneath her green eyes. Despite her obvious fatigue, she sat with the straight-backed posture typical of her clan, refusing to let her exhaustion show in her bearing.

"I keep hoping I'll find something more potent on the academy grounds," Thalia replied, dropping her hand to her lap. "The fever's spreading faster than the healers can manage."

Ashe nodded, her expression grave. "I've noticed."

"Has Instructor Maven said anything more about when supplies might arrive?" Thalia asked, already knowing the answer.

"Nothing beyond platitudes about 'holding fast' and 'weathering the storm.'" Ashe's voice dropped even lower, forcing Thalia to lean in. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about."

The Northern girl's eyes darted around the hall, making sure no one was watching them too closely.

"What is it?" Thalia prompted when Ashe remained silent.

Ashe sighed, her breath forming a small cloud in the air between them. "There's talk among the students from the Reaches. Ugly talk." She poked at her potatoes, appetite apparently gone. "Some are saying the Southerners are hoarding supplies — medicine, food, even blankets meant for the common stores."

Thalia's brows drew together. "That's ridiculous. We're all on the same rations. If anything, Northern students have an advantage with their cold resistance."

"I know that," Ashe said, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. "I'm not the one saying it. But tensions were already high before the supplies were cut off, and now..." She shrugged, a sharp, jerky motion. "Fear makes people irrational. And hunger makes them desperate."

The hall suddenly felt colder, the air heavy with more than just the perpetual chill of Frostforge. Thalia thought of the whispers she'd heard in her own dormitory — Southern students muttering about Northern privilege, about how the academy clearly favored those born to the ice.

"The Southerners are none too pleased, either," Thalia admitted. "Luna overheard some second-years claiming that Northern students were getting extra portions because they're 'built for survival' and the rest of us are just —" she mimicked the sneering tone she'd heard, "— 'deadweight dragging down the academy.'"

"None of that is true," Ashe said firmly, meeting Thalia's eyes. "I wanted you to know because...well, I consider you a friend. One of the few I've made here. And I don't want to see you caught in the middle of something ugly."

The admission warmed Thalia despite the surrounding chill. Friendship was a fragile thing at Frostforge, where competition and survival were the priorities for most. That Ashe would reach across the cultural divide between them meant more than the Northern girl probably realized.

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The infirmary's air hung thick with the mingled scents of illness and herbal remedies — bitter alpine mint competing with the metallic tang of fever sweat. Thalia moved between the rows of pallets with practiced steps, her fingers already reaching for the worn herb pouch at her waist. Three more students had arrived overnight, their faces flushed with fever despite the room's chill, bringing the total to fifteen. Not counting those trying to weather the sickness in their own dormitories, too proud or afraid to admit weakness.

"You're early today," noted one of the healers' assistants, a fourth-year with perpetually ink-stained fingers. She looked up from her ledger, dark circles beneath

her eyes betraying how little she'd slept."The healers are meeting with Instructor Maven about requisitioning more blankets.They said to tell you not to push yourself too hard."

Thalia nodded her acknowledgment without pausing in her preparation.The warning was well-intentioned but irrelevant; she couldn't walk away from suffering, not when she possessed even the smallest means to alleviate it.She'd grown up watching her mother work herself to exhaustion helping Verdant Port's poorest residents, refusing payment they couldn't afford.Some lessons ran too deep to ignore, even at Frostforge.

"I found more silverleaf by the eastern ridge," Thalia said, laying out her morning's harvest on the preparation table."And frost lichen growing under the bridge supports.Not much, but enough to bring down at least two students' fevers."

The assistant eyed the modest collection with poorly disguised relief."The healers will be glad to hear it.We're nearly out of the academy's supplies."

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Thalia didn't mention how many freezing hours she'd spent searching for the plants before dawn, fingers numbed despite her gloves, breath forming ice crystals on her scarf. Or how she'd nearly slipped from the bridge's icy edge, catching herself just in time to avoid a forty-foot fall into the frozen river below. Such details seemed trivial compared to the moans coming from the occupied pallets.

She sorted her findings with methodical precision, separating the silverleaf by potency, the frost lichen by color gradation. Each variation required different preparation, a detail her mother had drilled into her since childhood. "The wrong preparation is worse than no medicine at all," she'd said, guiding Thalia's small hands through the motions of grinding, steeping, straining. "It gives false hope, and that's the cruelest thing we can offer."

A fit of coughing drew her attention to the far corner, where a third-year lay curled on his side, body trembling with each ragged breath. Thalia recognized him immediately — Darrin, though everyone called him Dar. He'd been the first to offer help when she'd stumbled during a frost-walking exercise, ignoring the jeers from his fellow upper-years about assisting "fresh meat."

She approached his pallet, herbs and mortar in hand. "How's the chest feeling today?"

Dar attempted a smile that transformed into a grimace midway. "Like a frost golem's using it for a drum." His voice emerged as a rasp, each word clearly costing him. "But better than yesterday. Whatever you gave me then...it helped."

"Just a simple tincture," Thalia said, kneeling beside him. She began crushing the silverleaf, adding a few drops of water from her flask to form a paste. The sharp, clean

scent rose between them, cutting through the infirmary's heavier odors."My mother taught me.It draws out the heat without weakening the body's natural defenses."

"Your mother..."Dar wheezed, "must be one hell of a healer."

Thalia's hands faltered for just a moment, memories of her mother's worn face and gentle touch washing over her."She does what she can with what she has," she said softly."Just like we all do here."

She mixed the silverleaf paste with a touch of frost lichen, watching as the combination turned a pale blue, exactly the shade she'd been taught to look for."This will be cold at first," she warned, reaching toward his forehead."But it should ease the burning."

Dar nodded weakly, closing his eyes as she applied the mixture to his temples, throat, and the pulse points at his wrists.Within moments, his rigid posture began to relax, the painful furrow between his brows smoothing.

"That's..."he sighed, the sound clearer than before."That's good.Real good."

"Rest now," Thalia instructed, covering him with his thin blanket."The tincture works best when the body is still."

She was rising to her feet when the infirmary door creaked open, admitting a blast of frigid air and a familiar figure.Luna slipped inside; her dark eyes swept the room with the quick, assessing gaze that belied her carefully cultivated appearance of distraction.

"There you are," Luna said, unwinding her scarf as she approached."I checked our room, the dining hall, even the library."She glanced at the rows of occupied pallets."Though I should have guessed you'd be here."

"I had to check on some of yesterday's patients," Thalia explained, returning to the preparation table. "And I found more herbs on the eastern ridge."

Luna's eyebrows rose. "The eastern ridge? That's practically outside the academy boundaries." She didn't mention the dangers explicitly — the steep drop-offs, the treacherous ice formations — but her tone conveyed everything her words didn't.

"It was worth it," Thalia said simply, gesturing to the plants laid out before her. "These will help at least four more students."

Luna studied her for a long moment, then sighed, removing her gloves with precise movements. "Alright then, show me what to do. If you're determined to exhaust yourself helping everyone else, the least I can do is make sure you don't collapse in the process."

Thalia blinked in surprise. "You want to help?"

"Is that so shocking?" Luna asked, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. Then, more quietly, "I know what it's like to feel helpless when people are suffering. I grew up watching my father fight battles he couldn't win. I won't make the same mistake, ignoring the battles I actually can fight."

The admission, so plainly stated, caught Thalia off guard. Luna rarely spoke of her father, the disgraced councilor whose political stances had cost his family everything.

"Thank you," Thalia said, meaning it. "Here — you can start by grinding these frost lichen samples. Fine powder, not chunks."

They worked side by side, the silence between them comfortable rather than strained. Luna proved a quick study, her nimble fingers adapting easily to the delicate work. Together, they moved through the infirmary, administering tinctures, changing

damp cloths, helping students sip water when their strength failed them.

"It's strange," Luna murmured as they finished with a second-year whose fever had broken overnight. "Half these patients wouldn't even look at us in the dining hall a few weeks ago. Now they're thanking us like we're sent from the Five Spirits themselves."

Thalia had noticed the same shift. Students who had previously sneered at her Southern accent now greeted her with relieved smiles. Even a few Northerners had nodded respectfully when she passed them in the corridors.

"Suffering has a way of recalibrating priorities," she replied, recalling her mother's words. "When you're burning with fever, you care less about where the hand offering water comes from."

"True enough," Luna agreed. "Though I wonder if the lessons will stick once they're well again."

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The cryomancy classroom buzzed with subdued conversation as Thalia and Luna slipped through the door, the scent of medicinal herbs still clinging to their clothes. White-blue frost patterns crystallized across the practice tables, and the temperature hovered just above freezing — a "comfortable warmth" according to Instructor Varik. Thalia flexed her fingers, wincing as her knuckles cracked from the cold. Four hours in the infirmary had left her hands raw, despite her gloves, the skin reddened from constant washing between patients.

"Your hands look like you've been brawling with rimwolves," Luna muttered as they took their seats.



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Thalia grimaced, tucking her hands under the table. "I ran out of salve halfway through. Used the last of it on that second-year with the cracked lips."

Before Luna could respond, a prickling sensation at the back of Thalia's neck made her turn. Across the room, Brynn Firstborn sat straight-backed among her usual circle of Northern students, her dark eyes fixed on Thalia with undisguised contempt. The Southern noble's posture was perfect, her uniform immaculate despite the supply shortages that had left most students with increasingly threadbare clothes. Somehow, Brynn always managed to appear untouched by the hardships affecting the rest of them.

Thalia met her gaze for a brief moment before deliberately turning away. She had neither the energy nor the inclination to engage with Brynn's hostility today.

From the front of the room, Instructor Varik cleared his throat.

"First years. Your formations are sloppy," he announced without preamble. "Half of you are still treating ice as an obstacle rather than an extension of your will. Today we focus on precision." His gaze swept meaningfully across the room, lingering on several students who had struggled in previous lessons. "Current circumstances do not excuse mediocrity. If anything, they demand excellence."

A low murmur ran through the class at the veiled reference to their situation. Varik silenced it with a sharp gesture.

"Begin with the third formation. Focus on maintaining temperature variance within a single structure. Ice that is uniformly cold is uniformly brittle."

The students all leaned over their desks, foreheads creasing in concentration as they attempted to create the complex thermal gradients that would allow their ice to flex rather than shatter under pressure. Thalia positioned her hands to form a crude shard of ice, drawing slow, steady breaths as she reached for the faint pulse of magic that always seemed just beyond her grasp in this class.

"The only reason she knows so much about herbs is because her kind can't afford proper medicine."

Brynn's voice carried clearly across the intervening space, deliberately pitched to reach Thalia's ears while maintaining the illusion of privacy. "It's sad, isn't it, the way the lowborn folk live? Digging in dirt for remedies because they can't access real healing. Like watching a child play with mud pies, pretending it's a feast."

Heat rushed to Thalia's cheeks, her concentration fracturing. The shard before her clouded, frost patterns losing their definition as her emotions disrupted the delicate magical balance.

"Focus, Greenspire," Varik snapped from across the room, his keen ears missing nothing.

This only intensified Thalia's mortification. She could feel Brynn's satisfied smirk without having to look, could picture the gleam of triumph in the other girl's eyes. Anger bubbled up inside her — anger at Brynn, at her own inability to maintain composure, at the unfairness of a world where accident of birth determined so much of one's fate.

"Breathe," Luna whispered beside her, the word barely audible. "She's baiting you. Don't let her win."

Thalia closed her eyes briefly, forcing air into her lungs in a measured rhythm. When

she opened her eyes again, Thalia deliberately redirected her thoughts to the ice shard before her. Not fighting against the ice, as Varik had warned, but working with it — sensing the currents of cold that flowed through its structure, the way she sensed the magical properties of herbs. It was more difficult with ice than with metal.

Gradually, the shard responded; its clouded surface cleared as frost patterns realigned. She visualized a core of flexibility surrounded by a harder exterior shell, the precise balance that created strength without brittleness. Her raw fingers ached with cold, but she maintained her position, letting the pain sharpen her focus rather than disrupt it.

When Brynn spoke again, her voice carried a harder edge, frustration bleeding through the veneer of casual cruelty. "I suppose we should be grateful she's finding some use for her peasant skills. At least the fever victims have something to distract them while waiting for real treatment."

But this time, Thalia noted with surprise, the student beside Brynn — a quiet Northern girl who usually laughed at her jabs — shifted uncomfortably, eyes darting away from Brynn's expectant look. Down the row, another student frowned slightly.

"That tincture she made broke my cousin's fever when nothing else worked," the student muttered, just loud enough to be heard. "Healer Erith said he'd never seen anything like it."

Brynn's perfectly composed features flickered with momentary confusion before hardening into a mask of disdain. "Healer Erith is being kind to spare her feelings."

But the damage was done. The ripple of discomfort spreading through her usual supporters made it clear that Brynn's words had struck a discordant note. Several students who had benefited directly or indirectly from Thalia's remedies were no longer willing to pretend otherwise, even to maintain social standing.

Luna caught Thalia's eye, the barest hint of a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. Thalia returned her attention to her crystal, but a new warmth had kindled inside her chest that had nothing to do with the flush of embarrassment from earlier.

"Sufficient for today," Varik announced as the class period neared its end. "Practice the fourth formation before next session. Those who cannot maintain a stable thermal gradient will spend extra hours in the practice hall." His severe gaze swept the room. "Dismissed."

Students began gathering their materials, the usual end-of-class chatter notably subdued. Thalia flexed her stiff fingers, wincing as blood rushed back into the cold-numbed joints. Luna waited patiently beside her, allowing her the time she needed to recover her dexterity before they ventured back into Frostforge's frigid corridors.

"She's just upset that you're more useful than she is," Luna said once they were clear of the classroom, her voice pitched low to avoid being overheard. "And let's be honest, it's not like anyone else is stepping up to help the sick."

Thalia sighed, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Maybe," she replied, her voice equally quiet. "But it's not like I'm doing it for attention. I just...I can't stand doing nothing."

"Which is why you're better than her," Luna said with a shrug that belied the sharp intelligence in her eyes. "Brynn's entire existence revolves around being seen as superior. You actually care about making things better, regardless of who notices." She gave Thalia a sidelong glance. "It's driving her mad that people are starting to see it. Now, come on – we've got to get to Beast Bonding."

As they descended toward the beast pens, the familiar trepidation that accompanied this particular class settled over Thalia. But beneath it ran a current of determination stronger than before. She might not have Brynn's social standing or natural affinity for

ice magic, but she had something that was proving increasingly valuable in Frostforge's current climate: the ability to heal, to mend what was broken — whether it was bodies ravaged by fever or, perhaps, the fracturing trust between Northern and Southern students.

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Thalia sipped glacier water from her battered metal cup, staring morosely at the thin strip of dried haddock on her plate. This was what passed for lunch now — a finger-length of salt-preserved fish, tough enough to require serious effort from even the strongest teeth. Her stomach growled audibly, prompting Luna to glance up from her equally meager portion with a grimace of sympathy. The dining hall, once filled with the aromas of hearty stews and freshly baked bread, now carried only the faint, stale scent of preserved foods and hungry desperation.

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"We should be grateful," Luna said, her voice pitched just loud enough for Thalia to hear across the table. "At least we still have lunch. I overheard Instructor Maven telling Healer Erith they might have to cut it entirely if supplies don't arrive by week's end."

Thalia grimaced, tearing off a small piece of haddock with her teeth and chewing deliberately. The salt stung her chapped lips, but the protein was worth the discomfort. "That would be disastrous. We're already running on empty during afternoon classes."

"Keep your chin up," Luna advised, though her usual lightness sounded forced. "At least the fish is real. I've heard rumors that some of the servants are stretching the meat rations with sawdust."

Ashe dropped onto the bench beside Thalia, her own plate bearing the same paltry offering. The Northern girl's sharp features looked even more severe than usual, her cheekbones standing out prominently against her pale skin. She eyed her portion with thinly veiled disgust.

"We might not have lunch for much longer," she muttered, echoing Luna's earlier comment. "The storage rooms are nearly empty. Even the preserved stocks are running low." She glanced around the hall, her voice dropping even further. "My clan survived three months trapped by avalanches with more food than this academy has left."

Thalia followed her gaze, noting the hollow cheeks and dull eyes that had become commonplace among the students. The fever had weakened many, but hunger was affecting them all. Even the instructors looked gaunt, their uniforms hanging looser

with each passing week.

"Has there been any word about the supply routes?" Thalia asked, breaking off another small piece of fish and letting it dissolve slowly on her tongue, making the meager portion last.

Ashe shook her head, a quick, sharp motion. "Nothing reliable. Just rumors that the Ice Wardens have expanded their blockade to include even the mountain paths." She stabbed at her haddock with unnecessary force. "This isn't sustainable. People are getting desperate."

As if summoned by her words, a gasp and a shout erupted from across the hall. Thalia's head snapped up, her body tensing at the sudden commotion. A cluster of first-years had gathered around a fallen figure, their voices rising in panicked confusion.

"He just collapsed —"

"What happened?"

"Someone get a healer!"

The cry for a healer penetrated the initial shock that had frozen Thalia in place. She was on her feet before she'd made a conscious decision to move, Luna and Ashe rising beside her.

"What is it?" Luna asked, but Thalia was already in motion, pushing past students who stood in confused clusters, watching the scene unfold with horrified fascination.

The crowd parted reluctantly, some too absorbed in the spectacle to notice her approach. Thalia recognized the divisive grouping even in crisis — Northern students

clustered together, Southern students doing the same, the invisible boundary between them maintained even as one of their own lay stricken.

"Let me through," she called, her voice cutting through the babble of speculation. "I've been working in the infirmary."

Whether it was her words or the authority in her tone, the final circle of onlookers stepped aside, revealing a first-year boy sprawled on the stone floor. His face was deathly pale except for two bright spots of color high on his cheeks. One hand clutched spasmodically at his throat, while his eyes rolled back, showing only the whites.

Thalia dropped to her knees beside him, her mind racing through possibilities. Fever didn't strike this suddenly. A seizure? Poisoning? She pressed two fingers against his neck, feeling the rapid, thready pulse beneath clammy skin.

"What happened?" she demanded, looking up at the terrified faces surrounding them.

A girl stepped forward, her voice trembling. "He just — he was fine one moment, and then he started gasping. Said his throat was burning."

Another student, one Thalia recognized as the boy's friend, held out a shaking hand. In his palm lay a small collection of dark red berries, their surface glossy with a waxy sheen, thin black veins visible beneath the skin.

"He thought they might be safe to eat," the friend stammered, tears welling in his eyes. "He — he was hungry —"

Thalia's breath caught as recognition slammed into her. "Bloodshade berries," she said, the name escaping her lips in a horrified whisper. Her mother's warnings about the deceptive fruit echoed in her memory; their crimson color was similar to harmless



mountain cherries, yet the subtle black veins were a warning to those who knew what to look for.

"Those are bloodshade berries," she announced more loudly, meeting the frightened gazes around her. "Eating them raw is practically suicide. Did anyone else eat them?"

Heads shook in denial, faces paling at her stark assessment.

The boy on the floor convulsed, a thin line of pink-tinged saliva trickling from the corner of his mouth. Thalia's chest tightened with urgency. There was no time to run to the infirmary for supplies, no time to fetch a master healer. The toxin moved quickly once ingested, paralyzing the lungs within minutes.

"I need space," she commanded, surprised at the steadiness in her voice when her heart was hammering against her ribs. "And water. Clean water."

As someone rushed to comply, Thalia untied the herb pouch at her waist, fingers moving with practiced precision despite her inner turmoil. Frantic hands are useless hands, her mother had always said. The cool focus that descended over her felt like a physical change, as if she'd stepped slightly outside herself to observe with clinical detachment.

She sorted through the dried herbs, quickly identifying the silverleaf she'd gathered that morning. Unlike the tincture she'd prepared for fever patients, this application required a more concentrated form. Silverleaf contained powerful purifying properties that could bind to certain toxins, including the deadly compound in bloodshade but only if administered quickly enough.

"Hold his mouth open," she instructed, her tone brooking no argument. "We have to get this into his system before it's too late."

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One of the students moved to support the boy's head, their own hands trembling visibly. Thalia crushed the silverleaf between her fingers, the dry leaves crumbling into a fine powder that released a sharp, astringent scent. When a cup of water appeared at her side, she took a single mouthful, using it to create a paste with the crushed silverleaf.

The mixture turned a pale green as it reacted with her saliva, exactly as her mother had described. Thalia leaned forward, using two fingers to pry the boy's jaw wider, then carefully rubbed the silverleaf paste along his gums and under his tongue, where the blood vessels would carry it most quickly into his system.

"What are you doing?" someone asked, the question tinged with both hope and doubt.

"Silverleaf can neutralize bloodshade toxin if it's administered in time," Thalia explained without looking up, her attention fixed on the boy's face. "It won't reverse the damage already done, but it can stop the poison from spreading further."

The dining hall had fallen eerily silent, the usual clatter of utensils and murmur of conversation completely absent. Every eye was fixed on Thalia's desperate efforts, Northern and Southern students alike holding their breath as if their collective will could tip the scales toward survival.

The boy's breathing grew increasingly labored, each inhale a struggle that lifted his chest only slightly before subsiding. Thalia crushed more silverleaf, adding honey from a tiny jar she kept specifically for medicinal purposes, creating a second dose of the remedy. This she massaged into the pulse points at his wrists, where the skin was thinnest and absorption most efficient.

"Come on," she whispered, more to herself than to the boy. "Fight it."

For one terrible moment, the boy's breathing seemed to stop altogether. A collective gasp rippled through the watching crowd. Thalia pressed her fingers more firmly against his wrist, feeling for the pulse that would tell her whether they'd lost the battle.

Then, the boy's chest rose in a deeper breath than before. His eyelids fluttered, though they didn't open fully. The rigid tension in his limbs began to ease, the fingers that had been clutching spasmodically at his throat relaxing by increments.

"It's working," Ashe murmured from somewhere behind Thalia, the relief in her voice palpable.

Thalia sat back on her heels, exhaustion suddenly washing over her as the fierce concentration that had carried her through the crisis began to ebb. She wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a smear of green from the silverleaf paste.

"He needs to go to the infirmary," she said, her voice rough with emotion she hadn't allowed herself to feel until now. "The silverleaf has neutralized the worst of the toxin, but he'll need monitoring. And fluids — lots of fluids to help flush his system."

Two older students stepped forward, one Northern, one Southern, Thalia noted with distant surprise. They carefully lifted the semi-conscious boy between them. The crowd parted to create a path to the door, the momentary unity born of crisis transcending the usual divisions.

As they carried him away, whispers erupted around the hall, the spell of silence broken. Thalia became uncomfortably aware of the many eyes still fixed on her, expressions ranging from awe to suspicion to calculation.

"That was incredible," Ashe said quietly, appearing at Thalia's side to help her to her feet. "Where did you learn to treat bloodshade poisoning?"

"My mother," Thalia replied, her legs unsteady as she stood. The adrenaline that had sustained her was fading, leaving her light-headed. "We saw cases every summer when the mountain berries ripened. Sailors would go foraging in the hills above Verdant Port, not knowing the difference..."

She trailed off, the implication of what had just happened settling over her with renewed weight. A student had been desperate enough to eat unknown berries, risking death for a moment's relief from hunger. How many more might make similar choices as their rations dwindled further?

Luna handed Thalia her abandoned cup of water, concern evident in her dark eyes. "Drink. You look like you're about to collapse yourself."

Thalia accepted the cup gratefully, gulping the cold liquid despite knowing she should sip slowly. The water revived her somewhat, clearing the fog that had begun to settle over her thoughts.

"I need to find more healing herbs," she said, the decision crystallizing even as she spoke it aloud. "And there must be some edible plants growing on the academy grounds — roots, pine nuts, maybe even winter mushrooms if we know where to look."

"You can't feed the entire academy by foraging," Ashe pointed out, though her tone held no criticism, only pragmatic assessment.

"No," Thalia agreed, "but I can teach others what's safe to gather. Knowledge spreads. And maybe it will be enough to prevent another incident like this one."

As the three girls returned to their table and their abandoned meal, Thalia noticed something subtle but significant. The rigid division that had separated Northern and Southern students only minutes before had softened, just slightly. Conversations crossed the invisible boundary, concerned glances were exchanged without the usual suspicion.

Crisis had momentarily united them, reminding everyone that beneath the cultural differences and political tensions, they were all just students fighting to survive Frostforge's brutal challenges. The question that weighed on Thalia's mind as she forced herself to finish her meager portion of haddock, was whether that unity would last beyond the moment of emergency — and whether it could be nurtured into something stronger before hunger and fear drove them all toward more desperate measures.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thalia's boots crunched through a thin layer of frost as she trudged the final steps to the Crystalline Training Grounds. Her muscles ached from the climb, protesting after days split between classes, foraging expeditions, and extra hours at the forge. The wind hit her like a physical blow as she crested the rise, whipping her hair across her face and stinging her exposed skin with cold so intense it felt like tiny needles. She tucked her chin into the collar of her coat, squinting against the brightness of sunlight reflecting off ice in every direction. Ahead, a cluster of black-clad figures stood in stark contrast to the white expanse; her fellow first-years were already gathered and waiting for instruction.

