



# Frostforge: Passage Two

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**Category:** Romance, Fantasy

**Description:** At Frostforge Academy, where magical skill determines your fate, second-year student Thalia Greenspire hones her craft in magical metallurgy amidst rising tensions over missing weapons. As trust among the students fractures and an Isle Warden spy is suspected, Thalia's newfound abilities draw her into a vortex of mysteries and romance that could forge her destiny—or shatter it completely.

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):** 63

## CHAPTER ONE

Thalia moved through the crowded marketplace of Verdant Port, her shoulders squared and her steps measured. The humid air pressed against her skin like a forgotten embrace, both comforting and stifling after a year spent in Frostforge's perpetual winter. She inhaled deeply, letting the mingled scents of sea salt, roasting fish, and jungle blooms fill her lungs — smells that once had been so ordinary she barely noticed them, now precious in their familiarity. Around her, the port city pulsed with the same energetic rhythm she remembered, but something had changed. It took her a moment to realize it wasn't the place that was different — it was her.

Merchants called out their wares, their voices competing with the clatter of cart wheels on cobblestones and the distant cry of gulls circling the harbor. A year ago, she would have ducked her head and slipped between shoppers like a shadow, avoiding notice. Now, she found herself automatically scanning the crowd, assessing potential threats, and calculating escape routes — habits drilled into her by Frostforge's combat instructors. The weight of the concealed ice-steel knife strapped to her forearm beneath her sleeve was reassuring, though she doubted she'd need it here.

A group of children darted past, laughing as they chased a ball made of tightly wound cloth scraps. Thalia had to consciously relax her stance as they brushed by her. At the academy, sudden movements often preceded an attack. She shook her head slightly, trying to shed the combat-ready mindset that had kept her alive for the past year.

The heat was a welcome change. After months of blizzards and ice, the warmth of southern summer felt like a healing balm on her frost-nipped skin. Sweat gathered at her temples and traced a path down her spine, but she didn't mind. Warmth meant

life. Warmth meant home.

People looked at her differently now. An older man selling mangoes paused mid-transaction to stare, recognition and something like wariness crossing his weathered face. The fishmonger's wife, who had known Thalia since she was a child, faltered in her rhythmic filleting when Thalia passed. Even the harbor master, a man who rarely noticed anyone who wasn't directly paying him port fees, gave her a respectful nod.

They saw the changes in her, even if they couldn't name them. The gangly, uncertain girl who had left was gone. In her place stood someone with hardened muscles and a predator's grace. Frostforge had stripped away her softness, leaving behind something lean and dangerous. She moved differently now — more deliberate, more precise. Even her posture had changed, spine straight as a sword blade, shoulders set with quiet confidence born of surviving what many didn't.

A flash of recognition stopped Thalia mid-stride. Across the market square, a middle-aged woman was selecting fish at a stall, her movements mechanical, her face a mask of grief so profound it seemed to have settled into the lines of her face permanently. Mrs. Tidewell. Mother of Joren Tidewell.

Joren, who had arrived at Frostforge the same day as Thalia. Joren, who had joked about the cold during their first week, claimed his southern blood would freeze solid before winter's end. Joren, whose body had been recovered from the bottom of a ravine after the Frost Walk, was broken by a vicious golem and blue with cold.

Mrs. Tidewell looked up, sensing Thalia's stare. Their eyes locked across the bustling market. The woman's face crumpled, not in anger but in a fresh wave of grief, as if Thalia's very existence was a reminder that her son was gone forever. It was a look Thalia had seen too often in the past six weeks — survivors' guilt by proxy. Why are you here when my child is not?

Thalia tore her gaze away, heart hammering in her chest. She quickened her pace, throat tight with emotions she couldn't afford to indulge. Frostforge taught that sentiment was weakness, and weakness meant death. She was alive because she had learned that lesson well. Others hadn't been so fortunate.

The glassblower's stall appeared ahead, a welcome distraction. Thalia approached, noting the rainbow of glass bottles and jars arranged on a purple cloth. The glassblower, a thin man with soot-stained fingers and burn scars up his forearms, smiled at her approach.

"Ah, the Greenspire girl," he said, recognition brightening his eyes. "Your mother said you might come by. Academy treating you well, then?"

"Well enough," Thalia replied, her voice steady despite the lingering discomfort from her encounter with Mrs. Tidewell. "I need half a dozen of your small twist-cap jars. The ones with the rubber seals."

The man nodded, selecting the requested items with practiced hands. "These are my finest work — won't leak even if you turn them upside down and shake them." He demonstrated with one filled with colored water, and indeed, not a drop escaped.

As Thalia counted out the coins — more than her family could have afforded before her enrollment at Frostforge — she reflected on the irony of her situation. The monthly stipend the academy provided her family had lifted them from the desperate poverty that had forced her to volunteer for Selection in the first place.

With the carefully wrapped jars tucked into her market bag, Thalia made her way back through the winding streets toward her mother's herb shop. The wooden sign hanging above the door — a simple green leaf painted on weathered wood — swung gently in the breeze. It was the same sign her father had carved before his death at sea when Thalia was ten. Some things, at least, remained constant.

The bell above the door jingled as Thalia entered. The familiar scent of dried herbs enveloped her — rosemary, sage, and dozens of local jungle plants. Her mother looked up from behind the counter where she was methodically chopping heart root, its red juice staining her fingers. For a moment, her mother's face lit up with joy, then dimmed just as quickly as reality reasserted itself.

"You found Elio's shop, then?" Celeste asked, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Yes." Thalia placed the wrapped jars on the counter. "He sends his regards."

Celeste nodded, accepting the packages and unwrapping them with care. She inspected each jar before beginning to transfer the chopped heartroot into one of them. Her hands moved with practiced efficiency, but Thalia noticed she avoided direct eye contact.

"These will hold the tinctures nicely," her mother said, her voice deliberately light. "Much better than those chipped ones we've been using."

The unspoken hovered between them: tomorrow, a ship from the North would dock in Verdant Port's harbor. The city guard would hunt down any academy recruit who wasn't present at roll call. Another term at Frostforge would begin, and with it, the knowledge that not all who departed would return.

Celeste sealed the jar with a twist of her wrist, set it aside, and began working on the next. The silence stretched between them, thick with words neither knew how to say.

"Have you..." her mother began, then paused, searching for the right question. "Have you made any friends? At the academy?"

The question caught Thalia off guard. In six weeks home, her mother had avoided mentioning Frostforge directly, as if speaking of it might conjure its cold reality into

their warm shop.

"Yes," Thalia answered honestly, thinking of Kaiden with his quiet determination and Lyn with her fierce loyalty. Friends forged in survival, bound by shared trauma and triumph. "Good ones."

Relief softened her mother's features. "That's...that's good. You'll look after each other."

"We will," Thalia confirmed, hearing the worry beneath her mother's words. "And I'll be back for the next break. I promise."

She didn't add that nearly a third of her starting class hadn't survived the first year. That knowledge wouldn't comfort her mother.

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"I ranked fourth in our class," Thalia said instead. "The instructors say I have a natural gift for metallurgy."

For a brief moment, pride flickered in her mother's eyes before worry clouded them again. Celeste's hands stilled on the jars. "I didn't raise my children for war," she said quietly, barely above a whisper.

Thalia had no answer for that. None that would ease the ache in her mother's heart. Instead, she reached across the counter and covered her mother's herb-stained hand with her own — now callused from sword practice and rope climbing.

"But you raised us to survive," Thalia said gently. "And I will."

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The night wrapped around their small shack like a worn blanket, familiar and threadbare in places. Beyond the single window, Verdant Port's nightlife continued — distant music from the harbor taverns, the occasional shout of a sailor, the rhythmic creak of ships rocking against their moorings. Inside, the space that had once felt crowded to Thalia now seemed impossibly small. A single room behind her mother's herb shop, with three pallets laid out on the wooden floor, a rickety table, and whatever few possessions they'd managed to keep through years of poverty. Shadows danced across the ceiling as the single oil lamp flickered, casting wavering light that turned the familiar strange.

Thalia lay on her back, staring at the patterns of light and darkness above her. The wooden floor beneath her pallet was hard, nothing like the academy's surprisingly

comfortable cots.Frostforge might be brutal in its training, but they ensured their recruits slept well.

Beside her, Mari shifted restlessly.Unlike their mother, who had fallen asleep almost instantly — exhaustion from a day of tending the shop pulling her under — Mari remained awake, her breathing too measured for sleep.Thalia waited, knowing what would come next.It was a pattern as old as their childhood.

Sure enough, Mari's small form shifted closer, curling against Thalia's side the way she had done since she was tiny.Her sister's warmth was familiar — the same bony elbows, the same smell of wild honey in her hair.But Mari had grown too, her body longer, less childlike than Thalia remembered.Another reminder of time's passage.

"You're still awake," Thalia whispered, turning to face her sister.

In the dim light, Mari's eyes gleamed too bright."I don't want to sleep," she confessed, her voice small."If I sleep, tomorrow will come faster."

Thalia felt a pang in her chest.She reached out, brushing a strand of hair from Mari's face.Her sister's skin was soft, unmarked by scars or calluses.They shared the same dark hair and warm-toned skin, but where Thalia's hands now bore the marks of combat training, Mari's remained gentle and unmarred.It was exactly as it should be.

"I don't want you to go back," Mari whispered, the words rushing out like she'd been holding them in all day."What if — what if this is the last time we..."Her voice cracked, unable to finish the thought.

"Hey," Thalia soothed, her voice firmer than she felt."That's not going to happen.I'm coming back."

The promise tasted like steel on her tongue — cold and unyielding.She had no right



to make such guarantees. She'd watched too many of her classmates fall to the academy's brutal trials. Levi had nearly lost an eye during combat training. Lyn had suffered frostbite so severe she lost two fingers. And Joren...well, Joren hadn't made it home.

A tear slid down Mari's cheek, glinting in the lamplight before disappearing into the rough fabric of her pallet. "You don't know that," she whispered. "No one knows that."

Thalia pulled her sister closer, resting her chin atop Mari's head. The familiar gesture felt different now — her arms stronger, her embrace more confident. "I do know," she insisted. "Because I'm not going to let anything stop me from coming home to you and Mother."

Mari's fingers clutched at Thalia's sleep shirt, bunching the fabric. "Promise? Really promise?"

"I promise," Thalia said, the words a vow she would fight to keep. She had survived one year already, against all expectations. She could survive more. She had to.

The weight of her purpose settled over her — the reason she had volunteered for Selection in the first place. Every family was required to send one child to Frostforge when they came of age, unless they could afford the substantial bribe to exempt them. Their mother couldn't possibly pay such a sum. By going in Mari's place, Thalia ensured her sister would never face the academy's trials. It was worth any risk.

Mari was quiet for a long moment, her breathing uneven against Thalia's collarbone. Then, hesitantly, she asked, "Was it scary? The academy?"

Thalia stared at the ceiling, considering her answer. The truth flashed through her mind — the bone-deep cold that never truly left, even indoors. The combat training that left recruits bloody and sometimes broken. The cryomancy exercises that pushed

them until they collapsed from exhaustion. The Frost Walk trial, where they'd been abandoned in the Golem Fields in the midst of a blizzard, forced to navigate back to the academy or die trying.

"No," she lied, smoothing Mari's hair. "It wasn't scary. Different, yes. Challenging. But not scary."

"Really?" Mari's voice held equal parts disbelief and hope.

"Really," Thalia confirmed, her tone gentle but firm. "I'm stronger now than when I left. Faster. I can do things I never imagined." That, at least, was true. She had discovered abilities within herself she'd never known existed — affinity for metallurgy, tactical thinking, endurance beyond what should be possible.

Mari raised her head, studying Thalia's face in the dim light. "Like what things?"

Thalia smiled, choosing the most benign example she could think of. "I can forge weapons. And use cryomancy to make ice."

"That's amazing," Mari breathed, momentarily distracted from her worry.

"It is," Thalia agreed. "And I made friends who watch out for me."

She didn't tell Mari about the Frost Walk. About how it had been so cold that ice crystals had formed on her eyelashes. How she'd stumbled, half-blind, until she was nearly killed by roving ice-metal golems.

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"You should sleep," Thalia said, pulling herself back from the memory. "Tomorrow will come whether we're ready or not."

Mari sighed, nestling closer. "Will you tell me more stories about the academy when you come back next time? The not-scary parts?"

"All the not-scary parts," Thalia promised, knowing she would need to invent many of them. "Now sleep."

She hummed softly, an old lullaby their mother used to sing. Gradually, Mari's breathing deepened and evened out. Her body grew heavier against Thalia's side as sleep finally claimed her.

Thalia continued to stare at the ceiling, wide awake despite the late hour. Tomorrow, the ironclad ship would dock, its massive hull throwing shadows across the harbor. The recruitment officers would check their lists, ensuring every Selected student boarded. Then the journey north would begin — back to the academy nestled high in the Rimspire mountains, where winter never truly released its grip.

She was caught between two worlds now. Home was warm, filled with love and simple comforts. The smell of her mother's cooking, Mari's laughter, the predictable rhythms of the port city. But it felt smaller somehow. Constrained. The concerns that had once consumed her — a leaky roof during rainy season, stretching coins to afford food for the week — seemed distant now. She had faced death and survived.

Part of her feared she would never truly belong here again. The girl who had left Verdant Port was gone, transformed by Frostforge's brutal crucible into someone

harder, sharper. Someone who instinctively calculated escape routes in crowded markets and slept with a knife within reach.

Yet when Mari curled against her, seeking comfort and protection, Thalia knew with absolute certainty that she had made the right choice. She would return to Frostforge tomorrow. Would endure whatever trials awaited her there. Would become whatever the academy demanded of her.

Because every day she survived was another day, Mari wouldn't have to face Selection. Every skill she mastered brought her closer to graduation and the officer's commission that would permanently exempt her family from further obligation to the academy.

Thalia closed her eyes, focusing on her sister's gentle breathing beside her. She had learned to find rest even when true peace eluded her — another skill Frostforge had taught. As sleep finally began to claim her, her last conscious thought was of tomorrow's ship, waiting like a dark promise on the horizon.

## CHAPTER TWO

The salt-laden breeze tugged at Thalia's hair as she stepped onto the familiar weathered planks of Verdant Port's main dock. She adjusted the worn leather strap of her travel bag, the weight of it different now — heavier with items she'd never thought to bring last year, lighter without the fear of the unknown. The calls of sailors and merchants echoed across the harbor, a sound so familiar it almost hurt. One year at Frostforge had changed everything. The dock beneath her feet no longer felt like home, but rather a brief stopping point between two worlds.

Thalia inhaled deeply, tasting brine and smoke on her tongue. Six weeks had passed too quickly. Six weeks of helping her mother in the herb shop, of teaching Mari what she'd learned about the energy currents in plants, of pretending that her nightmares

about Frostforge were nothing to worry about. Six weeks of recovery that now felt like a half-remembered dream as reality loomed before her.

Movement caught her eye — a slight figure leaning against a weathered wooden post, seemingly absorbed in watching a pair of gulls fight over a fish head. Thalia's heart leapt with recognition.

"Luna?" she called out, raising her hand in greeting.

Luna Meadows turned, her short dreadlocks adorned with new silver beads that caught the morning light. Her face, which appeared perpetually distracted to most observers, broke into a genuine smile when she spotted Thalia. She pushed away from the post with fluid grace that belied her petite frame.

"And here I thought you might have decided to become a fishwife instead," Luna said, her large dark eyes sparkling as she approached. She wore simple travel clothes, but Thalia noted the fine quality of the fabric — a reminder of Luna's privileged background despite her father's political exile.

Thalia grinned, letting her bag drop to the dock as they embraced. "A fishwife might have better prospects than a second-year at Frostforge."

Luna pulled back, holding Thalia at arm's length. Her gaze sharpened, those seemingly unfocused eyes suddenly penetrating. "So, did you consider it? Running? This is your last chance, you know. Once we're on that ship..." She tilted her head toward the harbor entrance.

For a moment, Thalia thought she was serious, then caught the subtle quirk of Luna's mouth. "If I planned to flee, I wouldn't have come to the docks," Thalia replied with a chuckle. "Besides, who would keep you out of trouble?"

"Me? Trouble?" Luna's expression of wounded innocence dissolved into laughter. "I'll have you know I maintained a perfect record of appearing completely harmless all break."

"I'm sure you did," Thalia said, picking up her bag again. She studied her friend, noticing the slight shadows under Luna's eyes. "How was your father?"

Luna's smile dimmed slightly. "He's a bit depressed, I'm afraid." She straightened her shoulders, the momentary vulnerability gone. "But he was pleased I survived the first year. Not many from the South manage that, as we well know."

Thalia nodded, a comfortable silence falling between them. They had both beaten the odds — Southern recruits typically had the highest mortality rate at Frostforge. The Northern Reaches claimed the academy was equal opportunity, taking students from all the lands, but the brutal conditions naturally favored those born to ice and snow.

A low, resonant horn cut through the harbor noise, drawing all eyes to the sea. Thalia felt it in her chest before she fully registered the sound — the distinctive call of a Frostforge vessel.

"Right on time," Luna murmured.

The ship appeared around the harbor's protective arm, its prow cutting through the waves with predatory precision. Unlike the merchant vessels that frequented Verdant Port, the Frostforge ship was built for intimidation as much as function. Its hull, reinforced with ice-steel that gleamed like frozen mercury, tapered to a knife-sharp edge at the waterline. The majestic sails, a pale blue-gray that matched the frozen wasteland of its destination, billowed in the wind.

"They've added more ice-steel," Thalia noted, eyeing the reinforced plating along the sides. "I wonder why."

Luna's gaze sharpened again."Interesting observation.More Isle Warden raids in the North, perhaps?"

The ship glided into dock with unnatural grace for a vessel its size.Dock workers scrambled to secure mooring lines, their faces grim.No one enjoyed servicing the Frostforge ships — they carried away the youth of Verdant Port and returned with fewer each year.

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"Shall we?" Luna gestured toward the gangplank that was being lowered. "We should secure a spot on the rail. Unless you want to be stuck below deck for the journey north."

Thalia nodded reluctantly. "You're right."

They boarded among a trickle of returning students, all bearing the subtle marks of Frostforge training — watchful eyes, efficient movements, and an instinctive spacing that would allow for combat if necessary. Thalia recognized faces from different training cohorts, exchanging nods with those she'd trained alongside. No one smiled.

Luna led the way to a prime spot along the starboard rail, where they could observe the dock. The deck smelled of iron, oil, and salt, an oddly comforting combination that triggered memories of last year's journey — the fear of the unknown giving way to the certainty of hardship.

"Look," Luna nudged Thalia, pointing to the far end of the dock.

A procession of young people marched toward the ship, flanked by stern-faced recruiters in Frostforge gray and city guards in Verdant Port green. The new recruits — this year's first-years — moved with varying degrees of confidence. Some walked with shoulders squared, chins high — volunteers seeking glory or escape. Others glanced around frantically, eyes wide with panic; still others walked with their heads down, as if approaching the gallows.

"Gods," Thalia breathed. "Were we that obvious with our fear?"



Luna's mouth curved in a humorless smile. "You weren't. But most of them? Yes."

Thalia remembered her own recruitment day — she had volunteered, hoping to secure her family's future with the stipend families received for sending children to Frostforge. It had been the only path she could see out of poverty for her mother and sister. Now, watching the new recruits, she wondered how many were there by choice and how many by conscription.

A commotion at the dock's edge drew her attention. City guards held back a crowd of family members, straining to catch final glimpses of their children. Some wept openly, others stood stone-faced, and a few shouted encouragement or advice that was swallowed by the general din.

Thalia's heart clenched as she spotted her mother's tall figure and Mari's smaller one at the edge of the crowd. Her mother wore her best dress — faded blue cotton, carefully mended — and had styled her hair in a complex braid reserved for important occasions. Mari, now thirteen, clutched their mother's hand, tears streaming down her face.

"There," Thalia pointed, her voice catching. "My family."

Luna followed her gaze. "Your sister looks more like you than I realized."

"She's growing so fast," Thalia murmured. "Another five years and she'll be of age." The thought sent ice through her veins, even now that the threat of Mari's Selection was gone.

Thalia raised her hand in greeting. Her mother spotted the movement and nudged Mari, who looked up through her tears. Thalia gave them her most confident smile and a firm nod. "I'll come back," she tried to say with her expression. "I promise."

Her mother lifted her chin, returning the nod with quiet dignity that nearly broke Thalia's composure. Unlike many in the crowd, her mother wasn't wailing or collapsing in grief. She stood tall, shoulders back, eyes clear — believing in her daughter's return even as the statistics argued otherwise.

"They have faith in you," Luna observed quietly.

"They have to," Thalia replied. "It's all we have."

Below them, the last of the first-years boarded, some needing to be physically guided up the gangplank by the recruiters. The contrast between their terror and the composed returning students couldn't have been more stark.

Luna turned to Thalia, her expression thoughtful. "Strange to see them, isn't it? We were them once." Her gaze drifted back to the frightened faces of the new recruits. "Feels like another lifetime, doesn't it?"

Thalia nodded slowly. "A lifetime ago."

"If I'm being honest," Luna said, "Verdant Port feels less real now than Frostforge."

Thalia blinked, momentarily taken aback by the candid remark. Then she let out a long breath; she knew exactly what Luna was talking about. "My old neighbors are like strangers now," she admitted. "I've more friends at the academy."

Luna nudged her with one elbow. "That's one upside to going back, isn't it? Seeing our friends."

Despite herself, Thalia smiled. Luna, Ashe, Roran, Kaine. Even in the most dire of circumstances, she'd managed to find allies. People she trusted, with whom she'd forged bonds stronger than ice-steel.

The ship's horn bellowed again, vibrating through the deck beneath their feet. Sailors moved with practiced efficiency, casting off mooring lines and preparing for departure. The sails unfurled fully, catching the wind with a sound like distant thunder.

With surprising gentleness, the massive vessel pulled away from the dock. Thalia kept her eyes on her mother and sister until they became indistinguishable from the rest of the crowd, then remained fixed on Verdant Port as the city began to shrink behind them.

The ship cut through the harbor waters, leaving a trail of white foam in its wake. As they passed the harbor's protective arm, the wind freshened, bringing with it the scent of open sea and the promise of ice to come. The Southern warmth would give way to the brutal cold of the North with each league they traveled.

Luna leaned against the rail beside Thalia, their shoulders almost touching. Neither spoke. There was nothing to say that they didn't already know—the challenges ahead, the odds against them, the determination to survive another year.

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The ship's horn echoed against the fjord walls, the sound reverberating in Thalia's chest. The sailors moved with practiced efficiency, securing lines and preparing for docking. Around her, other second-years gathered their belongings, faces set in masks of determination or resignation.

"I'd forgotten how beautiful it is," Luna murmured, gazing up at the snow-dusted Rimsfire peaks that loomed above the fjord. "In a terrible way."

Thalia followed her gaze. "Beauty that kills."

The ship eased against the stone landing with a gentle bump. Within moments, sailors were securing gangplanks and beginning the process of offloading supplies. Thalia and Luna joined the stream of returning students disembarking onto the cold stone platform.

The air here was different — thinner, sharper, carrying the scent of snow and pine from the forests that clung to the lower slopes. Thalia inhaled deeply, letting the cold fill her lungs. Her body remembered this place even as her mind had tried to forget during the brief respite in the South.

"Look at them," Luna whispered, nodding toward the first-years being herded off the ship.

The new recruits huddled together at one end of the landing, their Southern clothes already inadequate for the Northern climate. Guards and recruiters surrounded them, barking orders that sent them scurrying into rough formation. One boy, no older than Thalia, stumbled on the gangplank and nearly fell into the dark water before a

recruiter grabbed his collar, hauling him roughly onto the stone.

Thalia's comment died in her throat as she spotted a familiar figure standing near the supply sleds. Her stomach clenched involuntarily.

Instructor Maven cut an imposing figure against the gray stone and mist. Taller than most men, with broad shoulders and a frame hardened by decades of combat, she stood perfectly still, surveying the arriving students with her single amber eye. The other socket remained covered by the polished piece of blackened metal she'd forged herself after losing the eye to a glacier bear — a badge of honor she wore with fierce pride. Her steel-gray hair was cropped close to her scalp, and the ever-present claw of the bear that had taken her eye hung on a chain around her neck.