She quickened her pace, not wanting to draw Instructor Maven's attention by being late. The plateau stretched before her, an endless plain of crystalline white bordered by jagged cliffs that rose like teeth against the pale blue sky. The air here was thin and dry, each breath scraping her throat raw and leaving her lips cracked despite the salve she'd made from alpine flowers and tallow.

Thalia slipped into place beside Luna just as Maven strode to the center of their formation. The imposing instructor's single amber eye swept over the assembled students.

"Today," Maven announced, her voice carrying effortlessly over the wind's persistent howl, "we practice facing Isle Wardens on a battlefield."

A ripple of tension passed through the students. Even here, hundreds of miles inland, the mention of Isle Wardens caused spines to stiffen and jaws to clench. Thalia had grown up hearing stories of their raids on coastal towns like her own Verdant Port — swift, merciless attacks that left buildings shattered and people dead or missing.

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"Isle Wardens are most formidable at sea," Maven continued, pacing a tight circle that left precise boot prints in the frost. "Their storm magic draws power from the ocean itself. But make no mistake —" She stopped abruptly, her gaze locking onto a student who had shifted his weight. "—they are deadly even far from water."

The student froze mid-movement, then forced himself to stand even straighter.

"Their preferred tactic on land is lightning," Maven said, addressing the entire group again. "Quick, precise strikes that pick off enemies one by one before they can mount a defense. Surviving requires agility, focus, and most importantly," she paused, her voice dropping to a dangerous purr, "the ability to recognize patterns in chaos."

Thalia swallowed hard, already dreading whatever exercise Maven had planned. The instructor had made no secret of her dislike for Thalia and never missed an opportunity to push her to her limits.

"You will pair up," Maven declared. "Each pair will attempt to cross this plateau while avoiding simulated lightning strikes."

She gestured toward the edge of the training grounds where the plateau met the cliff face. A solitary figure stood atop it, dark against the bright sky, cloak billowing dramatically in the wind.

"Instructor Varik will provide our lightning today," Maven said with a thin smile that held no warmth. "His frost bolts will mark you if struck. One hit, and you're dead."

Thalia felt her stomach tighten. Varik was a cryomancy master who could hit targets

with pinpoint accuracy at distances where most could barely see.

"Greenspire," Maven barked suddenly, her eye fixing on Thalia. "You're with Bright. You'll go first."

Of course, she would be first. Thalia suppressed a sigh and looked for Roran among the students. He caught her eye immediately, offering an encouraging smile as he stepped forward to join her. His dark curls were partially tamed in a knot at the nape of his neck, though several strands had already escaped to dance around his face in the wind.

"Ready for this?" he asked, his voice low as they moved to the starting position.

"Not even slightly," Thalia muttered, eyeing the distance to the opposite end of the plateau. It looked impossibly far.

Roran's smile widened. "Just follow my lead. I've got some experience with this kind of thing."

Before she could ask what he meant by that, Maven's voice cracked across the training ground.

"Begin!"

Thalia sprinted forward, Roran keeping pace beside her. The wind tore at her clothing, the cold air burning her lungs with each desperate breath. She kept her eyes on the terrain ahead, watching for any sign of movement from the cliff where Varik stood.

The first frost bolt struck without warning, hitting the ground just inches from her foot. Thalia veered sharply to the left, nearly colliding with Roran, who had somehow anticipated the strike and was already moving in the opposite direction.



"Keep moving!"he shouted over the wind."Don't try to predict — just react!"

Another bolt flashed past her shoulder, close enough that she felt the chill radiating from it.Thalia ducked and changed direction again, her heart hammering against her ribs.They'd covered barely a third of the distance, and already, the attacks were coming faster.

Roran moved with startling grace beside her, his body flowing like water between the frost bolts.There was something mesmerizing about the way he anticipated each strike, shifting his weight and changing directions with such fluidity that it almost looked choreographed.

A sudden flash of blue-white light filled Thalia's peripheral vision.She tried to dodge, but her exhausted muscles responded too slowly.Cold exploded across her left shoulder, spreading rapidly over her leather armor in a crystalline pattern.The frost bit through to her skin beneath, sending a paralyzing chill through her entire side.

She stumbled, dropping to one knee as her arm went numb.The rules were clear — she was out.But Roran hadn't noticed her fall.He continued forward, a dark silhouette weaving through a storm of frost bolts, never faltering, never hesitating.

Thalia could only watch, both impressed and unsettled by his display.His movements weren't like anything taught in their combat classes.They were wild yet precise, unpredictable yet purposeful — almost like a dance that flowed with the rhythm of the attacks rather than fighting against them.

It reminded her of stories she'd heard as a child, tales of Isle Warden raiders moving through Northern defenses like ghosts, impossible to hit, striking without warning.The similarity sent a chill through her that had nothing to do with the frost spreading across her armor.

Roran reached the end of the course, stopping at the designated marker with his chest heaving from exertion. He turned, smiling triumphantly, until he spotted Thalia kneeling in the middle of the plateau. His expression fell immediately. Without hesitation, he jogged back toward her, ignoring the continuing frost bolts that Varik was still firing.

"You okay?" he asked, reaching out a hand to help her up.

Just as their fingers touched, a frost bolt struck him squarely between the shoulder blades. Roran yelped in surprise, then groaned as the cold spread across his back.

"Oh," he said, wincing. "I messed up, didn't I?"

Thalia couldn't help the laugh that bubbled up despite her discomfort. There was something so genuine about his dismay, so at odds with the almost supernatural skill he'd displayed moments before.

"The exercise isn't over until I say it is," Maven's voice cut through their moment, sharp as a blade. The instructor had approached unnoticed, her boots leaving precise impressions in the frost. "Survival doesn't have a finish line, Mr. Bright."

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Anyone else might have wilted under Maven's cold stare, but Roran merely shrugged, his smile returning even as frost continued to spread across his cloak.

"Lesson learned, Instructor," he said cheerfully. "Never turn your back on a storm."

Maven's expression didn't change, but Thalia thought she detected a flicker of something — annoyance? Suspicion? — in her single amber eye.

"Both of you, join the others," Maven commanded before turning away. "Next pair!"

As they trudged back to the sidelines, Thalia studied Roran from the corner of her eye. His face showed nothing but good-natured acceptance of their failure, but she couldn't shake the image of him moving through those frost bolts with such unnatural precision.

"Where did you learn to move like that?" she asked quietly, keeping her voice below the howl of the wind.

Roran glanced at her, his expression momentarily guarded before relaxing into an easy smile. "You pick things up when you grow up in a port city. Dodging drunk sailors, angry merchants..." He shrugged. "Just street smarts, really."

It was a plausible answer, but it didn't quite explain the fluid grace she'd witnessed — a fighting style that seemed too refined, too practiced for someone who claimed to have learned it on the streets.

As they reached the other students, Thalia noticed several watching Roran with

expressions ranging from admonition to suspicion. She wasn't the only one who had seen something unusual in his movements.

The frost on her armor was beginning to melt, leaving her clothing damp and even colder than before. She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself as the next pair of students took their place at the starting line.

"Hey," Roran whispered, leaning close enough that his breath warmed her ear. "Next time, we'll make it all the way across. Together."

There was such certainty in his voice, such warmth in his dark eyes, that Thalia found herself nodding despite her lingering doubts. She wanted to believe him, to trust in the friendship they'd been building. In a place like Frostforge, steel was worth more than gold, and allies were worth more than either. She couldn't afford to misplace her suspicions, not if she wanted to survive what was to come.

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The forge's heat struck Thalia like a physical wall as she stepped through the massive iron doors, the abrupt transition from biting cold to intense warmth making her skin prickle and her ears ring. Sweat immediately began to bead along her hairline, replacing the frost that had melted down her neck during the walk from the Crystalline Training Grounds. The familiar scent of coal, hot metal, and sweat enveloped her, strangely comforting after the sterile cold of the plateau. Around her, other first-years were shaking off their cloaks and gravitating toward the nearest heat sources, their faces still pinched and pale from the ordeal they'd just survived.

Thalia flexed her fingers, wincing as blood rushed back into the tips, bringing with it the sharp sting of returning sensation. The metalworking class wouldn't begin for another half hour, just enough time to properly thaw before having to handle tools and raw materials. She made her way to her usual station near the eastern wall, where

a small workbench stood cluttered with her ongoing projects.

Luna and Ashe had already claimed their spots nearby. Luna perched delicately on a stool, rubbing her hands together and blowing on them dramatically, while Ashe methodically laid out her tools with the precision Thalia had come to expect from the Northern clan warrior.

"I think my toes might be permanently frozen," Luna announced, wiggling her feet in their thick leather boots. "I can't feel anything below my ankles."

"Southern blood," Ashe remarked without looking up from her tools. "Too thin for proper survival."

Thalia smiled at their familiar banter and reached for the steel pot she kept tucked beneath her workbench. She'd learned early on that the forges provided an excellent opportunity for brewing — the heat was constant, and no one questioned an extra pot among the metalworking equipment.

"I'll make us something warm," she offered, filling the pot with water from a nearby barrel. The water, collected from the glacier that towered above Frostforge, was so pure it almost seemed to glow in the pot's dark interior.

She set the pot on the edge of one of the smaller furnaces, where the heat would bring it to a gentle simmer without risking a full boil. While waiting, she reached into the small leather pouch hanging from her belt, fingers sifting through its contents with practiced familiarity.

"Wintermint for the chill," she murmured, selecting a few dried leaves and crushing them between her fingers. The sharp, clean scent cut through the forge's heavier smells. "Firethorn berries for circulation." These she added whole, their wrinkled red skins still vibrant despite being dried. "And a bit of mountain honey to sweeten."

Thalia stirred the mixture with a metal rod she kept specifically for this purpose, watching as the water gradually took on a deep amber hue. The scent rose with the steam, herbal and sweet, drawing appreciative glances from nearby students.

As she worked, Thalia became aware of an unusual pattern of movement in the forge. Students were clustered in small groups, heads bent together, voices low. But their eyes kept darting toward one specific area where Roran stood talking animatedly with three other first-years, his hands gesturing as he recounted some story that had his audience captivated.

"What's everyone whispering about?" Thalia asked, keeping her voice casual as she poured the steaming tea into three mismatched cups she'd salvaged from the kitchens.

Ashe accepted her cup with a grateful nod. "They're talking about your partner's performance on the plateau," she said, blowing gently across the surface of the tea. "Not exactly subtle, are they?"

Luna took a sip of her tea and made an appreciative sound before leaning closer to Thalia. "People are saying things," she murmured, her normally vacant expression sharpening into something more focused, "about Roran."

"What kind of things?"

Luna glanced around, confirming that no one was within earshot. "Some students think he might be an Isle Warden spy."

The tea suddenly tasted bitter on Thalia's tongue. "That's ridiculous," she said automatically, though the image of Roran weaving between frost bolts with unnatural grace flashed through her mind. "He lost his family to Isle Warden raids. He's made no secret of it."

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"That's his story," Luna replied with a small shrug. "But you saw him today. That wasn't just talent, Thalia. Those movements..." She trailed off, her eyes tracking Roran across the room. "The way he anticipated those strikes, the fluidity — it's exactly how Isle Wardens fight. It's what makes them so deadly."

Ashe, who had been listening silently, set down her cup with a decisive click against the workbench. "Those techniques aren't exclusive to Isle Wardens," she said, her voice low but firm. "Northern warriors who live near the coast sometimes adopt similar methods. It's a practical adaptation to the environment, not evidence of treachery."

"And how many Southern merchant's sons have been trained in Northern coastal fighting techniques?" Luna countered, raising an eyebrow.

Thalia looked over at Roran, trying to reconcile the young man with the feared raiders she'd grown up dreading. His head was thrown back in laughter at something one of the other students had said, his entire demeanor open and friendly. Nothing like the cold, calculating killers she'd heard about in tales of Isle Wardens.

"He said he grew up dodging drunk sailors and angry merchants in port cities," Thalia said slowly. "Maybe that's all it is — street reflexes honed by necessity."

"Maybe," Luna said, her tone making it clear she didn't believe it for a second. "Or maybe that's just what he wants us to think."

The forge suddenly felt too hot, the air too thick. Thalia sipped her tea, letting the familiar herbs ground her while her mind raced. She wanted to dismiss Luna's

suspicious outright, to defend Roran based on the friendship they'd been building. But doubt had taken root, and she couldn't quite shake it.

"If he were an Isle Warden spy," Ashe said thoughtfully, "why draw attention to himself by showing his skills so openly? Wouldn't a true spy try to blend in?"

It was a logical question, one that Thalia had been turning over in her own mind.

"Unless," Luna replied, her fingers tapping a thoughtful rhythm against her cup, "he wanted to gauge reactions. See who notices what. Or maybe he has other plans that require gaining reputation among the students. The best place to hide is sometimes in plain sight."

Across the forge, Roran's gaze suddenly met Thalia's. His smile widened, and he raised a hand in greeting. Without thinking, she returned the gesture, even as her stomach twisted with conflicting emotions.

"I don't know," Thalia said, turning back to her friends. "It seems like a leap to go from 'good at dodging' to 'enemy spy.'"

"In normal times, perhaps," Luna acknowledged. "But these aren't normal times. Food supplies dwindling, Isle Warden attacks increasing, students being sabotaged..." She gave Thalia a meaningful look. "Someone tampered with your frost gloves. Someone packed magnesium into your forge."

"And you think that someone is Roran?" Thalia asked, her voice sharper than she intended.

Luna shrugged, her face settling back into its usual dreamy expression as a group of students walked past. "I think," she said softly, "that we should consider all possibilities. Trust is a luxury we might not be able to afford."



Ashe's green eyes narrowed as she studied Roran across the room. "In my clan, we judge warriors by their actions in battle, not rumors whispered behind their backs. If he is what they say, he will reveal himself eventually. All masks slip, given time."

The conversation lapsed into silence as they finished their tea. The warmth had returned to Thalia's limbs, but a coldness had settled in her chest. She found herself cataloging every interaction she'd had with Roran since their arrival at Frostforge, searching for signs she might have missed.

"Don't look now," Luna whispered suddenly, "but our topic of conversation is heading this way."

Sure enough, Roran was weaving between workbenches, making his way toward them with two other students in tow. His curls were wilder than usual, still damp from melted frost, and his smile was bright against his brown skin.

"Saw you brewing some tea, Greenspire," he called as he approached. "Any chance you've got enough for a few more frozen souls?"

Thalia hesitated only briefly before reaching for her pot. "I might be able to stretch it," she said, forcing a smile that felt too tight on her face. "Though I can't promise it'll taste as good watered down."

"Anything hot would be a miracle right now," one of the other students said gratefully.

As Thalia poured the remaining tea into borrowed cups, she studied Roran's hands — the calluses that lined his palms, the small burn scars that matched her own from forge work, the slight tremor that still lingered from the cold. They looked like the hands of someone who had worked hard his entire life. Honest hands.

Thalia looked up and met Roran's gaze. He smiled, and his brown eyes were soft. Warm. Open. They weren't the eyes of a liar.

Luna was observant, but she wasn't immune to paranoia. Thalia set the pot of tea back down and forced the remnants of suspicion from her mind. Trusting Roran was a conscious decision; she had already earned herself too many enemies to turn away a friend.

She could only hope that she wasn't making a mistake, that her choice to trust wouldn't one day be her undoing.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thalia's breath clouded before her face as she hurried down darkened stairwells, descending into the Howling Forge. These early morning sessions with Kaine had become the part of her day she anticipated most, a private refuge from the academy's growing tensions and dwindling supplies.

She pushed open the heavy iron door, and a wall of heat struck her face. The contrast between the biting cold outside and the forge's sweltering interior made her skin prickle beneath her layers. Inside, the air shimmered with heat, thick with the acrid scent of hot metal and coal. The smell reminded her of blood and earth — elemental, ancient.

"You're right on time," Kaine's voice carried from the far corner, where he stood at a workbench arranging tools with methodical precision. His back was to her, shoulders broad beneath his leather apron, the muscles of his forearms shifting as he aligned hammers and tongs according to some system only he understood. When he turned, the perpetual severity of his expression softened slightly — not quite a smile, but something meant only for her.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

Thalia unwound her scarf and shed her outer layers, hanging them on a hook near the door. "I wouldn't miss it," she said, running her fingers through her hair to untangle the wind's handiwork. "Especially not today."

Today was special. After weeks of basic metallurgy, Kaine had promised to teach her the fundamentals of ice-metal forging; prior to their end-of-year trial, first-years were expected to forge their first ice-metal blade. While other students practiced blind, Thalia would have the advantage of expert guidance. The thought sent a flutter of anticipation through her chest that had nothing to do with the trials and everything to do with the man now gesturing her toward an empty forge station.

"Start by selecting your ore," he instructed, nodding toward a collection of metal ingots arranged by type on a nearby shelf. "Ice-metal can be made with any base, but steel gives the best balance of strength and magical conductivity."

Thalia approached the shelf, studying each option with care before selecting a steel ingot. "The Southern Kingdoms mostly work with copper and bronze."

"One of many Northern advantages," Kaine said, but without the smugness most Northern students displayed when discussing such things. His tone was matter-of-fact, almost apologetic.

He moved beside her at the forge, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from him. It was a different quality than the forge's fire, steadier and more contained. "The advantage of ice-metal is that it remains responsive to cryomancy after forging," he explained, gesturing for her to place the ingot in the forge's heart. "Standard metal weapons are static. Once forged, they can't be altered without

returning them to the fire. But ice-metal," he paused, and there was something like reverence in his voice. "Ice-metal remembers the cold. It can be manipulated in battle, called back to your hand if lost, even reshaped with sufficient skill."

Thalia placed the ingot in the roaring forge, watching as the metal slowly began to glow. "Like the golems along the edge of the Crystalline Plateau? Or the Golem Fields?" She was plenty familiar with the off-putting metal guardians of the academy's grounds, though she had only seen the roving constructs in the Golem Fields, the snow-swept valley below the plateau, on days with good visibility.

"Exactly. The most complex application is in constructs and golems — living metal, some call it, though that's not quite accurate. The ones you've seen in the Golem Fields are failed creations. Making a construct is difficult work. In the best-case scenario, a failure will be inert. Worst case, it'll be deadly." He paused, as though he could sense her building apprehension. "But don't worry about any of that yet. We'll start with the basics: a blade that responds to its wielder's cryomancy."

As the metal heated to a cherry red, Kaine handed her a pair of tongs. "Draw it out now. Work it evenly."

Thalia extracted the glowing ingot and placed it on the anvil. She took up a hammer, its weight familiar in her hand after weeks of practice. With steady, rhythmic strikes, she began to flatten the metal, stretching it into the rough shape of a blade. Each impact sent sparks flying and rang out in the cavernous forge.

Kaine watched without comment, his gaze intent on her technique. Only occasionally did he make small adjustments to her grip or stance — a hand on her elbow to correct her angle, fingers repositioning hers on the hammer's handle. Each brief contact sent a current through her that had nothing to do with magic.

After several rounds of heating and hammering, the blade began to take form — a

tapered length of metal with a dull edge that would later be honed to lethal sharpness. Sweat beaded on Thalia's forehead despite the relative cold of Frostforge; she wiped it away with her sleeve before it could drip onto the hot metal.

"Now comes the difficult part," Kaine said, taking the blade with his tongs and returning it to the forge. "When it reaches white-hot, we'll infuse it with ice magic. This is where most first attempts fail."

Thalia reached for her frost gloves, but Kaine held out a hand to stop her.

"Not like that," he said. "You're not ready to use frost gloves for this."

He crossed to a locked cabinet in the corner of the forge, returning with what looked like elaborate gauntlets. Unlike her simple frost gloves, these were works of art — dark metal layered with intricate runes that covered the hands and extended halfway up the forearms. The palms glowed with a faint blue light.

"These are infusion gauntlets," he explained, handling them with care. "Standard equipment for master smiths. The runes help direct magical flow, preventing the ice from overwhelming the metal or the heat from negating the cold. It's all about balance."

He helped her don the gauntlets, which were surprisingly light despite their appearance. The metal was cool against her skin, and she felt a strange resonance as the runes activated, responding to her natural magical signature.

"Now," Kaine said, retrieving the white-hot blade from the forge, "we work quickly. The metal must remain malleable while we infuse it. I'll hold; you channel."

He laid the glowing blade on the anvil, gripping it with specialized tongs. "Place your hands on either side — don't touch it yet — and focus your cold through the

gauntlets. Visualize the frost entering the metal, becoming one with it. Not freezing it, but joining it."

Thalia positioned her gauntleted hands as instructed, feeling the intense heat radiating from the blade. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the cold within her, directing it through her arms and into the runes of the gauntlets. The sigils began to glow brighter, frost patterns forming along their lengths.

"Now," Kaine instructed, his voice low and intense. "But gently. Too much ice will shatter the steel; too little won't take."

She lowered her hands until they hovered just above the blade's surface. The heat was nearly unbearable, but the gauntlets protected her skin while conducting her magic. Beads of sweat rolled down her temples as she focused, feeling the push and pull between her cold and the metal's heat. Steam hissed and danced above the blade, forming ghostly shapes in the forge's dim light.

"Feel the metal," Kaine murmured, so close his breath stirred the loose strands of hair by her ear. "It's alive in its own way. Listen to what it wants."

Thalia reached out with her magical senses, surprised to find that she could indeed feel something like a pulse in the steel — a rhythm created by its molecular structure, now in flux between solid and liquid states. She tried to match her cold to that rhythm, to insert frost between the metal's very atoms without disrupting their dance.

For a moment, she thought she had it; the blade glowed with an inner blue light beneath its red-hot surface, like veins of ice running through molten rock. But then something shifted. The balance tipped. The ice spread too quickly, and the metal's heat fought back. The blade warped beneath their hands, twisting away from her intended shape.

"Hold!" Kaine called, but it was too late. The delicate balance was lost.

When they finally set the cooling blade aside, Thalia stared at it in dismay. What should have been an elegant weapon was a misshapen, lumpy thing with frost fissures running along its edge. It looked like it had been chewed by some metal-eating beast rather than crafted by human hands.

"I'm sorry," she said, disappointment heavy in her chest. "I ruined it."

Kaine studied the failed blade, then surprised her with a short laugh. "This?" he asked, turning the malformed weapon in his hands. "This is excellent for a first attempt."

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Thalia looked up sharply, certain he was mocking her, but his expression held genuine approval.

"Most first-years can't even get the ice to take at all," he explained, running a finger along one of the frost veins. "You achieved partial integration. The shape is poor, yes, but the technique shows promise." He set the blade on a cooling rack. "The true masters work for decades to perfect this craft. I've been doing this for six years, and I still fail more often than I succeed."

The praise eased some of Thalia's disappointment, but also sparked her curiosity. "Six years?" she asked. "I thought you were only twenty-one."

"I am."

"Then you started when you were fifteen? Before Frostforge?"

A shadow passed over Kaine's face, his expression closing like a door. He turned away, busying himself with cleaning tools that were already immaculate. "I learned in prison," he said finally, the words falling between them like stones. "I spent five years there. It was forge work or breaking rocks. I chose the forge."

The revelation hit Thalia like a physical blow. Prison. She had dismissed Senna's claims as jealous lies, but here was confirmation from Kaine himself. Five years in prison; that much was true.

What about the rest of Senna's rumors? That Kaine was a murderer?



Her heart raced, suddenly aware of how alone they were in the vast, empty forge, how the tools surrounding them could easily become weapons. The man beside her had spent years incarcerated for a violent crime. He was, quite possibly, a killer. And she'd been spending hours alone with him, reveling in his attention, his touch.

"I should go," she said, her voice higher than normal. She fumbled with the gauntlets, suddenly desperate to be free of them. "Ashe and Luna will be waiting. We...we have plans before breakfast."

Kaine turned back, disappointment evident in his furrowed brow. He reached to help her with the gauntlets, but she flinched away — a small movement, but impossible to miss. His hands froze in mid-air, then slowly withdrew. His face settled into the impassive mask he wore with everyone else, the openness he'd shown her vanishing like frost under sunlight.

"Of course," he said, his voice carefully neutral. "We'll continue tomorrow."

Thalia placed the gauntlets on the workbench with trembling hands, not meeting his eyes. "Yes. Tomorrow."

She gathered her outer clothes, pulling them on with jerky movements. The heat of the forge, so welcome earlier, now felt oppressive. She needed air, space, distance from this man who both attracted and frightened her.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The storm descended upon Frostforge without warning, as if the academy had somehow offended the ancient winter gods. Blinding white snow lashed against stone walls, driven by winds that howled like wounded beasts. Within twenty-four hours, fifteen-foot drifts had sealed every exit, and temperatures plummeted so severely that the air itself seemed brittle enough to shatter. Thalia pressed her palm against the

window of her dormitory, the glass so cold it burned her skin, and watched ice crystals form intricate patterns across the pane — beautiful and deadly, like so much of what she'd encountered at the academy.

"Don't touch the glass," Ashe warned from her bed, where she sat cross-legged, sharpening a small blade. "That window glass is enchanted to withstand northern temperatures, but too much body heat can weaken the spell work."

Thalia pulled her hand away. "Is that true, or are you just trying to scare the Southern girl?"

A rare smile flickered across Ashe's face. "Both can be true at once."

Thalia wrapped her blanket tighter around her shoulders and shuffled back to her bed. The room wasn't exactly freezing — the network of heat channels from the forges below kept it habitable — but a persistent chill clung to the stone walls, seeping into her bones. Four days into the storm, and Thalia had already developed a routine: add another layer of clothing each morning, huddle near the corridor heat vents for twenty minutes, then retreat to her bed when the constant draft made standing unbearable.

Instructor Maven had made the announcement during breakfast: "All students will remain within the confines of the main building. Exterior training yards, outlying forges, and perimeter patrols are suspended until further notice. Any student attempting to venture outside will not be rescued." Her eyes had swept across the great hall, lingering pointedly on the more rebellious students. "Let me be clear — this is not standard winter weather. The weather-watchers in Winterhearth warn this particular storm formation occurs once every fifty years. It has killed experienced ice navigators. It will certainly kill you."

Since then, the academy had folded inward upon itself like a wounded animal. Classes

were suspended, meals were distributed in shifts to prevent overcrowding in the already-frigid great hall, and students were encouraged to stay in their dormitory sections. The only constant was the dull, rhythmic pounding from the central forges, which ran day and night to maintain enough heat to prevent the inhabitants from freezing to death.

Thalia had taken to retrieving her rations and retreating to eat in their room. She preferred to deal with crumbs in her bed than shivering through a meal in the great hall, where drafts cut through the air like invisible blades.

"Where's Luna?" Thalia asked, realizing their third roommate hadn't returned from breakfast.

Ashe's knife paused mid-stroke. "Not sure." She mumbled something about research in the library, but... She shrugged, returning to her methodical sharpening. "Luna says many things."

The implied skepticism wasn't lost on Thalia. Since Luna had revealed her true nature — not the scattered, forgetful girl she pretended to be, but the sharply observant daughter of a disgraced politician — Thalia had begun noticing how often Luna found reasons to be elsewhere. Before the storm, she'd attributed it to Luna's claimed need to maintain her ditzy facade, but now, confined to the academy's inner sanctum, the frequent disappearances seemed strange.

"I'm going to find her," Thalia decided, pulling on a second pair of wool socks.

"Why bother?" Ashe's question carried no malice, only genuine curiosity. "Luna keeps her own counsel."

"Because I'm bored, cold, and curious," Thalia replied. "And because something feels...off."

Ashe nodded once, a gesture of respect rather than agreement. In the Northern clans, as Ashe had explained one night, following one's instincts was considered wisdom, not paranoia.

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Thalia navigated the winding corridors of the dormitory wing, the stone passageways lit by blue-flame sconces that provided light but minimal warmth. At each junction, she paused to hover her hands near the heat vents, small, brass-grated openings where warm air from the forges below was channeled throughout the academy. The system was ingenious but inadequate against the current onslaught of cold.

She passed groups of students clustered near these heat sources like moths drawn to flame, their conversations a mix of complaints about the cold and speculation about how long the storm would last. None had seen Luna.

The common area at the center of the western wing's dormitories was sparsely furnished: worn chairs arranged in a loose circle, a threadbare rug faded to indeterminate gray, and a single heat vent that barely produced enough warmth to justify the crowd gathered around it. Luna sat perched on an armrest, her small frame almost childlike compared to the older students surrounding her.

"— and then the handle just snapped right off!" Luna was saying, her voice pitched higher than normal, embodying the flighty persona she maintained in public. "Can you believe my luck? As if forging wasn't hard enough already!" She waved her hands in exaggerated dismay, earning sympathetic nods from the group.

Thalia lingered in the shadows of the corridor entrance, watching. Luna's performance was flawless — the slightly unfocused gaze, the nervous energy in her gestures, the self-deprecating giggle after each comment. But now that Thalia knew the truth, she could see the calculation beneath each seemingly random question Luna posed to the group.

"What about you, Levi? Did you finish that shield design?"

A heavyset boy with dark circles under his eyes stared at his hands. "I was nearly done. Left it to cool overnight and came back to find it cracked clean in two." His voice was flat, resignation rather than anger. "Instructor Wolfe accused me of improper quenching."

"Sounds like everyone's having a streak of bad luck," Luna giggled, but Thalia noticed how her eyes sharpened, cataloging each response.

A lanky student with burn scars climbing his forearms — Tristan, Thalia recalled from metallurgy class — snorted bitterly. "I found my leather bracers soaked in lamp oil. That's not bad luck. That's someone's idea of a joke."

A heavy silence followed his statement. Several students exchanged weighted glances.

"Maybe it's the storm," Luna suggested airily. "Mama always said bad weather brings bad spirits!"

The tension broke, someone chuckled, and conversation resumed — lighter now, less specific. Luna had masterfully steered them away from dangerous territory, Thalia realized. Away from accusations that would only heighten the already palpable divide between Northern and Southern students.

Luna glanced up, and for a split second, their eyes met across the room. Recognition flashed in Luna's gaze — not surprise at being discovered, but something sharper. More deliberate. She stood, stretching dramatically.

"Well, I'd better check if they've delivered new forge tools yet!" she announced. "I'm absolutely useless without proper tongs!"

The group barely acknowledged her departure, already sinking back into subdued conversations about the cold, the food shortages, the interminable waiting. Thalia retreated into the corridor before Luna could reach her, not wanting the others to notice their connection.

Luna emerged moments later, her steps light but purposeful as she approached Thalia. Without breaking stride, she looped her arm through Thalia's and continued walking, guiding them away from the common area.

"Curious little mouse," Luna murmured, her voice dropping to its natural register, all pretense gone. "Following me around the academy?"

"I noticed you've been disappearing a lot lately," Thalia replied, matching Luna's pace. "Even before the storm."

"Observant. Good." Luna's grip tightened slightly as she steered them toward their dormitory.

"I thought we were going back to our room," Thalia said when Luna bypassed their door without slowing.

"I wanted to talk in private," Luna replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "Not with Ashe in the room."

Thalia frowned. "I trust Ashe."

"How charming," Luna said, but there was no bite to her words, only weariness. "Trust is a luxury, Thalia. One I've never been able to afford."

They climbed a narrow spiral staircase that Thalia had never explored before. The steps were worn in the center, suggesting centuries of use, but the dust on the upper

landings indicated this route was seldom traveled now. Luna finally stopped at a small alcove near a sealed window. Outside, the storm raged unabated, snow and ice particles striking the glass like tiny daggers.

"We won't be overheard here," Luna said, releasing Thalia's arm and leaning against the wall, suddenly looking exhausted. The transformation was jarring — from bright, scattered Luna to this focused, weary young woman whose eyes seemed decades older than her face.

"What's going on?" Thalia asked. "What was that performance downstairs about?"

Luna studied Thalia for a long moment before speaking. "You've had things go missing, tools tampered with. The magnesium in your forge. The frost gloves."

They weren't questions. Thalia nodded anyway.

"And you assumed you were being specifically targeted," Luna continued. "Because you're from the poorest district in Verdant Port. Because you've shown unexpected talent in metallurgy. Because you've associated with Kaine."

"Aren't I?"



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Luna's laugh was hollow. "Yes and no. You're being targeted, but not just you. Most of the Southern students in this academy have experienced similar incidents. Missing possessions. Damaged equipment. Sabotaged projects."

Thalia felt her breath catch. "Seriously?"

Luna nodded grimly. "I've been gathering their stories for weeks, compiling evidence. At first, I thought it might be random — hazing, perhaps, or general malice. But it's too consistent, too methodical."

Thalia processed this information, memories clicking into place. The Southern students who mysteriously failed crucial tests despite adequate preparation. The injuries during training that always seemed to affect Southern recruits more than Northern ones.

"Did you ask any Northern students?" Thalia asked. "Maybe everyone is experiencing this."

"Of course I did," Luna replied. "I've cultivated my harmless, forgetful persona precisely because it allows me to ask questions without arousing suspicion. No Northern student reports anything similar."

The implications settled over Thalia like a physical weight. "You're saying someone — or multiple someones — is systematically sabotaging every Southern student at Frostforge."

Luna nodded. "The pattern is undeniable." She traced a pattern in the frost on the

window beside them."The question is why.And whether it's sanctioned by the academy itself."

Thalia had volunteered for Frostforge, knowing its reputation for brutal training and high mortality rates.But she'd assumed those dangers would be faced equally by all students.The idea that the deck might be further stacked against her, against all Southern students, made her stomach twist.

"We need to tell them," Thalia said finally."The other Southern students.They have a right to know they're being targeted."

Luna cocked her head, studying Thalia with renewed interest."Do they?What good would it serve, beyond creating panic?If this escalates into open conflict..."

"So we do nothing?Let them continue to be sabotaged without even the courtesy of a warning?"

"I didn't say that," Luna replied."I'm saying we need to be strategic.Think, Thalia.What happens if we tell everyone?Best case scenario: Southern students become more vigilant, more careful.Worst case: accusations fly, tensions boil over, and the academy cracks down on 'troublemakers' spreading 'divisive rumors.'"

Thalia paced the small landing, trying to organize her thoughts.Part of her — the part raised in Verdant Port's poorest district, where community meant survival — recoiled at the idea of withholding such critical information from her fellow Southerners.But the part that had learned to navigate Frostforge's treacherous social and academic terrain recognized the danger in Luna's warning.

"This storm won't last forever," Thalia said slowly."And when it breaks, I'm willing to bet the sabotage will intensify.If resources are already strained, and if someone at the academy is looking to 'thin the herd' by targeting Southern students..."

Luna nodded, following Thalia's reasoning. "The next few weeks could be even more dangerous. Especially for those who've shown exceptional talent. Like you."

Thalia looked away, nerves churning in her stomach. She wanted to refute Luna's assertion, but she knew that while cryomancy still evaded her, her unexpected skill in metallurgy had set her apart from the other students.

"So," Luna prompted. "What do you propose?"

Thalia stared out at the raging snowstorm, its fury matching the conflict inside her. The academy had already tested her in ways she'd never anticipated. Now, it seemed the real test was just beginning.

"We warn them," she decided finally. "Not all at once, not in a way that could be traced back to us. One by one, quietly. Just enough for them to protect themselves without causing panic."

Luna considered this, then nodded slowly. "It could work. If we're careful."

"And we investigate," Thalia added, surprising herself with her own determination. "If someone is targeting Southern students, I want to know who. And why."

"Now that," Luna said, a genuine smile spreading across her face, "is why I decided to trust you, Thalia Greenspire."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thalia woke with her heart thumping against her ribs, fragments of unsettling dreams slipping away like water through her fingers. The dormitory air felt thick with unspoken tensions. She stared at the rough-hewn ceiling beams, her conversation with Luna from the night before replaying in her mind. Sabotage. The word itself seemed to

carry weight, like a stone lodged in her chest. Someone at the academy was deliberately targeting Southern students, and now she couldn't help but wonder if Kaine, with his dark past and five years in prison, might somehow be involved.

She slipped from beneath her furs, careful not to disturb the silence. Across the room, Luna's small form was curled tight beneath her blankets, only the top of her head visible. The tiny metal beads in her dreadlocks caught what little light filtered through the narrow window. Beyond her, Ashe's long frame stretched across her cot, one arm dangling toward the floor, her breathing deep and measured. The red streaks in her black hair looked almost like dried blood in the dim light.

What if Ashe was responsible for the sabotage? The thought made Thalia's gut twist. No, she pushed the suspicion away. Ashe had been nothing but loyal, guiding her through the brutal training and helping her adjust to the unforgiving cold of the Rimspire Mountains. And yet, after what Luna had suggested, after everything that had happened to the Southerners, how could she be sure of anyone?

Still, Kaine seemed a more likely suspect than Ashe.

Thalia's body moved with automatic precision, pulling on layers of clothing with practiced efficiency. For weeks, she'd risen before dawn to meet Kaine at the forge. Her muscles remembered this routine even as her mind resisted it. Three days had passed since their last conversation, three days since he'd confirmed Senna's accusation about his imprisonment. Three days of avoiding the forge, avoiding him, avoiding the complicated tangle of emotions his revelation had stirred.

She tugged on her boots and grabbed her cloak, slipping out the door with barely a whisper of sound. The corridor beyond was lit by magic-infused sconces that pulsed with a gentle blue glow, casting long shadows that seemed to reach for her ankles as she passed. Thalia wrapped her cloak tighter, ignoring the familiar pull toward the forge levels below. No. Not today. Not until she could make sense of what she knew, or

thought she knew, about Kaine Ember.

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Instead, Thalia climbed. Up spiral staircases hewn straight from the cliffside, through hallways lined with statues of stern-faced Northern war heroes. The higher she climbed, the colder the air became, crisp and sharp in her lungs. It felt cleansing somehow, burning away the fog of confusion that had settled over her thoughts.

When she finally pushed through the heavy iron door that led to the plateau, the wind slapped against her face with stinging force. Thalia gasped, the shock of cold momentarily driving all other thoughts from her mind. Perfect. Exactly what she needed.

The Crystalline Plateau stretched before her, a vast expanse of blue-white ice that seemed to glow with its own inner light. From here, at the highest point of Frostforge Academy, she could see all the way to the fjord where the supply ships would normally dock — empty now, thanks to the Isle Warden attacks. The sun was just beginning to crest the jagged mountain peaks to the east, painting the snow-covered landscape in hues of pink and gold.

Thalia walked to the edge, her boots crunching across frost-encrusted ground. She took care to avoid the patrolling golems. The constructs were under control, but the Golem Fields, a valley just to the east of the plateau, were a constant reminder that control was tenuous, and ice magic could be every bit as unpredictable as the Isle Wardens' storm magic. Since her arrival at Frostforge, Thalia had been wary of the golems — wary enough to stay out of the Golem Fields entirely. The shelter provided by the scraps of refuse that punctuated the blanket of snow below the Crystalline Training Grounds would be the perfect place for herbs to grow, but Thalia didn't dare risk the wrath of the failed constructs that wandered that wasteland. They'd been abandoned there for a reason.

At the plateau's edge, a sheer drop of several hundred feet separated her from the frozen river below. The wind that buffeted her seemed determined to test her resolve. She planted her feet firmly and leaned into it, feeling alive in a way that had nothing to do with magic or metallurgy or the complicated politics of the academy.

Breathe in. Hold. Breathe out. She practiced the centering technique Roran had taught her during their combat training. The cold air filled her lungs, pure and clarifying. For a moment, she managed to focus solely on the sensations of her body — the bite of wind against her cheeks, the solid ice beneath her feet, the steady rhythm of her heart.

But her traitorous mind circled back to Kaine like a compass needle finding north. The intensity in his blue eyes when he'd finally confirmed what Senna had told her. I spent five years in prison. No excuses, no elaborate explanations. Just a simple statement of fact, delivered with the same direct honesty he'd always shown her. Had she been a fool to trust him? To feel that spark of connection when they'd discovered those ancient sigils together? When they'd nearly —

"You've been avoiding me."

Thalia jumped, spinning so quickly she nearly lost her footing on the slick surface. Kaine stood a few paces away, his broad shoulders wrapped in the same leather and furs he always wore, his dark hair dusted with frost. He must have followed her up the winding staircases, yet she hadn't heard a single footstep. Or perhaps she'd been too lost in thoughts of him to notice.

"Kaine, I —" Her voice cracked, and she had to swallow before trying again. "I've just been...busy. Everything's been chaotic since the storm." The lie felt hollow even as she spoke it, and from Kaine's expression, he didn't believe it either.

"That's not it." His tone was steady but strained, like ice under too much pressure. "This is about what I confessed last time we spoke."

Thalia didn't respond, which Kaine seemed to take as confirmation. He sighed, the sound nearly lost to the wind, and took a step closer. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that she could see the weariness etched into the lines around his eyes.

"What else have you heard?" he asked finally.

Thalia hesitated, then decided honesty was the only path forward. "Senna told me you killed your father." She searched his expression, looking for confirmation or denial, but his face remained closed off, unreadable.

"And you believed her." Not a question. A resigned statement.

"I don't know what to believe," Thalia admitted, wrapping her arms around herself, not from the cold, but from the weight of the conversation. "I just know that you were in prison, and that Senna thinks —"

"Senna thinks many things," Kaine interrupted, a hardness entering his voice. "Not all of them accurate."

The wind changed direction, sending a spray of ice crystals dancing between them like miniature daggers. Kaine turned slightly, positioning himself to shield her from the worst of it. Even now, even amid suspicion and doubt, his instinct was to protect her. The realization made Thalia's chest ache.

"Then tell me," she said quietly. "Tell me what is accurate."

Kaine was silent for so long that Thalia thought he might refuse. Then, with a deep breath that clouded the air between them, he began.

"I come from a noble clan. Once powerful, fallen from grace two generations ago when my grandfather backed the wrong side in a succession dispute." His voice was



flat, reciting facts rather than telling a story."Restoring the family's honor was everything to my father.The only thing that mattered."

He turned away, looking out over the vast expanse of ice and sky."When I failed to meet his standards — which was often — he had ways of expressing his disappointment.At first, it was just harsh words.Then, when I was about twelve, it became more...physical."

Thalia's stomach twisted.She thought of her own mother — stern at times, but never cruel, never raising a hand in anger.She thought of the sailors who sometimes visited their herb shop in Verdant Port, men with haunted eyes and scars they wouldn't explain.

"You don't have to —" she started, but Kaine shook his head.

"You wanted to know.So I'm telling you."His jaw tightened."By the time I was sixteen, I was almost as tall as he was.But he was stronger, more seasoned.A warrior of the old school.And I was...just his disappointment of a son."Kaine's hands clenched into fists at his sides."Until the night he turned his anger on my mother."

Thalia's breath caught.She had not expected this turn.

"She'd tried to defend me earlier that day.Said maybe his expectations were too high, that maybe I had different talents than the ones he valued."A bitter smile twisted Kaine's lips."He didn't take the suggestion well.He'd been drinking at a clan gathering that night, and when he came home..."Kaine trailed off, his eyes distant."I found them in the great room.She was on the floor, blood on her face...."

The wind seemed to still around them, as if the very air was holding its breath.Thalia waited, her heart pounding in her chest.

He turned back to her, his blue eyes sharp with pain and something else — a challenge, perhaps, or a plea for understanding.

“I’m not a murderer,” he said. Thalia’s heart pounded against her ribs. She wasn’t sure whether or not to believe him.

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"I'm sorry," she said finally, her voice small. "For what happened to you? For assuming—"

"Don't." Kaine cut her off, but gently. "You had reason to be cautious."

Thalia opened her mouth to respond, but the scrape of boots on ice interrupted her. A figure materialized from the morning fog, striding toward them with purposeful steps. Senna. Her silver-gray eyes narrowed as she took in the scene — Kaine and Thalia standing close, deep in conversation.

"There you are," Senna called to Kaine, her voice carrying across the plateau with knife-edge precision. She pointedly ignored Thalia's presence. "I've been looking everywhere."

Kaine's posture shifted subtly, a new tension entering his shoulders. "What is it, Senna?"

She drew up beside them, her long black braid whipping in the wind. Her pale face was flushed with either cold or emotion — perhaps both. "There's been an incident."

"What kind of incident?" Thalia asked, unwilling to be excluded from the conversation.

Senna's gaze flicked to her, dismissive and cold. "Supplies have gone missing from the food storage. Critical provisions that were meant to last us until the supply routes reopen."

"Missing?" Kaine frowned. "Could they have been misplaced in the chaos after the storm?"

"Misplaced?" Senna's laugh was sharp as broken glass. "No. Three crates of preserved meat, a barrel of honey, and nearly half our medicinal herbs — all vanished overnight. This was deliberate."

Thalia's herbalist instincts flared at the mention of the missing medicines. Those were precisely the supplies she'd been using to help the sick students during the shortage. Without them... "Who would do such a thing? And why?"

Senna's lip curled. "Isn't it obvious? Most suspect the Southern weaklings." Her gaze locked on Thalia, the accusation clear in her eyes. "One of you, or perhaps all of you working together."

Heat rushed to Thalia's face. "That's absurd. Why would we sabotage supplies we all depend on?"

"To hoard them for yourselves, of course." Senna's tone dripped with condescension. "Everyone knows Southerners lack the discipline to endure hardship. You'd rather steal than suffer like the rest of us."

"That's enough, Senna," Kaine warned, his voice low.

But Senna wasn't finished. She stepped closer to Thalia, her breath fogging the air between them. "Children of the North are built stronger, more capable of surviving the lean times than you spoiled, soft Southerners. We endure. You scheme."

Fury rose in Thalia's chest, hot and sudden as a forge fire. She thought of her mother working endless hours in their tiny herb shop, of going to bed hungry so that Mari could have the last crust of bread, of volunteering for Frostforge to save her sister

from the same fate. She thought of Luna, hiding her intelligence behind a vapid mask to survive. Of other Southern students struggling against the sabotage they'd uncovered.

She wanted to scream the truth in Senna's perfect, sneering face. But she recognized the trap Senna was laying — provoke an emotional outburst, make Thalia look unstable and guilty in front of Kaine. A few months ago, Thalia might have taken the bait. But Frostforge had taught her, if nothing else, when to hold her fire.

"If you'll excuse me," Thalia said, her voice calm despite the rage churning inside her, "I should get back before breakfast. I'm sure Instructor Maven will address this situation with all of us."

She turned away without waiting for a response, feeling Senna's glare like a blade between her shoulder blades. Behind her, she heard Kaine begin to say something to Senna, his tone sharp, but the wind carried his words away.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thalia's footsteps echoed against the stone walls as she made her way to the infirmary. The corridor was colder than usual, the enchanted torches that typically lined the hallway reduced to every third sconce — another sign of the academy's dwindling resources. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, her breath visible in small, cloudy puffs. Even after months at Frostforge, she hadn't fully acclimated to the bitter chill that seeped through the ancient stone walls, a cold that seemed to be growing more severe as supplies ran low and tensions between students ran high.

As she approached the infirmary's heavy oak door, she heard raised voices from within. Thalia slowed her pace, hesitating just outside. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but the argument carried clearly through the door left ajar.

"We have no choice. These are our last stores of alpine feverfew. If we use it all on minor injuries, we'll have nothing when the serious cases come in." The voice was sharp, clinical — Thalia recognized it as belonging to the head healer, Erith, a stern Northern woman with silver-streaked hair and eyes like chips of winter sky.

"And what exactly constitutes 'serious' anymore?" The second voice trembled with barely contained frustration. "That Southern boy yesterday could barely breathe with that lung infection. Are we supposed to wait until students are at death's door before we help them?"

"The Isle Warden blockade shows no signs of lifting. Until it does, we ration everything — especially medicinals that can't be substituted. Those are Maven's orders."

Thalia pressed herself against the wall, mind racing. The herb shortages were worse than she'd thought. In her first weeks at Frostforge, the infirmary had been stocked with rows of glass jars filled with dried herbs, tinctures, and salves — nowhere near the variety her mother kept in their small shop in Verdant Port, but adequate for treating training injuries and seasonal illnesses. Now, it seemed, those supplies had dwindled to almost nothing.

She straightened her shoulders and pushed the door open. The argument ceased immediately as both healers turned to look at her, their faces composed into professional masks so quickly it was as if the heated exchange had never happened.

"Can we help you, recruit?" Healer Erith asked, her tone clipped.

"I was just delivering some alpine mint I gathered yesterday," Thalia said, holding up a burlap pouch containing the herbs. Erith's gaze softened.

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“Thank you,” she said, her voice warmer now. “You can place them with the others.”

As Thalia moved to comply, she scanned the infirmary with practiced efficiency. Her mother had taught her to inventory a space quickly, to assess what was available and what was lacking. The tall cabinets that lined the walls were distressingly bare. Where once neat rows of supplies had stood, now only scattered jars remained, their contents meager. A workstation that had previously bustled with the preparation of poultices and tinctures sat empty, gathering dust.