"Frost take me," Thalia muttered, quickly averting her gaze to avoid drawing Maven's attention.

Luna tracked Thalia's line of sight and grimaced. "I'd hoped she might have fallen down a crevasse over the break."

"No such luck," Thalia replied, turning her back to Maven and pretending to adjust the straps on her pack.

Last year, Maven had singled Thalia out for particularly brutal treatment, assigning her impossible tasks and dangerous challenges. Thalia never understood why she'd earned the instructor's enmity, only that it had nearly killed her on multiple occasions. She had hoped — foolishly, perhaps — that Maven might not be assigned to greet the ships this year.

"Don't let her see you flinch," Luna advised quietly.

"I'm not flinching," Thalia replied, straightening her shoulders. "I'm strategically

avoiding."

Luna's lips quirked."A sound tactic.For now."

Thalia moved away from the main group, drifting toward the shaggy ponies that stood patiently waiting to pull the supply sleds.The small, sturdy beasts were native to the Northern mountains, their thick coats perfect insulation against the brutal cold.Their breath steamed in the chill air, creating momentary clouds that dissipated into the mist.

One pony, a dun-colored beast with intelligent eyes, nickered softly as Thalia approached.She reached out, letting her fingers sink into its thick mane.

"Hello there," she murmured."Ready for another trek?"

The pony bumped its head against her chest, a gentle gesture.The ponies and larger draft horses in Frostforge's stables seemed indifferent to the hierarchies and cruelties of human interactions.

"Step away from the animals, recruit."Maven's voice cut through the misty air like a blade.

Thalia stiffened but obeyed immediately, taking three precise steps back from the pony.She turned to face Maven, keeping her expression carefully neutral.

"Second-year now, Instructor," she corrected before she could stop herself.She immediately regretted the words.

Maven's single eye narrowed, the amber iris seeming to glow with internal light."Is that so, Greenspire?"The instructor circled Thalia slowly, like a predator assessing prey."Strange.You still look like a child to my eye."

Thalia said nothing, keeping her gaze fixed on a point just past Maven's shoulder. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she refused to show fear. That was the first lesson of Frostforge — fear shown was weakness exploited.

Maven stopped directly in front of Thalia, close enough that Thalia could smell the metallic scent that always lingered around the instructor — iron and oil and something else, something unique to the North.

"The fact that you survived first year doesn't make you special," Maven said, her voice pitched low enough that only Thalia could hear. "It makes you lucky." She stepped back, raising her voice to address all the students gathered on the landing. "Form up! First-years in front, older students behind. The trek begins in five minutes. Anyone not in formation will be left for the Rimwolves."

The first-years scrambled to obey, their fear palpable. The returning students moved with more deliberate caution, taking positions and checking their gear.

Luna appeared at Thalia's side, her expression concerned. "What did she say to you?"

"Nothing important," Thalia replied, adjusting her pack. "Just Maven being Maven."

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Luna studied her face for a moment, then nodded, clearly unconvinced but willing to let it go for now.

They fell into formation as instructed. Around them, workers loaded the sleds with supplies — food stores, equipment, and empty stretchers for those who wouldn't make it to Frostforge on their own feet. The ponies stamped and snorted, eager to be moving rather than standing in the cold.

Maven strode to the front of the assembled group, her powerful frame silhouetted against the path that wound up from the landing.

"Listen carefully," she called out, her voice carrying easily despite not being raised. "The path to Frostforge is three leagues of Northern terrain. Those of you returning know what that means. Those of you who don't —" her gaze swept over the first-years — "will learn quickly or die slowly. Stay on the path. Keep up. Fall behind, and you will not be waited for."

A visible shudder ran through the ranks of first-years. One girl near the front, barely older than Mari, looked on the verge of tears.

"We move now," Maven announced, turning abruptly and starting up the path without looking back to see if anyone followed.

The column began to move, students falling into step with varying degrees of confidence. Thalia and Luna positioned themselves near the back of the second-year group, keeping a watchful eye on the first-years ahead of them.



"Five silver pieces says at least two of them collapse before we reach the ridge," Luna murmured.

"I'm not taking that bet," Thalia replied. "It'll be more than two."

The path steepened almost immediately, winding upward through bare rock and patches of stubborn snow. Cold wind cut through Thalia's layers, finding every gap in her clothing despite her careful preparation. Around her, first-years gasped and coughed as they struggled to adjust to the thin mountain air.

Luna moved with surprising grace despite her small stature, picking her way over the uneven ground with nimble steps. "You'd think they would have prepared them better," she commented, nodding toward a first-year boy who had already begun to wheeze.

"How could they?" Thalia replied. "There's no place to prepare for this in the Southern Kingdoms."

An hour into the climb, the first-years were faltering visibly. Their Southern bodies, accustomed to warmer climates and lower altitudes, rebelled against the harsh conditions. Several stumbled repeatedly, helped along by fellow recruits rather than by the instructors who watched impassively. As Luna had predicted, two had already dropped to their knees, unable to continue, and been loaded onto the supply sleds — their first mark of failure at Frostforge.

Thalia kept her pace steady, conserving energy while staying alert. Her muscles remembered this path, the specific angle of each turn, the places where loose stone might give way beneath an unwary foot. Last year, she had been in the middle of the pack, determined not to fall behind. This year, she could have easily pushed to the front but chose to remain watchful instead.

"Ridge ahead," Luna noted, pointing to where the path curved sharply upward.

Thalia nodded. The ridge marked the halfway point of their journey — and the first place from which Frostforge could be seen. Her pace quickened unconsciously, a part of her anxious to see the academy again, to confirm that it wasn't just a collection of nightmares she'd constructed during the break.

They crested the ridge with the main group, pausing as Maven called a brief halt to allow stragglers to catch up. Thalia turned, looking north toward the cliff face that housed Frostforge Academy.

Her breath caught in her throat.

The academy bulged from the side of the cliff like a growth of iron and stone, its dark edifice built into the rock. Thalia remembered her first glimpse of it last year — the dread and awe that had filled her at the sight of the infamous Northern school.

But something was different.

"Luna," she whispered, pointing. "Look."

Luna followed her gesture, her large eyes narrowing as she focused on the changes. "Interesting."

The outer walls of Frostforge, already formidable last term, had been reinforced with additional layers of ice-steel that gleamed dully in the weak Northern sunlight. New watchtowers rose at each corner, their windows narrow slits designed for archers. Around the perimeter, a series of barriers had been erected — angled plates of ice-steel embedded in the frozen ground like massive blades.

"Those weren't there before," Thalia said, a chill that had nothing to do with the

temperature running down her spine.

"No," Luna agreed, her voice thoughtful. "They weren't."

Around them, other second-years had noticed the changes as well, murmuring among themselves with varying degrees of concern. The first-years, still struggling with the basic challenge of breathing, remained oblivious to the significance.

"Defensive fortifications," Luna noted, her eyes scanning the valley methodically. "Do you think there was an attack in the off-season?"

"It's possible." Thalia studied the academy again, taking in details that had escaped her initial observation.

There was movement along the walls — more golem sentinels than she remembered from last year. A new gatehouse, massive and forbidding. Supply caches positioned strategically around the academy perimeter.

"They're preparing for something," she said quietly.

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Luna's expression was calculating, all pretense of distraction gone. "The ship was reinforced, as well. If I had to guess, I'd say the Isle Wardens have been more active lately."

As they descended into the valley, Thalia kept her eyes fixed on Frostforge's altered silhouette. The academy had always been dangerous — that was its purpose, after all. But these changes suggested a different kind of danger, something beyond the usual brutal training and high mortality rate.

The previous year, the threat of the Isle Wardens had felt distant, confined to the distant, storm-wreathed archipelago beyond the continent's shores. But now, faced with the evidence of the academy's modifications, Thalia felt the unease settle deeper in her chest.

Frostforge wasn't just training its students for war. It was bracing itself, preparing for the waves of battle to break against its walls.

### CHAPTER THREE

Thalia's legs ached as she crossed the threshold into Frostforge's main hall, the weight of her journey settling into her bones like frost. The familiar chill of the academy's stone walls seeped through her travel-worn cloak, a harsh reminder that comfort was a luxury not afforded to students here. Around her, the returning second, third and fourth-years moved with practiced ease, their chatter bouncing off the high cavern ceiling where stalactites hung like suspended daggers.

She fought the urge to lean against one of the massive stone pillars that lined the

hall. Six weeks of reprieve in the South had softened her, and now her body protested the trek through mountain passes to reach Frostforge once again. All she wanted was to collapse onto her pelt-lined bunk and sleep for a day — assuming her previous dormitory was still hers. Nothing at Frostforge remained constant except the cold and the competition, but Thalia hoped the students wouldn't have their rooms changed. Ashe and Luna had been her roommates last year, and they were two of the only people she trusted at the academy.

The main hall stretched before her, vast and imposing. Torches lined the walls, their flames casting long shadows that danced across the uneven floor. The academy's founders had chosen to build within this natural cavern, reinforcing it with stone pillars and iron supports but leaving the ceiling in its wild state. Hundreds of stalactites clung to the darkness above, some as thin as needles, others thick as tree trunks. When Thalia had first arrived last year, she'd spent weeks fearing that one would break free during an assembly and impale her. It hadn't happened — but she still couldn't rule out the possibility.

"—three outposts lost in the past month alone." The hushed voice came from two students to her right, both of whom she recognized as third-years.

Thalia slowed her pace, keeping her face neutral as she listened.

"Bitterroot Pass was the worst," the taller one continued, a muscular woman with intricate braids woven with small metal beads. "My cousin was stationed there. Said they barely had time to sound the alarm before the Wardens were on them."

Her companion, a lean man with a scar bisecting his left eyebrow, nodded grimly. "The coastal villages are evacuating inland. They're saying Frostforge might be called to send reinforcements."

"Students?" The woman's voice dropped even lower.

"Fourth-years, at least.Maybe some exceptional third-years."

Thalia's stomach tightened.Isle Wardens.The raiders from the archipelago surrounding the continent had been a threat to Northern and Southern coasts for generations, but their attacks had always been sporadic, opportunistic.If they were mounting a coordinated assault on Northern strongholds, it could signal an escalation in the war.

"Thalia Greenspire."The voice cut through her thoughts like a blade through ice."Still eavesdropping on your betters, I see."

She turned to find Ashe Redwood watching her with that familiar, barely-there smirk.The Northern warrior stood with perfect posture, her black hair still streaked with the distinctive red dye of her clan, though the braids at her temples were more intricate than Thalia remembered.

"Ashe."Thalia's lips curved into a genuine smile.Despite their rocky beginning, Ashe had become one of her few allies at Frostforge."I thought I might have to hunt you down."

"As if I'd miss the chance to see what the break did to everyone."Ashe's sharp green eyes assessed Thalia from head to toe."You look softer.The warmth made you complacent."

"It's been two days since I've slept on anything but rock or a ship's deck," Thalia countered, rolling one shoulder to ease the stiffness."Give me a week of training, and I'll be back to form."

Ashe raised an eyebrow."A week?I'd say three, at least."

This was Ashe's version of friendly banter — challenging, but without the venom that

characterized so many interactions at Frostforge. Thalia had learned to appreciate it, especially when compared to the outright hostility many Northern students showed Southerners.

"How was your clan gathering?" Thalia asked, falling into step beside Ashe as they moved deeper into the hall.

Ashe's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. "Predictable. Three marriage proposals. Two challenges to combat. My father's continued disappointment that I chose Frostforge over a 'respectable' alliance."

"You won the combat challenges, I assume?"

A flash of teeth. "Naturally. The second challenger still can't use his left arm properly."

Thalia was formulating a response when her attention snagged on a familiar broad-shouldered silhouette across the hall. Kaine Ember stood among a group of third-years, his posture rigid and controlled. Even from this distance, Thalia could see the new burn scars on his forearms — evidence of a summer spent at the forge. Her heart performed an unwelcome stutter.

And then she saw who stood beside him: Senna Drake. The third-year stood close enough to Kaine that their shoulders nearly touched, her silver-gray eyes scanning the crowd with predatory focus. As if sensing Thalia's gaze, Senna turned, her lips curving into something too sharp to be called a smile.

Thalia looked away first, her throat tight with an emotion she refused to name. Last year, during the Frost Walk trial, Senna had deliberately sabotaged her, cutting her pack and weakening her ice-metal blade. Only luck — and Brynn Firstborn — had saved her from hypothermia or worse. And Senna's obsession with Kaine was no secret — she'd made it clear she considered any connection between Thalia and

Kaine to be an offense worthy of elimination.

"Interesting," Ashe murmured, following Thalia's line of sight. "I'd heard that the Drake girl attached herself to Kaine's cohort for the advanced metallurgy project over the break. Apparently, she suddenly developed an interest in forge work." Her tone made it clear what she thought of Senna's motivations.



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Thalia forced her attention elsewhere, scanning the growing crowd for another familiar face. "Have you seen Roran?"

"Bright? Not yet." Ashe's brow furrowed slightly. "Though I heard rumors that he was held up at a soldiers' checkpoint."

Before Thalia could process this concerning information, a sharp, metallic clang reverberated through the hall, silencing all conversation. Students froze in place, all eyes drawn to the central platform where Instructor Maven stood, her ice-forged blade raised after striking a stone pillar. The light from the surrounding torches gleamed off the metal plate covering her missing eye, the amber of her remaining one burning with fierce intensity as she surveyed the assembled students.

Thalia felt Maven's gaze pass over her, lingering just long enough to send a chill down her spine before moving on.

"The weak were culled last year," Maven announced, her voice carrying effortlessly through the cavernous space. "The rest of you worthless louts survived — somehow. But survival isn't enough. This year, you prove your worth."

A nervous murmur rippled through the crowd, particularly among the first-years.

Maven's blade flashed as she pointed it toward the entrance. "Class assignments and schedules are posted at the hall's entrance. If you don't like where you've been placed — too bad. Adapt, or be left behind." She lowered her blade, steel scraping against the stone floor. "The North faces threats on multiple fronts. Those who cannot contribute will find themselves without a bed."

With that, she stepped from the platform, moving through the crowd which parted before her like water around a blade. No formal dismissal — Maven never saw the need for such niceties.

The crowd surged toward the entrance, students jostling for position to view the postings. Thalia hesitated, her mind still lingering on Kaine's proximity to Senna, and the news about Roran being held up at a checkpoint.

"Standing here won't change what's written on those lists," Ashe said, nudging Thalia forward with surprising gentleness. "I want to see what combat cohort they've placed me in."

Thalia allowed herself to be guided toward the entrance, where the crush of bodies made progress slow. The heat of so many bodies pressed together was almost welcome after the perpetual chill of the hall. Almost.

When they finally reached the front, Ashe found her name quickly among the combat rosters, nodding with satisfaction at her placement. Thalia scanned the metallurgy lists, starting with the standard second-year cohorts where she expected to find herself.

Her name wasn't there.

Frowning, she checked the beginner lists, wondering if her summer away had somehow erased her previous progress in the instructors' eyes. Nothing.

"Try the advanced section," Ashe suggested, pointing to a much shorter list posted separately.

Thalia's eyes widened as she found her name among only seven others — all Northern students, aside from her.

"That's..."Thalia didn't know how to finish the sentence.

"Impressive," Ashe supplied, grinning."You're the only Southerner in the advanced course."

For a brief moment, pride flickered in Thalia's chest.Her affinity for sensing the currents in metal, for understanding how elements could be coaxed and combined to create something stronger than their individual parts — it hadn't gone unnoticed.Even Maven's apparent dislike couldn't override the evidence of Thalia's talent.

Then reality set in.She would be the only Southerner in a cohort of Northerners who had grown up around forges and metalcraft.At Frostforge, the Northern students were a tight-knit bunch, often hostile toward their Southern Kingdom counterparts, particularly those of low status like Thalia.In her first term, she had faced plenty of threats from the Northern Reaches' recruits, and some of those threats had proven to have teeth.Within the academy's grounds, sabotage and regional divisions were more dangerous than the unforgiving cold.

"Congratulations," Ashe said quietly, seeming to understand the conflicting emotions flashing across Thalia's face."Or perhaps condolences are more appropriate."

Thalia took a deep breath, feeling the frigid air of the North fill her lungs."Both," she decided."Definitely both."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Thalia sank onto the bench in the lecture hall.The warmth of the hearty stew served at dinner still radiated through her body, dulling the constant chill of Frostforge just enough to let her mind clear.Around her, fellow second-years filled the tiered rows of seats, their voices creating a low hum of anticipation that bounced off the ice-veined stone walls.This assembly felt different from last year — her class were no longer

wide-eyed recruits, but survivors of the Trials of Ice. The empty seats scattered throughout the hall, which had once been at capacity during their year's orientation, served as silent reminders of those who hadn't made it.

Luna slid onto the bench beside her, close enough that their shoulders touched. "Thirty percent," she whispered, eyes darting around the room. "That's how many didn't return from last year's trials."

"You counted?" Thalia asked, though she wasn't surprised. Luna noticed everything, despite her carefully cultivated appearance of distraction.

"I always count," Luna replied, fidgeting with one of the metal beads in her dreadlocks. "Helps me calculate the odds."

Before Thalia could respond, the heavy doors at the front of the hall swung open. Instructor Wolfe strode in, her steps measured and purposeful. Unlike Maven's thunderous presence, Wolfe moved with the quiet precision of a well-honed blade. Her silver-streaked hair was pulled back in a severe knot at the nape of her neck, and her pale blue eyes surveyed the room with clinical detachment. Where Maven wore her glacier bear claw like a trophy, Wolfe's only adornment was a thin band of ice-silver around her wrist — a symbol of mastery few instructors earned.

The room fell silent without Wolfe having to utter a word. Power radiated from her in controlled waves, unlike Maven's barely contained fury. Different flavors of intimidation, Thalia thought, but intimidation nonetheless.

"Second-years," Wolfe began, her voice carrying to every corner of the hall without seeming to rise. "You have survived your first year at Frostforge. Some of you even managed to do so with a modicum of skill." Her gaze swept across the room, neither approving nor condemning. "Last year, you faced the Trials of Ice — a test of your ability to survive in the harshest conditions the North has to offer."

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She paused, and Thalia felt a collective shudder pass through the room as students remembered the brutal Frost Walk that had claimed so many lives. Thalia's own memories flashed vividly — her sabotaged equipment, the blinding white storm, the desperate struggle to keep moving when every instinct screamed to stop and rest.

"This year," Wolfe continued, "you will face the Trials of Steel."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the hall. Thalia glanced at Luna, whose expression had shifted from calculated disinterest to genuine attention.

"Last year tested your skill at survival. This year tests your aptitude for creation. You will build upon your basic metallurgy skills to forge your own ice-metal golems."

Thalia's breath caught. Ice-metal — the strange, gleaming alloys that only formed when metal was carefully fused with ice magic — was notoriously difficult to forge. Even experienced smiths spent years fully mastering its properties. Thalia had been introduced to ice-metal the previous year, and had forged a near-perfect blade.

"Your golems will be an extension of yourselves," Wolfe explained, her hands moving in precise, controlled gestures that made the ice-projection shift and change. "You will infuse them with your essence, create a bond that allows you to command them in combat. And at the end of the year, you will enter the Forge Gauntlet."

The projection expanded to show an arena where metal constructs clashed while human figures directed them from a distance.

"The Forge Gauntlet is a trial by combat — you and your golem against your fellow students and their creations. Your performance will determine your class rank going into your third year, which in turn will influence your eventual placement in the army." Wolfe's thin lips curved into what might have been a smile on anyone else.

A cautious sense of relief spread through the room. A tournament seemed almost merciful compared to the Frost Walk. No venturing into deadly storms or navigating treacherous ice fields — just a structured combat event within the safety of Frostforge.

Then Thalia remembered the failed constructs they'd encountered in the Golem Fields — mindless, aggressive, and nearly impossible to stop. Her throat tightened. A poorly constructed golem or a flawed bond wouldn't just mean a lower rank; it could mean death, perhaps for multiple students.

As if reading her thoughts, Wolfe's expression hardened. "Make no mistake. The Forge Gauntlet will test your limits in ways the Frost Walk never could. A failed bond with your golem can lead to catastrophic results. Those who cannot command their creation risk injury — or worse."

The momentary relief in the room gave way to a tense silence. Thalia caught several students exchanging nervous glances.

"Advanced students will begin construction of their golems immediately; regular students will spend time improving their skills at ice-metal forging before moving on to their constructs. This will give advanced students an advantage in the tournament, but students in the regular cohorts are encouraged to spend their free time in the forge, if they're looking to even the playing field."

Thalia felt a prickle at the back of her neck — the familiar sensation of being watched. She casually scanned the room, expecting to find Maven's single amber eye

boring into her. Instead, her gaze caught on a figure standing near the entrance to the lecture hall.

Senna Drake.

The third-year student leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over her chest, her silver-gray eyes surveying the assembly with predatory focus. Unlike their previous encounters, Senna wasn't staring directly at Thalia. Instead, her gaze moved methodically from student to student, as if taking inventory.

Thalia nudged Luna and nodded subtly toward the door. Luna's eyes narrowed when she spotted Senna.

"What's she doing here?" Luna muttered, all pretense of distraction gone from her voice.

Senna had no reason to be at a second-year assembly unless she was planning something. The previous year, climbing spikes had mysteriously dulled overnight, frost gloves had torn, and forged weapons had been compromised — all belonging to Southern students. The sabotage had been subtle enough to avoid detection by the instructors but severe enough to prove deadly in the harsh conditions of the Frost Walk.

Thalia had pieced together the pattern and traced it back to Senna. The North-born student harbored a particular hatred for Southerners, especially those who showed promise. But proving Senna's involvement had been impossible — she was too clever, too connected, and too quick to create alibis.

And now here she was, watching the second-years with calculated interest.

"She's up to something," Luna whispered. "People like her don't just stop playing the

game — they change the rules."

Thalia nodded, keeping her expression neutral despite the cold anger coiling in her chest. Whatever game Senna was playing now, it wouldn't end well for those caught in it. Last year, Thalia had been too new, too naive to see the danger until it nearly killed her. This year would be different.

At the front of the hall, Wolfe was concluding her address. "The next few months will determine much about your future at Frostforge — and beyond. The skills you develop now will serve you for the rest of your lives, assuming you have the talent and discipline to master them." Her pale eyes swept across the room one last time. "If last year was about proving you could survive, this year is about proving you belong."

With that, she turned and left the hall, her departure as efficient and purposeful as her entrance had been. The moment the doors closed behind her, the room erupted into a buzz of nervous conversation.

Thalia remained seated, watching as Senna pushed away from the doorframe and disappeared into the corridor. The other second-years gathered in anxious clusters, already speculating about the trials ahead. Some looked excited by the prospect of creating their own golem; others looked terrified. Most appeared to be both.

"We should go," Luna said, rising to her feet. "I need to check something in the archives before we turn in."

Thalia nodded and followed her friend out of the hall. The corridors of Frostforge were beginning to fill as students made their way to the dormitories. As they reached the junction where their paths would diverge — Luna to the archives, Thalia to their shared room — Luna pulled her into a shallow alcove carved into the ice-stone wall.



"I'll find out what she's up to," Luna promised, all traces of her usual scattered demeanor gone. Her dark eyes were focused and intent. "No one slithers around this academy without me noticing."

Thalia squeezed her friend's arm in silent gratitude. She'd learned last year that Luna's network of informants and her talent for collecting secrets made her one of the most valuable allies in Frostforge.

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"Be careful," Thalia warned. "Senna's dangerous. She's proven that she's willing to kill. If she knows you're watching her —"

Luna's lips curved into a knowing smile. "She won't." She adjusted one of the metal beads in her hair — a nervous tic that Thalia now recognized as part of her deliberate facade.

Before Thalia could say anything else, Luna slipped away, quickly adopting her usual appearance of mild confusion as she merged with the flow of students in the corridor. Within seconds, she'd vanished from sight, just another unremarkable figure in the press of bodies.

Thalia exhaled slowly, steeling herself for what lay ahead. The Trials of Steel. Ice-metal golems. The Forge Gauntlet. And somewhere in the midst of it all, Senna Drake weaving her plots like a spider crafting a web of frost.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The heat of the Howling Forge embraced Thalia like an old friend, wrapping around her in welcome contrast to Frostforge's perpetual chill. She paused at the threshold, letting the familiar symphony wash over her — the rhythmic clang of hammers striking metal, the hiss of hot steel meeting cold water, the low rumble of the great bellows feeding oxygen to hungry flames. The assembly's tension melted from her shoulders. This place, with its dancing shadows and glowing embers, had become more of a home to her than any dormitory ever could.