The younger healer, Fenn, noticed her assessment and gave a tight smile. “Not much to see anymore, is there?”

Erith shot him a warning glance. “That will be all, recruit. Return to your duties.”

Before Thalia could respond, the infirmary door burst open. Two students staggered in, supporting a third between them. The injured student — a girl with short-cropped dark hair that Thalia recognized from metallurgy classes — had her right arm cradled against her chest, the skin angry and blistered from wrist to elbow.

“Forge accident,” one of the supporting students explained, his face pale beneath a shock of red hair. “The cooling enchantment failed mid-pour.”

Healer Erith guided the injured student to a cot, her clinical demeanor firmly in place. “Let me see the burn.”

The girl extended her arm with a barely-suppressed whimper. The burn was severe — angry red blisters covered her forearm, with patches where the skin had charred to an

unsettling white. Thalia winced in sympathy. In her mother's shop, a burn like this would warrant immediate treatment with smoke needle salve and bandages soaked in cool willow-bark tea.

"I can treat the pain, but I'm afraid we don't have anything for the burn itself," Healer Erith said after examining the injury. "The last of the burn salve went to a third-year yesterday."

The girl's face crumpled. "Please — there must be something."

Healer Fenn looked stricken. "Surely we could —"

"We have nothing to spare," the head healer interrupted, her voice firm but not unkind. "A diluted pain tincture — that's the best we can offer."

The injured student's friends exchanged worried glances. "Will it...will it heal properly without medicine?" one asked.

"Keep it clean and hope for the best," Erith replied, her tone suggesting the conversation was over. She turned away to prepare the pain tincture, her shoulders rigid with tension.

Thalia's hands curled into fists at her sides. She knew what untreated burns could lead to — infection, scarring, limited mobility. In Verdant Port, her mother would never have allowed someone to suffer like this if there was any alternative.

"There's a washbasin in the corner," Thalia said, stepping forward. "Cold water will help with the immediate pain and prevent further damage."

The injured student looked up, hope flickering in her eyes. "Really?"



"It's basic first aid," Thalia said with a nod, careful not to undermine the healers' authority. "My mother taught me. It won't heal the burn, but it might help until proper medicine becomes available."

Erith paused in measuring the pain tincture, then gave a slight nod. "Go ahead. The girl is right."

Thalia led the student to the basin, turning the copper tap to release a stream of icy water. "What's your name?" she asked softly as they waited for the basin to fill.

"Mona," the girl replied through gritted teeth. "Second-year. I'm from the Southern Kingdoms."

Thalia nodded, noting the subtle softening of her accent — another Southern student. Grimly, Thalia wondered if her injury was the result of the pattern of sabotage she and Luna had noticed. "I'm Thalia. First-year, also Southern."

Some of the tension in Mona's face eased. "I know who you are. The herb girl. People say you've been helping students when the healers can't."

Thalia guided Mona's burned arm under the stream of water, supporting her weight as the injured girl shuddered at the initial shock of cold. "Just knowledge from my mother's shop," she said. "Nothing special."

"Doesn't seem like nothing from where I'm standing," Mona said, her voice steadier as the cold water began to numb the worst of the pain.

As they stood at the basin, Thalia's mind raced through the herbs that would help a burn like this. Smoke needle for pain and to reduce blistering. Silverleaf to prevent infection. Aloe vera to accelerate healing. None of which were available in the infirmary anymore, according to what she'd overheard.

Memory flashed through her mind — the small herb shop in Verdant Port, sunlight streaming through the windows, illuminating dust motes that danced in the air scented with dozens of dried plants. Her mother's deft hands sorting, measuring, mixing. The steady stream of sailors and dock workers coming in with burns, cuts, and ailments from their labor.

"Keep it under the water for at least ten minutes," Thalia instructed. "Then pat it dry — don't rub. The blisters need to stay intact if possible."

Mona nodded, her face pale but determined. "Thank you."

As Thalia turned away, her mind raced. She couldn't stand by while injured students went untreated; she would lose her mind before long. There must be an area near the academy's grounds she hadn't yet searched, somewhere she could find smokeneedle. Burns were some of the most common injuries at Frostforge. Students came into the infirmary multiple times a week with burns of varying degrees. The healers couldn't do without smokeneedle.

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There was one place she hadn't yet searched. One place she'd avoided.

Thalia glanced at Healer Erith, who was now carefully measuring out what looked to be the last dregs of a pain tincture. The head healer's face was drawn, her movements precise but heavy with the weight of impossible choices. Who to help. Who to turn away.

The Golem Fields were notoriously dangerous — failed constructs wandering mindlessly, unpredictable weather conditions, treacherous terrain. But if there were medicinal herbs growing there....

"That should be enough," Thalia said, helping Mona carefully withdraw her arm from the water. The angry red of the burn had faded somewhat, but the injury was still severe. "Remember, keep it clean and uncovered unless the healers have sterile bandages to spare."

Mona nodded gratefully as her friends came to help her back to her dormitory. "Thank you, Thalia. I won't forget this."

As Thalia watched them leave, her resolve crystallized. She couldn't stand by while students suffered, not when there might be a solution within reach. The Golem Fields were dangerous, yes — but was that danger any greater than what they all faced daily in this harsh academy? Was it any greater than the slow suffering of untreated injuries and illnesses?

She nodded to the healers and slipped out of the infirmary, her pace quickening as she headed back toward the dormitories.

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The common area hummed with subdued conversation when Thalia pushed through the heavy wooden door. Unlike weeks before, when the space had buzzed with discussions and occasional laughter, the atmosphere now held a brittle tension. Students clustered in small groups, Northern recruits dominating the prime spots near the hearth while Southern students huddled at tables farther from the warmth. The divide had grown more pronounced as resources dwindled, invisible lines drawn across the stone floor that few dared to cross. Thalia paused in the doorway, scanning the room for Luna and Ashe.

She spotted them in the corner farthest from the entrance — Luna perched cross-legged on a worn armchair, a book balanced on her knees, while Ashe stood nearby, sharpening a small knife with practiced strokes against a whetstone.

As Thalia approached, Luna glanced up, her perpetually distracted expression firmly in place for any watching eyes.

"Your energy is quite scattered," Luna said, her voice pitched to sound dreamy and unconcerned.

Ashe rolled her eyes at Luna's mystical affectation but paused in her knife-sharpening. "What happened?" she asked, her tone direct as always.

Thalia slid into the empty chair beside Luna, leaning in close enough to keep her voice from carrying. "I need to talk to you both. Not here."

Luna tilted her head, dark eyes sharpening with interest despite her deliberately slack features. "Dorm room," she suggested.

The three made their way to their room without drawing attention. Once inside, with

the door firmly shut, Luna's demeanor shifted subtly — her posture straightening, eyes focusing with precision on Thalia.

"What's wrong?" Luna asked, all pretense of vagueness gone from her voice.

Thalia paced the small room, gathering her thoughts. "The infirmary is completely out of medical supplies. No burn salves, barely any pain tincture, nothing for infections." She described what she'd witnessed — the argument between the healers, Mona's untreated burn, the empty shelves. "And it's only going to get worse. With the Isle Warden blockade, no new supplies are coming in."

Ashe crossed her arms, her face grim. "Maven said they had contingencies in place."

"Whatever those contingencies were, they're not working," Thalia replied. "But I might have a solution."

Ashe's eyes narrowed. "Why do I feel like I'm not going to like this solution?"

Thalia took a deep breath. "The Golem Fields. It's the only place I haven't checked for smokeneedle, and I heard one of the healers mention that silverleaf grows wild there. If I could gather enough, the healers could at least treat the worst injuries."

The room fell silent. Luna and Ashe exchanged a quick glance that contained an entire conversation — concern, calculation, resignation.

"It's best to stay out of the Golem Fields," Luna said carefully. "Those constructs are dangerous, hostile. And the terrain itself is treacherous — ice sinkholes, unstable formations."

"How do you know so much about it?" Thalia asked.

Luna's smile was thin."I listen.And I read.The academy library has records of every student injury or death since Frostforge was founded.More students die in the Golem Fields than anywhere else in the Rimspire."

Thalia's stomach tightened, but she pushed forward."I know it's dangerous.That's why I'm telling you both.I'm going tomorrow morning, early, before anyone notices I'm gone.I just wanted you to know where I'd be.In case something happens."

Ashe set her knife down with a decisive click against the wooden desk."If you're going to be stupid enough to wander into the Golem Fields, you're going to need someone with sense to keep you alive," she said, her tone gruff but her eyes filled with determination."I'm coming with you."

Relief flooded through Thalia."Are you sure?"

Ashe shrugged one shoulder."My clan's survival training focused heavily on frozen terrain navigation.I know how to spot sinkholes and unstable ice formations.Besides," her expression softened almost imperceptibly, "what's the point of all this training if we can't use it to help others?"

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Luna watched them both, her fingers idly tracing patterns on the worn cover of her book. "I don't want to discourage you," she said. "But..."

Thalia sensed her hesitancy. "It's okay," she said quickly. "You don't have to come. We need someone to remain here, just in case we don't come back – someone who knows where we are." Privately, Thalia didn't think that a search party would spring up if needed; Frostforge's administration was far more likely to let two students perish in the Golem Fields without help. But she didn't want Luna to feel pressured to join them.

Luna gave her a grateful look. Thalia reached out to clasp her hand briefly.

"We'll need to gather supplies tonight," Ashe said, already mentally preparing. "Ropes, extra gloves, water flasks—"

"Well, well," a cool voice interrupted from the doorway. "Planning a little adventure, are we?"

Thalia whirled around. Brynn stood in the open doorway, arms crossed over her chest, her tall frame silhouetted against the dim light of the corridor. Her dark hair was pulled back in a severe braid, accentuating her sharp features and the haughty lift of her chin.

"How long have you been there?" Thalia demanded, cursing herself for not checking that the door was properly closed.

"Long enough," Brynn replied, stepping fully into the room and closing the door

behind her with a soft click. "The Golem Fields? Harvesting herbs? Rather ambitious for a slum-dweller."

Thalia bristled at the deliberate dig at her background. "This doesn't concern you, Brynn."

"Doesn't it?" Brynn's smile didn't reach her eyes. "Southern students are being blamed for the lack of supplies. You don't think that concerns me?"

"Only because you want to save face in front of your Northern allies," Thalia muttered. "You feel no loyalty to the rest of us Southerners."

She watched Brynn's expression closely. Since she had discovered evidence of sabotage, Brynn had been one of her top suspects. Brynn was Southern, yes, but she had more disdain for her lower-class fellows from the Kingdoms than she did for those from the Reaches. As far as Thalia was aware, she hadn't yet been targeted for any sabotage; in fact, almost all of those sabotaged had been from lower social stations than Brynn. Luna, the daughter of a city councilor, had escaped targeting thus far, while Thalia herself, one of the poorest Southerners to arrive at Frostforge this year, had taken the brunt of the attacks.

It was a pattern Thalia couldn't ignore.

"Believe what you like," Brynn said coolly, her face betraying nothing but scorn. "I'm not about to let a Northerner and a low-born slum-dweller steal all the glory — or get themselves killed trying. I'm coming with you."

"We don't need your help," Thalia said firmly.

"Don't you?" Brynn arched an eyebrow. "I'm top of the class in combat training. I've been practicing ice-ward spells with Instructor Varik after hours. Unlike you lot, I'm a



survivor.”

Ashe's face darkened. "I've survived blizzards that would freeze your pampered bones solid."

"Stop it, both of you," Luna interjected, her usually dreamy voice suddenly sharp. "This isn't helping." She turned to Thalia, dark eyes serious. "She has a point. An extra fighter would increase your chances of success."

Thalia felt trapped. Every instinct warned against trusting Brynn, yet the practical side of her recognized the value of Brynn's skills. And perhaps keeping her close would be safer than leaving her behind to potentially report their plan.

"Fine," Thalia said at last. "But we do this my way. We're going for herbs, not glory. We get in, gather what we need, and get out. No unnecessary risks."

Brynn's smile was sharp as a blade. "Of course. I wouldn't dream of jeopardizing such a noble mission."

The sarcasm in her tone made Thalia's teeth clench, but she pushed forward. "We'll need bags for the herbs. And waterskins. Smoke needle needs to be kept damp or it loses potency."

"I have leather satchels in my room," Brynn offered. "Waterproofed. A gift from my father before I left."

"I'll bring ropes and extra gloves," Ashe said, studiously avoiding looking at Brynn. "And Luna, can you draw us a rough map of the fields? From what you've read?"

Luna nodded, already moving to her desk where neat stacks of parchment waited. "I'll

mark the likely areas for herb growth. The shelter of metal structures, with proximity to ice formations. The runoff from melting ice creates the perfect growing environment."

As her friends began preparations, Thalia felt a flutter of anxiety mixed with determination. She was leading them into danger — real danger, not just the controlled risks of academy training. If anything happened to any of them...

But the image of Mona's burned arm remained vivid in her mind. Of the healers' frustrated helplessness. Of the growing divide between Northern and Southern students as resources dwindled and tensions mounted. Thalia had hoped that the recent truce between the students of the two regions would last, but the peace had been woefully short-lived.

"We'll meet at the eastern storage shed before dawn," Thalia said. "Dress warmly. The Golem Fields are exposed to the wind coming off the glaciers."

Brynn gave a mocking half-bow. "Your wish is my command, Herb Girl."

She scowled at the nickname, but Thalia merely nodded. Let Brynn have her petty jabs. Tomorrow would test all of them in ways that had nothing to do with social standing or regional rivalries.

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As they dispersed to gather supplies, Thalia caught Luna's eye. The other girl gave her a small, knowing nod — a silent promise to keep watching, to remain vigilant.

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Dawn at Frostforge Academy painted the world in shades of pale blue and silver. Thalia's breath clouded before her face as she hurried up the steps onto the flat expanse of the Crystalline Plateau. The sky above was clear now, a vast canvas of fading stars giving way to the first hint of sunrise. She clutched her satchel tighter, feeling the reassuring weight of the water flask, her father's compass, and a small knife she'd packed.

Ashe was already waiting, a dark silhouette against the snow-covered ground. She wore a fur-lined cloak, the hood pulled up to cover her distinctive hair, and carried a coil of rope slung across her chest. She acknowledged Thalia with a curt nod.

"No sign of our other companion," Ashe said, her tone making it clear what she thought of Brynn's reliability.

"I'm here," came Brynn's voice behind Thalia, causing her to start. Brynn stepped forward, moving with the silent grace that made her so formidable in combat training. Unlike Ashe's practical clothing, Brynn wore what appeared to be a tailored expedition outfit — dark leather reinforced at the knees and elbows, with multiple pouches and straps for equipment. "Waiting to see if you'd actually show up or lose your nerve."

"Let's go," Thalia said. "We need to be back before dark. We'll be in trouble as it is

for missing classes.”

Without waiting for a response, she set off across the plateau. The others fell into step behind her, their footfalls nearly silent on the packed snow.

The plateau stretched before them like a frozen sea, its surface rippling with subtle waves formed by centuries of ice flows. In the growing light, the ice caught and reflected the dawn in prismatic flashes — brilliant pinks and golds fracturing across the otherwise monochrome landscape. Despite the beauty, Thalia felt exposed, vulnerable. Out here, away from the academy's walls, they were visible for miles.

"Stay close to the ridge line," Ashe advised, pointing to where the plateau began to slope downward to their right.

They adjusted their course, moving in single file with Ashe now taking the lead, her clan training evident in how confidently she read the terrain. Thalia followed, with Brynn bringing up the rear. The only sound was their breathing and the occasional crack of ice beneath their boots.

After twenty minutes of steady progress, the eastern edge of the plateau came into view — a gradual slope that descended toward a vast, irregular field dotted with strange, twisted shapes. The Golem Fields. Even from this distance, Thalia could make out the silhouettes of abandoned constructs — failed experiments or training exercises left to decay in the frozen wasteland.

"We should head down near that outcropping," Thalia said, pointing to a formation of dark rock that jutted from the ice like a broken tooth. "It'll give us cover for the descent."

Brynn made a dismissive sound. "That adds at least half an hour to our journey. The direct path is faster."

"And more exposed," Ashe countered. "Thalia's right. We use the rocks for cover."

Before the argument could escalate, a voice called out behind them, distant but distinct.

"Thalia! Wait!"

She froze, then turned slowly, heart sinking. Kaine Ember was running toward them across the plateau, his tall figure unmistakable even at a distance. His dark cloak billowed behind him, and even from afar, Thalia could see the determination in his stride.

"Frost take me," Ashe muttered. "What is he doing here?"

Thalia wondered the same thing. Since his revelation about his imprisonment, she'd kept her distance — partly out of uncertainty, partly out of self-preservation.

The three of them stood frozen in place as Kaine closed the distance. He moved with surprising speed across the treacherous ice, his footing sure and practiced. When he finally reached them, his breath came in controlled puffs, his pale face flushed slightly from exertion.

"Three first-years, running off into the Golem Fields alone?" Kaine said, his intense blue eyes sweeping over their group. "Not a chance. You'll get yourselves killed. I'm coming with you."

His gaze settled on Thalia, a complexity of emotions passing across his features too quickly for her to interpret. The morning light caught the angles of his face, highlighting the scar that ran along his jaw — a detail she'd once found intriguing but now viewed with new wariness. What violence had marked him? What violence might lie dormant within him?

Ashe scoffed impatiently. "We didn't invite you, Ember. This isn't a training exercise."

"Clearly," Kaine replied, his voice level. "If it were, you'd have proper equipment and an actual plan."

Thalia found her voice at last. "How did you even know we'd be here?"

Kaine's expression softened slightly. "Luna sought me out last night. Told me what you were planning." He shook his head, a hint of admonition creeping into his tone. "She's a good friend, Thalia. She was worried, and rightfully so. You wouldn't have stood a chance without someone who knows the fields."

A complicated mix of emotions surged through Thalia — betrayal that Luna had shared their plans, confusion at why she would choose Kaine of all people to confide in, and beneath it all, a treacherous flicker of relief. Despite everything, despite the questions and distance between them, some part of her was glad to see him.

"And you know the fields, do you?" Brynn asked, her voice dripping with skepticism. She positioned herself slightly in front of Thalia, a subtle gesture of protection that surprised Thalia given their contentious relationship.

Kaine met Brynn's challenging gaze evenly. "I do. I survived the Frost Walk last year, after all."

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Brynn stiffened, as did Thalia. She'd heard the Frost Walk mentioned, though none of the details of the task. It was the trial students faced at the end of the first year – a trial with a notoriously high death toll. If Kaine was to be believed, it involved the Golem Fields in some capacity.

Ashe's eyes narrowed. "Why should we trust you?"

It was the question hanging unspoken between all of them, the question that had been haunting Thalia since she'd learned of Kaine's imprisonment. Why trust someone who might be a murderer?

"You shouldn't," Kaine said simply. "Not blindly. But right now, I'm offering knowledge that could keep you alive, and you'd be fools to refuse it because of," he paused, glancing briefly at Thalia, "personal complications."

The wind picked up, sending a flurry of ice crystals skittering across the plateau surface. The temperature was dropping as they stood exposed, arguing — a reminder that indecision in this environment could be as dangerous as any wrong choice.

"What makes the Golem Fields so dangerous?" Thalia asked, breaking the tense silence. "Beyond the obvious."

Kaine seemed to recognize her question for what it was — not just a request for information, but a tentative opening, a willingness to listen.

"It's not just the constructs themselves," he explained, his voice taking on a teacher's cadence. "Though those are dangerous enough. Failed ice-metal constructs don't just

shut down; they degrade unpredictably. Some become inert, nothing more than bizarre sculptures. Others develop erratic behaviors, attacking anything that moves or generates heat."

Thalia absorbed this information, her determination wavering slightly in the face of dangers more complex than she'd anticipated. She glanced at Ashe and Brynn, seeing similar calculations behind their eyes.

"You said Luna told you why we're going," Thalia said. "Do you know where we might find smokeneedle?"

Something like approval flickered across Kaine's face. "I do. They tend to grow in the shadow of the larger constructs, particularly those with copper components. The magical interaction creates the perfect conditions." He pointed to the southeast section of the fields. "That area has the highest concentration of the older models, which used more copper in their construction. That's where we should focus our search."

Brynn made an impatient noise, adjusting the straps of her satchel. "If we're doing this, let's do it. Standing here debating is wasting daylight we don't have." Without waiting for agreement, she started down the slope at the edge of the plateau, picking her way along the steepest, most direct path.

"Brynn!" Thalia called, alarmed by her recklessness. "Wait for us!"

But the other girl didn't slow, her figure growing smaller as she descended toward the ominous field below.

"Stubborn fool," Ashe muttered, then turned to Thalia. "Your call. Do we follow her, or take the safer route?"

Thalia hesitated only briefly. "We can't split up. That's even more dangerous." She



glanced at Kaine. "If you're coming, now's the time to decide."

"I already decided," he said quietly. "When Luna came to me."

The three of them hurried after Brynn, following her precipitous route down the slope. The descent was treacherous, smooth ice giving way to jagged escarpments, patches of deceptively soft snow concealing sharp rocks beneath. Thalia's boots slipped more than once, and she found herself grateful for Ashe's steadying hand at her elbow.

Kaine moved with surprising grace for someone his size, finding secure footholds where there seemed to be none. He stayed close to Thalia, close enough that she could hear his measured breathing, could feel the occasional brush of his cloak against hers when the path narrowed.

As they approached the bottom of the slope, the Golem Fields revealed themselves in all their eerie grandeur. Dozens — perhaps hundreds — of constructs dotted the vast expanse, their forms twisted and bizarre. Some resembled humanoid figures frozen mid-motion, others were more abstract, like the fevered dreams of a mad sculptor rendered in ice and metal. In the growing light, their surfaces glinted with unnatural colors, not just the expected silver and white of ice-metal, but veins of green and crimson where the enchantments had warped and decayed.

Between the constructs, the ground was a treacherous patchwork of ice and bare stone, with occasional pools of liquid too still and too vividly colored to be mere meltwater. Mist clung to the lowest areas, swirling in slow eddies around the bases of the largest structures.

Thalia felt a chill. There was something deeply unsettling about this place — a sense of abandonment, of failure, of things created and then discarded when they didn't meet expectations. It reminded her, uncomfortably, of how the academy itself

sometimes treated its students.

They caught up to Brynn at the base of the slope. She stood at the very edge of the Golem Fields, her earlier bravado tempered by the reality before them.

"Not quite what you expected?" Kaine asked quietly.

Brynn's chin lifted defiantly, but she didn't respond.

"We stay together," Thalia said firmly, looking at each of her companions in turn. "No heroics, no splitting up. We find the herbs, gather what we need, and get out. Agreed?"

Ashe nodded immediately. Brynn gave a tight shrug that Thalia chose to interpret as assent. Kaine's eyes met hers, something unspoken passing between them — a moment of connection that transcended their recent estrangement.

"I'll lead," he said, not breaking eye contact with Thalia. "Stay close. Walk exactly where I walk. Touch nothing unless I say it's safe."

With that, he turned and stepped into the Golem Fields, the mist swirling around his boots as if welcoming him into its domain. Thalia followed, then Ashe, with Brynn bringing up the rear. The academy behind them looked small and distant now, its towers rising against the brightening sky like a fortress from another world.

Ahead, the twisted shapes of failed ambitions waited in silent judgment.

### CHAPTER TWENTY

Thalia pulled her collar higher against the biting wind as they ventured deeper into the Golem Fields. Jagged ice formations rose from the ground like broken teeth, interspersed with the twisted metal remains of ancient war machines. Each breath crystallized before her face, joining the swirling snow that stung her exposed skin. She cast a sidelong glance at Brynn, who walked several paces away, her daggers glinting at her hips. Thalia couldn't shake the feeling that bringing her rival on this expedition had been a terrible mistake.

"Keep up," Ashe called from ahead, her voice barely audible over the howling wind. Her tall frame moved with practiced ease through the treacherous terrain, each step confident despite the slippery ground.

Kaine walked beside Thalia, close enough that their shoulders occasionally brushed. His presence was reassuring, a solid wall of warmth in the bitter cold. "You are doing all right?" he asked, his breath forming a white cloud between them.

"I'm fine," Thalia replied, though her fingers already ached inside her gloves. The cold was alive, almost sentient in its cruelty. "Just worried about how much we'll be able to gather before dark."

"We'll find what you need," Kaine assured her, but his gaze kept drifting to Brynn, who lagged behind them, eyes constantly scanning their surroundings.

The distance between them wasn't accidental. Since they'd left Frostforge's walls, Brynn had maintained a calculated space — not close enough to suggest camaraderie,

but not far enough to be accused of isolating herself. Thalia had caught her watching them with narrowed eyes whenever she thought no one was looking.