Thalia moved deeper into the forge, her body remembering the precise way to

navigate between work stations without disturbing the students bent over their anvils. The smell of molten metal mingled with coal smoke and sweat, forming an aroma that most found overwhelming but that Thalia had grown to associate with her greatest triumphs. Here, last year, she had first discovered her unusual connection to metal — the way she could sense its composition, its weaknesses, its potential. Here, she had forged her first successful blade while her Northern classmates watched in disbelief.

The thought brought a smile to her lips. Advanced metallurgy section or not, Thalia knew she belonged here.

She scanned the vast chamber, spotting familiar faces and new ones alike, all focused on their work with varying degrees of intensity. Some students were struggling with basic tasks — heating metal to the proper temperature, striking with consistent force — while others moved with the practiced grace of those born to the craft. And then there was Kaine.

He stood at his usual station in the far corner, a place he had claimed for himself last year and that no one had dared to encroach upon since. His broad shoulders moved in a steady rhythm as he hammered a glowing piece of metal, each strike deliberate and precise. Thalia felt a flutter in her chest at the sight of him, a reaction she had grown accustomed to but never quite mastered. In the previous term, Kaine had gone out of his way to help her develop her burgeoning talent for metallurgy, which had entailed plenty of long, late-night work sessions in the forge, just the two of them. Thalia wasn't sure if her feelings for him — warm, complicated, confusing — were entirely hers, or shaped by the intensity of this place. But seeing him now, with sparks flying around him like fireflies and that familiar furrow between his brows, she couldn't deny the pull.

A dangerous pull. Senna Drake had made that abundantly clear last year, when she'd pulled Thalia aside to stake her claim over Kaine, hissing threats that had proven far

from empty.

Thalia approached, noting how the muscles in his forearms tensed and released with each movement. His focus was absolute — he hadn't noticed her yet. This was typical Kaine, lost in his work, skipping other classes just to spend more time with hammer and flame. It was one of the things they had in common, this devotion to craft, though his bordered on obsession.

"Still hitting things to solve your problems?" she called over the din, falling back on teasing to mask the unexpected nervousness she felt.

Kaine's head snapped up, hammer pausing mid-stroke. For a moment, his ice-blue eyes looked almost startled — an expression so rare on his stoic face that Thalia instantly catalogued it in her memory. Then his features softened, just barely, into what passed for Kaine Ember's version of a welcome.

"Thalia." He nodded, setting down his hammer with deliberate care. "You're back."

"Observant as ever," she replied, moving closer to his workbench. The heat was more intense here; Kaine always kept his forge hotter than the others. "How was your break?"

The words slipped out automatically — the same question she had asked Luna, asked all her returning classmates — before she realized her mistake. Kaine had nowhere to go during breaks. The Ember clan, already in disgrace for generations, had completely abandoned him after he'd been imprisoned, accused of patricide. Frostforge was his only home now.

Thalia winced, mentally berating herself. "I'm sorry, I didn't think —"

"It's fine," Kaine cut her off, but his shoulders had stiffened. He reached for a rag to

wipe his hands, the movement precise and controlled, like everything he did. "Nothing much changed. Same forge, same work."

There was something in his voice that caught her attention — a flatness that seemed forced. Kaine had never been particularly expressive, but there was a difference between his usual economy of emotion and this deliberate suppression. He was ashamed, she realized, of having nothing to share while others returned with stories of home and family.

Thalia searched for something to say that wouldn't make it worse. Her gaze landed on his workbench, where an unusual object lay partially covered by a cloth. Without thinking, she reached for it.

"What's this?"

Kaine moved as if to stop her, then seemed to reconsider. "Careful. It's not finished."

Thalia lifted the cloth to reveal a shield unlike any she had seen before. It was smaller than standard, almost circular, but with elegant points extending from four sides. The surface gleamed with a blue-silver sheen that spoke of high-quality ice-steel, but it was the intricate runes etched along its edges that truly caught her attention. She picked it up, surprised by its lightness.

"It feels like it's singing," she murmured, running her fingers along the engravings. "These runes — they're not just decorative, are they? Those are cryomancy runes."

Kaine watched her reaction carefully, his earlier discomfort seemingly forgotten. "It's a prototype. A shield that doesn't need to be held." He gestured to the runes she was tracing. "When it's finished, a fighter will be able to use cryomancy to control it, make it hover and deflect attacks while keeping both hands free for weapons."

His voice had changed, taking on a rare note of animation. This project clearly meant something to him beyond a simple exercise.

"Has anyone done this before?" Thalia asked, still feeling the pulse of magic beneath her fingertips. The shield seemed almost alive, as though waiting for the right command to spring into action. The magic of metal felt like currents in a river, but this shield was more animated than other metals, even other ice-metals.

Kaine shook his head. "The theory is solid, but making it work?" He frowned slightly. "That's the hard part. The balance between the weight of the metal and the lift of the magic has to be perfect. Too heavy, and even a master cryomancer couldn't keep it airborne for long. Too light, and it won't provide enough protection to be worth the effort."

"What make you choose this alloy?" Thalia pointed to a small ring, a strip of a different metal within the steel body of the shield. "There's more nickel here."

"You can feel that?"

Thalia hesitated. Her ability to sense the properties of metal and the magic embedded in it wasn't something she advertised, especially after learning how unusual it was. But this was Kaine, who had his own secrets, who had never once treated her Southern origins as a mark against her. He was also familiar with the technique; last year, he'd all but admitted that he shared the ability.

"I can feel patterns in metal," she admitted. "Not just see them — feel them. Like currents or...or heartbeats."

Kaine studied her for a long moment, his expression unreadable. Then he nodded toward the smaller runes. "It's meant to channel the cryomancy, make sure that the runes are never overloaded."

"Brilliant," Thalia breathed, genuinely impressed. The complexity of the design spoke to hours — no, weeks — of careful planning and execution. "When it's finished, this could change battlefield tactics completely."

"If it's finished," Kaine corrected. "The magic keeps destabilizing at the connection points. I've reforged those sections three times now."

Thalia grinned, setting the shield back on his workbench. "You'll crack it on the fourth try, then. I know it."

Her confidence seemed to catch him off guard. For a moment, the tension in his shoulders eased, and something almost like a smile touched the corners of his mouth

before disappearing.

"They've put you in advanced metallurgy this year," he said, changing the subject. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, apparently my 'unconventional approach' to metalcraft earned me a spot." She didn't mention the sideways glances she'd received from her Northern classmates when the assignments were posted, or the whispers that followed her in the halls.

"Good." Kaine had already turned back to his forge, checking the temperature of the coals. "The others would only hold you back."

Coming from anyone else, it might have sounded like flattery. From Kaine, it was simply an assessment of fact. Thalia felt a rush of warmth that had nothing to do with the forge's heat.

She watched him work for a moment, noting how many projects littered his station — far more than required for any class. An elegant rapier with a frost-blue blade. A breastplate with reinforced joints. Half a dozen daggers in various stages of completion.

"What happens to all of it?" she asked suddenly. "All the weapons and armor we forge — yours especially. You're always working, far more than needed for classes. Where does it all go?"

Kaine's hands stilled. He straightened slowly, turning to face her with an expression more serious than usual.

"Most of what we make here doesn't stay at Frostforge." He met her gaze directly. "It goes to the war effort."



Thalia blinked, processing his words. "The war effort? You mean against the Isle Wardens?"

"What other war is there?" He gestured around the forge, where dozens of students hammered and shaped metal into instruments of combat. "Frostforge isn't just training warriors. It's outfitting them."

The implication settled over Thalia like a weight. The weapons they created weren't just for training or display. They were being wielded in real battles, by real soldiers, against real enemies.

"I thought..." She paused, trying to articulate the vague assumptions she'd been carrying. "I thought most of what we made was practice. Exercises."

"It is." Kaine turned back to his forge, using iron tongs to shift the coals. "The flawed pieces, the failures — those stay here for training. But anything of quality?" He shrugged. "The armies need weapons."

Thalia glanced around at the forge, seeing it differently now. Every blade she would forge, every piece of armor she would craft — all of it potentially destined for the front lines of battle, just like she was.

## CHAPTER SIX

The Howling Forge lived up to its name. The wind whistled through unseen vents in the vaulted ceiling, creating an eerie, constant moan that mingled with the hiss of cooling metal and the rhythmic clanging of hammers. Thalia's skin prickled with goosebumps that had nothing to do with the perpetual chill of Frostforge. Advanced metallurgy. She shouldn't be here — not according to the whispers of the Northern students who flanked her on either side, their glances sliding over her like she was an imperfection in otherwise flawless steel.

Thalia kept her eyes forward, focusing on the massive hearth at the center of the circular chamber. Flames leaped and danced, casting long shadows across the stone floor. The walls around them were lined with hulking figures: incomplete ice-steel constructs, their metal frames gleaming dully in the forge light, hollow eye sockets dark and waiting.

Golems. Dozens of them. Each one was easily twice the height of a man, with broad shoulders and limbs thick as tree trunks.

"Second-years," a sharp voice cut through the forge's ambient noise. "Gather."

Instructor Wolfe stood beside the central hearth, her tall figure silhouetted against the flames. Unlike Maven's weathered appearance, Wolfe was all angles and edges — high cheekbones, a sharp jawline, and eyes pale as winter ice.

Thalia moved with the group, careful to maintain the precise distance that would keep her from being singled out. Not too eager at the front, not suspiciously hesitant at the back. The sweet spot of invisibility she'd cultivated over her first year.

"You've been placed in advanced metallurgy because you've shown aptitude," Wolfe said, her gaze sweeping over them before settling, briefly, on Thalia. "Or because someone believes you have potential you've yet to demonstrate."

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A ripple of chuckles passed through the Northern students. Thalia kept her expression neutral, though her cheeks burned.

"Since you're on an accelerated curriculum, I will introduce you today to the cornerstone of golem creation." Wolfe turned and approached one of the incomplete constructs. She laid a hand on its chest plate, where a circular depression marked the absence of something vital. "Activating the heart."

The instructor's voice softened with something like reverence. "The core that determines strength, obedience, and power. A golem is only as strong as its heart. If you fail this step, you create a mindless beast — or worse, a traitorous one."

Thalia thought of the golems she'd seen patrolling Frostforge's perimeter — silent, obedient guardians with glowing blue eyes. She'd never considered what made them function, what gave them their eerie semblance of life.

Wolfe reached into a small leather pouch at her belt and withdrew an object that fits perfectly in her palm: a spherical device about the size of a fist crafted from a strange, smoky metal that seemed to absorb rather than reflect the forge's light. There were intricate patterns carved across its surface.

Thalia leaned forward, studying the device with fascination. It appeared deceptively simple, but her senses detected complex magical layers woven into its construction.

"This," Wolfe said, holding it up, "is a recently forged, inert golem heart. The process of creating the physical core itself is complex, requiring precise metallurgical techniques that you'll learn over the coming months. But forming the metal is only the

beginning."She cradled the core in both hands."The true challenge lies in awakening it.And contrary to what many believe, it's metallurgy, not cryomancy, that will bring it to life."

Wolfe closed her eyes.Her expression remained unchanged, revealing nothing of what she was doing.No incantations, no visible magic, no obvious technique — yet suddenly, unmistakably, the core transformed.A cold blue light kindled in its center, pulsing like a heartbeat, throwing the patterns on its surface into sharp relief.

A collective intake of breath swept through the students.Thalia leaned forward despite herself, entranced by the rhythmic glow.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"Wolfe said, a rare smile touching her lips as she gazed at the awakened core."And deadly, if done wrong."The smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Wolfe moved to a table at the side of the forge and lifted a cloth covering, revealing dozens of identical cores arranged in neat rows."Today, each of you will attempt to awaken a core.Initially, without guidance."

She began distributing them, one to each student.When she reached Thalia, their eyes met briefly.Something in Wolfe's gaze — curiosity?Challenge?— made Thalia's pulse quicken.She could practically hear an unspoken message:Prove that you belong here.

The core was heavier than it looked and cool against her palm despite the forge's heat.The metal surface was smooth but not uniform — the etched patterns created subtle variations she could feel under her fingertips.

"Instructor."One of the Northern boys raised his hand, Matthias.He had white-blond hair and the ice-blue eyes common to those from the Reaches."If we succeed, will we

keep these golems as our own constructs?"

Wolfe's lips curved in a grim smile. "No. You won't." She walked back to the center of the forge. "The golems you forge for the Gauntlet will be created entirely by you, throughout the year. Trust me when I say you won't want these golems." Her gaze swept over them. "Many of you will fail this first attempt at awakening a heart. The constructs you awaken today will join the academy's defensive patrols along the Crystalline Plateau."

Her voice dropped. "Those that fail, whether they don't awaken or don't comply with instruction, will be sent to the Golem Fields."

A murmur passed through the students. After the Frost Walk, Thalia was all too familiar with the Golem Fields, the valley that served as a graveyard for defective or dangerous constructs.

"Begin," Wolfe commanded, then stepped back to observe.

For a moment, nobody moved. Thalia glanced around, seeing the uncertainty on every face. Even the Northern students, who had been raised on tales of golem craft, seemed at a loss.

Then, as if by unspoken agreement, they all sprang into action at once.

Matthias strode to the nearest anvil and began hammering his core with methodical force. Others followed suit, the forge soon filled with the cacophonous rhythm of metal striking metal. Some students channeled visible cryomancy, their hands frosting over as they attempted to freeze their cores or shock them with crackling energy.

Nothing worked.

As minutes stretched into an hour, frustration mounted. One core cracked under too much force, causing a cry of dismay from its owner. Others remained stubbornly lifeless despite increasingly desperate attempts.

"This is impossible," muttered a girl to Thalia's right, her accent thick with Northern inflection.

Thalia hadn't moved to an anvil. Instead, she found a quiet corner and sat cross-legged on the stone floor, the core resting in her upturned palms. She closed her eyes, shutting out the sounds of frustration around her.

She didn't think of the core as just metal. She felt the magic lying dormant inside, sensing it the way she'd once sensed the subtle currents in herbs at her mother's shop. All natural things carried these currents, save for ice, which had always eluded her understanding. The sensation was familiar — a whisper beneath her fingertips, a pattern waiting to be recognized.

The metal had been forged precisely, she realized. Channels formed within its structure, like the veins of a leaf or the capillaries of a circulatory system. These were pathways for magic to flow, but they needed...what? Not force. Not external magic pushing its way in.

Resonance.

The word came to her unbidden, a memory of her mother explaining how certain herbs amplified each other when combined. "It's about finding the right harmony," she'd said, her hands gentle as she mixed ingredients. "Let them speak to each other."

Thalia traced her fingers over the metal, letting its magical currents guide her. The forge's noise faded into the background as she focused entirely on the subtle hum beneath her fingertips. She experimented with different levels of pressure, tapping the

core lightly in different spots, listening to the way it vibrated.

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There — a spot where the metal sang a different note, almost imperceptibly. She pressed gently, not forcing but encouraging, the way she'd coax reluctant plants to release their properties.

A soft, pulsing glow spread from the center of the core, flickering like a heartbeat. The magic wasn't being pushed into motion — it was answering her call. The glow surged, forming distinct patterns across the metal surface as the core awakened fully, its light steadier now, a cool blue radiance that illuminated her hands from below.

"Stop." Instructor Wolfe's voice cut through the forge's clamor. The hammering ceased abruptly, and all eyes turned to the instructor — then followed her gaze to Thalia, still sitting cross-legged on the floor, the awakened core pulsing with light in her hands.

Wolfe approached, her expression unreadable. She crouched before Thalia and held out her hand. Reluctantly, feeling somehow protective of the core she'd awakened, Thalia placed it in the instructor's palm.

Wolfe stood and lifted the core high, its blue light casting her features in sharp relief. "Observe," she commanded. "Greenspire has succeeded where you all continue to fail."

The words should have filled Thalia with pride, but instead, a chill ran down her spine as she became aware of the eyes upon her — not just Wolfe's approving gaze, but the stares of her classmates. There was no admiration there, no camaraderie or congratulations. Only suspicion. Hatred. The Northern students glared at her with expressions that ranged from disbelief to outright disdain.



"How did you do it?" Wolfe asked, her voice carrying in the suddenly silent forge.

Thalia rose to her feet, uncomfortable with looking up at everyone from her seated position. "I...I listened to it." The words sounded foolish as soon as they left her mouth. "The core has channels for the magic to flow. It doesn't need force or outside magic — it just needs to be awakened to resonate with the magic already inside it."

Wolfe nodded slowly. "Precisely." She returned the core to Thalia. "The heart of a golem contains all the magic it will ever need. Our task is not to fill it with power, but to set that power in motion." She addressed the class again. "Return to your attempts with this understanding."

As the others reluctantly turned back to their cores, Wolfe leaned closer to Thalia. "Impressive, Greenspire. Few grasp the principle so quickly."

The rare praise should have warmed her, but Thalia could feel the resentment emanating from the students around them. She'd violated some unspoken rule — a Southerner wasn't supposed to succeed where Northerners struggled, especially not in an art they considered their birthright.

"Thank you, Instructor," she said quietly, clutching her awakened core.

Wolfe gave her a considering look. "At the end of class, we'll install the successful cores into their constructs. Yours will be first." She turned away, moving to assist a student whose aggressive cryomancy attempts were causing their core to frost over dangerously.

Thalia glanced around the forge. One by one, her classmates' eyes slid away from her, but not before she caught the hardness in their expressions.

She looked down at the glowing core in her hands, its rhythmic pulse like a second

heartbeat. Success at Frostforge, she was learning, came with its own dangers. But as she gazed at the awakened heart, feeling the magic thrumming in harmony with her own, Thalia couldn't bring herself to regret it.

Even if it made her more of an outsider than ever before.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Thalia emerged from the forge, her fingers still tingling with residual magic from animating the golem heart. The memory of metal coming to life under her touch glowed inside her like an ember, warming her against the perpetual chill of Frostforge's stone corridors. Then she spotted a familiar figure ahead — a mess of dark curls hastily tied back, shoulders that moved with a particular confident swagger she'd recognize anywhere. Roran. Finally back at Frostforge. Without thinking, she quickened her pace, fatigue forgotten.

"Roran!" she called, weaving between clusters of students who clogged the corridor like boulders in a stream. Several turned to stare, their faces creasing with disapproval at her outburst, but Thalia ignored them.

The figure ahead paused mid-stride, then half-turned. When Roran's face came into view, Thalia's smile widened. She'd missed that face — the way his dark eyes always seemed to hold a secret joke, the permanent hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, slightly breathless as she caught up to him. "You're over a week late. As he said you were held up at a checkpoint. I thought you might have —" She stopped herself, not wanting to voice the myriad possibilities that had kept her awake some nights.

But instead of the easy grin she expected, or some teasing retort about her worrying

for nothing, Roran's expression darkened. The muscles in his jaw tightened, and he glanced quickly at the students passing by.

"Not here," he said, his voice low and clipped. He started walking again, faster than before.

Thalia blinked, thrown by his reaction. In the months she'd known Roran last year, she'd rarely seen him anything but relaxed, even in the face of the academy's brutal training regimen. She hurried to match his stride, confusion and concern battling within her.

"Are you all right?" she asked, lowering her voice to match his serious tone.

Roran's steps faltered briefly. He ran a hand over his face, his shoulders rising and falling with a deep breath. Something in his posture shifted, the tension bleeding out just enough to be noticeable.

"Sorry," he said, glancing at her with a flicker of regret. "Didn't mean to snap." He adjusted the leather strap of his satchel where it crossed his chest. "It's been a long journey."

Thalia studied his profile as they walked, noting the shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there last year, the tightness around his mouth. She'd been so relieved to see him that she hadn't immediately registered the subtle changes.

"What happened?" she asked, gentler now.

Roran sighed, rubbing the back of his neck where his curls escaped their tie. "The ship was delayed," he explained, his pace slowing to a more natural rhythm. "Coastal travel in the far South has become nearly impossible. Isle Warden raids have doubled — maybe tripled — since last spring."

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Thalia's stomach tightened at the mention of the raiders. The Isle Wardens had always been a shadow over the Southern Kingdoms, their swift ships appearing without warning to pillage coastal towns. But if the raids were increasing...

"The rest of the Southern recruits from my region had to form a caravan," Roran continued, his voice taking on a bitter edge. "An inland route. Safety in numbers."

"But they made it on time. Unless... wait, you weren't with them?" Thalia asked, noticing the way he'd separated himself from the group in his explanation.

Roran's laugh held no humor. "Ashe's rumor was accurate, actually, though I've no idea how word spread that fast. I ran into trouble at an army checkpoint," he said, his voice dropping further. "The Northern soldiers there..." He exhaled sharply through his nose. "Someone recognized my name, or claimed to. They pulled me aside, searched everything I owned. Accused me of being an Isle Warden spy."

Thalia felt a cold weight settle in her chest. She remembered the whispers that had followed Roran throughout their first year — how his fighting techniques were too precise, too fluid. Too similar to the feared warriors who commanded the storm-wreathed ships of the Isle Wardens. The rumors had persisted despite Roran's stated Southern heritage and his open contempt for the raiders; to hear him tell it, Isle Wardens had killed his entire family.

"They kept me there for three days," he continued, his fingers curling into a fist at his side. "Three days of questions, of 'tests' to prove I wasn't harboring some secret loyalty to the Isles." His laugh was sharp and brittle. "They acted like I was about to summon a storm right then and there." Frustration laced his words. "Like I'd ever fight

for the bastards who destroyed my life."

"I know you're loyal," Thalia said firmly, meeting his gaze. "If anyone had reason to hate the Isle Wardens, it's you."

Something in Roran's expression softened, just for a moment. The tension in his shoulders eased slightly. He looked away, his profile sharp against the gray stone walls.

"You'd think that'd be enough," he murmured. "But some people will only ever see what they want to see."

Thalia didn't know how to respond to that. The truth of his words settled uncomfortably in her stomach. She'd felt the weight of prejudiced eyes herself — the automatic assumption that someone from the Southern Kingdoms must be less capable, less worthy of respect. But what Roran faced was different, tainted by fear of his peculiar ways of fighting, which he swore were just instinctive.

Wanting to lighten the mood, she elbowed him gently. "Well, you're here now," she said, forcing brightness into her voice, "and you owe me lunch for making me worry."

Roran huffed a laugh, shaking his head. For a moment, he looked more like the boy she remembered from last year. "You just want an excuse to steal my food," he retorted. "Stick to your own rations, Greenspire."

"I've been surviving on Frostforge's idea of nourishment for over a week," she moaned, exaggerating her complaint to make him smile.

They turned toward the dining hall, their steps falling into an easy rhythm together. Thalia felt tension she hadn't realized she was carrying melt from her

shoulders.Despite the shadows that seemed to cling to Roran, despite whatever had happened on his journey north, he was still here.Still himself at his core.

"So," he said, clearly eager to change the subject, "how was your first week back in this frigid hellscape?Anything interesting happen, or just the usual delightful hazing?"

Thalia hesitated, then decided Roran deserved some good news after his ordeal."Actually, I had some success in metallurgy today," she said, unable to keep a note of pride from her voice."I animated a golem heart."

Roran stopped walking abruptly, turning to face her with raised eyebrows."A golem heart?In your first class?"His surprise gave way to a slow, genuine smile."Greenspire, that's advanced stuff."

"That's what the instructor said."Thalia couldn't help but smile back, warmth spreading through her at the memory."You should have seen the Northern students' faces.Like they'd all bitten into something sour at once."

"You're getting too good," Roran said, his smile shifting into something sharper."They're probably worried you'll disprove their Northern superiority, or something."

Thalia rolled her eyes but couldn't help but laugh."You joke," she said wryly, "but most of them really do think that way."She lowered her voice."I've been placed in an advanced metallurgy section."

"Let me guess—you're the only one from the South in your class?"

She nodded.

"Of course." Roran's expression darkened momentarily before he forced another smile. "Well, you'll just have to show them what the South is capable of. Lead the way, prodigy."

As they approached the dining hall, the rumble of voices grew louder. Thalia pushed open the heavy wooden door, feeling the rush of warm air laden with the scent of food. Not particularly good food — Frostforge wasn't known for its culinary achievements — but food nonetheless. Her stomach growled in anticipation.

The hall was crowded with students, their voices echoing off the high stone ceiling. Tables stretched in long rows, grouped loosely by year and specialization. Thalia scanned the room, looking for familiar faces among the first-years, but almost immediately noticed something else — heads turning in their direction, eyes narrowing.

Some glares came from Northern students in her metallurgy class, their pale faces set in expressions of disapproval. But others, she realized with a sinking feeling, came from Southern students. And those glares were directed at Roran.

She felt him stiffen beside her, almost imperceptibly. If she hadn't been standing so close, she might have missed it — the slight squaring of his shoulders, the way his breathing became more measured, his expression carefully neutral. It was the posture of someone bracing for impact.

"Ignore them," she muttered, though she knew it was easier said than done.

Roran's mouth quirked in what might have been an attempt at a smile. "Always do," he replied, but there was a hollowness to his words that made Thalia's heart ache.

She might trust him — might know with bone-deep certainty that Roran Bright was loyal to Frostforge and an enemy of the Isle Wardens — but she was one of the few

who did. And as they made their way through the dining hall, the weight of suspicious stares heavy on their backs, Thalia understood with painful clarity what Roran had meant earlier.



Some people would only ever see what they wanted to see. And what they saw when they looked at Roran was the enemy, no matter how false that vision might be.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Thalia tucked a wayward strand of black hair behind her ear as she hurried along the frost-slick path toward the Howling Forge. Two days had passed since she'd animated the golem heart, and the whispers had only intensified — sideways glances from Northern students, hushed conversations that stopped when she entered the dining hall. She kept her eyes forward, one hand clutching her satchel of tools, the other tracing the outline of her father's compass through the fabric of her pocket. The familiar weight steadied her as the massive iron doors of the forge loomed ahead, steam billowing from the ventilation shafts and dissipating into the crisp morning air.

Her steps faltered as a familiar figure rounded the corner ahead. Senna walked the path directly toward her, head high, silver-gray eyes usually so piercing they seemed to cut through whatever they focused on. Thalia's shoulders tensed automatically, her chin lifting in the subtle defiance she'd cultivated over weeks of hostile encounters. Her mind raced through possible reactions — sidestep the confrontation entirely? Stand her ground? Prepare a retort for whatever cutting remark Senna might fling her way?

But Senna did none of the things Thalia expected. She didn't slow her pace to deliver a calculated insult. Didn't curl her lip in that familiar sneer of disgust. Didn't even properly look at Thalia. Instead, she continued forward with steady, purposeful strides, her gaze fixed on some distant point beyond Thalia's shoulder. When they passed — close enough that Thalia caught the scent of pine and metal that always

clung to the Northern girl — Senna's shoulder barely brushed against hers.No acknowledgment.Not even a flicker of recognition.

Thalia stopped, turning to watch Senna's retreating form.The second-year student moved with uncharacteristic urgency, her normally perfect posture just slightly off, her braided black hair swinging with each determined step.Senna's hands were clenched at her sides, knuckles white with tension.

"What in all the hells?"Thalia murmured to herself.

This wasn't normal.Not even close.Senna Drake never passed up an opportunity to remind Thalia of her supposed inferiority.Never failed to make some cutting remark about Southern weakness or drop some veiled threat wrapped in false pleasantries.Her fixation on Thalia — and on Kaine Ember — was as predictable as the bitter cold that swept down from Frostforge's peaks each evening.

Luna's words from the assembly echoed in Thalia's mind: "She's up to something.I just need to figure out what."At the time, Thalia had been distracted by too many other concerns to give Luna's suspicions much weight.But now...

Thalia watched until Senna disappeared around a corner, heading not toward the main academy buildings but toward the eastern training grounds.Whatever occupied Senna's thoughts so completely that she'd ignore her favorite target — it had to be significant.And potentially dangerous.

With one last glance in the direction Senna had gone, Thalia turned back toward the forge.She needed to find Luna later, compare notes.But first, there was work to be done.Skills to master.And, if she was honest with herself, a certain brooding metalworker to see.

The heavy iron doors of the Howling Forge groaned as Thalia pushed them open, the

rush of heat immediately enveloping her like an embrace. She stepped inside, letting the familiar sensations wash over her — the orange glow of multiple furnaces, the rhythmic percussion of hammers striking metal, the pungent mix of coal smoke and quenching oil. Usually, these sensations calmed her racing thoughts, grounded her in the physical world of making rather than the uncertain terrain of academy politics.

But today, something felt off.

The rhythm was wrong. The usual symphony of metalwork sounded discordant, disjointed. Several stations sat empty, their fires banked. And the usual shouts of instruction or camaraderie were replaced by hushed, urgent conversations happening in tight clusters around the vast space.

Thalia scanned the room for Kaine, finding him near his usual workstation in the far corner. Even from a distance, she could tell something was wrong. His broad-shouldered frame was rigid with tension, his hands — usually so steady and precise — clenched into white-knuckled fists at his sides as he spoke with two other Northern students. When he turned slightly, she caught a glimpse of his face — jaw tight, blue eyes flashing with something that looked dangerously close to rage.

She navigated through the forge, sidestepping worktables and cooling racks until she reached him. The other students dispersed as she approached, their expressions grim.

"Kaine?" she ventured, setting her satchel down on a nearby bench. "What's happened?"

He didn't answer immediately, his gaze fixed on his workstation. The table where his shield — the one with the intricate hovering mechanism he'd been so proud to show her — should have been sitting was conspicuously empty. Only his tools remained, meticulously arranged as always, a stark contrast to the chaos of his expression.

"It's gone," he finally said, his voice low and controlled in a way that suggested he was working hard to keep it that way. "The shield. Gone."

Thalia blinked, not comprehending at first. "Gone? You mean you moved it to storage, or —"

"Stolen." The word came out like a blade being unsheathed. "Not just mine. Six other pieces. All advanced work, all nearly complete." He gestured toward several other empty stations around the forge.

"Someone broke in?" Thalia asked, looking around for signs of forced entry, her mind racing to make sense of it.

Kaine shook his head, running a hand through his cropped dark hair in a rare display of agitation. "No. No damage to the locks or wards. Nothing disturbed except the missing pieces."

"When did you notice?" she asked, stepping closer to examine the empty workstation.

"This morning. I came in early to test the hovering enchantment." His expression darkened further. "I'd just worked the magic into it. Never got to see if my calculations would hold under combat conditions."

She studied his face, noting something beyond anger in his features. There was frustration there, yes, and fury. But also something that looked almost like grief. And suddenly, she understood. For Kaine, this wasn't just about a missing shield. It was about his craft — the one thing that had given him purpose during his years in prison, the skill that had earned him a place at Frostforge instead of a lifetime sentence.

"The shield was special," she said softly. Not a question.

His ice-blue eyes met hers, surprise flashing briefly across his features before his expression shuttered again."I'd been working on the design for weeks.The hovering mechanism was...unique."His hands unclenched slightly, fingers flexing as if he could still feel the metal under them."It would have worked.I know it would have."

The admission cost him something; she could see it in the tight set of his shoulders.Kaine didn't share his hopes or plans easily.Prison had taught him to keep such vulnerabilities hidden, a lesson Thalia understood all too well from her own hard upbringing in Verdant Port's poorest district.

"Who knew about your design?"she asked, her mind shifting from sympathy to strategy.

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Kaine's expression sharpened, following her line of thought. "No one. At least, I didn't tell anyone." He paused, considering. "But someone could have seen me working on it. Could have watched me storing the papers."

Thalia thought of Senna's distracted expression, her purposeful stride. Was it connected? She couldn't imagine Senna stealing something meant for the war effort — her family was Northern military elite, after all. But the timing was suspicious.

"Couldn't have been an outsider," she mused aloud, thinking of Frostforge's intense fortifications, the patrolling golems that swept the grounds at night. "Not with security as tight as it is."

"No," Kaine agreed, his voice hardening again. "It's someone here. Someone who's going to regret it when I find them."

The promise in his voice sent another chill through her. Kaine had spent five years in Northern prisons after being convicted of killing his father. Though he'd never confirmed or denied the act, Thalia had seen enough to know his capacity for violence wasn't just rumor. The thought of him hunting down the thief — potentially confronting them alone — made her stomach twist.

"We'll find them," she said, emphasizing the *we*. "But carefully. Whoever did this was clever enough to get in and out without leaving a trace. They're dangerous."

For a moment, something like protest flashed in Kaine's eyes. Then his expression softened fractionally, and he gave a short nod. "We'll need to be smarter, then."

Around them, the forge had begun to return to its normal rhythm, hammers resuming their steady beat against metal, flames hissing as they licked at raw ore. But the undercurrent of tension remained — in hushed conversations, in darting, suspicious glances.

Thalia adjusted the strap of her satchel, mind already racing ahead to who might have access, who might have motive, who might have the skill to bypass Frostforge's security. One thing was certain: in an academy built on secrets and competition, someone had just raised the stakes dramatically.

And somewhere in these stone halls, a thief walked free, armed with weapons crafted by Northern hands — weapons that could change the course of whatever game they were playing.

## CHAPTER NINE

Thalia trudged into the dormitory, her shoulders tight with tension from her encounter with Kaine. The news of stolen weapons from the Howling Forge had left a cold weight in her stomach — another mystery in a place already overflowing with secrets. The room was unusually quiet without Ashe's commanding presence; she was at her advanced combat class, leaving only Luna sprawled across her bed, seemingly engrossed in a tattered book of Northern folklore.

Luna didn't look up as Thalia entered, her fingers absently tracing the worn edges of the pages. Her short dreadlocks fell forward, partially obscuring her face, the tiny metal rings woven into them catching the fading light from the window.

"You're back early," Luna murmured, turning a page with deliberate slowness. "Did they cancel your extra forge time?"

Thalia dropped her satchel onto her bed, the leather making a soft thud against the

thin mattress."No.Something happened."She hesitated, then added, "Something bad."

Luna's eyes continued to drift across her book, but Thalia caught the subtle shift in her posture — a slight straightening of her spine, a barely perceptible tilt of her head.Despite appearances, Luna was listening.Intently.

"Weapons have gone missing from the Howling Forge," Thalia said, sinking onto her bed."Kaine just told me.He was furious — the kind of fury that burns cold, not hot."

The book in Luna's hands lowered.Her perpetually dreamy expression vanished, replaced by a sharp, calculating look that few at Frostforge ever witnessed."Missing weapons?"she echoed, her voice no longer distant but focused as a blade."How many?What kind?"

"He didn't say exactly.Just that they discovered the theft this morning during inventory, and that one of them was an enchanted shield he's been working on."Thalia ran a hand through her black waves, tucking a strand behind her ear.

Luna set her book aside, all pretense of distraction abandoned.She swung her legs over the edge of her bed, feet barely touching the floor, and leaned forward with her elbows on her knees."Well, then you probably ought to know it's bigger than just that.This isn't the first time weapons have disappeared."

Thalia's head snapped up."What do you mean?"

"The instructors have been whispering about it for days."Luna's dark eyes narrowed."Small things at first.A dagger from the training armory.A hammer from the smithing class.Items easy to dismiss as misplaced or borrowed without permission."

"And no one thought to mention this to the students?"



Luna's laugh was soft and without humor."Of course not.The mighty Frostforge Academy, admitting to a security breach?They'd rather pretend it wasn't happening."She stood, crossed to her trunk, and pulled out several scraps of parchment from a hidden compartment beneath a false bottom."But I've been keeping track."

Thalia watched as Luna spread the parchments across the small table between their beds.Each contained Luna's spidery handwriting — dates, locations, items.Far more organized than Luna's absentminded persona would suggest.Thalia had learned the previous year that Luna made a habit of spying on her fellow recruits, gathering information for her father's crusade against the Selection.Still, the notes were thorough enough to take Thalia by surprise.

"How did you find out about all this?"Thalia asked, moving to examine the parchments.

Luna shrugged one shoulder."People talk around me because they think I'm not listening.And I go where I'm not supposed to be."She tapped her finger against one of the parchments."Three throwing knives from the second-year combat storage.A breastplate from the training grounds.Two short swords from the eastern armory."Her finger moved to another note."And these are just the ones I know about."

Thalia began arranging the scraps in chronological order, her brow furrowing as she analyzed the information."There's no pattern to what's being taken.Armor, weapons of different kinds...."

"Exactly."Luna nodded, her beaded locks clicking softly."It's as if the thief — or thieves — are selecting at random.Or perhaps..."She paused, head tilting."Perhaps there's a purpose we can't see yet."

They spent the next hour mapping the disappearances, using a rough sketch Luna

drew of the academy's layout. The thefts were scattered across Frostforge — the Crystalline training grounds, the armories, instructors' quarters, and now the Howling Forge itself.

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"It could be a student," Thalia suggested, rocking back in her chair. "Someone building their own private arsenal."

Luna's finger tapped against her chin. "Possibly. But why such an assortment? And how would they hide so many weapons in their quarters without being discovered during inspections?"

"An instructor, then? They have private chambers, fewer inspections."

"But instructors already have access to better weapons. Why steal what's essentially beneath them?"

Thalia stared at the map, frustration mounting. "An outsider?"

"Perhaps. But Frostforge is sealed against intrusion. The wards alone would detect any unauthorized entry." Luna drew her knees up to her chest, balancing precariously on her chair. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless someone's helping them from the inside." Luna's eyes met Thalia's, serious and unblinking.

The thought hung between them, uncomfortable but impossible to dismiss.

"Could a golem have taken them?" Luna asked suddenly. "You've been working with them in your advanced class, right? Could someone have commanded a golem to

gather weapons?"

Thalia shook her head, thinking back to her recent success animating the golem heart. "No, I don't think so. The magic required to animate a golem is specific and limited. They can follow simple commands, yes, but something as complex as identifying valuable weapons, avoiding detection, and transporting them without being seen?" She traced the edge of the table with her finger. "Golems aren't stealthy. They're practically walking boulders. Someone would have noticed."

Luna sighed, pushing one of the parchments away. "There has to be a connection we're not seeing."

Silence fell between them, broken only by the distant sound of voices in the corridor outside. Light from the setting sun painted long shadows across the dormitory floor, turning the whitewashed walls a burnt orange.

Thalia tapped her fingers against the table, thinking. Then, almost as an afterthought, she said, "I saw Senna today."

Luna's gaze flicked up, instantly alert. "And?"

"And nothing. That's what was strange." Thalia explained the encounter — how Senna had barely acknowledged her existence, a stark contrast to her usual hostility. "It was like she didn't even see me. Like she had more important things on her mind."

Luna's expression darkened, the beads in her hair clicking as she leaned forward. "I've been tracking her," she admitted, her voice low. "Since the start of term."

Thalia wasn't entirely surprised. "Tracking her how?"

"Following her. At night." Luna's lips curved into a humorless smile. "She sneaks out

after curfew.Moves through the academy like she's looking for something — or someone.And yes," she added, anticipating Thalia's next question, "the forge is one of the places she visits."

Thalia felt her pulse quicken."Did you see her take anything?"

Luna shook her head, the tiny rings in her dreadlocks catching the light."That's the problem.She enters, stays for a while, and leaves.I've never seen her carrying anything suspicious, either before or after."

"So if she's not stealing the weapons herself..."Thalia began.

"Then what's she doing there?"Luna finished for her."Scouting?Checking inventory for someone else?Or is she searching for something specific?"

Thalia frowned, remembering Senna's demeanor earlier that day — distracted, preoccupied.Not the behavior of someone who had just successfully pulled off a major theft."If Senna is involved, but not the actual thief..."

"Then she's working with someone," Luna concluded, her eyes sharp and serious."The question is: who?And why?"

Thalia stood, pacing the small space between their beds.The pieces didn't fit together neatly — Senna's nighttime wanderings, the missing weapons with no discernible pattern, the academy's apparent reluctance to address the situation openly.Something larger was at play, something neither of them fully understood yet.

## CHAPTER TEN

Rumors of the weapon thefts spread through Frostforge like frost creeping across glass, intricate patterns of suspicion branching in all directions.Thalia noticed how

conversations would halt when she entered rooms, how eyes tracked certain students — particularly those from the South — with newfound wariness. Three days had passed since Kaine had stormed through the academy halls, fury etched into his face, and in that time the whispers had only grown louder. Isle Warden spies. Traitors in their midst. As if the constant drills and brutal training weren't enough, now students eyed each other with suspicion over breakfast porridge and during combat exercises.

Thalia kept her head down, focusing on her classes. The suspicious glances bothered her less than they might have — growing up in Verdant Port's poorest district had taught her to ignore the judgment of others. But she couldn't ignore how the atmosphere at Frostforge had shifted, becoming as brittle as poorly tempered steel.

The theft had been substantial: fifteen daggers, three sets of gauntlets designed to amplify cryomancy, two recently-forged broadswords. Weapons meant for the war effort, now in unknown hands. Thalia had heard at least six different theories of how the items had been stolen, each more elaborate than the last. One involved tunnels beneath the academy; another suggested levitation magic that allowed the thief to float above the detection wards.

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As she made her way toward the dining hall for breakfast, the hallway ahead was unusually crowded for this early hour. Students clustered in a tight knot, their postures suggesting something more confrontational than morning gossip. The crowd parted just enough for Thalia to glimpse a familiar figure at its center — Roran Bright, his shoulders rigid and his wild curls escaping from a hastily tied ponytail.

Facing him were three Northern students, second-years based on their insignias. The tallest of them, a broad-shouldered boy with a scar bisecting his left eyebrow, leaned into Roran's space.

"It's a bit convenient, isn't it, Bright?" The name came out like a sneer. "You show up, fighting like an Isle Warden like you always do — and suddenly our weapons go missing."

Thalia slowed her pace. She recognized the Northern student — Nash, she thought his name was. His family had strong military ties; she'd overheard him boasting about it during combat training.

Roran's arms were crossed tight against his chest, his fingers digging into his own biceps. Gone was the easy smile that usually graced his features, replaced by a jaw clenched so tight that a muscle twitched visibly beneath the skin.

"I lost everything to the Isle Wardens," Roran replied, his voice dangerously quiet. "My entire family. You think I'm working with them?" His laugh was hollow, nothing like his usual warm chuckle. "You're even more stupid than you look, Nash."

Nash's friends shifted closer, forming a tighter semicircle around Roran. One of them

— a girl with white hair and cold blue eyes — rested her hand on the hilt of the training dagger at her belt.

"We all know the story you tell," Nash said. "Poor merchant's son, all those raids, such tragedy." He mimicked, wiping away a tear. "But let's look at the facts, shall we? You're late returning to Frostforge. You get stopped at a checkpoint for 'suspicious behavior.' You use fighting techniques that only Isle Wardens use. And now weapons are missing — weapons that could give an advantage to whoever has them." He leaned even closer. "I think you're exactly what you appear to be — a Warden spy who's not half as clever as he thinks."

The hallway had gone quiet, students watching with the tense anticipation of spectators at a duel. Thalia could feel the crackle of energy in the air — not from any spell being cast, but from the raw emotion radiating from Roran. She'd seen it before in the training yards — when Roran's emotions spiked, she swore static discharges would sometimes leap from his fingertips. She winced at the thought; if others had noticed this, too, that would only serve as further proof that he was an Isle Warden. Only the raiders of the archipelago used storm magic.

"You want to say that again?" Roran uncrossed his arms, hands now balled into fists at his sides.

Nash smiled, clearly pleased to have provoked a reaction. "What's wrong, Warden? Truth hurt?"

Something dangerous flashed in Roran's eyes. He stepped forward, fists clenched. The air pressure in the hallway shifted, making Thalia's ears pop.

Without conscious thought, Thalia lunged forward, pushing through the gathered students. She inserted herself between Roran and Nash, palms out toward both of them.



"That's enough," she said, her voice surprisingly steady despite her racing heart. She faced Nash first, meeting his contemptuous stare. "You're throwing around accusations with zero evidence. Roran was cleared by the checkpoint guards, or he wouldn't be here. You're only complaining about his fighting techniques because they're better than yours." She took a breath, aware that she now had the attention of everyone in the hallway. "If you want to find the real thief, maybe look for actual evidence instead of attacking someone based on nothing."

Nash's expression darkened. "Defending your fellow Southerner, Greenspire? Maybe we should be looking at you too. Birds of a feather, and all that."

The girl with the white hair smirked. "Heard you're quite special in metallurgy class. Animated a golem heart on your first try, didn't you? Bit suspicious, that kind of talent just appearing out of nowhere."

Thalia felt a flash of anger. "If excelling in class makes someone suspicious, then half the Northern students should be under investigation." She glanced back at Roran, whose fists were still clenched, but the blue glow had diminished slightly. Emboldened, she continued, "It's ridiculous to think Roran is an Isle Warden. If you suspect that of him, you might as well suspect it of me."

"Maybe we do," said Nash, his lip curling. "But Bright here has done a particularly poor job of hiding his true nature. The way he fights, that storm brewing inside him — he might be playing like some commoner from the Southern Kingdoms, but we can see the raider underneath."

Beside her, Thalia heard Roran hiss a breath through clenched teeth. She could feel the tension radiating from him like heat from forge fire.

"Back off," Thalia warned Nash, her voice hard. "And leave Roran alone."

"I don't need your help, Greenspire."

Roran's voice was so cold that Thalia almost didn't recognize it. She turned to look at him, startled.

His face was a mask of barely controlled fury, but his eyes — those eyes that usually sparkled with humor — were now dark.

"I can handle things on my own," he continued, turning away. The bitterness in his tone cut through the air. "Clearly, that's how I'm meant to be."

Nash and his friends exchanged glances, their expressions morphing from antagonism to amusement.

"Sounds like the pretty Isle Warden doesn't want you, Greenspire!" Nash laughed, the sound echoing off the stone walls. "Turned down in front of everyone. How embarrassing for you."

The white-haired girl nudged another friend, whispering something that made them both snicker. "Maybe she thought defending him would win his heart? Southern romance at its finest."

Heat flooded Thalia's cheeks. "That's not —"

"Get lost," Roran snapped at the Northerners, cutting off Thalia's protest. "You've made your point."

Surprisingly, Nash shrugged and stepped back, seemingly satisfied with the discord he'd created. "We'll be watching you, Bright." He nodded to his friends, and the group moved away, still chuckling amongst themselves.

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The audience, sensing the confrontation was over, began to disperse. Conversations resumed, though now they had fresh material to dissect.

Thalia turned to Roran, confusion and hurt tangling in her chest. "Roran, I was just trying to —"

"I know what you were trying to do," he interrupted, his voice low. "But you made it worse. Now they'll connect us in their minds — the Southern misfits, potentially conspiring together." He ran a hand through his hair, dislodging more curls from his ponytail. "I've survived this long by handling things my way. I don't need someone charging in to rescue me."

"They were about to jump you four against one," Thalia protested.

Something flickered across Roran's face — a brief acknowledgment that she might be right — but it was quickly replaced by that same dark look. This wasn't the Roran she knew — the boy who'd made her laugh despite the brutal conditions at Frostforge, who seemed to find hope in the most hopeless situations.

"This isn't you," Thalia said softly. "Don't let them change who you are."

Roran squared his shoulders and stepped back.

"You don't know me, Greenspire. Not really." He glanced around at the few remaining students who were still watching them. "And for your sake, maybe it should stay that way."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The heat of the Howling Forge wrapped around Thalia like a fevered blanket as she stepped through the heavy oak doors. Through the veil of shimmering air rising from the central pit, she spotted Kaine at his usual workbench, his broad shoulders hunched in concentration over a piece of metal. The advanced second-year class was scheduled for this time, but Kaine operated by his own rules when it came to the forge, and was often present during other years' classes. What she hadn't expected to see was Senna perched in the far corner, her attention fixed on a blade she was polishing with methodical strokes. Thalia's muscles tensed at the sight of her nemesis, but something was off — Senna seemed lost in her own world, her usual predatory awareness notably absent.

Thalia adjusted the strap of her leather apron and moved deeper into the forge, the familiar scent of hot metal and coal smoke filling her lungs. Fellow students filtered in around her, their voices echoing against the stone walls.

Instructor Wolfe strode into the center of the room, her boots striking the stone floor with authoritative clicks.

"Advanced second-years," Wolfe called, her voice cutting through the chatter like a blade through butter. The room fell silent immediately. "Today marks the beginning of your golem project."