"I still don't understand why she came," Thalia murmured, low enough that only Kaine could hear.

He shrugged, his broad shoulders shifting beneath his heavy coat. "Maybe she wants to prove something. Or maybe she's curious about what we're really doing out here."

"Or she's making sure we don't find anything helpful," Thalia replied, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice.

Ahead of them, Ashe stopped abruptly, turning back with an impatient gesture. "If you two are done whispering, I've found something."

They gathered around where Ashe stood, careful to maintain their distances. Thalia couldn't help but notice how Brynn positioned herself to keep all three of them in her line of sight as if expecting an ambush.

"Look," Ashe pointed to a depression in the snowy ground, partially sheltered by the massive, frozen arm of a fallen golem. Nestled in the relative protection were clusters of delicate gray flowers, their narrow, tapered petals shimmering with an inner light. Smoke needle.

"Perfect," Thalia breathed, kneeling to examine them. "These are exactly what we need. The petals can make a poultice for burns, and the stems can be ground into a paste for treating frostbite."

"How convenient that you know so much about Northern herbs," Brynn commented, her voice deceptively light. "Almost as if you've been preparing for this shortage."

Ashe's head snapped up, her eyes flashing."What exactly are you implying, Firstborn?"

"I'm not implying anything," Brynn replied with a cold smile."Just noting that our Southern herbalist seems remarkably well-versed in plants that don't grow anywhere near Verdant Port."

Thalia bit back a sharp retort."My mother traded with Northern merchants.I learned what I could from their supplies and books."

"How enterprising," Brynn said, the word dripping with disdain.

"Enough," Kaine interjected, stepping between them."We came here for herbs, not accusations.The sooner we gather what we need, the sooner we can get back."

Ashe's gaze lingered on Brynn for a moment longer before she nodded."He's right.Let's spread out a little; there should be more clusters nearby.Stay within sight of each other."

They fanned out, each searching the uneven terrain.Thalia focused on gathering the smoke needle, her fingers working with practiced precision despite the cold.Each bloom needed to be harvested carefully — cut too close to the root and they'd wither before they could be used; leave too much stem and the potency would drain away.She placed each collected specimen in a small cloth bag tucked inside her coat, where her body heat would keep them from freezing solid.

The weight of the gathered herbs against her chest was comforting.Each plant represented another student who might recover from illness, another potential life saved.Her herbal remedies couldn't replace proper supplies, but they might buy enough time for Frostforge's leaders to find a solution.

"Found another patch," Kaine called from several yards away. He stood beside the half-buried torso of a massive golem, its metal frame streaked with frost. Around its base, more frostblooms grew in abundance, their pale blue glow visible even through the swirling snow.

Thalia made her way toward him, carefully navigating between sharp metal fragments jutting from the ice. As she drew closer, she noted the features of these particular blooms — they were larger than the others, their petals unfurled to reveal centers that pulsed with an almost electric blue light.

"These are perfect," she said, kneeling beside the cluster. "They're mature specimens — twice as potent as the younger ones."

She began harvesting them, filling a second bag as Kaine kept watch. As she joined them a few minutes later, her own collection meager compared to what they'd found.

"Snow's picking up," she said, eyes scanning the horizon where visibility was rapidly decreasing. "We should head back soon."

"Just a few more," Thalia insisted, her fingers working faster. "These could make the difference for so many people."

Brynn approached from the opposite direction, her arms crossed. "Listen to Redwood. The weather's turning. Only fools get caught in a Frostforge blizzard."

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Before Thalia could respond, the ground beneath them shuddered. A low, metallic groan resonated through the ice, vibrating up through her boots and into her bones. She froze, hands still clutching a half-picked bloom.

"What was that?" she whispered.

Kaine had already drawn the short sword he carried, his body tensed. "Something's moving."

Another tremor, stronger this time. Cracks spiderwebbed across the ice near the buried golem, spreading outward like lightning.

"Move!" Ashe shouted, grabbing Thalia's arm and pulling her back just as the ice split open with a deafening crack.

Something massive heaved itself upward through the broken surface — a twisted amalgamation of metal and ice that only vaguely resembled a humanoid shape. Its limbs were mismatched, one arm ending in what looked like a massive hammer while the other terminated in sharp, finger-like projections. Where a head should have been, there was only a jumbled mass of metal, sparking with unstable magical energy.

"Malfunctioning construct," Kaine said, his voice tight with urgency. "Back away slowly. No sudden movements."

The golem swiveled what passed for its head, the energy at its core pulsing erratically. Thalia could see ancient, spiraling runes carved into its metal frame, many of them cracked or incomplete — broken bindings that had once controlled the

construct.

For a moment, it seemed to be assessing them, its movements jerky and unpredictable. Then, with startling speed, it lurched forward, the hammer-arm swinging in a wild arc.

"Scatter!" Ashe yelled, diving to one side.

Thalia threw herself backward, landing hard on the frozen ground as the golem's massive arm swept through the space where she'd been standing. Her herb bag spilled partially open, precious blooms tumbling into the snow.

The golem let out a sound like grinding gears, ice crystals forming and cracking around its frame as it turned toward Brynn, who had drawn both her daggers. The blades glinted with a pale blue light — cryomancy enchantments activated and ready.

"Distract it!" Kaine shouted to Ashe as he circled behind the construct, looking for vulnerabilities in its patchwork body.

Ashe pulled a small ice-pick from her belt — a standard tool for Northern students navigating the treacherous terrain — and slammed it against her metal vambrace, creating a sharp, ringing sound. The golem pivoted toward her, its attention momentarily diverted.

Brynn seized the opportunity, darting forward with impressive speed. Her daggers flashed as she slashed at the construct's legs, the enchanted blades leaving glowing furrows in its icy exterior. The golem staggered but didn't fall.

Thalia scrambled to her feet, frantically gathering the spilled herbs while keeping one eye on the battle. Her hands shook as she stuffed the precious blooms back into their bag. These herbs represented lives — she couldn't leave without them.



The golem swung again, its movements becoming more erratic, more dangerous. Kaine ducked beneath its hammer-arm and drove his sword into a gap in its side, where metal met ice. The blade sank deep, and for a moment, Thalia thought it might be enough.

Then the construct convulsed, magic surging through its frame. The sword was wrenched from Kaine's grip as the golem spun with unexpected agility, its spiked arm whistling through the air.

"Kaine!" Thalia cried out in warning.

He dropped flat just in time, the spikes passing inches above his head. But the golem wasn't finished. It continued its spin, building momentum, the hammer-arm now sweeping low across the ground.

Ashe leaped over it, her years of training evident in the perfect timing of her jump. But Brynn, positioned on the opposite side, had nowhere to go. The massive arm caught her mid-thigh, sending her flying through the air. She hit a jagged outcropping of ice with a sickening crack, her body crumpling as she slid to the ground.

The golem lurched toward Brynn's still form, drawn perhaps by the movement of the others or simply following some broken directive in its damaged core. It raised its hammer-arm again, preparing to deliver a blow that would surely be fatal.

Thalia looked down at the herbs clutched against her chest, then at Brynn. She could run now and grab the rest of the herbs while the golem was distracted and slip away. No one would blame her. Brynn was her rival, possibly even one of those responsible for sabotaging other Southern students; it would be an easy way for her to curry favor with the Northerners, which she'd been trying to do since the term's start. And on top of Thalia's suspicions, saving her meant abandoning some of the herbs they'd come for — herbs that could save others.

The golem loomed over Brynn, its hulking frame blotting out the pale light as it prepared to strike.

“Damn it,” Thalia hissed.

She jammed the herb pouch into her coat and bolted forward, boots slipping on the frost-slick ground. Dropping to her knees beside Brynn, she grabbed her by the shoulders and hauled with all her strength.

The air shifted. Thalia felt the weight of the golem’s presence above her, sensed its arm descending for the blow. She closed her eyes, teeth bared, bracing for impact.

A roar of exertion from behind her was followed by the sound of metal striking metal. Thalia looked up to see Kaine, his recovered sword braced against the golem's arm, the muscles in his neck straining with the effort of holding it back.

"Move her!" he shouted through gritted teeth.

Thalia wrapped her arms around Brynn's torso and pulled, dragging her away from the golem's reach. Brynn's eyes fluttered open briefly, a moan of pain escaping her lips before she lapsed back into unconsciousness.

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Meanwhile, Ashe had scrambled up the back of the construct, her ice-pick raised high. With a shout, she drove it down into the creature's core — the pulsing center where its magical energy was most concentrated. The golem jerked violently, nearly throwing her off, but she clung to its frame, twisting the pick deeper.

Kaine disengaged from the hammer-arm and rolled clear, coming up in a fighting stance with his sword at the ready. But it wasn't necessary. The golem's movements were already becoming more sluggish, the light at its core flickering erratically.

With a final, convulsive shudder, the construct froze in place. Cracks spread across its frame like a spiderweb, and then, all at once, it shattered — collapsing into a heap of broken metal and ice fragments. Ashe leaped clear at the last moment, landing in a crouch nearby.

For a moment, no one moved. The only sounds were their heavy breathing and the constant moan of the wind. Then Ashe straightened, brushing ice crystals from her coat.

"Is she alive?" she asked, nodding toward Brynn.

Thalia checked Brynn's pulse, rapid but present. "Yes, just unconscious. She needs a healer."

"We need to get back to Frostforge," Kaine said, sheathing his sword and moving to examine Brynn's injuries. His face was grim. "We can't carry her through this terrain, not with the weather worsening."

Thalia looked around desperately, her gaze falling on the scattered herbs that had spilled when she'd rushed to save Brynn. Many were crushed or lost in the snow. She began gathering what she could, her movements frantic.

Ashe watched her for a moment, then sighed heavily. "You should have left her. We need those herbs."

"And become the kind of person who lets someone die when I could have helped?" Thalia shot back, more sharply than she'd intended. "Is that what Frostforge is supposed to teach us?"

Ashe's expression remained hard, but something flickered in her eyes. After a moment, she knelt and began helping Thalia collect the salvageable herbs. "You're too soft for this place," she said quietly.

Kaine had moved to examine the remains of the golem, pulling out several pieces of flat metal from its collapsed frame. "We can make a sled," he said, returning with the largest pieces. "It won't be comfortable, but it'll get her back."

Together, they fashioned a crude but functional sled from the golem's remains. Kaine and Ashe used ice-picks to punch holes in the metal plates, then threaded rope through to bind them together. Thalia contributed strips torn from her undershirt to pad the makeshift transport and secure Brynn's broken leg as best she could.

As they worked, the sky darkened further, the snow falling more heavily around them. Time was running out; if they didn't start back soon, they'd be caught in the full force of the blizzard.

"That's as good as it's going to get," Kaine said finally, standing back to examine their work. "Let's move."

They carefully lifted Brynn onto the sled, securing her with the remaining rope. She stirred at the movement, her eyes fluttering open. Despite the pain that must have been coursing through her, she focused immediately on Thalia.

"Why?" she rasped, her voice barely audible above the wind. "Why didn't you leave me?"

Thalia met her gaze steadily, feeling the weight of the herbs against her chest — less than half what they'd come for, but still something. Perhaps enough to make a difference.

"Because you're one of us," she replied simply. "And I'm not a monster."

Something flickered across Brynn's face — confusion, perhaps, or disbelief. Then, almost imperceptibly, she nodded before her eyes drifted closed again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Thalia counted the empty seats in the dining hall, marking each one in her mental tally of the sick and bedridden. Twenty-three missing today — five more than yesterday. The grand hall, once alive with the clatter of cutlery and boisterous conversation, now held a subdued atmosphere, punctuated by occasional coughing fits and the scrape of utensils against nearly empty plates. As the winter deepened outside Frostforge's ancient walls, so too did the pallor of its inhabitants, their faces growing gaunt with hunger and exhaustion.

Three weeks had passed since the announcement of the supply line disruptions, and conditions at the academy had deteriorated with alarming speed. The healers' wing overflowed with students suffering from a persistent respiratory illness that spread through the dormitories like wildfire. Those still healthy enough to attend classes moved through the halls like ghosts, conserving energy, speaking in hushed tones as

if volume itself was a luxury they could no longer afford.

As Thalia's gaze moved through the hall, taking stock of those still standing, her eyes landed on Brynn. They made brief eye contact; Brynn turned her gaze down to her bowl, a scowl on her face.

Despite her injury in the Golem Fields, Brynn was among those who still dragged themselves to training each day. She had suffered a concussion and a bruised rib in the attack, and had faced the healers' wrath with a stiff silence. Frostforge's administration didn't much care whether students put themselves in danger; if they were killed by their own foolishness, it was considered a lesson to the rest. But the healers were bound by different oaths. Only Thalia's offering of the gathered smoke needle had softened their scolding.

The healers had warned Brynn to rest, but with the Frost Walk trial approaching, there was little time for recuperation. Every student still upright was pushing themselves harder, trying to prepare for a journey that demanded strength few of them still had. The academy didn't wait for the sick or the injured. It didn't care about bruised ribs or hollow cheeks or the rattle in one's lungs.

Thalia stirred her thin porridge, stretching the meager breakfast as long as possible. The pale gruel contained flecks of something unidentifiable — bark, perhaps, or some other filler the kitchen staff had added to create the illusion of substance. Her stomach growled, unsatisfied with what little she'd managed to consume. She'd given half her portion to an ashen-faced first-year from the Southern Kingdoms whose fever had broken only yesterday.

"Drink the water, too," she had instructed, pressing the cup into his trembling hands. "It's steeped with pine needle extract. Not exactly delicious, but it'll help keep the lung sickness at bay."

Now, seated with Luna and Ashe, she watched the doors to the dining hall, counting familiar faces as they straggled in. Roran entered, his normally energetic stride reduced to a careful walk. His eyes brightened when he spotted her, and he made his way toward their table.

"Morning," he said, lowering himself onto the bench beside Luna. His voice was hoarse, but his expression remained determined. "Or what passes for morning in this frozen pit."

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Luna pushed her half-finished bowl toward him without looking up from her notebook, where she appeared to be sketching idle patterns. "Take it," she said, her voice airy and distracted as always when others might be listening. "I'm not hungry."

"Liar," Roran said, but he accepted the offering nonetheless, his fingers gripping the wooden spoon with too much force. "But thank you."

Thalia glanced at Ashe, who sat straight-backed and alert despite the shadows beneath her eyes. The Northern girl had been disappearing for hours at a time over the past week, returning to their dormitory with snow crusted in her black-and-red hair and a distant look in her eyes. When questioned, she'd offered only vague explanations about "perimeter checks."

A hush fell over the hall. Thalia's attention snapped to the raised dais where the instructors took their meals. Instructor Maven stood at its edge, her single amber eye surveying the students with cold calculation.

"Your attention," Maven said, her voice carrying without effort across the hall. She didn't shout; her presence alone commanded silence. "I see the illness continues to spread among you. Unfortunate."

She paused, allowing the word to hang in the air. Unfortunate. As if the fever sweeping through the academy was merely an inconvenience rather than a potential catastrophe.

"Some of you may be harboring hopes that the current difficulties will delay your trials." Maven's lips curved into what might have been a smile on another face. On



hers, it resembled the baring of teeth."Let me disabuse you of that notion immediately.The trials will proceed as scheduled."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, quickly silenced by Maven's glare as it swept toward the first-years' tables.

"The Frost Walk trial begins in three days," she continued, her voice hardening."First years will traverse the Golem Fields, from its far boundary to the edge of the Crystalline Plateau.It is a trek of several miles in difficult conditions.Those who survive will advance in their studies."

Thalia's spoon froze halfway to her mouth.The porridge slid back into the bowl with a dull plop.

"Those who fail will not be mourned," Maven added, her eye lingering on the Southern students."The Frost Walk is designed to test your mettle, your magic, and your will to survive.Under normal circumstances, we expect to lose perhaps one in five students."

Her pause was deliberate, calculated to maximize dread.

"Given the current state of your physical preparation and the depleted resources available to you, I estimate at least a third of you will not return."Something like satisfaction flashed across Maven's face."Perhaps more."

Thalia shivered, remembering her venture into the Golem Fields weeks earlier.They had only skirted the outer perimeter, yet even there, they'd encountered dangers that had left Brynn injured.The abandoned constructs roamed the fields in varying states of functionality and aggression.The deeper sections were said to be far worse — a graveyard of magical machines where fragments of discarded experiments had fused together into nightmarish new forms.

"You will each be allowed one weapon of your crafting, standard field gear, and whatever magical talent you possess," Maven continued. "Details of the artifact retrieval will be provided the morning of the trial. I suggest you use the intervening days wisely. Dismissed."

The dining hall erupted into frantic whispers as Maven stepped away from the dais. Across from Thalia, Levi — a thin, dark-haired boy from the Southern coastal villages — pressed his palms flat against the table.

"This is insanity," he muttered, his voice tight with controlled panic. "They know at least half of us are weakened from hunger or recovering from illness. The trial would be deadly even in ideal conditions."

"Maven must be disappointed she can't just line us up and execute us outright," Roran said, attempting levity but failing to mask the tension in his voice. "That would be too efficient, I suppose. Where's the fun in that?"

Luna's fingers continued to trace patterns in her notebook, but Thalia noticed how she'd angled the page to capture the reactions of students at nearby tables. "Standard procedure," she said dreamily. "The academy culls the weak. It's in the charter."

"There's a difference between culling the weak and throwing the sick to the wolves," Ashe muttered, her voice low and controlled.

Students began filing out of the hall, their conversations a blend of strategies, lamentations, and desperate planning. Thalia rose to follow them, her mind already cataloging what little she knew about the Golem Fields and what she would need to survive.

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Wind found every crack in the ancient stonework of the Howling Forge, creating an eerie symphony of whispers and moans that played counterpoint to the rhythmic striking of Thalia's hammer. She worked alone, the other forges cold and dark, while hers glowed with stubborn defiance against the encroaching night. Sweat beaded on her forehead despite the chill, each drop hissing as it fell onto the heated metal before her. Time was running out — the Frost Walk loomed just days away, and her latest ice-steel blade was far from ready.

Thalia adjusted her grip on the tongs, rotating the glowing length of metal to examine its edges. The ice-steel alloy was notoriously difficult to achieve, requiring precise temperature control and timing. Too hot, and the ice essence would evaporate from the mixture; too cold, and the metal would crack under her hammer. She needed to find that perfect moment when the two opposing elements — fire and ice — balanced in temporary harmony.

The blade before her represented her third attempt this week. The first had shattered during quenching, its crystalline structure collapsing under the thermal shock. The second had formed properly but lacked the distinctive blue sheen that indicated successful ice infusion. This one had to work. In the Golem Fields, only ice-metal weapons could effectively penetrate the frost golems' armored bodies — that, or cryomancy, which continued to elude her grasp despite months of training.

She plunged the blade back into the forge, watching the metal's color shift from dull red to bright orange. The heat painted her face in warm light, a stark contrast to the shadows that filled the rest of the cavernous space. Muted blue flames danced along the edge of her vision where the ice essence interacted with the fire, creating ghostly patterns that reminded her of auroras she'd glimpsed in the night sky above Frostforge.

Thalia rolled her shoulders, trying to release the tension that had settled between her shoulder blades. Her muscles ached from hours of concentrated work. Earlier in the

evening, Kaine had been beside her, his experienced hands guiding hers through the more delicate phases of the forging process. He'd shown her a technique for folding the metal that would create microscopic pockets where the ice essence could bond more effectively.

"You're getting better," he'd told her, his voice low and reassuring near her ear. "Your instincts are good. Trust them."

His presence had been both comforting and distracting. Since his revelation about his imprisonment, Thalia had tried to maintain distance, unsure how to reconcile the Kaine she'd come to know — focused, protective, patient — with the possibility that he'd killed his own father. Yet in moments like these, working side by side at the forge, it became impossible to hold onto her suspicions. His hands were steady, his instructions clear, his blue eyes focused entirely on the task rather than on her.

He'd also protected her in the Golem Fields — without hesitation, without question. She had little doubt that she would have been killed without his intervention. In that moment, when the golem's massive arm was descending toward her, Kaine had acted as though her life mattered more than anything else. It wasn't a choice or a sacrifice; it was simply a reflex, an instinctive act of protection.

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He'd left two hours ago, reluctantly, after she'd insisted she could finish the tempering process on her own.

"Don't stay too late," he'd warned, pausing at the heavy wooden door. "You need rest before the trial."

Now, alone with her thoughts and the half-formed weapon, Thalia found herself wondering if she'd made the right choice focusing so heavily on metallurgy. While her skills with the forge had improved dramatically, her cryomancy remained rudimentary at best. During their last class, she'd managed to create a thin sheet of ice across the surface of a water basin — an accomplishment that had earned her a rare nod of acknowledgment from the instructor but would hardly protect her from a rampaging golem.

She withdrew the blade from the forge when it reached the correct temperature, laying it carefully on the anvil. With practiced movements, she began hammering the edge, each strike precise and measured. The metal sang under her hammer, a clear, ringing tone that echoed through the empty forge.

And then — a discordant note. Not from her hammer, but from somewhere behind her. The subtle shift of weight on stone. The whisper of fabric against leather.

Someone was watching her.

Thalia didn't turn immediately. Her grip tightened on her hammer as she continued working, her senses heightened. There were no scheduled late-night forge sessions aside from hers. Kaine wouldn't have returned without announcing himself. Which

meant her visitor was either lost — unlikely given the hour — or had sought her out specifically.

"I know you're there," she said finally, setting down her hammer and turning slowly.

Senna stood several yards away, her tall frame outlined against the darker shadows of the forge's entrance. The glowing coals painted her pale features in shades of orange and red, transforming her face into something otherworldly and predatory. Her silver-gray eyes reflected the firelight like mirrors, giving no hint of the thoughts behind them.

"Burning the midnight oil?" Senna asked, her voice deceptively casual as she stepped closer. Each footfall was deliberate, measured, like a predator stalking prey. "How dedicated."

Thalia wiped her hands on her leather apron, acutely aware of the isolation of their surroundings. The nearest occupied room would be at least two corridors away. Even if she shouted, it was unlikely anyone would hear her over the constant wind that gave the Howling Forge its name.

"I need to finish this before the trial," Thalia said, keeping her voice neutral. "What brings you here so late, Senna?"

Senna's lips curved into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Curiosity," she said, running her fingers along a workbench as she circled closer. "I wanted to see what keeps pulling Kaine back to these forges night after night."

Her gaze fell to the blade on the anvil, examining it with expert assessment. "Your technique is improving," she conceded, "but your grip on the hammer is still too tight. It'll affect the balance of the blade." She looked up, meeting Thalia's eyes directly. "Kaine's influence, no doubt. He always favors control over impact."

The possessive way Senna spoke his name made Thalia's skin crawl. There was an intimacy to it, as if she were laying claim to him with each syllable.

"Kaine has been generous enough to share his expertise," Thalia said carefully. "As have several of the second-years."

Senna moved closer, and Thalia resisted the urge to step back. Showing fear would only encourage Senna's aggression.

"Did he tell you about us?" Senna asked, her voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "About the nights we've spent together? About the promises we've made to each other?"

Thalia maintained her neutral expression despite the unexpected twist in her stomach. Kaine had never mentioned a relationship with Senna, but then, why would he? Their own connection, whatever it was, remained unspoken, defined more by shared silences and the brush of fingers over heated metal than by any declarations.

"Kaine's past is his business," Thalia said. "As are his relationships."

Senna's laugh was sharp and cold. "So diplomatic. But you're not a diplomat, are you? Just a Southern slum-dweller who somehow caught the eye of a man too good for her."

The insult stung, but Thalia had heard worse growing up in the poorest district of Verdant Port. She turned back to her blade, lifting it with the tongs and examining its edge in a deliberate dismissal. "It's none of your business what I do – or what Kaine does."

The air temperature dropped several degrees. Thalia felt the hair on her arms rise as Senna's magic manifested — not in an outright attack, but in a display of power that

frosted the nearest workbench and sent plumes of condensation curling from her lips when she next spoke.

"You mistake my concern for jealousy," Senna said, her voice now rimmed with ice. "I'm trying to protect you. The Frost Walk is dangerous, you know. Even for those with strong cryomancy skills and years of training in the North – and you have neither advantage."

Thalia kept her attention on the blade, but her spine stiffened.

"That little pocket knife won't save you if luck isn't on your side," Senna murmured. "Accidents happen in the Golem Fields all the time."

The threat was thinly veiled, and Thalia felt a cold that had nothing to do with Senna's magic settle in her chest. She set the blade down carefully, turning to face the older girl once more.

"Is that what you're planning?" Thalia asked, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice. "An accident?"