An excited murmur rippled through the assembled students. Thalia felt her own pulse quicken.

"This is a task that will take the entirety of the term," Wolfe continued, lifting a hand to silence the whispers. "Today, you will select your alloys and begin work on your golem's breastplate. This will form the protective housing for the heart you've already learned to animate."

Thalia's fingers twitched at her sides, already envisioning her golem.

"Your entire construct must be fashioned from ice-metal," Wolfe explained, gesturing to the racks of ingots lined along the wall. "Choose wisely. An overly ambitious alloy will leave you with a half-finished project and low chances of success in the Forge Gauntlet."

The students dispersed, moving toward the material stores with purpose. Thalia hung back, watching as most gravitated toward iron and steel — reliable choices that would hold enchantment well while remaining relatively easy to work. All of them had forged ice-iron and ice-steel in the previous year, and experience was valuable.

Thalia approached the racks last, running her fingers along the metal ingots. Something about brass called to her — a warm gold compared to the cold silvers and grays the others had chosen. She lifted a bar, feeling its weight, sensing the way magic might flow through it. Brass would be more difficult to smith properly, more challenging, but it possessed properties the others lacked.

As she carried her selection back to an open workstation, she felt the telltale prickle of being watched. She glanced up to find several Northern students observing her choice with smirks and raised eyebrows.

"Beginning your failure early, Southerner?" one called, just loudly enough for her to hear.

Thalia ignored him, setting up her station with methodical care. She stoked the small forge beside her bench until the coals glowed orange-red. As she worked the bellows, she lost herself in the rhythm, the way her mother had taught her to find patterns in the mundane.

"Brass is an interesting choice."

Kaine's voice startled her. He stood beside her workstation, arms folded across his chest, his blue eyes reflecting the forge fire. Unlike the other students, his presence didn't feel like an intrusion.

"Most would go for iron," he added. "Simpler to work with."

Thalia nodded, placing the brass ingot into the crucible. "Brass resists corrosion better," she explained, adjusting the crucible's position in the fire. "If I'm creating something meant to last, why start with a metal that will eventually weaken?" She gave him a small smile. "Besides, I like a challenge."

Something shifted in Kaine's expression — a softening around his eyes that lasted only a moment before his usual stoic mask returned. "Smart thinking," he said. "The Northern forges use brass in constructs meant for coastal regions for exactly that reason."

He lingered by her station as she worked, occasionally offering quiet suggestions when she struggled with the unfamiliar metal. The brass required a more precise temperature than iron — too hot and it would become brittle, too cool and it wouldn't take shape properly.

"You need to hammer it while it's still bright yellow," Kaine murmured, standing close enough that his sleeve brushed against hers. "Brass has a narrower working window than you're used to."

Thalia nodded, focusing on the metal's color rather than the warmth of Kaine beside her or the weight of stares from around the room. As she lifted the heated metal from the forge, she caught sight of two Northern students whispering, their eyes darting between her and Kaine.

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Last year, their proximity would have sent Senna into a cold rage. Thalia glanced toward the corner where Senna had been working, half-expecting to find the older girl stalking toward them with murder in her silver eyes.

Instead, Senna remained hunched over her blade, running a whetstone along its edge with mechanical precision. Her brow was furrowed, lips moving in silent conversation with herself. The sight was so unusual that Thalia nearly missed her timing with the hammer, barely catching the brass at the right temperature.

"Focus," Kaine said softly, noticing her distraction.

Thalia returned her attention to her work, letting the rhythm of metal-on-metal fill her mind. The brass flattened under her hammer, taking shape as she folded and stretched it according to the rough design she'd sketched. Unlike the others who worked on boxy, angular pieces, Thalia aimed for something more organic — curved plates that would articulate around a central core.

She lost track of time as she worked, aware only of the shifting color of the metal, the heat of the forge, and the occasional presence of Kaine as he drifted between his own work and hers. When she paused to wipe sweat from her brow, she saw that Instructor Wolfe had stopped at several stations, offering criticism more often than praise.

As Thalia quenched a section of brass in the water barrel, steam rising around her face in a white cloud, she again glanced toward Senna's corner. The Northern girl was sliding her blade into a leather sheath, her movements oddly mechanical. Without looking up — without even seeming to register the presence of anyone else in the forge — Senna stood and walked out, her usual predatory grace replaced by

something that looked almost like sleepwalking.

"That's strange," Thalia murmured.

"What is?" Kaine asked, appearing at her side again with a pair of tongs.

"Senna," Thalia said, nodding toward the now-empty corner. "She didn't even look at us once. Last year, she would've been over here threatening to slit my throat for standing too close to you."

Kaine's expression darkened. "I've noticed her behaving oddly since we returned," he said quietly. "Not just toward you or me. Toward everyone."

Thalia frowned, returning to her work. As she hammered the next section of her breastplate, she wondered what could possibly distract Senna from her obsession with Kaine. Whatever it was, Thalia doubted it meant anything good.

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"Time," Instructor Wolfe called, her voice cutting through the rhythmic percussion of hammers and the hiss of quenching metal. "Store your work properly. We'll continue tomorrow." Thalia stepped back from her workbench, wiping sweat-dampened hair from her forehead with the back of her wrist. The curved brass breastplate gleamed in the forge light, its surface marked with the careful hammer strikes that would eventually form the warding patterns necessary for animation. Not perfect, but further along than she'd expected to get in one session. She carefully lifted the piece — still warm to the touch — and placed it on the designated storage rack, labeling it with a piece of chalk.

Around her, students were packing up their tools, some with expressions of satisfaction, others with barely concealed frustration.



Thalia rolled her shoulders, feeling the pleasant ache of muscles well-used. She untied her leather apron and hung it on a hook by her station, then gathered her sketches and notes into her satchel. The other students were already filtering out of the forge, voices rising in volume as they discussed their progress and plans for the next session.

She had just turned to follow when a hand caught her elbow — gentle but insistent.

"Wait," Kaine said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. "I want to show you something."

Thalia glanced toward the door where the last students were leaving. "Is it about Senna?"

Kaine shook his head, a lock of dark hair falling across his forehead. "The runes. Remember? From last year?"

That was all he needed to say. Thalia nodded, stepping back from the door. "Lead the way."

They waited until the heavy oak door swung shut behind the last student before Kaine guided her toward the back of the forge. The old furnace stood against the far wall, its iron surface blackened with decades of soot and use. It was rarely used now that newer, more efficient forges had been installed, but it had never been removed — a relic from Frostforge's earlier days.

As they approached, Thalia felt it again — that strange tingling sensation that traveled up her arms and settled at the base of her skull. It was similar to what she felt when working with particularly potent herbs, or when handling raw metal that held strong magical potential. But this was older, deeper somehow.

"You feel something, don't you?" Kaine asked, watching her face closely.

Thalia nodded. "Like pins and needles, but not unpleasant. Almost like it's...recognizing me." She hadn't shared this particular sensation with Kaine before, but something in his expression told her he understood exactly what she meant.

"I spent nearly two weeks of the break trying to decipher these markings," Kaine said, squeezing behind the furnace to the narrow space where they'd discovered the runes the previous year. "I copied what we could see, took the sketches to three different merchants in the Winterhearth who deal in antiquities. None of them recognized the script, though one thought it might be pre-unification."

Thalia raised her eyebrows. "Before the Northern tribes united? That would make it —"

"At least three hundred years old," Kaine confirmed. "But that's just a guess. The merchant wasn't certain."

He gestured for her to join him behind the furnace. The space was narrow, barely wide enough for one person, let alone two. Thalia pressed herself against the cool stone wall, acutely aware of Kaine's proximity as he squeezed in beside her. The heat of the forge didn't reach this forgotten corner, and the temperature dropped noticeably.

"I tried to move the furnace further during the break," Kaine said, "but it's too heavy for one person. I think there's more inscription beneath it."

Thalia studied the runes visible on the wall. In the dim light, they seemed to pulse with faint energy — or perhaps that was just her imagination, spurred by the tingling in her fingertips. Some resembled the cryomancy symbols taught in their first-year classes, but most were utterly foreign, carved in angular patterns that seemed to flow into one another.

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"We could try moving it together," she suggested. "If we can slide it just a few more inches..."

Kaine nodded, positioning himself at one side of the ancient furnace. "On three. One, two —"

They pushed in unison, their boots scraping against the stone floor as they strained against the massive iron structure. For a moment, it seemed immovable, but then, with a groaning sound like a creature awakening from centuries of sleep, the furnace shifted. One inch. Two. Three.

Thalia stumbled forward as the resistance suddenly gave way, nearly falling before Kaine's hand shot out to steady her. The furnace had moved almost a foot, revealing a previously hidden section of wall covered in more densely packed runes.

"Look," Thalia breathed, crouching down to examine the new markings. These were smaller, more precisely carved than those above.

Kaine knelt beside her, his shoulder brushing against hers as he leaned in to study the wall. "We need better light, and something to trace these. They're too faint to copy by memory."

Thalia dug into her satchel and pulled out a stick of graphite she used for sketching designs. "This should work, if we press lightly."

Kaine retrieved a lantern from a nearby workbench, adjusting its flame to cast a steady golden light across the wall. In the improved illumination, the runes seemed to

sharpen, their edges more defined.

They worked in silence for several minutes, Thalia carefully tracing the outline of each symbol onto the stone surface, making them more visible without damaging the originals. Kaine held the light steady, occasionally pointing out markings she might have missed.

"There," she said finally, sitting back on her heels. "That should make them easier to study."

The newly highlighted runes formed what appeared to be a continuous text, unlike the scattered, individual symbols they'd found above. Thalia ran her fingers lightly over the markings, and the tingling sensation intensified, as if the stone itself was responding to her touch.

"Can you read any of it?" Kaine asked, shifting the lantern to better illuminate the section she'd traced.

Thalia shook her head. She pointed to a series of connected markings. "This pattern is reminiscent of some cryomancy runes, but more complex."

"There," Kaine said suddenly, pointing to a sequence near the bottom of the revealed section. "That symbol means 'founder' or 'creator.' It's used in some traditional naming ceremonies in the Reaches."

Thalia leaned closer, examining the indicated rune. It did bear a striking resemblance to the symbol she'd seen in her textbooks, though with additional flourishes that altered its meaning slightly.

"And this one," he added, pointing to an adjacent mark, "looks like the rune for 'payment' or 'cost.' I've seen a similar one on merchants' stalls."

"The Founder's Price," Thalia read aloud, the words hanging in the cool air of their hidden corner.

Kaine's brow furrowed, his expression troubled in the lantern light. "Price' implies sacrifice."

"Or payment," Thalia added. "Something given in exchange for something received."

They stared at the ancient inscription, the implications settling between them like a physical weight. The founding of Frostforge wasn't a subject covered in detail in their classes — they'd learned the bare facts of when the academy was established and by whom, but little about the circumstances or methods.

"Do you think it's referring to the founders of Frostforge?" Thalia asked, voicing the question that had formed in both their minds.

Kaine's jaw tightened. "I don't know much about the academy's founding. But this..." He gestured to the inscriptions. "This has dark implications."

A shiver that had nothing to do with the temperature ran down Thalia's spine. "What kind of price would require such secrecy? These markings were deliberately hidden behind a furnace that hasn't been moved in decades."

"The kind of price people don't want remembered," Kaine said softly.

They fell silent, the weight of the discovery hanging between them. The flame in the lantern flickered, causing the shadows to dance across the ancient runes like specters trying to communicate across time.

"We should check the archives," Thalia suggested. "There might be old texts that could help us translate the rest of these symbols. Or at least give us context for what

"The Founder's Price' might mean."

Kaine looked skeptical. "If this information is something the academy has gone to such lengths to conceal, I doubt they'd leave books about it lying around for students to find."

"Maybe not, obviously," Thalia conceded. "But Frostforge is old, and bureaucracies are rarely perfect. Something might have slipped through, been miscategorized, or simply forgotten over time."

Kaine considered this, then nodded slowly. "It's worth trying. But we should take care who sees us researching this."

Together, they replaced the furnace, not all the way back to its original position but enough to conceal most of the newly discovered inscriptions. No sense advertising their interest to anyone else who might enter the forge.

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As they gathered their things to leave, Thalia cast one last glance at the ancient furnace. Through the stone and iron, she could still feel the faint magical resonance of the hidden runes, like a pulse from the distant past. Whatever the Founder's Price was, it had left an imprint on Frostforge itself — in its walls, in its very foundation.

And as she followed Kaine out of the forge, Thalia couldn't shake the feeling that they had barely scratched the surface of a truth that had been buried for centuries. A truth that someone, even now, might want to keep hidden.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Thalia arrived at the forge early, her tools bundled carefully in the leather wrap she'd purchased with part of her monthly stipend. The familiar warmth should have been comforting after the bitter cold of the Frostforge grounds, but something in the air felt wrong. She noticed it immediately: hushed conversations cutting off as she walked past, Northern students standing in tight clusters, their eyes following her with barely disguised suspicion. Another weapon had gone missing overnight — this time, a third-year student's prized war hammer, the product of a month's work.

"Three more weapons from the east armory too," a girl with short-cropped red hair whispered to her companion. "And Riverton's personal daggers — all five of them."

"Those were enchanted," her friend replied, voice pitched low but not quite low enough. "Worth more than what most of us will earn in our first year of service."

Thalia kept her gaze fixed ahead, the weight of stares pressing against her back as she moved to her station.

"Morning," she said to the Northern student at the station beside hers, a formality she'd maintained despite weeks of receiving only grunts in response.

Today, she didn't even get that. The boy — Asher, she thought his name was — turned his broad back to her, the sun-pale hair at the nape of his neck bristling like an animal's hackles.

Four stations away, Einar Frostborne worked with his usual intensity. Unlike the standard training models most first-years struggled with, Einar's creation was ambitious — a predator's form with blades concealed beneath overlapping plates of steel.

Einar stood back, assessing his work with narrowed eyes. The golem's torso lay open on his bench, internal mechanisms exposed — coiled springs that would drive the hidden blades, interlocking gears to regulate their deployment. Pride straightened his shoulders as he reached for the central component, a curved steel plate that would connect the power core to the primary movement mechanisms.

"Perfect," he said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

He lifted the component high, as if showing off a trophy, and Thalia watched the light catch its polished surface. Then, with a theatrical flourish that went wrong, his fingers slipped.

The fall seemed to happen in slow motion. The curved steel plate tumbled through the air, striking the edge of the workbench before clattering to the stone floor.

Silence crashed into the forge.

Einar's face went from shocked to incredulous as he bent to retrieve the piece. When he straightened, he was holding two pieces, the steel cracked cleanly where it had



struck the bench.

"No," he whispered, then louder: "No!"

His face, already flushed from the forge heat, darkened to crimson. "This isn't possible. This alloy is rated for combat. It shouldn't break from a simple fall."

His head snapped up, eyes scanning the room until they locked onto Thalia. "You," he snarled. "What did you do to my materials?"

The accusation hit her like a physical blow. "What? Nothing! I've never even touched your station."

"Liar!" Einar's voice echoed off the stone walls. He stormed toward her, the broken pieces clutched in his fist. "First the weapons disappear, now this? Northern steel doesn't just break. It's been compromised — sabotaged!"

Students backed away, creating a circle around them. Thalia stood her ground, though her heart hammered against her ribs.

"I had nothing to do with your component breaking," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Maybe you made a mistake in the forging process."

Einar's laugh was ugly. "A Nordhall, making a basic forging mistake? My family has been working steel since before your Southern Kingdoms even existed." He thrust the broken pieces toward her face. "This is sabotage. And who better to sabotage Northern weapons than a Southerner with unexplained talent for metallurgy?"

Other Northern students pressed closer, their expressions darkening.

"She's the only one who got her golem heart to animate on the first try," someone

called out."Maybe because she's been studying our methods by tampering with our materials."

The circle tightened.Thalia's fingernails dug into her palms.She knew how quickly suspicion could turn to violence in Frostforge.

"I've been working on my own projects," she said, each word precise and clear."I don't have time to sabotage anyone else's work, even if I wanted to.Which I don't."

"Enough!"

Instructor Wolfe's voice cut through the tension.The crowd parted as the weathered forge master approached, her icy blue eyes sweeping over the assembled students before settling on the broken component in Einar's hand.

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"Give me that," she demanded, holding out a calloused hand.

Einar hesitated only a moment before surrendering the pieces. Wolfe turned them over, examining the break with practiced eyes.

"This is a clean fracture along a crystallization plane," she said finally. "Could be poor smelting, could be improper quenching." Her eye narrowed at Einar. "Or it could be that your design puts too much stress on a piece that's too thin for its function."

"Instructor Wolfe," Einar protested, "that steel was forged to my specifications. It should have withstood ten times that impact."

"Perhaps," Wolfe conceded, "but I won't have accusations thrown around my forge without evidence." She turned to face the gathered students. "Unless anyone saw Greenspire tampering with materials, return to your stations. Now."

The students dispersed reluctantly. Wolfe fixed Einar with a stare. "You'll need to catch up with the rest of the class. I suggest you start immediately with a new component."

"Yes, Instructor," he muttered, snatching back the broken pieces.

As he passed Thalia, he hissed, "This isn't over, Southerner."

Thalia returned to her station, feeling the weight of hostile stares. Northern students glared openly now, their earlier veiled suspicion abandoned. She took a deep breath and picked up her chisel, determined to focus on her own work — a delicate pattern

she was etching into brass plates for her golem's exterior.

The brass felt strange under her hands. There was a discord to its magical resonance, a stuttering in the flow that made her fingers tingle unpleasantly. She closed her eyes, focusing her awareness on the metal itself rather than its surface.

The magic should have moved through the alloy in smooth, golden waves—brass was a blend of copper and zinc, the copper providing stability while the zinc amplified magical conductivity. But the current felt thin, weak in places where it should have been strong.

Thalia opened her eyes with a sharp intake of breath. This wasn't the same quality brass she'd been working with before. The zinc content was lower — much lower than the standard alloy used for golem components. No wonder it felt wrong; this brass would barely hold the enchantments needed to animate a basic golem, let alone the complex mechanisms she was designing.

She glanced around the forge, watching as other students hammered and chiseled at their materials, oblivious to the flaws she could sense so clearly. How many of them were working with substandard metals? Were Einar's accusations of sabotage right, just misdirected?

Or was something else happening — something that might explain both the weapon thefts and the compromised materials?

Thalia ran her fingers along the brass plate again, feeling the discordant magic beneath her fingertips. This wasn't just a quality control issue. This felt deliberate, as if someone had intentionally provided inferior materials that looked correct to the naked eye but lacked the necessary magical properties.

She set down her chisel, mind racing. If the stolen weapons and the sabotaged

materials were connected, it painted a far more troubling picture than simple theft or Northern-Southern rivalries.

It suggested someone was systematically undermining Frostforge's ability to produce functional magical weapons.

Someone wanted to disrupt their training — and possibly even the war effort at large.

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Thalia left the Howling Forge with her mind churning like molten metal. The brass plate in her satchel felt like it was burning a hole through the fabric, though its temperature had nothing to do with heat. It was the wrongness of it — the discordant magical signature that shouldn't exist in academy-grade materials. She hurried across the frost-crusting courtyard, barely noticing the bite of the wind or the way her breath clouded before her. Something systematic was happening at Frostforge, something that went beyond petty rivalries or even the theft of weapons. If someone was deliberately compromising the materials students worked with, the consequences could be catastrophic when those compromised creations were activated.

The common area welcomed her with warmth after the biting cold outside. A fire crackled in the stone hearth, casting dancing shadows across worn furniture and the scattered possessions of first-year students. Despite the comfort, few students lingered here between classes; many preferred the library or practice rooms where classmates' eyes wouldn't follow their every move.

Luna, however, sat cross-legged in an oversized armchair near the window, her small frame almost swallowed by the faded upholstery. A massive leather-bound tome lay open on her lap, its yellowed pages covered in intricate diagrams of wild beasts and the magical bonds that could be formed with them. She appeared completely absorbed, her finger tracing a circle around the illustration of a Rimwolf, lips moving

silently as she read.

"Advanced beast bonding?" Thalia asked, dropping her satchel beside the chair opposite Luna's. "That's fourth-year material."

Luna's head jerked up, her eyes momentarily unfocused as if returning from a distant place. Then her characteristic smile spread across her face, slightly crooked, slightly too wide.

"Oh! Thalia! I didn't hear you come in." She blinked rapidly, a deliberate affectation that Thalia now recognized as part of Luna's carefully crafted persona. "Beast bonding? Yes, fascinating stuff. Did you know Rimwolves can sense magic fluctuations through solid ice?" She closed the book with theatrical care. "But you look troubled. More troubled than usual, I mean."

Thalia sank into the chair, glancing around to ensure they were alone before leaning forward. "Have you found anything new about the weapons disappearances?"

Luna's expression shifted subtly — the distracted veneer falling away as calculation took its place. She shook her head, dreadlocks swaying with the movement. "Nothing concrete. Senna's movements remain erratic but not definitively suspicious. She's been spending time in the east wing after curfew, but I haven't caught her near any of the armories."

"What about the most recent thefts? The war hammer and Riverton's daggers?"

"I was tracking a different lead last night," Luna admitted, her voice dropping lower. "A meeting between two instructors in the western courtyard. Nothing came of it — just discussion of curriculum changes." Her sharp eyes fixed on Thalia. "But something's happened, hasn't it? Something new."

Thalia extracted the brass plate from her satchel, placing it on the small table between them. To an untrained eye, it looked perfectly normal — smoothly finished, with half-completed etchings along one edge.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"There was an incident in the forge today. Einar Frostborne was working on an advanced golem design. He dropped a steel component, and it broke. Clean break, from just a short fall."

Luna's eyebrows rose. "Steel doesn't break that easily. Not academy-grade steel."

"Exactly. He immediately accused me of sabotage." Thalia's jaw tightened at the memory. "Started a whole scene, got the other Northerners riled up. Instructor Wolfe had to intervene."

"Typical Northern response — blame the closest Southerner." Luna picked up the brass plate, turning it over in her small hands. "But this isn't steel. Why are you showing me this?"

"After everyone went back to work, I noticed something wrong with my brass." Thalia reached out, running her finger along the edge of the plate. "Do you feel it?"

Luna closed her eyes, her expression shifting to one of intense concentration. After a moment, her brow furrowed, and she shook her head. "Explain."

"It feels...thin, somehow, " Thalia explained. "There's not enough zinc in this alloy. This isn't the standard brass we've been using. It's been altered — or replaced with an inferior substitute that looks the same, but won't hold up as part of a magical construct."

Luna set the plate down carefully, her mind visibly racing behind her dark eyes. "Was everyone experiencing this, or just you?"



"I'm not sure." Thalia frowned. "Einar didn't realize his steel was compromised until it broke."

"But you noticed," Luna pointed out. "Because of your sensitivity to magical currents." She said this matter-of-factly, not as a question.

Thalia nodded, a flush of warmth creeping up her neck at Luna's implicit recognition of her talent. "It's like...when I worked with herbs in my mother's shop, I could feel which plants had the strongest properties, which combinations would work best together. It's the same with metals here. I can feel the way magic moves through them, where it catches or flows smoothly."

"A valuable skill," Luna murmured, then leaned forward intently. "If other students are working with compromised materials without realizing it, this could be far more serious than simple theft. When they try to animate their golems..."

"Catastrophic failure," Thalia finished. "At best, the enchantments won't take. At worst..."

She didn't need to complete the thought. They both knew what happened when improperly enchanted metals were subjected to magical activation — explosive releases of energy, unpredictable breakdowns, constructs that turned on their creators. The results of such impurities dotted the Golem Fields.

"But why?" Thalia asked, voice barely above a whisper. "Who would benefit from sabotaging student projects?"

Luna's finger tapped rhythmically against the book cover. "The same people who might benefit from stealing weapons, perhaps? Weaken Frostforge's output, acquire magical weapons through theft rather than legitimate channels..."

"The Isle Wardens?"Thalia suggested.

"That's what I was thinking."Luna's eyes narrowed."Regardless, if all students are working with compromised materials — even ones who haven't noticed yet — the danger is immediate.You need to report this to the instructors."

Thalia's heart pounded at the thought.Coming forward with accusations about sabotaged materials would place her even more firmly in the spotlight — a position no Southern student wanted to occupy, especially now with tensions so high.

"If I report this, the Northern students might take it as confirmation of my guilt," she said."They'll think I'm trying to deflect suspicion."

"Would you rather wait until someone's golem explodes in their face?"Luna asked bluntly."Your credibility isn't worth someone's life."

The fire crackled loudly in the sudden silence that followed.Outside the window, snow had begun to fall again, fat flakes spiraling down from an iron-gray sky.

"You're right," Thalia conceded."But I need to be smart about how I approach this.Instructor Wolfe already saw Einar's broken component.If I bring this to her with evidence that it's not an isolated incident..."

"Bring samples," Luna suggested."Not just your brass, but ask other Southern students to check their materials too.The more evidence you gather, the harder it will be to dismiss."

Thalia nodded slowly, her mind already outlining a plan."I'll need to move quickly.If someone is systematically replacing academy materials with inferior substitutes, they might be planning something bigger."

Luna's normally playful expression had vanished entirely, replaced by the sharp focus Thalia had glimpsed only rarely. "I'll continue tracking Senna, but I'll expand my surveillance to the material storerooms as well. If someone is tampering with supplies, they need access."

Luna rummaged in her bag, producing a weathered journal. She opened it to a page that showed a detailed schematic of Frostforge's eastern wing. Thalia realized with a start that Luna had re-sketched and modified the standard academy map, adding notations and markings that definitely weren't part of the original.

"You've been busy," Thalia observed.

Luna's lips curved into a small smile. "People underestimate how much you can learn just by watching." She traced a finger along a corridor leading to the material storerooms. "I'll focus here tonight. You gather your evidence and prepare to speak with Instructor Wolfe."

Thalia nodded, reaching for the brass plate. As her fingers touched the metal, she felt again that discordant magical signature — the wrongness that had alerted her in the first place. It was a subtle flaw, one that most would miss. But it could mean the difference between life and death when the time came to activate their creations.

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"Whoever is behind this knows exactly what they're doing," she said softly. "They're counting on no one noticing until it's too late."

"They didn't count on you," Luna replied, her voice equally soft but filled with certainty. "That may be their biggest mistake."

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Thalia cradled the steel ingot in her palm, its weight familiar but its essence wrong. The metal felt hollow, devoid of the thrumming energy that normally pulsed beneath her fingertips when she handled Frostforge materials. Dawn had barely broken over the academy's frost-encrusted spires, casting long shadows across the empty forge as she arrived early, determined to have Instructor Wolfe confirm what she already knew — someone had replaced their high-quality ores with inferior substitutes.

The forge itself was eerily quiet without the usual clanging of hammers and hissing of quench tanks. Embers glowed in the main hearth, casting flickering red-orange light across the stone walls. Thalia's footsteps echoed as she navigated between workstations, her breath creating small clouds in the frigid morning air.

Instructor Wolfe stood at the far end of the forge, inspecting a set of tools with methodical precision. Her weathered hands moved with practiced efficiency, sorting tongs and hammers by size and function. She didn't look up when Thalia approached, though the subtle tightening of her shoulders indicated she was aware of the intrusion.

"Instructor," Thalia began, her voice cutting through the quiet with unexpected

volume."I need to report something."

Wolfe turned, her expression impassive."Greenspire.You're early."

Thalia held out the ingot, balancing it on her open palm."The metals, Instructor.They've been changed.This isn't the same steel we've been working with."

Wolfe's eyebrows rose slightly — the closest thing to surprise Thalia had ever seen on the woman's face.She took the ingot, hefting it with expert hands, then ran a fingertip along its surface."Looks standard to me."

"But it's not," Thalia insisted, fighting to keep frustration from her voice."The currents are different.Weaker.Less...pure."She struggled to articulate what she felt so clearly — the absence of that singing resonance that had guided her hands when crafting her golem components.

Wolfe's gaze sharpened, studying Thalia's face with newfound interest."Currents?"

"In the metal," Thalia explained, gesturing vaguely."The magic flow.It's like...like comparing fresh spring water to stagnant puddles.The same basic substance, but fundamentally different."

Wolfe turned the ingot over once more, her expression betraying nothing."And you can...feel this difference?"

"Can't you?"The question escaped before Thalia could stop it, and the realization struck her like a physical blow.Wolfe couldn't sense it.Her Instructor — one of the most accomplished metallurgists at the academy — couldn't detect what seemed painfully obvious to Thalia.

Wolfe handed the ingot back, her movements deliberate."I appreciate your attention

to detail, Greenspire, but this steel meets academy standards. Focus on your golem. First-years with half-built constructs shouldn't concern themselves with material sourcing." The dismissal in her tone was unmistakable.

"But—"

"That will be all." Wolfe turned away, effectively ending the conversation.

Thalia stood frozen, the ingot cold against her skin. The revelation of her unique sensitivity left her mind reeling. If Wolfe couldn't sense the difference in the metal, who could? And if no one else could detect the substitution, how would she ever prove what was happening?

With reluctant steps, she made her way to her workstation, where her partially completed golem waited. Unlike the rigid, militaristic designs favored by her Northern classmates, Thalia's construct bore more organic lines — a fusion of function and fluid form. She'd chosen brass for its superior conductivity of certain magical currents despite the odd looks it had earned her. The golem's torso, head, and arms were complete, the metal polished to a warm golden sheen that caught the light from the forge fires.

She ran her fingers along the smooth brass shoulder joint, feeling the faint magical signature she'd painstakingly worked into the metal. Hours of careful tempering, cooling, and infusion had created a vessel that could theoretically house a magical core. It was beautiful, in its way — a testament to what she'd learned since arriving at Frostforge.

But would it be enough? The thought of creating a permanent core from the substandard materials now available filled her with dread. She had dug through the metal stores for quality brass, but what if there were impurities within the metal that even she couldn't feel?

The forge's heavy door creaked open, and students began to file in, their voices shattering the morning quiet. They moved to their workstations with varying degrees of confidence, some eyeing their half-built constructs with obvious pride, others with thinly-veiled concern. Northern accents dominated the chatter — sharp, clipped syllables that still sounded foreign to Thalia's ear after months at the academy.

Instructor Wolfe strode to the front of the forge, placing a golem heart on the demonstration table with ceremonial precision. Silence fell immediately.

"Today," Wolfe announced, her voice carrying effortlessly across the space, "you will test your constructs for animation compatibility. Consider this a checkpoint. Many of you —" her gaze lingered briefly on several workstations, "— will likely need to start from scratch after today's test."

A ripple of anxiety passed through the room. Starting over would put any student weeks behind, a potentially devastating setback.

"When you craft your permanent cores, you will have one chance. One." Wolfe's voice hardened. "That is why we test now — to avoid wasting valuable materials and time."

With a few deft taps of her fingertips, Wolfe activated the heart. The sphere hummed to life, a soft blue glow emanating from within, pulsing like a heartbeat. The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees as ice magic radiated from the device.

"We'll proceed in sequence," Wolfe said, lifting the now-active heart and moving toward the first workstation.

A Northern girl with platinum braids stood stiffly beside her iron construct — a hulking, broad-shouldered design typical of Northern military specifications. Her face was pale, hands clasped tightly behind her back as Wolfe approached.

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Wolfe opened a panel in the golem's chest cavity and carefully placed the heart inside. The room held its collective breath.

Nothing happened.

The golem remained motionless, the heart's blue glow dimly visible through gaps in the metal plating. Ten seconds passed. Twenty. Wolfe removed the heart with a brisk motion.

"Insufficient ice magic infusion," she pronounced, her tone clinical. "The construct cannot channel the heart's energy. You will rebuild."

The girl's face drained of what little color it had, but she nodded stiffly, accepting the judgment without protest. Thalia felt a twinge of sympathy despite herself. The girl had spent weeks on that construct.

Wolfe moved to the next station, where a boy with a jagged scar across his chin waited. His golem was smaller, more compact, with articulated joints that suggested speed rather than brute force. When Wolfe placed the heart in its chest, the construct shuddered once, then straightened, its metal fingers flexing with audible clicks.

The boy's relief was palpable as Wolfe nodded approval. "Adequate," she said, which from her was high praise indeed.

She retrieved the heart and continued around the room, leaving alternating waves of relief and despair in her wake. Two more students passed the test; one failed. Then it was Thalia's turn.



Her palms were slick with sweat as Wolfe approached. The brass golem gleamed under the forge lights, its design noticeably different from the others — more elegant, with curves where others had used harsh angles, and intricate filigree work around the joints that served both decorative and functional purposes.

"Brass," Wolfe commented, the word neither approval nor criticism.

Thalia nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She'd chosen brass for its superior resistance to corrosion, a property she'd discovered through experimentation rather than instruction. Iron and steel were traditional, reliable — but brass sang with magic in a way the other metals didn't, at least to her senses.

Wolfe opened the panel in the golem's chest and placed the heart inside with practiced precision.

For one terrible moment, nothing happened. Thalia's heart sank. Then —

A surge of energy flowed through the brass like liquid light. The golem's eyes — elegant slits Thalia had carved and set with quartz — illuminated with a brilliant blue glow. Its fingers twitched, then curled into a fluid motion, unlike the jerky movements of the iron constructs. The golem turned its head, the movement unnervingly smooth, and looked directly at Thalia.

Recognition. There was recognition in those glowing eyes.

Thalia stood transfixed, barely breathing. She had created this. This rudimentary form of life, this consciousness, however limited — it had sprung from her hands, her understanding of metal and magic.

The golem raised its hand, mirroring Thalia's unconscious gesture. Around them, the forge had gone utterly silent.

Wolfe carefully removed the heart, and the light faded from the golem's eyes. It froze in position, a beautiful statue once more. The Instructor studied Thalia for a long moment, her expression unreadable.

"Well done," she said finally, the words quiet but clear.

Thalia exhaled slowly, dizzy with relief and lingering wonder. Her golem had not only animated but had demonstrated a level of responsiveness that exceeded any of the others. The validation flooded through her, momentarily washing away her concerns about the materials.

But as Wolfe moved away, reality reasserted itself. Her test had succeeded with a temporary heart. To create a permanent core, she would need materials of the highest quality — materials that were apparently being systematically replaced with inferior substitutes.

Wolfe stopped at the station beside Thalia's, where Einar waited. His golem was imposing, nearly seven feet tall, with a bulky frame and crude facial features hammered into a steel mask. The chest plate showed signs of hasty repair, faint weld lines visible where the broken pieces had been rejoined.

Wolfe frowned slightly but said nothing as she placed the heart into the golem's chest cavity.

The response was immediate and catastrophic.

Blue energy surged through the steel, not with the controlled flow of Thalia's brass construct, but in wild, erratic bursts. The golem jerked upright, its movements spasmodic and uncoordinated. A high-pitched whine emanated from its core, rising in pitch and volume.

"Something's wrong," Thalia said, backing away instinctively. "The energy flow is —"

The golem lurched forward, one massive arm swinging in a wild arc. Einar scrambled backward, stumbling over a tool cart with a crash. Other students scattered, pressing against the forge walls. The construct staggered as the magical energy coursed unchecked through its frame.

With a final, convulsive movement, it overbalanced and crashed to the stone floor. The impact shattered its hastily-repaired chest plate, sending fragments of steel scattering across the floor. Blue energy discharged in a blinding flash, and the whining sound cut off abruptly.

"Stay back!" Wolfe's command cut through the chaos. She approached the fallen construct warily, her movements precise and controlled. The golem lay in pieces, the heart still pulsing erratically among the wreckage.

With practiced movements, Wolfe deactivated the heart, the blue glow fading to nothing. The sudden silence was deafening.

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"Explain yourself," she demanded, turning to a pale-faced Einar.

"I — I don't know what happened," he stammered, his Northern accent thickened by fear. "I followed all the specifications, I swear it."

"Clearly not," Wolfe said, her voice laced with contempt. "This is shoddy workmanship, rushed and careless. Your construct was fundamentally unstable — the magical channels improperly aligned, the metal inadequately prepared. You endangered everyone in this forge with your negligence."

The boy's face flushed with humiliation as Wolfe continued to dismantle his work, pointing out every flaw and mistake to the now-attentive class. Thalia listened with only half her attention, her mind spinning with possibilities. The golem's failure confirmed her suspicions — the substandard metals were causing catastrophic instabilities when infused with magic.

A flicker of movement caught her eye. While Wolfe lectured and the other students watched in morbid fascination, a figure detached from the shadowed wall and moved with silent purpose toward the scattered golem remains.

Senna.

Her movements were fluid and practiced as she knelt, ostensibly to examine the damage. With a motion so quick Thalia almost missed it, Senna's hand darted out and snatched a jagged shard of the broken chest plate. The piece disappeared into her pocket as she straightened, her face a mask of studious concern.

Their eyes met across the forge. For an instant, Senna's silver-gray gaze locked with Thalia's, sharp and calculating. Then she looked away, her expression smoothing into bland attentiveness as she rejoined the group of students.

Thalia's pulse quickened. Why would Senna want a piece of a failed golem? What possible use could she have for a fragment of substandard steel?

Unless...

Unless she already knew the metals had been tampered with. Unless she was collecting evidence — or analyzing the results of her work.

The suspicion crystallized in Thalia's mind as Wolfe dismissed the class with a warning about the consequences of rushing their work. As students filed out, many casting wary glances at their own constructs, Thalia remained at her station, one hand resting protectively on her brass golem's shoulder.

Someone was systematically sabotaging the academy's materials. Someone with access to the forges and knowledge of metallurgy. Someone who moved through Frostforge unseen and unquestioned.

And Senna had just moved to the top of Thalia's list of suspects.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Thalia's breath clouded in front of her face as she turned another brittle page of *Principles of Frost Manipulation*. The tome weighed heavy in her lap, its leather binding cracked with age and cold. She shifted on the iron chair, grateful for the wolf pelt that separated her from the frigid metal. In the dim torchlight of Frostforge's library, the words seemed to shimmer and dance, either from the flickering flames or from her own exhaustion — she couldn't tell anymore. Three hours of study, and still

the fundamental principles of cryomancy eluded her grasp like morning mist, as they had since she'd first arrived at Frostforge.

Unlike the grand, sprawling libraries of her homeland — those marble-floored monuments to knowledge where Southern nobles paraded their wealth as much as their intellect — Frostforge's library was compact and utilitarian. No gilded shelves or stained glass, just walls of reinforced ice-steel lined with books and scrolls. The collection was impressive not for its size but for its specialization: metallurgy, elemental magic, combat tactics, and Northern history. Knowledge is meant for survival, not pleasure.

The space had been carved directly into the mountain, with low ceilings that trapped the perpetual cold in a way that made even breathing feel like an exercise in endurance. Between the stacks, students hunched over their work, visible only as dark silhouettes against the scattered light of wall-mounted torches. The library's layout created perfect pockets of isolation — sound was swallowed by the dense shelving and the perpetual layer of frost that coated all surfaces.

Thalia underlined a passage with her fingernail, trying to commit it to memory: "The practitioner must envision not the creation of cold, but the extraction of heat — a subtle distinction that separates novices from masters." She closed her eyes, extending her awareness toward the small metal bowl of water on the table beside her. Breathe in, breathe out. Heat is energy. Energy can be redirected. She imagined drawing the warmth from the water, pulling it through herself and dispersing it.

When she opened her eyes, the water remained stubbornly liquid. Not even a hint of frost at the edges.

"Hells," she muttered, pushing back a strand of hair that had escaped her tight braid. Ice magic should not be this difficult. She could sense the vibrations in metal across a room, could manipulate the complex dance of elements needed to animate a

golem heart, but ask her to freeze a bowl of water and suddenly she was as magically adept as a stone. She thought her troubles might lie in the distinction between materials and energy — the properties of existing matter were easy for her to sense, but cryomancy required the practitioner to create a reaction, to alter states.

The sound of boots on stone broke her concentration — heavy, deliberate steps approaching from between the stacks. She recognized the rhythm before she saw the face. Kaine.

He emerged from the shadows, his broad shoulders nearly filling the narrow passage between shelves. In his arms he carried a stack of parchment and loose notes, their edges curling with age. The torchlight caught the sharp planes of his face, highlighting the intensity in his ice-blue eyes.

"Found you," he said, his deep voice lowered to the library's obligatory whisper. Without waiting for an invitation, he set his materials down on the table beside her, claiming the space with the casual confidence that always left her both irritated and intrigued.

"I was trying to be difficult to find," Thalia replied, but moved her bowl of water to make room. The tome on her lap slid dangerously toward the floor, and she caught it with a quick reflex. "What's all this?"

Kaine's normally stern expression had softened with something rare — excitement. She'd seen that look only a few times before, usually when he'd mastered a particularly challenging forge technique.

"I've been researching those markings we found beneath the forge last year," he said, arranging the papers in a specific order. "And I've made progress. Real progress."

Thalia closed her book and set it aside, her frustrations with cryomancy instantly

forgotten."You deciphered more of it?"

"Not just more.All of it."His fingers, calloused from years at the forge, gently smoothed out a central piece of parchment covered in his precise handwriting."It took cross-referencing with some obscure Northern runic systems and a dialect that's practically extinct, but I found patterns, repetitions."

Thalia leaned forward, her eyes scanning his notes.His handwriting was as controlled and disciplined as the man himself — each character formed with mechanical precision, annotations arranged in clean columns.It was the work of someone who approached problems methodically, leaving nothing to chance.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"What does it say?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper now.

Kaine cleared his throat slightly, then recited: "'The mountain does not yield without cost. The first flames of the forge were kindled in blood, and the Founders took their gift with hands both eager and trembling. But beneath the anvil's weight, beneath the hammer's song, memory stirs — unseen, unheard, but never undone. The Founder's Price was paid, yet the mountain remembers. The forge burns, but its embers rest on a past that cannot be buried.'"

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with unspoken implications. Thalia felt a chill that had nothing to do with the perpetual cold of Frostforge.

"It's a warning," she said finally.

Kaine nodded. "Or a confession." He laid out several sketches, rough copies of the original markings with his translations noted beneath each symbol. "Look at the tense structure, the formal cadence. This wasn't graffiti or casual notation. This was deliberately inscribed, meant to last."

"But who would write this? And when?" Thalia traced the edge of one of his sketches, a curved symbol that he'd translated as "memory."

Kaine shook his head, his expression thoughtful. "I think that's the wrong question." He leaned closer, his voice dropping even lower. "The question is why they wrote it. Why hide this message in a place few would ever see? Why encode it in a dying language?"

"You think Frostforge wasn't originally built as an academy."It wasn't a question.Thalia could see where his logic was leading.

"I think the academy was built on top of something older.Something with a different purpose."He tapped the phrase 'The Founders' price was paid.'"Whatever that purpose was, I think it was deliberately buried, erased from history."

Thalia thought of the uncanny way the mountain seemed to channel power into their metallurgy, how the forges burned hotter than any natural flame should allow."The mountain remembers," she echoed."What do you think it means by 'kindled in blood'?"

Before Kaine could answer, the distinctive sound of boots skidding on frost-slick stone interrupted them.A small figure appeared at the end of their row, momentarily off-balance before righting herself with a dancer's precision.

Luna Meadows, breathless and wide-eyed, her short dreadlocks adorned with tiny metal rings that caught the torchlight as she moved.Her dark eyes scanned the library until they found Thalia.

"There you are!"Luna exclaimed, then winced at the echo of her own voice in the quiet space.She hurried toward them, lowering her volume but not her intensity."I was looking for you.I have news."

Without invitation, Luna dropped into the empty chair beside Thalia, her movements quick and bird-like.She leaned in close, seemingly oblivious to Kaine's presence across the table.

"I finally figured out where Senna goes at night," she whispered, her eyes bright with triumph.

Kaine shifted in his seat, the iron chair scraping slightly against the stone floor. Luna's head snapped up.

"Oh," she said, blinking rapidly. "You're here too."

A flicker of amusement crossed Thalia's face. Most people reacted to Kaine's presence immediately — his size, his reputation, the intensity he carried like a cloak. But Luna, in her singular focus, hadn't even noticed him. His eyebrows drew together in mild confusion.

Luna recovered quickly, waving her hand dismissively. "You can listen in, I suppose. No harm there." She turned back to Thalia as if the matter was settled.

"What did you find?" Thalia prompted, pushing aside Kaine's translation work to give Luna her full attention.

Luna's voice dropped to a true whisper. "I've been tracking her movements for weeks now. It wasn't easy — she's careful, uses different routes, doubles back. But last night, I finally managed to follow her all the way."

"To where?" Kaine asked, drawn into the conversation despite himself.

"A hidden chamber, just past the southwest corner of the Howling Forge," Luna said, drawing a quick map with her finger on the tabletop. "There's a maintenance passage that runs behind the coal storage. Most people think it's just for ventilation, but it continues deeper than it should."

Thalia's mind raced. The location was close to where several of the weapons had disappeared. "And? What did you find? The stolen weapons?"

Luna's expression faltered slightly. "That's the strange part. No weapons — at least,

not the missing ones. Instead, there was an anvil, smaller than the ones in the main forge. Tools, arranged with obsessive precision. Metal shavings on the floor — unusual ones, with traces of magical residue."

"She's crafting something," Kaine concluded, his brow furrowed. "In secret."

"But why?" Thalia asked, genuinely perplexed. "If she wanted to work on a personal project, she could use the student forge like everyone else. What is she making that needs to be hidden from both students and instructors?"

Kaine leaned back, his face partially in shadow. "She's been different lately. Distant. Usually, she's..." He hesitated, uncomfortable.

"Usually she's trailing after you like a shadow?" Luna supplied helpfully. "Yes, I've noticed that too. The change in behavior coincides with when the thefts started."

Thalia felt the pieces shifting in her mind, refusing to form a complete picture. "Did you see any evidence of what she's crafting? Any finished work?"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Luna's shoulders slumped slightly. "I couldn't stay long enough to search properly. There was a noise from the main forge — a night guard doing rounds, I think. I had to leave before I was caught."

"So we still don't know what she's up to," Thalia concluded, frustration evident in her voice.

"But now we know where to look," Kaine pointed out, his tactical mind already moving forward. "If we want answers, someone needs to go back and investigate properly."

The three fell silent, each considering the implications. The distant sound of a page turning reminded Thalia they weren't completely alone, despite the library's effective acoustic isolation.

"This has to be connected to the weapon thefts," Thalia said finally. "And the sabotaged materials for the golem projects."

Luna nodded vigorously. "I thought the same thing. Especially after what happened with Einar's golem going berserk."

"I saw Senna collect a piece of the broken metal afterward," Thalia supplied. "She was very...purposeful about it." The memory of that catastrophic failure — the screams, the wild, uncontrolled magic, the sense of wrongness she'd felt in the metal itself — sent a shiver down her spine.

"Lingering around the forge during a second-year class. Almost like she was

expecting it to break, and checking to make sure it actually happened," Luna murmured.

Two mysteries,Thalia thought, her gaze shifting from Kaine's translation notes to Luna's face.One buried in the past... the other unfolding in the present.

The bowl of water beside her had finally developed a thin skin of ice across its surface — too late to count as success in her studies, but perfectly timed to mirror the chill of foreboding that had settled over their discoveries.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thalia rounded the corner of the east corridor, her mind swimming with fragments of ancient symbols and the image of Senna hunched over stolen metal scraps.The morning light slanted through the high, narrow windows of Frostforge, casting long shadows across the stone floor and illuminating motes of dust that danced in the frigid air.She nearly missed the cluster of students ahead — a tight knot of tension forming in the otherwise empty passageway — but the sharp echo of raised voices snapped her attention forward.There, surrounded by a semicircle of Northern students, stood Roran, his shoulders squared and jaw set in that stubborn way she'd come to recognize as dangerous.

Her steps faltered.The scene before her crystallized with awful clarity: five Northern students — Nash Ironhall at their center — had Roran cornered against the wall.Nash's finger jabbed toward Roran's chest, his face flushed with the particular shade of righteous anger that seemed endemic to Northern blood when confronted with Southerners.

"Not again," Thalia muttered, quickening her pace.The confrontations had grown more frequent since the weapons thefts began, with Northern students increasingly bold in their accusations against Southerners — especially Roran, who was an easy

target for suspicion.

She was still too far away to hear the exact words, but Nash's posture told her everything she needed to know. His broad frame leaned forward aggressively, one hand clenched at his side while the other gestured sharply at Roran. The Northern student's cronies flanked him like a honor guard — all second-years with the bulk and confidence that came from surviving their first year at Frostforge.