Senna's eyes widened fractionally — surprise, perhaps, at Thalia's directness — before her expression settled back into calculated menace. "Planning? No. Merely observing that those who interfere with natural bonds often find themselves facing natural consequences."

She stepped closer, close enough that Thalia could see the fine tracery of scars along her jawline — marks from past battles or training accidents, worn like badges of honor. They marred her otherwise smooth skin.



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"Kaine and I are connected by blood and experience that you cannot possibly comprehend," Senna continued, her voice dropping to a whisper. "We have survived things together that would have broken someone like you. He may be temporarily distracted by your novelty, but when the trial begins and survival is at stake, he will remember where his true loyalties lie."

Thalia's hands clenched at her sides. The smith's hammer lay within reach, its familiar weight suddenly tempting. But violence would solve nothing — would likely only escalate the situation beyond her control.

"If your connection is so strong," Thalia said, measuring each word, "then you have nothing to fear from me."

"Fear?" Senna's laugh was brittle. "I don't fear you, Southern girl. I pity you."

She reached out suddenly, her fingers ice-cold as they grasped Thalia's wrist. Frost spread from the point of contact, crystallizing along Thalia's skin in intricate, painful patterns.

"This is your final warning," Senna said, her voice barely audible over the forge's mournful keening. "Stay away from Kaine, or return to Verdant Port in a box — assuming there's enough left of you to send home."

She released Thalia's wrist with a dismissive flick, leaving behind a perfect bracelet of ice that burned like fire against Thalia's skin. Then she turned and walked away, her silhouette elongating as she passed near the forge before disappearing into the shadows beyond.

Thalia stood frozen, her breath coming in short gasps as she stared at the ice encircling her wrist. With trembling fingers, she broke the crystalline shackle, wincing as fragments fell to the stone floor and shattered like glass.

The wind howled louder, a banshee's wail that seemed to mock her solitude. The forge fire, which had burned so steadily throughout the night, suddenly guttered, threatened by an unseen draft. Shadows leaped and danced along the walls, transforming familiar tools into grotesque, threatening shapes.

Thalia turned back to her unfinished blade, trying to focus on the task at hand, but her thoughts scattered like sparks from an anvil. Her hands shook as she lifted the hammer, its weight suddenly unbearable.

The Frost Walk had always represented a deadly challenge, but now it felt like an execution waiting to happen. Thalia had prepared for the dangers of the ice constructs, for the biting cold, for the physical challenges of the trial. She had not prepared for a human enemy who could manipulate both the environment and the other students against her.

As she forced herself to continue working, hammering the blade into its final form, each strike echoed Senna's threat. The Golem Fields stretched in her imagination — vast, hostile, and now hiding something worse than mindless constructs.

Someone who wanted her dead.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The first-years stood in rigid formation at the far edge of the Golem Fields, their breath crystallizing in clouds before being whipped away by the cutting wind. Thalia pulled her fur-lined hood tighter around her face, the material stiff with frost despite having only been outside for minutes. Before them stretched a desolate expanse where

jagged metal constructs lurked beneath blankets of snow and behemoth ice formations rose like the twisted spines of ancient beasts. Somewhere across that wasteland lay the safety of the academy — the goal they each had to reach alone.

Storm clouds hung low over the mountains, painting the world in shades of slate and steel. The snow glittered dangerously, jagged crystals catching what little light penetrated the cloud cover. Thalia's feet had gone numb within minutes of standing in formation, and she shifted her weight subtly, trying to encourage blood flow without drawing attention. Around her, thirty other first-years stood like statues, their eyes fixed on Instructor Maven's scarred face as she paced before them.

"The Frost Walk is not a game," Maven announced, her voice slicing through the howling wind with practiced precision. "It is tradition. It is a necessity. And for some of you, it will be the end."

Her single amber eye swept across the group, lingering on the Southern students.

"You will enter the Golem Fields alone. You will navigate to the far side using whatever skills you possess. You will reach Frostforge without assistance." Her lips curved into something too sharp to be a smile. "Or you will not reach it at all."

A Southern student to Thalia's right — a boy with a persistent cough that had worsened since the supplies ran short — raised a trembling hand. "Ma'am, with the shortages and the storm coming—"

"Did I ask for commentary?" Maven's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper that somehow carried over the wind. "The Frost Walk has been conducted in blizzards, droughts, and wars. It will not be postponed for your comfort."

The boy lowered his hand, shrinking back into line.

"You have each been assigned a departure time. When your name is called, you will step forward and proceed into the fields. Spacing ensures fairness and prevents...collaboration." She pronounced the final word like it was poison on her tongue.

Maven unrolled a scroll of ice-paper, the material crackling as it unfurled. "Brynn Frostborn."

Brynn stepped forward without hesitation, her back ramrod straight. Only a subtle grimace betrayed the echo of her bruised rib. She gave Maven a sharp nod before turning to face the Golem Fields. Thalia watched as she strode confidently into the wasteland, her hair whipping behind her like a battle flag.

One by one, names were called. Luna stepped forward when summoned, her typical air of frivolity nowhere to be seen. Instead, her face was set with grim determination, a glimpse of the shrewd politician's daughter. She caught Thalia's eye and gave a nearly imperceptible nod before disappearing into the swirling snow.

Ashe was called next among their circle. The Northern girl looked almost at home in the brutal cold, her movements economical and precise as she began her journey. Before crossing the threshold into the Fields, she turned and mouthed something to Thalia that might have been "Remember what I taught you."

Roran's departure sent a spike of unexpected concern through Thalia's chest. The whispers about him being an Isle Warden spy had grown louder in recent days, but watching him stride into danger — his curls partially tamed under a woolen cap — made her question the rumors again. There was something in the set of his shoulders that spoke of determination rather than treachery. He didn't look back.

"Thalia Greenspire."

Her name cut through her thoughts like a blade. Thalia stepped forward, feeling the eyes of the remaining students on her back. She didn't turn to acknowledge them, keeping her gaze fixed on the vast expanse ahead. With a deep breath that stabbed her lungs with cold, she crossed the boundary line and became one with the wasteland.

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The howling of the wind increased with each step she took, as if the Golem Fields themselves were warning her away. The ground beneath her feet was treacherous—patches of ice hidden beneath innocent-looking snow, shards of metal jutting up at unpredictable intervals. Thalia moved carefully, testing each footfall before committing her weight.

The sounds of the other students — the distant shuffling of feet, the occasional cough or murmured curse — faded behind her until all she could hear was the wind and the occasional groan of shifting ice. The isolation was immediate and absolute.

A distant crack echoed across the fields — the sound of ice breaking, or perhaps a golem awakening. Thalia instinctively dropped into a crouch, scanning the horizon. Nothing moved except swirling snow, but the sound had been a stark reminder of what lurked in this place.

After several tense moments, she continued forward, angling slightly west. The academy lay due north, but Thalia had no intention of taking a direct path through the heart of the Golem Fields. Better to skirt the edges where she could, even if it meant a longer journey.

She pressed her palm against the ground, closing her eyes to better focus on the sensation that had become increasingly familiar over her months at Frostforge. The metal veins beneath the earth's surface hummed with a distinct resonance, each type of ore singing its own quiet song. Iron was a deep, steady pulse. Copper trilled higher, more excitable. And there — a faint but recognizable pattern that she'd come to associate with tungsten.

Thalia opened her eyes, a ghost of a smile touching her lips. She had sensed this particular tungsten vein during training exercises on the Crystalline Plateau. If she followed it, she would at least know she was moving in territory that had been deemed safe enough for supervised training.

As she tracked the vein, memories of Kaine's patient instruction filtered through her mind. His deep voice explaining how different metals responded to different forging techniques. His calloused hands guiding hers as she learned to sense the subtle variations in ore quality. The almost-smile that would touch his lips when she succeeded.

"Feel the metal's voice," he had told her during one late-night session in the forge. "It's not just dead earth. It has history, memory, temperament."

At the time, she had thought he was being poetic. Now, with her life depending on her ability to navigate by the songs of buried metal, she understood the practicality behind his words.

The tungsten vein led her around a particularly treacherous field of ice spikes, their transparent surfaces glinting like serrated teeth. She moved steadily, conserving energy, her eyes constantly scanning for movement. Twice she froze in place as distant shapes shifted against the white backdrop, but neither proved to be golems — just snow collapsing from overhanging ice shelves.

The wind shifted direction, now driving directly into her face with increased savagery. Ice crystals stung her exposed skin, and she tugged her scarf higher until only her eyes remained uncovered. The sky darkened further as the storm intensified, visibility dropping by the minute.

Thalia tightened the straps on her pack, verifying that her supplies were secure. The weight of her forged ice-steel blade against her hip was reassuring. She had poured all

her skill into crafting it, and though it wasn't a masterwork, it would serve its purpose if she encountered trouble.

The tungsten vein began to diverge from her planned route, veering eastward toward what she knew to be a more dangerous section of the Fields. Thalia hesitated, weighing her options. Following familiar metal signatures felt safer, but would lead her into territory known to harbor active golems.

She closed her eyes again, pressing both hands to the frozen ground, searching for a different signature. There — fainter but recognizable — a vein of silver that seemed to run more northerly. Thalia adjusted her course, following the silver vein northward.

The terrain grew more challenging with each passing hour. What had begun as a relatively flat expanse gave way to sudden drops and rising shelves of ice. The silver vein led her up a gradual incline, the footing becoming increasingly precarious as loose shards of ice skittered away beneath her boots.

At the crest of the rise, Thalia paused to catch her breath. From this vantage point, she could see further across the Golem Fields, though the worsening storm obscured the most distant features. Movement caught her eye, a dark shape lumbering between ice formations perhaps half a mile east. Its movements were too mechanical to be anything but a golem.

Thalia dropped to her knees, making herself as small as possible against the white landscape. The golem showed no sign of having spotted her, continuing its ponderous patrol. She watched it until it disappeared behind a massive ice shelf, then rose carefully to her feet.

The wind howled with renewed fury, driving snow horizontally across her path. Thalia lowered her head and pressed forward, following the increasingly faint song of the silver beneath her feet. The cold had penetrated all layers of her clothing



now, settling into her bones with a dull ache that threatened to slow her movements.

"Keep moving," she muttered to herself, the words immediately torn away by the wind. "Just keep moving."

The vibration came first — a subtle tremor in the ground that traveled up through Thalia's boots and into her bones. She stopped mid-stride, every muscle suddenly alert. The air pressure changed, growing heavier, as if the atmosphere itself was being compressed by something massive moving through it. Thalia slowly turned toward the disturbance, her hand instinctively finding the hilt of her ice-steel shortsword. Through a curtain of swirling snow, a dark shape materialized; it was a golem, its movements deliberate and inexorable as it headed directly toward her position.

Her heart hammered against her ribs, each beat sending a fresh surge of adrenaline through her veins. The golem was still far enough away that it might not have detected her, but its path would intersect with hers within minutes. She crouched lower, making herself smaller against the white backdrop, and forced herself to study the construct methodically, the way Kaine had taught her to analyze metal formations.

The golem's body was primarily ice-iron, a nightmarish fusion of metal and frozen water that only occurred in places of extreme magical convergence. Its core glowed with a dull blue light that pulsed like a heartbeat, while its limbs — asymmetrical and cruelly jointed — dragged through the snow with inexorable purpose. Where the metal components met the ice, frost had formed intricate patterns reminiscent of the ancient sigils she and Kaine had discovered behind the unused furnace. The golem's head was a featureless block of solid ice with shards of rusted metal protruding at odd angles, giving it the appearance of wearing a crown of broken swords.

As it drew closer, Thalia could hear the grinding of metal against ice with each movement, a sound like the death rattle of some mechanical beast. Flakes of rust

drifted down in its wake, leaving a faint trail of reddish specks on the pristine snow.

Thalia tightened her grip on her sword hilt but didn't draw the weapon. Her blade, while decently crafted, would likely do little against the golem's massive frame. Even if she could damage it, the combat would be noisy and possibly lengthy — attracting attention from other constructs, or else rimwolves, the predators that stalked the mountains hunting for weakened prey.

She considered her position, scanning the surrounding terrain for advantages. To her right, a ridge of ice offered a potential path, but the footing looked treacherous, with patches of near-transparent ice that would make silent movement impossible. To her left, a field of snow-covered boulders might provide cover, but the spacing between them would force her to expose herself repeatedly as she moved from one to the next.

The direct path ahead lay open, with only scattered ice formations interrupting the flat expanse. The golem was approaching from an angle that would cut off this route within minutes.

"Think," she whispered to herself, the word forming a small cloud in the frigid air.

The golem paused suddenly, its head swiveling in a half-circle as it scanned its surroundings. Thalia held her breath, remaining still. Had it sensed her? The construct's detecting mechanisms were poorly understood even by Frostforge's instructors. Some claimed they tracked heat signatures; others insisted they responded to movement; still others believed they could sense the magical potential in human blood.

After what felt like an eternity, the golem resumed its march, still on an intercept course with her position but showing no signs of having detected her presence yet.

Thalia exhaled slowly, then closed her eyes to center herself. She had to move, and quickly, but panic would only lead to mistakes. Who among her peers had faced

similar situations and prevailed? Whose techniques could she adapt?

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Roran's face flashed in her mind. During combat training, he moved differently than the others — not with the brute strength of the Northern students or the calculated precision of the academy-trained Southerners, but with an almost supernatural fluidity. He seemed to anticipate where attacks would come from, shifting his body just enough to avoid them without wasting energy on unnecessary movement.

At first, she had attributed his skill to natural talent. But after working with him directly, she'd begun to recognize the intentionality behind every step, every gesture. It wasn't magic, or at least not entirely; it was technique, honed through careful practice.

"Don't fight the elements," he had told her during one particularly frustrating training session. "Wind, snow, ice — they aren't obstacles. They're tools. Move with them, not against them."

Thalia opened her eyes, a plan forming. She wouldn't try to outrun the golem or hide from it; she would use the environment to become invisible in plain sight.

When the next strong gust of wind whipped across the fields, driving a fresh wave of snow before it, Thalia moved. She stayed low, matching her movements to the rhythm of the blowing snow. Each step was placed deliberately, her weight distributed to prevent the telltale crunch of compacting snow. She angled her body to present the smallest possible profile to the golem's line of sight.

The wind died down, and Thalia froze in place, becoming just another ice formation on the landscape. She controlled her breathing, keeping it shallow and even despite the hammering of her heart.

Twenty yards separated her from the golem now, and its path would bring it within five yards of her position. Too close. Much too close. But the next patch of cover — a jagged outcropping of ice and stone — lay thirty yards beyond her current position. She would have to cross open ground to reach it.

The golem paused again, this time emitting a low, grinding sound that seemed to resonate through the frozen ground. A signal? A malfunction? Thalia couldn't tell, but she used the momentary halt to study its sensory capabilities more closely.

Its head rotated in regular intervals, seeming to focus more on movement than on static objects. The strange crown of metal shards quivered slightly with each rotation, as if they were acting as primitive antennae. Most importantly, she noticed that its attention seemed drawn to areas where the snow was disturbed — places where previous travelers had left footprints or signs of passage.

The next gust of wind came howling across the plain, stronger than the last, carrying stinging ice crystals that bit at any exposed skin. Thalia moved with it, taking advantage of the reduced visibility to close half the distance to the outcropping. This time, she placed her feet carefully in existing depressions in the snow, leaving minimal evidence of her passage.

When the wind subsided, she was dangerously exposed — caught in open ground with the golem now just fifteen yards away and moving steadily closer. She crouched low.

The golem turned its head in her direction.

Thalia's breath caught in her throat. Had it seen her? Her hand tightened on her sword hilt, ready to draw if the construct charged.

But the golem's head continued its rotation, passing over her position without pause. It

hadn't distinguished her from the surrounding terrain.Roran's technique was working.

Another gust provided cover for another advance.Thalia was now within a dozen yards of the outcropping, but the golem had changed course slightly, moving on a path that would bring it between her and her destination.There was no choice but to wait for it to pass.

The minutes stretched painfully as the golem lumbered forward.It was close enough now that Thalia could see the intricate patterns of frost on its metal components, could hear the soft hiss of steam where its heated core met the ice of its outer shell.The blue glow at its center pulsed with a rhythm that seemed almost alive, casting eerie shadows across the snow.

Five yards away.Three.Two.

The golem was directly adjacent to her position now, its massive bulk blotting out what little light filtered through the storm clouds.If it turned its head at this moment, there would be no mistaking her for part of the landscape.Thalia held her breath, mentally preparing for combat while praying it wouldn't come to that.

The construct paused, its grinding movement ceasing so abruptly that the sudden silence was jarring.Slowly, with mechanical precision, its head began to turn toward her.

A howl split the air from somewhere far to the east — the hunting cry of a rimwolf.The golem's head swiveled sharply toward the sound, the blue glow at its core intensifying momentarily.

Thalia didn't hesitate.As the golem's attention was directed away from her, she moved, abandoning stealth for speed, sprinting the final distance to the outcropping and ducking behind its sheltering bulk.Her lungs burned with the suppressed need to

gasp for air, but she forced herself to breathe silently through her nose, listening intently for signs of pursuit.

The grinding footsteps resumed, but they were moving away, growing fainter as the golem continued on its original path, now angling toward the direction of the wolf's cry. Thalia allowed herself a small, shaky exhale of relief. She had done it. She had evaded a fully active golem using nothing but observation and adapted technique.

The taste of victory was sharp and sweet, a momentary respite from the constant fear that had been her companion since entering the Golem Fields. She permitted herself only seconds to savor it before focusing on the path ahead.

From her new position, she could see that the terrain would become more challenging. The relatively flat expanse gave way to a series of ice ridges and deep fissures — the kind of broken ground where golems and other predators could hide unseen until prey was within striking distance. Beyond that lay the central region of the fields, where the highest concentration of active constructs patrolled.

Thalia closed her eyes briefly, reconnecting with her metal-sensing ability. The silver vein she had been following was still detectable, though fainter now, running beneath the ridge line to the north. Following it would take her into more dangerous territory, but also closer to Frostforge.

She tightened the straps of her pack and checked that her sword was secure but accessible. The encounter with the golem had taught her valuable lessons about their behavior and detection capabilities, knowledge that might mean the difference between life and death in the challenges to come. But it had also confirmed her fears: as she moved deeper into the fields, stealth alone might not be enough. Combat could become inevitable.

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Night descended on the Golem Fields like a predator, swift and merciless. Thalia scanned the landscape with increasing desperation, knowing that to be caught in the open after dark was a death sentence. The temperature was plummeting, the wind acquiring a knife-edge quality that sliced through her layers of protection. When she spotted the narrow crevice between two jagged rock formations, she nearly sobbed with relief. It wasn't ideal — barely deep enough to shield her from the direct force of the wind — but it would have to do. Thalia squeezed into the space, her back pressed against one rough wall, her knees drawn up to her chest to conserve both space and warmth.

The stone against her spine leached heat from her body, but at least the worst of the wind was blocked. Overhead, a small opening between the rock formations framed a patch of darkening sky where the first stars were becoming visible through breaks in the cloud cover. The storm was pausing, gathering strength for the night to come. She had perhaps an hour before it returned in full force.

Thalia's teeth chattered uncontrollably. She needed fire, not just for warmth but for the psychological comfort it would provide. Ashe's lessons on cold-weather survival echoed in her mind — fire is life out here in the Reaches.



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Her fingers were stiff and clumsy as she retrieved the small fire-starting kit from the side pocket of her pack — the one item she never stored inside, keeping it accessible for exactly this kind of emergency. The kit was simple: a flint striker, a small tin of dried moss treated with oil, and a folding blade for preparing kindling.

Nearby, a withered bush poked through the snow, its branches brittle and dry. Perfect. Thalia broke off several twigs and arranged them in a small pyramid atop a flat stone, then prepared a nest of the treated moss beneath them. She worked methodically despite her shivering, focusing on the task rather than her growing discomfort.

The first strike of flint sent sparks dancing across the moss, but they died before catching. The second attempt was similarly unsuccessful. Thalia cupped her hands around the tinder to shield it from stray drafts and tried again, striking the flint with more force.

A spark caught. A tiny flame flickered to life, fragile as a whisper. Thalia held her breath, gently feeding the fire with progressively larger twigs until a small but steady blaze illuminated the crevice with warm, golden light. The heat it produced was minimal, but the psychological effect was immediate — a bubble of safety in a hostile world.

"Thank you, Ashe," she murmured, warming her hands over the flames.

But her triumph was short-lived. The bush had been dead for too long, its branches lacking sufficient resin to sustain a proper fire. The flames began to diminish almost immediately, consuming the dry wood too quickly without generating lasting

heat. Within minutes, the fire was reduced to embers that glowed feebly against the encroaching darkness.

Thalia frantically searched for more fuel, but nothing within reach would burn. The last ember winked out with a final puff of smoke, leaving her in near-total darkness. The brief warmth had only served to make her more acutely aware of the cold that now returned with redoubled intensity.

Her extremities were going numb — fingertips and toes first, then hands and feet. The cold crept up her limbs with inexorable patience, a silent invader claiming territory inch by inch. Each breath created a cloud of condensation that briefly illuminated the small space before dissipating. Her muscles began to ache from constant shivering.

She shifted her body into the tight position Ashe had taught her when winter had first begun to descend on Frostforge, curling in on herself to conserve heat. Pressing her knees to her chest, she tucked her hands beneath her arms, trying to ignore the violent tremors wracking her frame.

Her mind turned to her provisions. Food meant calories, calories meant warmth. She needed the dried beef and hardtack she'd packed — not just for sustenance but for survival through the night.

Thalia reached for her pack, pulling it into her lap. The outer canvas was stiff with frost, the buckles almost too cold to touch with bare fingers. She fumbled with the main compartment's clasp, finally managing to open it and reach inside.

Her fingers searched blindly through the contents, expecting to encounter the wrapped package of food she'd carefully positioned at the top for easy access. Nothing. She dug deeper, growing increasingly frantic as she removed items one by one, laying them carefully on the stone beside her: spare socks; a small medical kit; a water flask, now frozen.

No food.

"No, no, no," she whispered, emptying the pack completely and running her hands along the interior.

Her fingers found the tear along the bottom seam, a clean cut that could only have been made with a blade. The realization struck her like a physical blow: this wasn't an accident or poor craftsmanship. Someone had deliberately sabotaged her pack, positioned the cut so that items would gradually fall through during her journey across the uneven terrain of the Golem Fields.

Not just any items — specifically her food supplies, which she hadn't needed to access until now. Whoever had done this had calculated that she wouldn't notice until it was too late, until she was deep in the fields with no way to replace what was lost.

Senna's voice whispered through her memory, the threat delivered with cold precision while Thalia worked on her ice-steel blade: I don't fear you, Southern girl. I pity you.

Thalia's hands clenched into fists so tight her nails bit into her palms. The pain was grounding, focusing her thoughts through the fog of cold and hunger.

"She's trying to kill me," Thalia whispered, the words forming crystals in the frozen air.

The revelation should have terrified her, but instead, it fueled a slow-burning anger that pushed back against the cold. She would not die here. She would not give Senna the satisfaction.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The storm had worsened while Thalia rested. Wind screamed through the ice-carved

ravines of the Golem Fields, carrying needles of snow that stung any exposed skin. Her brief shelter against the rock face had provided momentary respite, but now the cold had settled deeper into her bones, a predator that had found its way inside her. Thalia pressed her back against the rough stone and forced her stiff body to stand, the muscles in her legs trembling with the effort. Rest, she realized too late, had only made her weaker.

She clutched her torn pack to her chest like a talisman, though its most crucial contents — the life-saving rations she'd meticulously packed — were long gone. Just flakes of ice and scraps of cloth remained where her carefully stored hardtack and jerky should have been. The wind howled, drowning the soft curse that escaped her cracked lips.

"Keep moving," she whispered to herself, her voice strange and distant in her ears. "Stay still and die."

The words became a rhythm in her mind as she pushed away from the rock face and back into the heart of the blizzard. Snow swirled in dizzying patterns, limiting visibility to mere feet ahead. Thalia squinted, lifting a frost-gloved hand to shield her eyes, though the protection the gloves offered had been compromised — another act of sabotage she'd discovered too late.

Each step required deliberate thought. Lift foot. Push through snow. Place down. Repeat. The simple mechanics of walking had become a complex series of movements that her frozen body struggled to execute. Her legs moved like wooden posts, heavy and unfeeling. The wind shifted direction, blasting her face with a fresh surge of icy particles that scraped her cheeks raw.

The sabotage. It kept circling back to that in her mind, a frustrating puzzle with too many missing pieces. Senna's warning echoed in her memory: "Accidents happen all the time in the Golem Fields." Not a warning at all, she now realized, but a promise.