Thalia recognized Nash's lieutenant from her metallurgy class — a stocky girl with close-cropped blonde hair who had sneered when Thalia successfully animated her golem heart. Beside her stood Matthias and another girl from Nash's clique, a young woman with long, flowing white hair.

"—all Isle rats are the same," Nash's voice carried down the corridor as Thalia drew closer. "Sneaking around, stealing what isn't yours."

Roran's response was too low to hear, but the tight smile on his face spoke volumes. Thalia winced. That smile — a mask that couldn't precede anything good.

Should I help? Thalia wondered, her pace slowing. The last time she'd defended Roran, he'd shrugged off her assistance coldly. The memory stung, sharper than she cared to admit.

Nash's voice cut through her hesitation. "Everyone knows what you are. A spy. An infiltrator. Your kind aren't even human — just storm-touched vermin pretending to walk upright."

The corridor seemed to grow colder. The dehumanizing rhetoric was new, an escalation that made Thalia's skin prickle with alarm. The stolen weapons had transformed normal rivalry into something uglier, more dangerous.

Roran's knuckles whitened at his sides."Say that again."His voice was soft, barely audible, but it carried the static charge of an approaching storm.

Nash leaned in, his lips peeling back from his teeth."You heard me, Warden scum.You're not a person.You're a thing that should be put down like the —"

Thalia broke into a run."Stop!"she called, but her voice was lost in the sudden crack of Roran's fist connecting with Nash's jaw.

The Northern student staggered back, eyes wide with shock — then narrowed with fury.With a roar, he launched himself at Roran, tackling him against the wall with enough force to rattle the nearby torch brackets.The twins surged forward to grab Roran's arms, pinning them wide as Nash drove a fist into his stomach.

Roran grunted, doubling over, but managed to wrench one arm free.He drove his elbow into Matthias's face with a sickening crack.Blood sprayed from the boy's nose, and he howled, stumbling backward.

"Stop it!"Thalia shouted, now close enough to be heard.No one seemed to notice her.The corridor had erupted into chaos, the air thick with grunts and the dull thuds of flesh striking flesh.

Nash's blonde lieutenant lunged forward, driving her knee into Roran's side as Nash caught him with an uppercut that snapped his head back.Roran twisted, using the momentum to break free from Matthias's grasp, and managed to land a solid punch to Nash's ribs before the other three swarmed him.

Thalia flung her bag aside and reached for her magic, feeling the metallic tang of the torch brackets and door hinges around her.Before she could channel a spell, a thunderous voice boomed down the corridor.



"ENOUGH!"

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Instructor Maven strode toward them, her single amber eye blazing with fury, the metal patch over her missing eye reflecting the torchlight like a small, angry sun. The students froze mid-motion, the air suddenly electric with a different kind of tension.

"What in the frozen hell is going on here?" Maven demanded, her scarred hands already separating combatants.

Nash wiped blood from his split lip. "He attacked me, Instructor. Unprovoked. We were just talking and —"

"That's not true," Thalia interrupted, finally reaching the group. "I heard you taunting him. Calling him —"

"Did I ask for your input, Greenspire?" Maven cut her off, the metal claw pendant at her neck swinging as she turned. "Return to your quarters. All of you," she barked at the onlookers who had gathered during the fight. Then, to the participants: "Nash, take your friends to the infirmary. You —" she pointed at Roran, "— stay put."

Nash smirked as he backed away. He and his friends departed with muttered threats disguised as compliance, leaving Roran slumped against the wall, Maven looming over him, and Thalia hovering uncertainly nearby.

Roran's face was a mess. His left eye had already begun to swell, a dark bruise blooming across his cheekbone. Blood trickled from a split in his lower lip, and he held his ribs protectively. Despite this, he straightened under Maven's scrutiny, defiance written in every line of his body.

"I won't apologize," he said before Maven could speak.

The Instructor studied him with her single, unnerving eye. "Did I ask for an apology, recruit?"

"No, but —"

"Then save your breath. This is the third altercation you've been involved in this month." Maven's voice lowered. "The academy doesn't look kindly on those who can't control their tempers. Especially not with the weapons thefts unresolved."

Roran stiffened. "You think I —"

"I think," Maven interrupted, "that a smart recruit would be keeping his head down and staying out of trouble right now. Particularly a Southern recruit with...unusual skills."

The implication hung in the air between them, heavy as a glacier. Thalia held her breath.

Roran's face hardened. Without another word, he pushed himself off the wall, wincing slightly as he straightened. He shot one unreadable glance at Thalia — not quite anger, not quite gratitude — before stalking past Maven and disappearing down the corridor, leaving a few drops of blood on the stone floor in his wake.

Maven's eye followed him, then flicked to Thalia. "Something to add, Greenspire?"

Thalia swallowed. "He didn't start it. Not really. Nash called him —"

"Let me give you some advice," Maven said, her voice dropping to a dangerous purr. "Frostforge doesn't care about fairness. It cares about strength and survival. Your

friend would do well to remember that."She tapped the bear claw at her neck."And so would you."

With that, she turned and strode away, her footsteps echoing in the now-empty corridor.

Thalia stood alone, torn between following Roran and giving him space.The last time she'd tried to help, he'd pushed her away with cold finality.Yet the image of his battered face and the carefully blank expression as he left stirred something protective in her chest.

She retrieved her bag from where she'd thrown it, brushing off the dust.The corridor felt colder now, the morning light harsher.Somewhere in Frostforge, weapons continued to disappear, ancient secrets lurked beneath the stones, and Senna conducted experiments with stolen metals.And now Roran was bleeding and alone, possibly suspected of theft by the instructors themselves.

Thalia sighed, adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder."Prioritize," she murmured to herself, her mother's favorite word when the herb shop became overwhelming.The problem was, at Frostforge, everything seemed equally important — equally dangerous to ignore.

She cast one last glance in the direction Roran had gone.The corridor stretched empty and silent, offering no answers.With reluctance weighing her steps, Thalia turned away.She'd check on him later when his pride had healed a little.For now, she had advanced metallurgy in ten minutes, and Frostforge had made it clear that tardiness was unacceptable for Southern students.

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The Crystalline Plateau jutted from Frostforge's eastern face like a glass blade, its

surface a sheet of ice so clear it seemed to capture the sky itself. Thalia's breath plumed in the frigid air as she made the final climb, her fingers stiff inside her gloves despite the warming charm she'd activated before leaving the academy proper. She'd known Roran might be here — had overheard him mention once that he came to the plateau when he needed to think, drawn to its isolation and the view of the strange, frozen wasteland below. What she didn't know was whether he'd welcome her presence or turn her away like he had in the corridor a few days before.

The wind bit at her exposed face as she crested the rise, carrying the scent of ice and distant pine. The plateau stretched before her, a flat expanse of translucent blue-white that ended in a sheer drop to the valley below. And there, silhouetted against the vast northern sky, stood Roran.

He hadn't noticed her yet. He stood with his back to the academy, face turned toward the horizon, his wild black curls whipping in the wind. Even from a distance, Thalia could see the rigid set of his shoulders, the way he flexed and unfurled his bruised hands at his sides. The swelling around his eye had darkened to a violent purple that stood out starkly against his brown skin.

Thalia hesitated. Perhaps she should leave him to his solitude. But before she could decide, Roran turned slightly, catching sight of her from the corner of his blackened eye. He didn't wave or call out — just turned back to the view, which she took as neither invitation nor rejection.

She crossed the ice carefully, the special grips on her boots preventing her from slipping. When she reached him, she said nothing, merely took up position beside him, close but not touching, and followed his gaze out over the valley below.

The Golem Fields stretched to the horizon, a frozen graveyard of metal and stone. Hundreds — perhaps thousands — of constructs littered the valley. Some were small as children, others towered three times the height of a man. Some were

immobile, frozen where they stood, or else slumped over in useless heaps of metal; others were still active, roving through the fields or waiting to be activated by proximity. All were dusted with snow, their metal joints glittering in the weak winter sun. Years of accumulated ice had transformed many into abstract sculptures, their original forms only vaguely discernible beneath crystalline shells.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"The failed experiments," Roran said suddenly, his voice rough. "That's what Instructor Virek called them last year. Every golem that wasn't perfect enough for Frostforge's standards, abandoned out there. Useless junk."

Thalia glanced at him. "Some of them are still functional."

"Right." He flexed his right hand again, wincing slightly. His knuckles were split and crusted with dried blood. "They just weren't obedient enough."

The bitterness in his voice was new — or at least, newly unmasked. For a long moment, they stood in silence, the wind carrying occasional creaks and groans from the field below as the warming day caused the ice to shift on the metal forms.

"Are you okay?" Thalia finally asked, looking directly at his bruised face.

Roran's mouth quirked in what might have been an attempt at his usual charming smile. "What, this?" He gestured at his black eye. "Just a little Northern hospitality. You should see the other guy."

"I did see the other guy," Thalia replied, not letting him deflect. "Nash looked a lot better than you do right now."

The forced humor faded from Roran's face. He turned back to the view, his jaw tight. "It doesn't matter."

"It does matter." Thalia shifted to face him more directly. "They outnumbered you five to one. And Nash — what he said was —"

"Nothing I haven't heard before," Roran cut her off. His breath clouded between them. "Isle rat. Warden scum. Less than human. It's all the same garbage."

"That doesn't make it right."

Roran ran a hand through his tangled curls, wincing as his bruised fingers caught in the wind-knotted mass. "No, it doesn't. But me punching him didn't make it right either. Just confirmed every suspicion they already had." He let out a harsh laugh. "The instructors probably think I'm stealing the weapons too."

Thalia felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind. "Are they questioning you?"

"Not yet." Roran's eyes tracked a distant raven circling above the Golem Fields. "But they will. The thing is..." He trailed off, his expression clouding.

"What?" Thalia prompted gently.

"I'm tired, Thalia." The admission seemed to deflate him slightly. "Tired of constantly defending myself. Tired of being suspected just because of where I'm from, how I fight." He turned to her, and for the first time since she'd known him, the easy confidence was gone from his face. "Do you know what it's like to have everyone watching you, waiting for you to confirm their worst assumptions?"

Thalia thought of her first weeks at Frostforge, of the sidelong glances and whispered comments. "I do, actually."

"Right." He looked abashed. "Of course you do."

The wind shifted, bringing a fresh bite of cold. Roran pulled his cloak tighter, then surprised her by continuing.



"There's something I haven't told you. About why I was late returning to Frostforge this year."

Thalia kept her face carefully neutral. "You said you were held up at a checkpoint."

"That happened," he confirmed. "But it wasn't the whole story." He stared out at the frozen wasteland, as if gathering his thoughts from the ice. "I wasn't just delayed. I...went looking for information."

"About what?"

"About who killed my family." His voice had gone flat, emotionless in a way that spoke of carefully controlled pain. "The raid that destroyed our trading caravan wasn't random. I've always known that. So during break, I traveled the coast, asking questions."

Thalia remained silent, sensing that any interruption might cause him to retreat behind his usual walls. The wind whipped a strand of hair across her face, but she didn't move to brush it away.

"I talked to everyone who might know something — mercenaries, sailors, fishermen. Even found a former Isle Warden in a coastal prison." Roran's eyes hardened at this. "He wasn't very cooperative at first."

The implication hung in the air between them. Thalia suppressed a shiver.

"What did you learn?" she asked, when it became clear he wasn't going to continue without prompting.

Roran shrugged, the movement too casual, too rehearsed. "Not much. Dead ends, mostly. A few rumors about a specific raid commander, but nothing I could verify." He

glanced at her, then away. "Waste of time, really."

Thalia studied his profile. There was a tension in his jaw that hadn't been there before, a guardedness in his eyes that made her wonder what he wasn't saying. She'd seen Roran lie before — charm his way past suspicious instructors or talk himself out of trouble with easy smiles and half-truths. This felt different. More personal.

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"You didn't tell me you were planning this," she said quietly.

"It was...impulsive." Another shrug, equally unconvincing. "I got word about a lead and just followed it."

"Why tell me now?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Roran's gaze remained fixed on the horizon. "I don't know." His fingers flexed again, the bruises darkening in the cold. "Maybe I'm tired of keeping secrets." He turned to her finally, his face unreadable. "Or maybe I just wanted someone to know there's more to me than what Nash and his friends think."

Something in his tone struck Thalia as off — rehearsed, perhaps, or not entirely truthful. His eyes didn't quite meet hers.

"Is there something else? Something you're not telling me?" The words escaped before she could reconsider them.

A flicker of something — alarm? Guilt? — crossed his features before being replaced by a more familiar expression of rueful charm. "Just that my eye hurts like hell and I'm considering pushing Nash off this plateau next time I see him." He forced a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "But that's probably not a confession I should make out loud."

The attempt at humor fell flat between them. Thalia wanted to press further, to ask about the gaps in his story and the hesitation in his voice. But the shuttered look that had crept back into his expression told her she'd reached the limit of what he was

willing to share today.

The wind picked up, sending a spray of ice crystals dancing across the plateau's surface. One of the massive golems in the field below creaked and shifted, ice falling from its limbs in a glittering cascade.

"We should head back," Roran said, already turning toward the path. "It's getting colder."

It wasn't, really — the sun had actually emerged from behind the clouds, warming the air slightly — but Thalia nodded anyway. As they picked their way back toward the academy in silence, she couldn't shake the feeling that something fundamental had shifted between them. Roran had opened a door just slightly, but what she'd glimpsed inside wasn't what she'd expected.

His confession about seeking vengeance made sense — fit with everything she knew about him, his loss, his determination. But there was something else, something hidden beneath the words. A current running counter to the surface flow, subtle but unmistakable to someone trained to sense magical discordance.

Thalia cast a sideways glance at him as they walked, noting the careful way he held himself, guarding his injured ribs. The Roran she thought she knew wouldn't have hidden his search for his family's killers. He would have mentioned it, perhaps even asked for her help.

So why keep it secret? And why reveal it now, after the fight with Nash?

As they reached the academy gates, the questions circled in her mind like ravens over the frozen Golem Fields, dark shapes against an inscrutable sky.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Thalia's hands moved with delicate precision as she etched the final series of grooves into the gleaming silver sphere. The metal sang beneath her tools, responding to her touch in a way that steel or brass never did. Silver was the most conductive, the most responsive to magical currents — and thankfully, one of the few metals in the Howling Forge that hadn't been compromised. She traced her finger along a completed line, feeling the nearly imperceptible warmth as it absorbed a fraction of her intent. The golem heart was coming together perfectly, each connection and circuit laid with meticulous care. When Instructor Wolfe announced that class time was ending, Thalia barely looked up from her work.

"Advanced students may continue working if they wish," Wolfe added, her voice carrying across the forge. "The other second-years will be arriving momentarily for their lesson."

Thalia exhaled with relief. The creation of a golem heart required uninterrupted concentration; breaking her flow now would set her back days. Around her, three other advanced students also chose to remain, their faces illuminated by the glow of forge-fire and molten metal. The rest packed their tools, eager to escape the sweltering heat and acrid smells of the workshop.

Heat pulsed from the nearby furnaces in steady waves, beading sweat along Thalia's hairline. She tucked a stray lock behind her ear, leaving a smudge of silver dust on her temple. The rhythmic clanging of hammers and the hiss of cooling metal formed a familiar backdrop to her thoughts as she returned to her work, measuring each chisel strike with mathematical precision.

Silver was an unusual choice for a golem heart. Most students opted for copper — easier to work with, more forgiving of mistakes. Even Instructor Wolfe had raised an eyebrow when she'd brought out the precious metal. Silver required triple the work hours and left no margin for error. One misplaced groove, and weeks of effort would be wasted.

But silver conducted magical energy better than any other metal, and Thalia needed every advantage she could get.

As she worked, her thoughts circled back to the mystery that had been consuming her for weeks. Weapons disappearing from across the academy. Training gear being replaced with inferior materials. And now, students' projects failing catastrophically. Yet, through it all, the silver reserves remained untouched.

Why?

The answer materialized as she carved another delicate line: silver made terrible weapons. Too soft for blades, too malleable for armor. Beautiful, valuable — but useless in combat without significant magical enhancement. The saboteur wasn't interested in precious metals; they wanted iron, steel, materials of war.

The implications chilled her despite the forge's heat. Whoever was behind this wanted to ensure that when Frostforge students faced real combat, their weapons would fail them.

The door to the forge swung open, admitting a stream of second-year students. Their voices carried across the workshop, a blend of excitement and nervousness that Thalia recognized from her own first days. She glanced up briefly, noting the predominance of familiar Southern accents. The regular class — those deemed less talented, less worthy of acceleration.

She returned to her etching, but her attention remained split. From the corner of her eye, she watched as Instructor Wolfe organized the newcomers around a central workbench.

"Today," Instructor Wolfe announced, her voice pitched to carry over the ambient noise of the forge, "we begin our study of golem animation. The heart you see before

me is the cornerstone of any successful construct."

Thalia's hands continued their work, but her ears strained to catch Wolfe's words. She held up a simple brass core, perhaps one-third the complexity of what Thalia was creating, and began explaining its basic functions. The students crowded closer, their faces rapt with attention.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"The heart is typically comprised of a single alloy," Wolfe continued. "The exterior grooves you see here direct the flow of cryomantic energy and allow the core to be activated."

Basic information, taught to the advanced class weeks ago. Thalia watched the Southern students absorbing this knowledge for the first time and felt a twist of anger in her gut. By the time they mastered these fundamentals, the Northern students would be leagues ahead. When the Forge Gauntlet came, these second-years would enter at a deliberate disadvantage.

And that, she realized, was exactly the point.

Frostforge Academy didn't want Southern graduates returning home with equal knowledge and power. The North maintained its dominance by ensuring that recruits from the Southern Kingdoms received just enough education to be useful, but never enough to be threatening.

She turned back to her silver sphere, channeling her frustration into her work. The metal seemed to respond to her emotions, the grooves taking on a subtle glow as she completed them. This, at least, she could control. This, she could perfect.

Wolfe's voice continued in the background. "Now, I'll demonstrate the proper installation of a heart into a prepared framework. Who has completed the preliminary assembly exercise from last week?"

A thin Southern boy with sandy hair raised his hand. There was tension in the movement, a visible strain that Thalia recognized immediately: the desperate desire to



prove oneself. She'd felt it herself countless times.

"Bring your construct forward," Wolfe instructed.

The boy retrieved a small, humanoid framework from his workstation. It was crude compared to the advanced students' work, but solidly built. Thalia could see he'd taken care with the joints and articulation points. Not bad for a beginner.

"This will serve for our demonstration," Wolfe said, examining the framework critically. "Though the balance is questionable, and the proportions are somewhat irregular."

The boy's face fell, and Thalia felt another spike of anger. The framework was more than adequate for a first attempt. Wolfe's criticism wasn't constructive; it was meant to diminish.

Wolfe placed the demonstration heart inside the chest cavity of the small golem, then guided the boy through the activation sequence. "A properly installed heart will resonate with the surrounding ice-metal," she explained to the class. "The animation process begins with a spark of intent from the crafter, followed by the autonomous circulation of energy through the prepared circuits."

The boy placed his hand on the golem's chest as instructed, his face a mask of concentration. For a moment, nothing happened.

Then the golem shuddered.

Thalia felt it before she saw it — a wrongness in the metal's song, a discordant note that didn't belong. She dropped her tools and stood just as the golem's limbs began to twitch violently.

"Step back," Wolfe ordered, but she was a moment too late.

The golem lurched upright, its movements jagged and unpredictable. Its head rotated a full circle, an impossible motion that snapped something in its neck. The boy backed away, confusion turning to fear as the construct staggered toward him, one arm windmilling outward with unnatural force.

"Stay away from it!" Wolfe shouted, lunging toward the construct.

But the golem moved with unexpected speed. Its arm connected with the boy's outstretched hand, then continued upward, crushing his forearm against his chest. The sound of breaking bone cut through the workshop like a knife.

The boy screamed, a high, thin sound that pierced Thalia to her core. She pushed through the panicking crowd, reaching for the broken golem with her magic rather than her hands. She could feel the discord in its heart, the wild, unpredictable surges of energy where there should have been controlled flow.

Chaos erupted. Students scattered, some frozen in horror, others rushing to help. Two of the advanced students vaulted over workbenches, trying to restrain the malfunctioning construct. Wolfe grabbed a heavy magnetic rod used for emergency deactivations and swung it toward the golem's chest.

To Thalia's shock, the construct fought back. It caught the rod mid-swing, its fingers locking around the metal with a screech of strain. Sparks flew where the steel connected with iron. As it held the deactivation rod at bay, it turned its attention back to its injured creator, who was curled on the ground, cradling his broken arm.

It's going to kill him, Thalia realized in a haze of panic. This student wouldn't be as lucky as Einar, whose hostile construct had fallen apart before it could do any damage. The inferior metal used in this golem wasn't just making its behavior

erratic. It was making it violent.

Wolfe seemed to come to the same horrifying conclusion. "Get him out of there!" she shouted, her voice sharp with urgency. Two Southern students surged forward, dragging the boy away just as the golem took another staggering step forward, its limbs jerking like a marionette in the hands of a drunk puppeteer.

Without hesitation, Wolfe pivoted and slammed the magnetic deactivation rod she already held against the golem's chest. The instant the rod made contact with the iron-rich plating, it latched on with a sharp clack. A hum reverberated through the room like a struck bell.

With a final, violent convulsion, the golem collapsed into a heap of twitching metal. Wolfe straightened, breathing heavily, her composure barely intact. She looked up, her gaze seeking the injured boy. He was pale, his face contorted; Thalia could tell that he was trying to hide his pain, trying to appear strong, but failing miserably. She felt a twinge of sympathy for him. He had almost died. Any student with a broken bone would be in agony, but the Northerners in the room were already snickering, whispering to each other under their breaths. Within the next few days, Thalia was sure, their shape of their mockery would solidify, and the injured boy would become a laughingstock throughout the academy.

"Get him to the healers," Wolfe ordered. "Everyone else, class dismissed. Clear the area immediately."

As students rushed to comply, Thalia approached the fallen golem. Despite Wolfe's instructions, she knelt beside it, examining the twisted metal limbs and the exposed heart. Up close, she could see what she'd suspected: the steel alloy used for the framework was flawed, riddled with impurities that disrupted the magical current.

She pried open the chest cavity and removed the heart. Unlike the framework, the

copper core was perfect — standard academy issue, untainted. But it had been placed into a body that couldn't properly channel its energy, creating a feedback loop of increasingly chaotic instructions.

"Greenspire! I said clear the area," Wolfe snapped, striding toward her.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Thalia stood, the broken heart clutched in her palm. "The metal in this framework is compromised," she said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her. "The same way the Northern student's project failed last week. It's not their craftsmanship that's the problem — it's the materials."

Wolfe's expression darkened. "That's a ridiculous claim."

"Examine it yourself," she challenged, holding out the fragment of steel. "This alloy is at least thirty percent impure. No amount of skill could make it hold a stable animation."

For a moment, she thought Wolfe might consider her words. But then the Instructor's face closed off, and she took the heart from Thalia without examining the steel. "Return to your workstation and pack up, Greenspire. We're done for today."

"But—"

"That's an order." Her tone left no room for argument.

Thalia clenched her jaw and returned to her bench, carefully securing her half-completed silver heart in its protective case. Around her, the forge emptied of stunned students, leaving behind the scent of burnt metal and the echo of the boy's scream.

She packed her tools with methodical precision, each movement controlled despite the anger building inside her. This wasn't just inconvenient anymore — it was dangerous. Someone had nearly killed that boy, and the faculty were either blind to it or complicit.

As she left the forge, her resolve hardened like cooling steel. She wouldn't let this continue. If the instructors wouldn't listen, she'd find another way to expose the truth. Whatever it took, whatever the risk, she would not stand by while her fellow students were put in danger.

The silver heart in her bag seemed to pulse in response to her determination, a secret promise between craftsman and creation. She would find whoever was behind this, and when she did, they would pay.

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The Crystalline Plateau glittered beneath the morning sun, its polished surface reflecting light like thousands of embedded diamonds. Thalia adjusted her grip on the practice sword, feeling the worn leather handle against her calloused palm as she circled Roran. Their breath misted in the cold air, two predators sizing each other up across the pale expanse of the training ground. This was her favorite part of the day — sparring with someone who never patronized her with fake victories, but who gave her the room she needed to practice. Roran grinned, his wild black curls tied back but still threatening to escape their binding, and lunged forward in a feint that Thalia had learned to recognize weeks ago.