Thalia's mind, sluggish from cold, tried to piece together the timeline. Her torn pack. The missing rations. Her compromised frost gloves. The pattern of sabotage against Southern students that she and Luna had uncovered during the blizzard. Had that all been Senna's doing? She'd suspected Brynn, with her aggressive competitiveness, and Roran, with his suspicious Isle Warden techniques.

But neither Brynn nor Roran made sense as the saboteur; they lacked motives. Senna, however, had made her jealousy clear. Senna, who believed she had some claim to Kaine. Senna, whose eyes flashed with cold fury whenever she saw Thalia and Kaine together. Senna, who had voiced disdain and hatred for Southerners at every opportunity.

A violent shiver wracked Thalia's body, jarring her from her thoughts. A particularly fierce gust knocked her sideways. Thalia stumbled, her knees buckling. She fell face-first into the snow, the impact knocking what little breath she had from her lungs. The cold embraced her, seductive in its promise of peaceful oblivion. For a dangerous moment, she considered simply staying there, letting the snow cover her, letting the cold take her.

No. Not like this.

With a groan that was half defiance, half pain, Thalia pushed herself up onto her hands and knees. Snow clung to her eyelashes, her cheeks, her hair. She needed shelter. A fundamental fact of survival in extreme cold: without protection from the elements, her core temperature would continue to drop until hypothermia claimed her.

Shelter. Another application of cryomancy, one she'd seen Northern students demonstrate with casual ease. Creating structures from ice itself. First-years had practiced building simple ice walls in class. Thalia's had been pathetic compared to those of students like Brynn or Ashe, but any barrier against this wind would help.

Thalia forced herself to stand, legs shaking beneath her. She raised her arms, palms outward, focusing her intention on the snow before her. In her mind, she pictured a curved wall, high enough to block the wind, thick enough to insulate.

"Rise," she commanded through chattering teeth. The snow stirred, particles lifting, swirling, beginning to coalesce.

Then her concentration slipped, exhaustion overwhelming her control. The half-formed wall crumbled, collapsing into a misshapen pile that the wind immediately began to scatter.

She tried again, gathering what remained of her strength, focusing it into a single, desperate effort. This time, the ice rose higher, forming an uneven, crystalline barrier about four feet tall. Thalia fell to her knees, drained by the effort, watching as cracks

immediately appeared in her creation.

The wall shattered seconds later, shards of ice exploding outward. One sliced across her cheek, leaving a thin line of blood that froze almost instantly in the bitter cold. The failure left her more exhausted than before, her breath coming in shallow gasps that froze in the air before her.

Movement caught her eye — a shifting in the curtain of falling snow. At first, she thought it might be another student, someone who could help her. Then the shape took form, and her heart sank.

A golem. Its massive form was a hulking silhouette against the white backdrop of the storm, ice and metal fused into a nightmarish approximation of a human shape. Crystal eyes glowed with an eerie blue light, scanning, searching.

For her.

Thalia froze, instinct telling her to remain perfectly still. The golem's senses were attuned to magic and movement. Her failed attempt at cryomancy must have drawn it. If she stayed motionless, maybe it would lose interest, continue its patrol elsewhere.

More shapes materialized in the blizzard. Three golems, not one. They moved with surprising grace for their size, metal joints coated in perpetual frost that never melted, never slowed them down. They were closing in, forming a loose semicircle around her position.

Stay still. Don't breathe. Don't move.

But her body betrayed her. A violent shiver wracked her frame, and a harsh, involuntary gasp escaped her lips as her lungs fought for air. The nearest golem's head swiveled toward her, crystal eyes flaring brighter. It had detected her.

She needed to move.Needed to fight.Needed to live.

With numbed fingers, Thalia reached for the ice-steel dagger at her belt — the blade she'd forged herself, under Kaine's guidance.Her last defense.

The dagger came free, its weight reassuring in her hand despite her weakened grip.The nearest golem shambled forward, its movements oddly fluid for something made of such unyielding materials.Thalia raised the blade, her arm feeling as though it were moving through honey.

The golem continued its advance.In desperation, Thalia lunged forward, driving the point of her dagger toward the construct's chest, where the primary magical core would be housed.

The blade struck with a sound like a distant bell — and shattered.

Fragments of ice-steel scattered across the snow, leaving Thalia holding nothing but a broken hilt.She stared at it in disbelief, her frozen mind struggling to comprehend what had happened.The blade should have been perfect.She'd followed every step meticulously, and Kaine had overseen the entire process.It should have been strong enough to at least deflect a golem's attack, if not penetrate its defenses.

Sabotage.Again.This time, it would prove fatal.

The golem's massive arm swung toward her, and Thalia barely managed to throw herself backward, landing hard in the snow.Her muscles screamed in protest, already pushed beyond their limits by cold and exhaustion.

One last attempt.Cryomancy.Not for warmth this time, but for defense.She thrust her hands forward, channeling every remaining scrap of magical energy into creating a barrier between herself and the advancing constructs.



Nothing happened. Not even the stirring of snow she'd managed before. Her reserves were empty, her connection to the magic severed by exhaustion and cold.

The realization hit her with finality: she was going to die here. Not in some grand battle or heroic sacrifice, but alone in the snow, defeated by sabotage and the elements. Her mother and Mari would never know what happened to her. Another Frostforge casualty, unremarkable in the academy's bloody history.

Thalia forced herself to her feet, refusing to die on her knees. If this was her end, she would meet it standing. Her legs betrayed her immediately, buckling beneath her weight. She fell forward, catching herself on her hands, then collapsed fully into the snow as her strength finally gave out completely.

The world around her began to fade, darkness creeping in from the edges of her vision. The cold no longer hurt — a dangerous sign. Her eyelids fluttered, too heavy to keep open. The golems' glowing eyes were the last things she saw, blue stars in a white void, coming closer.

Then came a sound. Different from the wind's howl or the golems' mechanical grinding. Boots crunching on snow. A voice, cursing loudly and colorfully.

Brynn. It was Brynn Firstborn's voice, impossibly clear through the storm's roar.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

The sharp sound of a blade being drawn cut through the white noise of the blizzard. The last thing Thalia registered before consciousness slipped away was the sight of Brynn's tall figure stepping between her and the golems, twin daggers gleaming in her hands.

### CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Ice crystals formed on Thalia's eyelashes as consciousness flickered through her mind like a sputtering candle. The world resolved itself in fragments — the howl of wind, the crunch of steel against ice, a dark figure darting between hulking shadows. Brynn. The name registered dimly in Thalia's frost-addled brain as she struggled to focus through the whiteout conditions. Her rival was fighting for both their lives, and all Thalia could do was watch through half-frozen eyes as death circled them in triplicate.

The golems were massive, their ice-metal bodies gleaming dully in the storm. One lunged — a grinding, creaking movement like a glacier shifting — its fist aimed squarely at Brynn's head. Thalia tried to call out a warning, but her lips had gone numb, the words freezing before they could form.

She needn't have worried. Brynn moved like water through the snow, ducking beneath the blow and sliding across the ice on one knee. Her twin daggers flashed, cutting deep into what passed for the golem's ankle joint. Ice cracked. Metal shrieked. The massive construct faltered, its momentum carrying it forward as its leg gave way.

Darkness swallowed Thalia's vision again. When it cleared, Brynn was perched on the first golem's back, her daggers buried to the hilt in the nexus point where its neck met

torso. The creature's arcane light flickered and died as she twisted the blades with practiced precision.

"Come on," Brynn snarled, though whether at the golems or at Thalia, it was impossible to tell. "Just die already!"

The remaining two converged, their movements oddly synchronized. Brynn leapt from her fallen prey, rolling through the snow and coming up in a fighting stance. Her breath plumed before her in rapid bursts, but her hands were steady, her posture rooted. She looked nothing like the haughty student who strutted through Frostforge's halls. Here, in the killing cold, she was transformed — a warrior.

Darkness again. The next time Thalia's eyes focused, one more golem lay shattered across the snow while Brynn danced around the last. Her hair whipped in the wind, frost collecting along its length like tiny diamonds. She moved with the assurance of someone who had trained for years, anticipating each thunderous blow and countering with cruel efficiency.

"Gutter trash," Thalia heard her mutter as she darted beneath the golem's guard, "wasting my time... making me risk my life...." The rest was lost as she ducked a sweeping arm, then sprang upward, driving both daggers into the construct's chest.

A sound like breaking glass echoed across the mountainside, strangely clear despite the howling wind. The golem stood motionless for a heartbeat, then collapsed in a heap of twisted metal and fractured ice. Brynn landed lightly beside it, chest heaving but otherwise unscathed.

She turned toward Thalia, her face a mask of disgust.

"If you die after all that, I'll be very annoyed," she said, stalking over and crouching beside Thalia's crumpled form. "Can you walk?"

Thalia tried to nod, but her muscles refused to obey. Cold had seeped into her bones, turning her limbs to lead. The shivering that had wracked her body for hours had eased — a dangerous sign, she knew from her herbalist training. When the cold stopped hurting, death was near.

Brynn cursed, the words catching and freezing in the air. "Useless," she muttered, then bent down and hauled Thalia's arm across her shoulders.

The next stretch of time passed in a blur of pain and cold. Thalia's boots dragged through drifts of snow as Brynn half-carried, half-dragged her across the treacherous terrain. Every step sent jolts of agony through Thalia's frozen feet, but the pain was distant, like it belonged to someone else.

"...completely stupid," Brynn was saying, her voice coming and going with the gusting wind. "...knew you were incompetent, but this... suicidal levels of idiocy."

Thalia tried to defend herself, to explain about Senna and the sabotage, but her tongue felt swollen and useless in her mouth. Only a weak moan escaped.

"Save it," Brynn snapped. "Just focus on staying alive. I didn't fight three golems for nothing."

They crested a small rise, and Brynn's pace quickened. Through frost-rimmed eyes, Thalia saw what had caught her attention — a rocky outcropping jutting from the mountainside, offering minimal shelter from the relentless wind.

"There," Brynn grunted, adjusting her hold on Thalia. "Think you can make it twenty more steps without collapsing? No, don't answer. It wasn't a real question."

The distance to the outcropping seemed to stretch and contract, a trick of Thalia's fading consciousness. When they finally reached it, Brynn wasted no time. She

propped Thalia against the cold stone and began clearing snow with swift, economical movements.

"Don't fall asleep," she ordered, not looking up from her work. "I mean it, Greenspire. You sleep, you die."

Thalia fought to keep her eyes open, focusing on Brynn's back as she worked. Once a rough semicircle was cleared, Brynn straightened and pulled off a glove. Her exposed hand was pale, the fingertips tinged faintly blue, but steady as she extended it toward the open side of their makeshift shelter.

The air temperature plummeted even further. Thalia's ears popped as pressure changed. Frost spread from Brynn's outstretched fingers, not in delicate crystals but in thick, architectural planes. Ice grew in sheets and blocks, layering upon itself to form a translucent wall that curved perfectly to match the stone outcropping.

A windbreak. Brynn was creating a windbreak, with cryomancy far beyond what Thalia herself could manage on her best day. The ice was dense and opaque, riddled with air pockets that would insulate rather than conduct the killing cold.

"You're good at that," Thalia managed, her voice a barely audible rasp.

Brynn shot her a withering glance over her shoulder. "Yes. I am." She flexed her fingers and the ice wall thickened, acquiring a slight bluish tint. "Unlike some who can barely manage a snowflake."

The biting wind dropped to a dull moan as the barrier rose to completion. Brynn stepped back to inspect her work, then nodded once, satisfied. She turned to Thalia, assessing her with clinical detachment.

"Your shivering's getting weaker," she said, frowning. "That's not good."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:16 pm*

Thalia wanted to respond with something witty, but even breathing required concentration now. Her extremities had gone from painful to numb, and a curious warmth was spreading through her core — the body's last, desperate attempt to protect itself before surrendering to the cold.

Brynn grimaced, looking genuinely conflicted for the first time since Thalia had known her. Then, with a muttered curse, she dropped to her knees beside Thalia and pressed their bodies together, sharing her warmth.

"This doesn't mean we're friends," she said firmly.

"Didn't think... we were," Thalia managed between chattering teeth.

Brynn reached into her pack and extracted a small pouch. The scent of dried meat filled their tiny shelter as she fished out a strip of dark, leathery elk.

"Eat," she commanded, pressing it into Thalia's stiff fingers. "Your body needs fuel to generate heat."

Thalia brought the meat to her lips, taking small, careful bites. Each chew sent a wave of saliva flooding her mouth, her stomach clenching painfully as it remembered hunger.

"I didn't expect to find you like this," Brynn said after a moment, her breath fogging between them. "I knew you were an idiot, but I didn't realize you were this weak."

Thalia swallowed her mouthful of meat before responding. "My equipment was

sabotaged."With clumsy fingers, she indicated the tear in her pack, then the stub of her ice-steel blade, still clutched in her other hand."My blade shattered with the first golem.Food was lost when my pack tore."

Brynn took the broken blade, turning it over in her gloved hands.Her expression hardened as she examined the fracture point.

"There are chemicals," she said slowly, "certain compounds that can be mixed into the water used to forge ice-steel.They weaken the molecular bonds without changing the appearance."She handed the blade back to Thalia."You're right.This is the result of sabotage, not poor craftsmanship."

"You believe me?"Thalia asked, surprised by the validation.

"I believe the evidence," Brynn said flatly."Someone at Frostforge really hates you."

Thalia nodded shakily."I think I know who it was."

"Good."Brynn's expression was grim, almost approving."Knowledge is power."

Outside their shelter, the sky was darkening rapidly.The temperature, already deadly, began to plummet further as night descended on the mountainside.Brynn dug back into her pack and extracted a tightly rolled blanket, which she shook out and wrapped around Thalia's shoulders.

"Why are you helping me?"Thalia asked, her voice small in the gathering darkness.

Brynn was silent for a long moment."My family taught me honor," she said finally, her tone suggesting the word carried weight Thalia couldn't possibly understand."Something I don't expect someone of your status to understand."The barb was delivered reflexively, almost without thought.

"You saved me during the medicine-gathering expedition," she continued, grudging admission in every syllable. "Despite the fact that I've given you no reason to show me kindness. I pay my debts." She met Thalia's gaze directly. "Now we're even, and nothing about our relationship has changed. The next time you flounder, you're on your own."

Thalia nodded, accepting the terms. But as Brynn settled beside her, reluctantly sharing body heat against the cold, Thalia allowed herself a small smile. She felt vindicated in her decision to help Brynn weeks ago, even if the other girl would never admit to needing it.

The storm howled on through the night, battering against their ice shelter like a living thing. Thalia drifted in and out of consciousness, anchored to life by Brynn's solid presence beside her. As darkness claimed her once more, Thalia wondered what other surprises Frostforge's remaining trials would reveal, and if she would survive to discover them.

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Morning arrived with merciful clarity. Thalia blinked awake to find the air still bitterly cold but absent the vicious bite of yesterday's blizzard. The storm had passed, leaving behind a transformed landscape — snow piled in elegant drifts against the rocky outcropping, their shelter standing as the only human imprint for what seemed like miles. Through the small vent Brynn had crafted in their ice wall, Thalia could see the remains of the golems, now half-buried mounds of crystal and metal gleaming in the early light.

A sharp movement drew her attention. Brynn was already on her feet, pack opened on the ground before her as she methodically restowed her supplies. Her movements were brisk and efficient, each item finding its assigned place with practiced precision. Dark brown hair hung in a curtain around her face, the tips crusted with



frost that sparkled like tiny diamonds when she moved. She hadn't bothered to wake Thalia.

"Took you long enough to wake up," Brynn said without looking up from her task. Her voice was clipped, impatient. "If you're not dead, then get moving."

Thalia pushed herself upright, wincing as her stiff muscles protested the movement. The cold had seeped deep into her bones, leaving behind a dull ache that pulsed with each heartbeat. Her skin prickled with the memory of numbness, a phantom sensation of the near-fatal chill that had almost claimed her life. She flexed her fingers experimentally, relieved to find them responsive, though tender.

Her mind felt sluggish, thoughts coming through a fog of exhaustion, but the terror of the previous night remained vivid. She remembered the wind cutting through her inadequate clothing, the sabotaged equipment failing one piece at a time, the realization that she might actually die out here, alone and far from home.

Thalia's gaze drifted to the scattered remains of the golems. In the clear morning light, they were less intimidating — just frozen chunks of ice-metal half-buried by fresh snowfall. It was hard to believe that just hours ago, these inert fragments had been animated constructs intent on destroying anything that crossed their path.

What was even harder to believe was how easily Brynn had dismantled them.

The memory of Brynn's battle surfaced — her fluid movements, the precision of each strike, the absolute confidence with which she'd faced creatures twice her size. There had been no hesitation, no fear. Only calculated aggression and skill born from years of dedicated training.

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It shouldn't have surprised Thalia. The Firstborn family was among the Southern elite, with resources to provide their children with the finest combat instructors gold could buy. But there was a difference between knowing something intellectually and witnessing it firsthand. Brynn hadn't just been taught to fight; she'd mastered the art.

Thalia glanced down, realizing she still clutched the broken stub of her ice-steel blade. The fractured edge caught the morning light, revealing the irregular crystalline pattern where the metal had failed. It shouldn't have broken. She had followed every step of the forging process meticulously, had checked and double-checked the balance, had tested the edge herself before setting out.

Anger rose in her throat, hot and bitter, warming her from the inside out. Senna's face flashed in her mind.

The sound of Brynn snapping her fingers cut through Thalia's thoughts.

"Hello? Are you still half-frozen?" Brynn stood over her, impatience written in every line of her posture. "I said get moving. Do you want to survive this thing or not?"

Thalia nodded, then cleared her throat. "Thank you," she said; the words emerged rough but sincere. "For saving my life."

Brynn's expression tightened. She turned away, slinging her pack over her shoulder with practiced ease. "Don't tell anyone about this," she ordered, her tone leaving no room for argument. "The last thing I need is everyone thinking I've gone soft." She kicked at the remnants of their shelter, collapsing part of the ice wall. "Nothing's changed between us — we're just even now. Got it?"

Thalia forced herself to stand, ignoring the tremors that still ran through her limbs. She met Brynn's gaze directly, refusing to show weakness now that daylight had returned. "I won't. But... thanks."

Brynn snorted. "Save your gratitude for someone who cares."

She turned on her heel, her boots crunching in the fresh snow as she began walking toward the distant peaks that marked the final checkpoint of the Frost Walk. Before she got too far, she paused, glancing back over her shoulder.

"If you're smart, Greenspire," she called, "you'll realize the ones sabotaging you are playing for keeps. You'll have to play just as dirty if you want to survive."

With that final piece of advice, Brynn strode away, her silhouette quickly swallowed by the vast whiteness of the landscape. She didn't look back again.

Thalia watched her go, the harsh truth of Brynn's words sinking in like a stone dropped into still water. She'd been naive, believing that her talent and hard work would be enough to see her through Frostforge's trials. She'd approached the academy as she had approached life in Verdant Port — head down, work hard, prove your worth through merit alone.

But Frostforge didn't reward fairness. It rewarded strength, cunning, and the will to survive by any means necessary.

Thalia looked again at the broken blade in her hand. Senna hadn't just tried to eliminate a rival for Kaine's affections; she'd tried to eliminate Thalia entirely. And she'd nearly succeeded.

The realization settled over Thalia with a strange sort of clarity. Senna was every bit as dangerous as the ice-metal golems that roamed these fields — perhaps more so,

because the golems didn't harbor personal grudges or elaborate schemes. Senna, with her extra year at Frostforge and her obsession with Northern superiority, was a calculated predator.

And Thalia had been easy prey.

No longer, she decided, carefully tucking the remnant of her blade into her pack. Next time she would be prepared.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Thalia staggered toward the towering iron gate, each step a negotiation between her frozen limbs and her determination to finish the Frost Walk. Frost rimmed the massive structure like delicate lace, beautiful and deadly — much like everything at Frostforge. Beyond the gate, instructors stood watching with impassive faces as students stumbled through, their expressions revealing nothing of what they thought about the broken, freezing recruits who had somehow survived the brutal trial. Thalia's fingers had long since gone numb around the hilt of her shattered blade, the only evidence to support her suspicions about Senna. She clutched it tighter, refusing to let it go even as her vision blurred from exhaustion.

The gate loomed before her, embedded in the cliff face that marked the edge of the Crystalline Plateau. The wind howled through the gaps in the iron, creating an eerie, keening sound that reminded her of the storm she'd barely survived. Her borrowed furs hung in tatters around her shoulders, ice crystals forming in the matted fur where her breath had frozen. Her lips were cracked and bleeding, her cheeks raw from windburn.

All around her, other students trudged toward the same destination. Some moved with stubborn purpose, others barely crawled. Neither spoke—words required energy they couldn't spare. Ahead, a boy Thalia recognized from metallurgy class passed through

the gate, his shoulders sagging with relief as he crossed the threshold. Three instructors flanked the entrance, tallying survivors with marks on a frost-resistant slate.

Thalia passed through the gate. The moment she stepped beyond the threshold, heat enveloped her like an embrace. The sudden shift from bitter cold to warmth shocked her system. Her muscles spasmed, knees buckling beneath her. She stumbled forward, barely keeping her footing as her body tried to process the abrupt temperature change.

The cave beyond the gate was vast, its ceiling disappearing into darkness. Campfires burned regularly, their orange glow reflecting off the crystalline walls. The heat they generated was overwhelming after days in the freezing wilderness. Thalia's skin prickled painfully as sensation returned, thousands of needles stabbing into her flesh as circulation slowly returned to her extremities.

Around her, other students reacted to the warmth in various ways. A girl with Northern features dropped to her knees, laughing with wild, almost manic relief, tears streaming down her face as she held her hands toward the nearest fire. Two boys collapsed side by side, too exhausted even to celebrate their survival, their chests heaving with effort. A Southern girl Thalia had seen only in passing sat with her back against the cave wall, staring into nothing, shock evident in her vacant expression.

Thalia spotted a flat stone near one of the fires and made her way toward it, each step sending jolts of pain through her thawing limbs. She lowered herself onto the stone, the movement lacking any grace. Her hands trembled violently as she extended them toward the flames, her skin mottled with patches of angry red and alarming white.

Her breath rattled in her chest like loose pebbles in a jar. For the first time since the storm hit, since she'd discovered her sabotaged equipment, since Brynn had found her half-frozen in the snow, Thalia allowed herself to feel something beyond raw survival instinct. Relief washed over her, melting her reserves of strength just as the fire was

melting the ice crystals in her hair. She was alive. Despite Senna's interference, despite the storm, despite everything, she had survived.

Healers in gray robes moved through the cave, their expressions grim as they assessed the condition of the survivors. They carried stacks of thick blankets and distributed them to the shivering students. A woman with silver at her temples approached Thalia, draping a heavy woolen blanket around her shoulders without a word. Thalia clutched it gratefully, pulling it tight around her body. The healer moved on without comment, already focused on the next student in need.

Thalia scanned the gathered survivors, counting heads, looking for familiar faces. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest as she searched for her friends. Her gaze caught on Brynn Firstborn, who sat near another fire, her perfect posture intact despite the ordeal they'd all endured. The girl who had surprised Thalia most during the Frost Walk — the rival who had saved her life rather than leaving her to die. Brynn met her eyes across the cave, and for a brief moment, something passed between them. Not friendship, certainly, but something like respect. Brynn gave Thalia an almost imperceptible nod before turning away.

Relief flooded through her when she spotted Ashe near the cave's entrance. The Northern girl was clearly battered — a purple bruise bloomed across her left cheekbone, and she favored her right leg as she moved — but she was undeniably alive. Ashe's expression was one of weary pride.

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Thalia continued her visual sweep of the cave, worry gnawing at her when she didn't immediately see Roran or Luna. She strained to see through the haze of smoke and steam rising from wet clothes meeting heat, searching for Roran's wild mass of frizzy black curls or Luna's neat dreadlocks.

Her worry for Roran eased when he stumbled through the gate, looking as though he'd wrestled with the storm itself and barely come out on top. His steps were unsteady, but his head remained high. His left arm was bound against his chest with what appeared to be a torn piece of his own coat, but he was smiling — that easy smile that had offered Thalia encouragement during her first disastrous cryomancy lesson.

Luna, though, was still missing. Thalia's stomach tightened with concern. Luna, with her keen observations hidden behind a carefully crafted facade of distraction. Luna, who had become an unexpected ally in this harsh place. Thalia stared at the gate, willing her friend to appear.

"You made it!"

The voice came from beside her, not from the direction of the gate. Thalia turned sharply, wincing as the movement sent a fresh wave of pain through her stiff neck. Luna stood next to her, wrapped in a blanket identical to Thalia's, her dark eyes bright despite the exhaustion evident in the slump of her shoulders.

"Luna," Thalia breathed, relief washing over her. "I didn't see you come in."

Luna's lips curved in a small smile. "I arrived just before you. Been sitting here

watching everyone stumble in. It's quite the show." Despite her casual tone, Thalia could see the tension in Luna's jaw, the careful way she held herself to minimize pain.

"Are you all right?" Thalia asked.

Luna gave a noncommittal shrug. "Better than some. Worse than others. Standard Frostforge experience." She studied Thalia's face, her gaze sharpening. "You look like you went through all of the frozen hells. And back."

"I have a lot to tell you," Thalia said, her voice dropping to ensure only Luna could hear.

Luna's eyes flashed with interest, immediately alert despite her exhaustion. Her gaze dropped to Thalia's hands, still clutching the broken blade like a lifeline.

"Does it have anything to do with that?" Luna asked, nodding toward the shattered, useless weapon.

Thalia nodded grimly. "Everything to do with it." She shifted the blade so Luna could see the break more clearly. "This should not have happened. Not with a blade I forged myself."

"Sabotage?" Luna whispered, her expression hardening.

"Sabotage," Thalia confirmed, her own voice equally quiet. "And I know who did it."

Luna's eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

Before Thalia could answer, a healer approached them with steaming cups. The conversation paused as they accepted the hot liquid, both understanding without words that this discussion would continue once they were alone. Thalia wrapped her



still-trembling fingers around the cup, letting the heat seep into her bones, her mind racing despite her body's exhaustion. She had survived the Frost Walk, but as she looked at her broken blade, she knew that her trials at Frostforge were far from over.

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Hours passed in the cave's warm embrace as Thalia watched the iron gate with unwavering attention. The steady stream of survivors had dwindled to a trickle, then to sporadic arrivals gasping through the entrance, then to nothing at all. A hollow silence stretched between each new arrival, growing longer and heavier with each passing minute. The air in the cave tasted of woodsmoke, healing herbs, and an undercurrent of something darker — the collective realization that many who had set out on the Frost Walk would never return. Thalia counted the empty spaces where students should have been, cataloging faces she would never see again. Among them was Joren Tidewell, a boy from her same street in Verdant Port.

Cold dread pooled in Thalia's stomach as she mentally tallied those missing. Nearly a third of their class hadn't made it through the gate. She remembered Joren's deep-set eyes and the crooked tooth that showed when he smiled, how he'd described his mother's fish stew recipe during their first communal meal at Frostforge — a taste of home that neither expected to enjoy again. Now, he was another name on the growing list of those claimed by the academy's brutal training regimen. She wondered if his mother would receive compensation for her son's life, or if it would be deemed his own failure rather than the academy's loss.

Several students wept openly for missing friends. Others sat in stunned silence, perhaps contemplating how easily they could have been among the missing. The Northern students, Thalia noticed, seemed less affected; they had been raised with the expectation that not everyone survives the cold. Death by ice was as natural to them as breathing. Still, even among them, Thalia saw tight expressions and distant gazes that hinted at concealed grief.

The distinct sound of metal striking stone silenced the murmurs of conversation throughout the cave. Instructor Maven stood at the entrance, her metal eye-covering reflecting the firelight. She struck her blade against the cave wall once more, ensuring she had everyone's attention before sheathing it at her hip.

"The Frost Walk trial is complete," she announced, her voice carrying easily through the cave without needing to shout. "Those who have survived have passed, and will continue at Frostforge. Those who have not..." She let the sentence hang unfinished, the implication clear. No search parties would be sent for the missing. No bodies would be recovered. The Golem Fields had claimed them, as it had claimed countless others before.

Maven's remaining eye scanned the survivors, her expression unreadable. The bear claw around her neck gleamed dully in the firelight as she continued. "You will receive medical attention here before returning to the academy. Your performance during the Frost Walk will be evaluated, and your yearly rankings adjusted accordingly."

Rankings. As if the whole ordeal had been nothing more than an academic exercise. Thalia's fingers tightened around her broken blade, anger momentarily cutting through her exhaustion. People had died, and all Maven cared about was how to grade the survivors.

"Rest while you can," Maven concluded, already turning to leave. "Classes resume tomorrow at dawn." With that, she strode out of the cave, leaving a wake of disbelieving stares behind her.

The healers moved with greater purpose now, organizing the students into groups for medical assessment. They applied salves to frostbite, bandaged wounds, and distributed steaming mugs of herbal tea that smelled of pine and something bitter but medicinal. The tea burned Thalia's throat going down, but warmth spread through her

core immediately, chasing away the last of the bone-deep chill that had settled during the trial.

A healer with a severe expression and gentle hands examined Thalia's frost-nipped fingers and toes, coating them with a greenish paste that tingled unpleasantly. "You're lucky," the woman said. "Another hour out there and you'd have lost the tips of these fingers." She wrapped Thalia's hands in thin, soft bandages. "Keep them warm and dry. Change the dressings twice daily."

As the healer moved to her next patient, a Northern instructor Thalia didn't recognize approached, hand extended. "Your weapon," he said, voice flat.

Thalia hesitated, reluctant to surrender the broken blade. "Will I get it back?"

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The instructor's pale eyes narrowed slightly. "All damaged equipment is evaluated. If salvageable, it will be returned to the forges for repair or recycling. If not..." He shrugged, the gesture eloquent in its dismissal.

Left with no choice that wouldn't draw unwanted attention, Thalia surrendered the blade. The instructor examined the break with a practiced eye, his expression revealing nothing as he placed it in a sack with other damaged weapons and moved on.

Thalia settled against the rough stone wall of the cave, cradling her mug of medicinal tea between bandaged hands. The warmth seeped into her palms, a welcome contrast to the chill that had nearly claimed her life. Steam rose from the dark liquid, carrying the scent of herbs she recognized from her mother's shop — white willow bark for pain, ginger root for circulation, and something else, something native to the Reaches that she couldn't identify.

Luna appeared at her side, moving with the quiet grace that belied her carefully constructed persona of distraction and forgetfulness. She slid down the wall to sit beside Thalia, her own mug cradled in hands that bore similar bandages.

"So," Luna said, voice pitched low enough that only Thalia could hear. "You wanted to tell me something?"

Thalia glanced around, ensuring no one was paying them undue attention. Most students were focused on their own recovery, too exhausted to eavesdrop. Still, she kept her voice quiet as she set her mug down and reached for her pack.

"Look at this," she said, showing Luna the tear inside the pack where her spare gloves should have been. "My backup equipment was damaged before I ever left. And the blade — the one they just took — it shattered on first contact with an ice-metal construct." She met Luna's eyes, her own hard with certainty. "That was deliberate weakening."

Luna touched the tear in the pack, her expression calculating. "When did you last check your equipment?"

"The night before the Frost Walk. Everything was intact then." Thalia leaned closer. "And Senna approached me in the forge while I was working on that blade. She warned me to stay away from Kaine. Said something bad might happen to me during the Frost Walk if I didn't."

Luna's lips thinned. "And then something bad conveniently happened."

"Exactly." Thalia took a sip of her tea, grimacing at the bitter aftertaste. "I have no proof beyond timing and motive, but I'm certain it was her."

Luna nodded slowly. "It makes sense. The saboteur has targeted you more than anyone else, and Senna has made her hatred for you clear since you started spending time with Kaine. She's also a Northerner." She tucked a loose dreadlock behind her ear, her dark eyes thoughtful. "What are you planning to do?"

Thalia hesitated. "I wasn't going to report her. Not yet."

"Good," Luna said with surprising vehemence. "Reporting her would be futile and would only escalate the situation." She leaned back against the cave wall, her expression distant as she calculated possibilities. "She wouldn't face any trouble, since you have no proof. But it would paint more of a target on your back."

Thalia's stomach tightened at Luna's matter-of-fact assessment. "So what do I do? Wait for her to try again?"

Luna's lips curved in a smile that held little warmth. "We keep a low profile while gathering evidence. And more importantly," she added, her voice dropping even lower, "we make allies. Power's not just about strength. It's about who owes you favors."

The practical wisdom in Luna's words resonated with Thalia. It reminded her of the careful social navigation her mother had taught her — how to remember which sailor preferred which herb, which merchant might extend credit during lean times, which dock master could be persuaded to look the other way when they gathered seaweed from restricted areas. Survival wasn't always about confrontation. Sometimes, it was about knowing when to fight and when to build support for the battles that mattered.

Thalia reflected on the allies she'd already made at Frostforge. Luna, with her sharp mind and carefully cultivated connections. Ashe, whose Northern upbringing gave her insights into surviving in this harsh environment. Kaine, who had been steadfast and generous with his skills, even if his company had proven dangerous after all — though not in the way she'd expected. Roran, whose storm magic and inexplicable knowledge might prove valuable. And now, perhaps, a tentative understanding with Brynn — not friendship, but a mutual respect born from shared survival.

As if summoned by her thoughts, Ashe approached, limping slightly but moving with determination. Fresh bandages wrapped her right calf, and a salve glistened on her bruised cheekbone. Without asking permission, she lowered herself to sit on Thalia's other side.

"That," Ashe said, "was worse than my clan's coming-of-age trial."

Roran joined them moments later, his arm properly splinted now and secured in a

sling.Despite his injury, his characteristic good humor seemed intact."Room for one more in this gathering of the not-quite-dead?"he asked, settling across from them with his back against a low boulder.

"Always room for another survivor," Luna replied, her airy, vacant expression slipping into place so smoothly that Thalia might have missed the transition if she hadn't been watching.

The four of them formed a small circle, separate from the larger groups of students huddled around the fires.In the dancing shadows cast by the flames, Thalia studied her companions' faces.Each bore the marks of their ordeal — cuts, bruises, the lingering hollowness of exhaustion — but also a newfound hardness, the beginning of the transformation that Frostforge demanded of its students.

"Heard about your blade," Roran said to Thalia, his voice low."Bad luck, that."

Thalia met his gaze steadily."Not luck," she replied, keeping her voice neutral.

Understanding dawned in his eyes, quickly followed by anger on her behalf."The same person who's been messing with Southern students' equipment?"

"Most likely," Luna said before Thalia could respond."But we're being careful about accusations without proof."

Ashe frowned, leaning forward."Someone deliberately sabotaged you during the Frost Walk?"The Northern girl's hand moved to the knife at her belt, a reflexive gesture."That goes beyond competition.That's attempted murder."

"Welcome to Frostforge," Thalia murmured.

The conversation shifted to comparing experiences during the trial, each sharing the

challenges they'd faced and how they'd overcome them. Thalia listened more than she spoke, gathering information, noting strengths and weaknesses, building a mental map of how they might work together in the future.



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As they talked, Thalia's gaze drifted to the iron gate through which they'd entered this temporary sanctuary. Beyond it lay the Golem Fields, still blanketed in snow and ice, where the bodies of their classmates would remain until spring thaw—if animals and scavengers left anything to find. Beyond that, Frostforge Academy waited, its ancient stone walls harboring secrets, alliances, and enemies.

Thalia took another sip of her medicinal tea, the bitter taste a reminder of the harsh realities of her new life. Her mother had taught her that the most potent remedies often tasted the worst. Perhaps surviving Frostforge would prove the same — bitter in the moment, but ultimately strengthening. And unlike many of her classmates, she no longer faced that bitterness alone.

### CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The flames of the funeral pyre reached toward the ice-pale sky, carrying ash and sorrow in equal measure. Thalia stood among the surviving students, shoulders rigid against the bitter wind that swept across the Crystalline Training Grounds. The shrouded bodies before them — nine in total — represented more than just failed students. They were dreams extinguished, families shattered, futures erased by Frostforge's merciless trials. And Thalia knew, with a cold certainty that settled in her bones like frost, that she had nearly been the tenth.

The instructors had ventured into the Golem Fields at dawn to retrieve the corpses, their grim procession back to the academy observed in silence from frost-glazed windows. Now, as the white shrouds blackened and curled in the flames, Thalia couldn't help but wonder which of the bodies belonged to Joren, her old neighbor from Verdant Port's slums. The odds had been stacked against him from the

beginning. Against both of them.

Instructor Maven stood before the gathered students, her single amber eye reflecting the dancing flames. The metal plate covering her missing eye gleamed, cold and unforgiving.

“Learn from their failures.” Her voice cut through the crackle of the fire. “Or join them next year.”

No prayers, no comfort. Just harsh reality, served cold.

Luna stood beside Thalia, and beside her, Ashe maintained the rigid posture of Northern mourning, her gaze fixed on the middle distance, red-streaked hair whipping in the wind like flames caught in ice. Roran's usual easy smile had vanished, replaced by a tight-lipped solemnity that aged his face.

"It could have been any of us," he whispered, the words barely audible.

It nearly was me, Thalia thought, her eyes finding Brynn across the gathering. Her rival stood apart from the other students, chin raised, posture perfect — every inch the daughter of Southern nobility. Their eyes met briefly, and something passed between them — an understanding forged in the howling darkness of the storm where Brynn had found her, half-frozen and clinging to consciousness. Neither acknowledged it with more than the slightest nod, but it was there: a debt unpaid, a rivalry transformed.

The memorial concluded with no further ceremony. The students dispersed in small groups, leaving the pyre to burn under the watchful eyes of two junior instructors. As they walked back toward the main building, Thalia caught a glimpse of silver-gray eyes watching from the edge of the dispersing crowd. Senna's pale face was framed by straight black hair, lips curled in what might have been a smile.

Their eyes locked, and the smirk widened before Senna turned on her heel, disappearing into the stream of students.

"She's looking particularly pleased with herself," Luna murmured, her breath creating small clouds in the frigid air.

"Not for long," Thalia replied, her voice steady despite the anger bubbling beneath.

Luna's eyebrows raised slightly, the only indication of her surprise. "What are you planning to do?"

"Something I should have done after she first threatened me." Thalia squeezed Luna's arm. "I'll meet you at dinner."

Before her friend could protest, Thalia broke away, following the path Senna had taken. The corridors of Frostforge were quieter than usual, the students' voices subdued by the morning's events. Thalia moved with purpose, no longer the hesitant Southern girl who had arrived months ago. Her steps were sure, her eyes tracking the distinctive swagger of Senna's walk as the second-year student turned down the hallway leading to the advanced training rooms.

Perfect. Few students would be there today, given the morning's memorial. The corridor narrowed, the blue-tinged ice-steel walls reflecting distorted versions of herself as she walked. Ahead, Senna pushed through a door into one of the smaller practice rooms.

Thalia counted to ten, then followed.

The room was empty save for Senna, who stood before a rack of training weapons, her back to the door. The click of the latch announced Thalia's presence, causing Senna to turn, surprise briefly flashing across her features before hardening into

contempt.

"Looking for private lessons, Southerner?" Senna's voice dripped with disdain. "I doubt even I could teach you proper Northern techniques."

Thalia let the door close behind her, her heart pounding but her face composed. "I didn't come here to train."

"No?" Senna lifted a practice dagger, testing its weight with casual expertise. "Come to thank me for not having to join your countrymen on the pyre today?"

The taunt hit its mark; of the nine casualties, seven had been students from the Southern Kingdoms. Thalia refused to flinch. Instead, she stepped forward, closing the distance between them.

"My equipment was tampered with before the Frost Walk," she said, her voice low and even. "Someone wanted to ensure I wouldn't return."

Senna's lips curved into a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "And you think I'd waste my time on a first-year nobody?"

"I think you'd waste your time on anyone you consider a threat to your relationship with Kaine."

The name hung in the air between them, electric and dangerous.

Senna twirled the practice dagger, its blunted edge catching the light from the frost-glass windows. "Perhaps you just aren't as skilled at metallurgy as you thought you were, Southerner. Survival in these reaches can be difficult for those with your...background. Your blade's weakness was the result of your own inadequacy, and nothing more."

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Thalia felt a surge of satisfaction. The trap was set, and Senna had walked right into it.

"I never said anything about my blade," Thalia replied, her voice soft but cutting. "But it's interesting that you know the precise details of the sabotage."

The flicker in Senna's eyes — there and gone in an instant — told Thalia everything she needed to know. Senna's knuckles whitened around the dagger's hilt.

Thalia stepped closer, close enough now to see the tiny scar above Senna's left eyebrow. "I don't know what you did to it, but I know that my metallurgy was flawless. Do you want to know how I know?"

Senna's jaw clenched, but she remained silent, a dangerous stillness settling over her.

"Because Kaine told me it was."

Senna's nostrils flared, her composure cracking just enough for Thalia to see the possessive rage beneath. The Northern girl's gaze burned into her back as she walked away, but refused to give her the satisfaction of looking back.

Thalia's hands shook only after she turned the corner, the adrenaline finally breaking through her carefully maintained composure. She leaned against the wall, breathing deeply, processing what had just happened. She had confronted Senna — had all but confirmed the second-year student had tried to kill her — and walked away unscathed.

For now.

The realization that she'd made a dangerous enemy was tempered by the certainty that remaining silent would have been even more dangerous. Senna would try again, but now she knew that Thalia wasn't the easy target she'd imagined.

The funeral pyre would be ash by now, the dead committed to memory and warning. Thalia pushed away from the wall, straightening her shoulders.

She had survived the Frost Walk.

She had survived Senna's sabotage.

She would survive whatever came next.

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The main hall hummed with nervous energy, students arranged in neat rows by year, their breaths collectively held as Instructor Maven unrolled the scroll containing the year's final rankings. Thalia stood with the other first-years, her hands clasped behind her back to hide their slight trembling. She had survived, yes, but survival alone didn't determine one's standing at Frostforge. Performance, skill, adaptability — all would factor into where her name appeared on that list. And at Frostforge, rankings weren't merely a matter of pride; they determined everything from training opportunities in the coming term to placements within the war effort upon graduation. Higher-ranked recruits became higher-ranked officers.

The great hearth at the end of the hall crackled with blue-tinged flames, the only sound breaking the tense silence. Light from the high windows cast long, pale rectangles across the stone floor, illuminating the frost patterns that never fully melted, even indoors. Maven's single amber eye swept across the assembled students, lingering briefly on the gaps in formation where the fallen would have stood.

"First-years," Maven began, her voice echoing in the cavernous space. "Ranked first: Brynn Firstborn."

No surprise rippled through the assembly. Brynn's position at the top had been as certain as the ice on Rimspire Peak. Brynn stepped forward to receive the silver pin that marked her rank. Her face betrayed no emotion, save for the slight lift of her chin.

Maven continued down the list. The second position went to a Northern student Thalia barely recognized. The third went to Roran, which sent a wave of whispers through the ranks.

"Ranked fourth: Thalia Greenspire."

The sound of her name jolted Thalia from her thoughts. Fourth? She had expected perhaps tenth, maybe eighth at best. Not fourth in her entire year. Her feet carried her forward automatically while her mind raced. Around her, she heard the slight intake of breath from several students — surprise, perhaps respect, possibly resentment.

As Maven pinned the silver emblem to her collar, a stylized number four overlaid on the academy's crest, Thalia caught the instructor's eye. Was that the faintest hint of approval in that amber gaze? No, impossible. Maven had made it clear from the beginning that she considered Southern students inferior, and had treated Thalia with open hostility.

Thalia's gaze drifted across the hall as Maven continued through the rankings. She found Ashe ranked eleventh. Luna placed thirty-third — deliberately underperforming, Thalia suspected, to maintain her facade of mediocrity.

Thalia met Brynn's gaze and offered a slight nod. To her surprise, Brynn returned it, the barest movement, before turning her attention back to Maven, who had finished the first-year rankings and moved on to the second-years.

Kaine placed third among the second-years, his jaw tight as he accepted his pin from Maven. Senna ranked fifth, her silver-gray eyes flashing with barely concealed fury as she glared at the student who stood between her and Kaine.

When the rankings were complete and all pins distributed, Maven rolled her scroll with practiced precision. "And now, news that will please even those of you at the bottom of these lists." Her voice carried a rare note of satisfaction. "The Isle Warden blockades have been circumvented. Supply ships broke through three days ago."

A collective exhale swept through the hall, followed by murmurs of relief. The last weeks of limited rations and dwindling resources had taken their toll on everyone.

"This means," Maven continued, raising her voice over the growing chatter, "that you will all be permitted to return home for the break — those of you who wish to do so. Transport ships will depart in three days. Those staying at Frostforge must register with the administrative office by tomorrow evening."

The formal dismissal that followed released a flood of excited conversation. Students broke formation, clustering in animated groups. Thalia found herself surrounded by her friends, Luna's mask dropping the moment they were in relative privacy.



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"Fourth!" Luna exclaimed, her dark eyes bright with genuine excitement. "Thalia, that's incredible!"

"It's unexpected," Thalia admitted, still processing the implications. Her high ranking would mean better resources, more forge time — advantages she desperately needed if she was to survive three more years at Frostforge.

Ashe clapped her on the shoulder, her usual reserve softened by a rare smile. "Well deserved."

Roran grinned, the strain of the past weeks momentarily lifted from his features. "We should celebrate with actual food, now that supplies have arrived."

They made their way to their usual table in the dining hall, joined by other Southern students whose relief at the news of returning home was palpable. The hall seemed lighter somehow, as if the very stones of Frostforge had been awaiting this respite.

"What will you all do with the break?" Thalia asked, surveying her friends' faces. "Six weeks seems like an eternity after being here."

"Return to my clan lands," Ashe said without hesitation. "There are ceremonies I should attend, family obligations to fulfill." She didn't elaborate, and Thalia didn't press.

"I'll be on the first ship south," Luna said, a gleam in her eye that spoke volumes. "My father will be eager to hear about my...educational experiences." She exchanged a significant glance with Thalia, who understood the unspoken truth — Luna's father

would want every detail about the academy to fuel his campaign against it.

"What about you, Roran?" Thalia turned to the curly-haired Southern boy.

A shadow crossed his features, dimming his usual brightness. "I'm...not sure. I don't exactly have family to go back to, but there are some matters I'd like to attend to."

The vague response only deepened Thalia's curiosity about his background. For all his openness and charm, Roran rarely spoke of his life before Frostforge, beyond mentioning that his family had been lost to Isle Warden raids. A few feet away, she noticed Levi and Mona exchanging a meaningful glance. She realized that they, too, were reading into Roran's words – though their curiosity was more rooted in suspicion.

Clearly, not everyone had decided to trust Roran, as Thalia had. Some of them still seemed to think that he wasn't a survivor, but a spy for the Isle Wardens. Not for the first time, Thalia found herself wondering whether Roran was aware of the rumors that swirled around him. He didn't act like someone burdened by suspicion — no furtive glances, no forced charm meant to deflect.

"Levi, what are your plans?" Roran asked, his tone delicate; perhaps he had noticed, after all.

"Back home to Verdant Port," Levi said, his arms folded. "I'll be working as a fisherman – earning a bit of coin for my family."

Beside him, Mona frowned. "A shame, having to work while you're meant to be resting."

Levi snorted and waved a dismissive hand. "Not at all. It'll be a joy to work the docks compared to being stuck in the Howling Forge."

Thalia's gaze drifted across the hall, unconsciously seeking a particular face. She found Kaine sitting apart from the other second-years, his broad shoulders hunched slightly as he ate alone. As if sensing her attention, he looked up, his ice-blue eyes finding hers without hesitation.

Something twisted in Thalia's chest — sympathy, perhaps. While others celebrated their temporary freedom, Kaine had nowhere to go. The academy was his alternative to a prison cell; the break would mean six weeks of echoing hallways and solitary meals.

"Kaine will be staying," she murmured, more to herself than her companions.

"Of course he will," Luna replied softly. "Where else would he go?"

The question hung between them, a reminder of the dark rumors that surrounded him — rumors he had partially confirmed to Thalia. Had he killed his father? He had never denied it outright.

"What about you, Thalia?" Roran asked, breaking into her thoughts. "Back to Verdant Port?"

The question brought a genuine smile to her face. "On the first ship I can board. I need to see my mother and Mari, my sister." The thought of home — the small herb shop with its hanging bundles of dried plants, the scent of the sea mixing with medicinal preparations, her mother's tired but loving face — filled her with longing so intense it was almost pain.

"I want them to see that I survived," she added, her voice softer. She was no longer the girl who had left Verdant Port, frightened but determined. Frostforge had tempered her, like metal in fire — hardened her edges while revealing strengths she hadn't known she possessed.

"They'll hardly recognize you," Luna said, her tone light but her eyes serious. "The question is, will you recognize home?"

Thalia had no answer for that. She only knew that for the first time in months, she felt something close to hope — not just for survival, but for something more. The chance to see her family, to know they were safe for a little while longer.

Six weeks of respite before returning to the academy's dangers.

Six weeks to remember what she was fighting for; and after that, she would be thrown back into the furnace of Frostforge once more.