She sidestepped, bringing her blade up to parry his follow-through strike. Steel rang against steel, the sound sharp and clean in the frigid mountain air. Unlike the stuffy confines of the Howling Forge, the plateau offered an endless expanse of sky and a horizon dominated by jagged, snow-capped peaks. The wind carried the scent of pine and frost, a bracing combination that cleared Thalia's mind of everything but the present moment.

"You're telegraphing your left side," Roran said, dancing backward as Thalia pressed forward with a series of quick strikes. He deflected each blow with economical movements, his footwork precise despite the slick surface. "Watch your elbow — it

drops about three seconds before you attack."

Thalia adjusted, keeping her arm tight against her body as she feinted right, then spun left. Roran caught her blade with the flat of his own, twisting in a move that should have disarmed her. She'd anticipated it, though, and countered with a grip change she'd been practicing for weeks.

Roran's eyes widened with genuine surprise. "Nice! Where'd you learn that?"

"Watching you do it to the third-years," Thalia replied, unable to suppress a smile despite her concentration. She pressed her advantage, forcing Roran to retreat a few steps.

He laughed, the sound bright against the stark landscape. "Always studying, aren't you, Greenspire?" With a fluid motion that seemed to defy the laws of combat, he slipped inside her guard and tapped her ribs with the flat of his blade. "But you're still leaving this side exposed."

Instead of claiming the touch as a victory, Roran backed away, giving her space to reset. That was his way — turning every bout into a lesson, extending the practice so his partners got maximum benefit. Thalia had seen him do the same with other Southern students, never rushing to end a match when there was something to be learned.

"Again," he said, returning to ready position. "Remember, it's not about strength. It's about —"

"— seeing the pattern before it emerges," Thalia finished, mirroring his stance. "I know."

They moved together in a dance of advance and retreat, their blades catching the

sunlight with each exchange. Roran had a natural grace that made even the most complex maneuvers look effortless. Despite the intensity of their sparring, he maintained a running commentary, pointing out openings and suggesting adjustments.

"Your footwork is improving," he noted as Thalia executed a perfect pivot to avoid his thrust. "But you're still thinking too much. Feel the rhythm."

She tried to follow his advice, letting her body respond without conscious thought. For a brief, exhilarating moment, it worked — her blade moved as if of its own accord, finding the perfect angle to slip past Roran's guard.

Roran's face broke into a wide smile. "There it is! That's what I've been talking about."

"Enough playing around, Bright!" Instructor Maven's voice cut across the plateau like a whip crack. She stood at the edge of the training ground, her single amber eye fixed on their match with visible disapproval. "Either finish it or switch partners. This isn't a dancing lesson."

The joy drained from Roran's face. His posture shifted subtly, shoulders tensing as he glanced toward Maven, then at the other students who had paused their own matches to watch. Some were openly staring, their expressions ranging from curiosity to barely concealed hostility.

"Yes, Instructor," Roran replied, his voice suddenly formal.

Before Thalia could blink, he executed a lightning-fast sequence that ended with her sword clattering to the frozen ground. The move was precise, efficient, and completely unlike the instructive style he'd been using moments before. This was Roran as Maven wanted him to be — ruthlessly effective, no wasted motion, no mercy.



Maven wasn't even watching. She'd already turned her attention to another pair of combatants.

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Roran retrieved Thalia's sword and handed it back to her, his expression carefully neutral. But Thalia saw the tightness around his eyes, the forced quality of his smile. Behind him, a group of Northern students watched with undisguised suspicion.

"Thanks for the bout," he said, loud enough for others to hear. Then, more quietly: "Sorry about the disarm. Didn't have much choice."

Thalia took her sword, frustration burning in her chest. She wanted to say something — to call out Maven's obvious bias, to confront the staring students, to tell Roran he had nothing to apologize for. Their eyes met, and she saw the warning in his gaze.

Don't. Not now. Not for me.

She gave him a small nod, accepting his unspoken request, though it felt like swallowing glass. She'd learned early at Frostforge that picking the wrong battles could make life unbearable. Roran was already targeted enough without her adding fuel to the fire.

He squeezed her shoulder briefly, then turned away to find a new sparring partner. Thalia watched as the Northern students divided around him like water around a stone, none willing to pair with him directly but all keeping him in their sights. The accusations of being an Isle Warden spy had diminished in volume but not in effect. Despite his proven skills and Southern heritage, Roran remained an outsider, viewed with suspicion.

"Gather up!" Maven bellowed, drawing the class's attention. She stood in the center of the plateau, her metal eye patch gleaming in the sun, the glacier bear claw pendant

stark against her dark training gear."That's enough for today, though I use the word 'enough' very generously.What I've seen is barely adequate for first-years, let alone second-years preparing for the Forge Gauntlet."

The students assembled in a loose semicircle, breathing hard from exertion.No one spoke; Maven's critiques were rarely worth challenging.

"Movement patterns are sloppy.Reaction times are pathetic.Half of you still telegraph your strikes like you're sending advance warning by messenger bird."Her single eye swept over them, lingering accusingly on several Southern students."If this is your best effort, you're in poor shape for what's to come.Metalworking isn't the only skill tested in the Gauntlet."

Thalia kept her expression neutral, though internally she seethed.Maven's criticism always seemed to land hardest on Southern students, regardless of their actual performance.She'd seen Northern students make identical mistakes without comment.

"Dismissed," Maven concluded."Additional practice sessions are available this evening for those of you with enough sense to recognize you need them."

The students dispersed, some heading directly for the path back to the academy buildings, others lingering to discuss the day's lessons.Thalia remained where she was, waiting as the plateau gradually emptied.Maven busied herself with collecting the training equipment, her movements efficient despite the bulk of her scarred frame.

"Instructor Maven," Thalia said once the last student had departed, "may I speak with you?"

Maven didn't look up from her task."Make it quick, Greenspire.Unlike some, I don't have time to waste."

Thalia approached, careful to maintain a respectful distance. Maven had a renowned dislike of having people at her back or in her blind spot.

"It's about the metallurgy supplies in the Howling Forge," she began. "I've noticed irregularities in the metal alloys being used for student projects."

"And?" Maven continued collecting practice swords, lining them up in a wooden rack with methodical precision.

"The irregularities aren't random. Someone is systematically replacing high-quality ores with inferior substitutes." Thalia pressed on despite Maven's apparent disinterest. "Yesterday, a student was seriously injured when his golem malfunctioned. I examined the metal afterward, and it was fundamentally flawed — unable to properly channel magical energy."

Maven straightened, turning to face Thalia directly. The scar that ran past the edges of her eye patch seemed to deepen as she frowned. "And you're telling me this because...?"

"Because it's dangerous," Thalia said, struggling to keep frustration from her voice. "And it connects to the weapon thefts. I think someone is deliberately sabotaging our materials."

"I see." Maven's tone was flat, unreadable. "And naturally, you — a second-year student with barely eighteen months of formal training — are qualified to make such assessments?"

Thalia felt heat rising to her face. "I may not have decades of experience, but I know when metal is impure. I can feel it. The steel used in that boy's golem was at least thirty percent contaminated with non-responsive elements."

“Oh, you can feel it?” Maven’s voice took on a mocking tenor. “Well, say no more.”

“Instructor, please —”

Maven held up a hand, abruptly cutting Thalia off. “Enough.”

“But—”

“No, Greenspire. Listen carefully.” Maven stepped closer, her imposing height forcing Thalia to look up to maintain eye contact. “What you’re describing is not sabotage. It’s incompetence. Southern students consistently fail to properly prepare their materials before forging. They rush the purification process, skip essential steps in the alloying procedure, then wonder why their constructs fail.”

The dismissal was so absolute, so casually delivered, that Thalia momentarily lost her words. When she found them again, they came out sharper than intended. “That’s not true. The metals are being replaced before the students even receive them. I’ve seen the difference, and it’s not only Southern —”

“What you’ve seen,” Maven interrupted coldly, “is the difference between properly trained Northern students who understand metallurgical principles and Southern students who lack the basic foundation needed for this work.”

“That’s unfair,” Thalia protested. “The Southern student whose golem malfunctioned was using academy-issued materials. He never had a chance to contaminate them.”

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Maven's expression hardened further. "You know what they say about poor craftsmen, Greenspire?"

Thalia remained silent, recognizing the rhetorical trap.

"They blame their tools." Maven's voice dripped with condescension. "Instead of making wild accusations about sabotage, perhaps you should focus on improving your own skills. The Forge Gauntlet doesn't allow excuses."

With that, she turned away, dismissing Thalia as effectively as if she'd disappeared entirely. The conversation was over.

Thalia stood frozen for a moment, anger and disbelief warring within her. She'd expected skepticism, even resistance, but not this flat denial.

Without another word, she turned and strode toward the path leading back to the academy. The crystal surface beneath her boots reflected her rigid posture, her clenched fists, the storm of determination building in her expression. Maven's dismissal burned like a brand, adding fuel to a fire already burning hot.

If the instructors wouldn't listen, she would find another way. She would gather evidence too compelling to ignore, expose whoever was behind the sabotage, and ensure they faced consequences.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Thalia leaned across the rough-hewn table, her voice dropping to a whisper that

barely carried over the clatter of dining in the great hall. "Show me," she said, eyes fixed on Luna. Around them, students shoveled down their evening rations, oblivious to the urgency tightening Thalia's shoulders. "The hidden chamber where you saw Senna. I need to see it now." She pushed her half-finished plate away, the bland Northern stew suddenly tasting like ashes in her mouth.

Luna glanced around with practiced casualness, her seemingly distracted gaze methodically scanning the dining hall. "Now?" she asked, though her hands were already gathering her things. "It's risky during regular hours."

"Maven won't listen. Another golem could malfunction tomorrow." Thalia pressed her palms flat against the table to stop them from trembling — whether from anger or anticipation, she wasn't sure. "We need to find proof before someone gets killed."

Luna nodded once, decisively. She scooped up a final spoonful of stew and stuffed it into her mouth, then drained her cup in one swift motion. Thalia followed suit, forcing down lukewarm food without tasting it.

"Follow me," Luna murmured, standing with the careful movements of someone trying not to draw attention. "But not too closely until we're out of sight."

They left separately, Luna first, then Thalia thirty seconds later. In the stone corridor outside, the ambient temperature dropped ten degrees, and Thalia pulled her academy-issued cloak tighter around her shoulders. The sounds of dining faded behind them as Luna led her toward the Howling Forge, then down a series of increasingly narrow passages, the torchlight growing sparser as they descended.

"How did you find this place?" Thalia asked, her breath fogging in the chill air.

Luna's footsteps were nearly silent against the stone floor. "I followed Senna three times before I was certain of the pattern. She's careful — checks behind her double

back and takes different routes. But she always ends up here eventually."

The passage narrowed further, forcing them to walk single file. The walls were rough-hewn, not polished like the main corridors of Frostforge. These tunnels felt older, forgotten.

Thalia brushed her fingertips against the wall. The stone pulsed with a faint, familiar energy — the residual magic of countless generations of metalwork seeping into the very foundation of the mountain. It felt like a heartbeat, ancient and steady.

Luna stopped so abruptly that Thalia nearly collided with her. "Here," she said, pointing to what appeared to be a solid stone wall. "Watch." She pressed her palm against a specific spot and slid it downward in a precise motion. The stone shifted with a barely audible grinding sound, revealing a narrow opening.

"How did you figure that out?" Thalia whispered, impressed.

Luna's lips quirked in a small smile. "I didn't. I saw Senna do it."

They squeezed through the gap one at a time. The passage beyond was darker still, illuminated only by the faintest blue glow emanating from crystalline formations embedded in the ceiling. The air here tasted different — metallic and sharp, with lingering traces of smoke.

After twenty paces, the passage widened into a small chamber. Thalia stopped on the threshold, eyes adjusting to the dim light. It was a forge room, but unlike any she'd seen at the academy. The space was cramped yet efficiently arranged, with a small forge built into the rock wall, workbenches crowded with tools, and shelves laden with crucibles and molds.

"It's cold," Thalia noted, approaching the forge. The coals were gray and lifeless,



covered with a fine layer of ash."No one's been here for days."

Luna moved to one of the workbenches, examining a collection of small metal ingots arranged in neat rows."Senna was here five nights ago.She stayed for almost three hours."

Thalia circled the space slowly, taking in the details.Half-finished projects littered the surfaces — a partially formed golem hand, sketches of internal mechanisms, a collection of small gears with peculiar teeth.This wasn't student-level work.Whoever used this space had advanced knowledge of metallurgy and golem construction.

Her attention caught on a pile of slag near the forge — the discarded byproducts of metal refinement.She picked up a piece, feeling its weight, its texture.Without thinking, she closed her eyes and reached out with that strange sense, the ability to feel the magical currents flowing through metal.

The sensation hit her like a physical blow.Her stomach lurched, and she dropped the slag with a gasp.

"Thalia?"Luna was at her side instantly."What is it?"

"It's wrong," Thalia whispered, wiping her palm against her cloak as if to clean away a stain."The metal — it's been altered."She picked up another piece, forcing herself to hold it despite the revulsion it triggered."Someone's been experimenting with disruptive alloys.Creating metals that look right, feel right, but will fail catastrophically when channeling magic."

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Thalia moved to the workbench and examined a row of small ingots. Each had been stamped with a different mark, likely denoting their composition. "They've been methodically developing this. Testing different combinations to see which ones would pass the instructors' inspection but fail under pressure."

She picked up a notebook, flipping through pages of densely written notes. The handwriting was precise and clinical. Whoever had been working here documented everything with meticulous care: mixture ratios, heat treatments, and stabilizing agents.

"It's deliberate," Thalia said, the realization making her voice hard. "It's Senna. She's replacing quality metals with these compromised alloys." She paused on a page showing a diagram of a golem's core component — the very piece that had failed in the recent accidents. "Luna, this isn't like her sabotage last year. This is more calculated. It's systematic."

"But why?" Luna ran her fingers over a set of small labeled vials containing metal filings. "What's the purpose? How does Senna benefit from students creating defective golems?"

Thalia's mind raced through possibilities. "It could be about eliminating certain students — making them fail their projects. Or maybe it's more sinister." She remembered the violent way the golems had malfunctioned and the potential for serious injuries.

"Or maybe she's testing something," Luna suggested, examining a chart pinned to the wall that tracked alloy performance. "These notes are meticulous. Like she's trying to

perfect the formula for something specific."

"This is where it's happening," Thalia realized. "Where they're creating the compromised metals that have been causing problems in the forge."

"Do you think it has to do with the thefts?" Luna asked. "Someone working for the Isle Wardens?"

A thought struck her with sudden force. "Roran," she whispered, the name slipping out before she could stop it.

Luna raised an eyebrow. "You think he's involved?"

Thalia shook her head. As she traced the techniques described in the notes, relief flooded through her. "No. In fact, this all but proves he's innocent. These methods require advanced metallurgical knowledge. Years of experience." She gestured at the complex diagrams. "Roran barely passed basic forging last year. He couldn't do this — not alone, at least."

Luna watched her with knowing eyes. "You're sure that's not just what you want to believe?"

Thalia met her gaze steadily. "I'm sure of what the evidence tells me."

Her thoughts turned back to Senna. The Northern student's strange behavior suddenly made more sense — her distraction, her furtiveness. And Luna had seen her here.

"It's not Roran. But Senna's been coming here secretly. And I saw her gathering fragments of the inferior metal after Einar's golem exploded."

Luna nodded slowly. "She has the skills. Advanced metallurgy training from her

tribe. And we know she's not above sabotage."

"It fits," Thalia agreed, piecing it together. "She could have been the one replacing the materials in the classrooms. No one would question her presence there."

But Luna's brow furrowed. "Something doesn't add up. Senna's always targeted Southerners before. The students affected by these faulty metals — they're mostly Northerners."

Thalia paused, considering this. "You're right. Why would she sabotage her own people?"

"And why take such risks coming here?" Luna continued, gesturing around the hidden forge. "If she wanted to sabotage students, there are simpler ways. Less traceable ways."

They stood in silence for a moment, the blue crystals overhead casting ghostly shadows across their faces.

"We need proof," Thalia finally said, reaching for a small canvas pouch at her belt. She carefully collected samples — pieces of slag, metal filings, a small unmarked ingot. "If we can compare these to the fragments from the failed golems, we might be able to confirm they're the same material."

Luna nodded, then began methodically copying key information from the notebook onto a small scroll she produced from her sleeve.

They gathered their evidence in silence, each lost in thought. Before leaving, Thalia took one last look around the hidden forge. The cold ashes, the abandoned tools, the mysterious notes — all pieces of a puzzle she couldn't yet assemble.

"We should go," Luna murmured, already slipping toward the passage. "Dinner will be ending soon. People will notice we're missing."

Thalia nodded, following her friend back into the narrow tunnel. As Luna carefully resealed the hidden entrance, Thalia clutched the pouch of metal samples tightly.

"Luna," she said as they began retracing their steps through the dark corridors, "whoever's behind this — they're inside Frostforge. They have access, knowledge, skills."

"I know," Luna replied, her usually scattered demeanor completely absent now. "The question is: what are they trying to accomplish?"

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thalia emerged from the cryomancy classroom with frost still clinging to her fingertips, tiny crystals that caught the light from the wall sconces and sparkled like diamond dust. The cold lingered in her bones, a familiar ache that she'd grown accustomed to over the past months at Frostforge. Unlike her classmates, who hurried to warm their hands by the corridor's heat vents, she let the chill remain, a reminder of what she'd accomplished today — a perfect ice pattern, delicate as lace and strong as steel. Instructor Virek had actually nodded at her work. Not smiled, of course — Frostforge instructors rarely did — but a nod was practically effusive praise in the frigid halls of the academy.

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She flexed her fingers, watching the last ice crystals fall like snow to the stone floor. Her mind wasn't on romance, though. It kept circling back to the secret room she and Luna had discovered, where someone — almost certainly Senna — had been creating inferior alloys. Alloys that had replaced the high-quality materials throughout the academy caused golems to malfunction, putting students at risk.

And Maven had dismissed her concerns entirely. Every time Thalia closed her eyes, she saw that curl of Maven's lip that suggested Thalia's very presence was an inconvenience. As if the ruined projects and rampaging golems were somehow a figment of her imagination, not hard evidence. Instructor Wolfe was no help, either; Thalia wondered if she refused to admit the truth out of wounded pride, an unwillingness to recognize that a student had noticed something that had escaped her.

The corridor was emptying now, students dispersing toward the dining hall or their next classes. Thalia pulled her cloak tighter, its blue trim marking her as a second-year, and stepped around a group of first-years who stared at her with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Her reputation preceded her — the Southern girl who could animate a golem's heart on her first try.

"Thalia."

The voice came from an alcove to her left, low and urgent. She turned to find Kaine leaning against the stone wall, his broad shoulders silhouetted against a stained glass window depicting ancient forge masters. The colored light played across his face, turning his pale skin into a canvas of blues and reds.

"Kaine? What are you —"

He jerked his head toward a narrower passageway. "Not here. Too many ears."

Thalia glanced around — the corridor was now nearly empty, but a pair of instructors had emerged from another classroom, deep in conversation. She nodded and followed Kaine into the smaller corridor, their footsteps echoing against the stone. This passage was older, the walls rough-hewn and lacking the polish of the main corridors. It smelled of dust and disuse.

Kaine stopped when they reached a curved section where the passage bent away from the main hall. No one could see them here or overhear their conversation. He turned to face her, eyes intense.

"It's happening again," he said without preamble. "More weapons missing from the forge. The axe I was working on is gone."

Thalia's stomach tightened. "When?"

"Last night. And that's not all." Kaine ran a hand through his dark hair, a rare gesture of frustration. "I heard from one of the fourth-years that a set of daggers went missing from the armory. Weapons are vanishing from all over Frostforge."

"And no one's caught anything? No suspects?" Thalia asked, though she already suspected the answer.

Kaine's expression darkened. "The instructors are on the hunt, but no one's found so far. I heard Virek pinned the crimes on 'record-keeping errors.' As if the most meticulous forge in the Reaches would misplace its weapons."

Thalia leaned against the wall opposite him, processing this. "And the inferior metals? Any more incidents?"

"Two more golems malfunctioned yesterday in the third-year class. One nearly took off a student's arm." Kaine's voice had dropped even lower. "No one's connecting the thefts to the metal substitutions. Not officially."

"But you are."

"So are you." It wasn't a question. Kaine's ice-blue eyes met hers. "I've been thinking about this for days, and I have an idea. But I need your help."

"My help?"

"Your particular talents." Kaine stepped closer, lowering his voice further. "Your sensitivity to the metal, Thalia. The way you can sense the magic in materials."

She blinked, surprised. "But you can do the same. You sensed the magic in the ancient symbols when we found them last year."

A flicker of hesitation, or possibly embarrassment, crossed Kaine's face.

"Not like you can," he admitted. "I didn't even notice the difference in the alloys until you pointed it out. Even now..." He shook his head. "To me, the differences seem minor, subtle. But you identified them immediately."

Thalia stared at him, startled by the admission. Kaine never acknowledged weakness and never admitted limitations. Yet here he was, openly telling her she possessed a skill he didn't.

"I trust your intuition," he continued when she remained silent. "I've seen what these inferior metals do when they're put to use. The failures, the accidents." His jaw tightened. "Someone's going to get killed."



"What's your plan?" she asked, still processing his unexpected praise.

Kaine's eyes lit with the intensity she'd come to associate with his most determined moments. "We forge a decoy. Something valuable enough to attract the thieves, but secretly imbued with a magical trace metal that you can track."

Thalia considered this. "A tracking spell? Those are advanced magic — beyond Frostforge curriculum."

"Not a spell." Kaine shook his head. "Something more subtle. A metal signature that only someone with your sensitivity could detect. Something that would lead us right to whoever's taking these weapons."

It was a bold plan — and a dangerous one. Thalia chewed her lower lip, thinking it through.

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"You really think they'd fall for it? These thieves seem calculated and careful. They've managed to steal weapons from all over the academy without getting caught."

"Whoever's doing this knows their value," Kaine said. "They're selective. If we create something too tempting to resist — something unique, something valuable — it'll disappear like all the others."

As he spoke, something changed in his expression. The hard lines of worry softened, replaced by a gleam in his eyes that Thalia hadn't seen before. Despite the dire circumstances, despite the danger, he was excited by the challenge of crafting something extraordinary.

"You want to forge this weapon," she said, understanding dawning.

Kaine's lips curved into a half-smile. "Of course I do."

His enthusiasm was infectious, and Thalia found herself smiling back. She was enchanted by this side of Kaine, the artist hidden inside the survivor. It made him seem younger somehow, more alive.

"Alright," she said, decision made. "I'll help you. When do we start?"

"Tonight," Kaine replied immediately. "The Howling Forge, after the evening bell."

Thalia raised her eyebrows. "After hours? That's against at least three academy rules."

"And investigating theft, forging unauthorized weapons, and tracking fellow students

breaks about a dozen more."Kaine's expression turned serious again."We need privacy and time.The only way we'll have both is if we work when everyone else is asleep."

"The Howling Forge, after the evening bell," she agreed.

Kaine nodded, satisfaction is evident in the set of his shoulders."Wear something that won't stand out in the shadows.And Thalia —" he hesitated, then reached out to touch her arm briefly, the gesture surprisingly gentle from his calloused hand."Be careful.Whoever's behind this has been operating right under the instructors' noses for weeks.They're clever and connected."

Thalia watched him walk away, his tall figure soon swallowed by the shadows of the old corridor.Only when he'd disappeared did she realize her heart was beating faster than usual—and not entirely from the prospect of catching the thieves.

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The entrance to the Howling Forge loomed ahead, a massive archway carved with scenes of ancient battles, the stone worn smooth from centuries of hands passing through.The forge itself was never truly cold — the heart fires burned continuously, maintained by a rotating staff of dedicated forge masters — but at this hour, it would be empty.

A figure detached itself from the shadows beside the archway.Thalia's hand flew to the small knife at her belt before she recognized Kaine's silhouette.

Kaine nodded once, then gestured toward a smaller entrance to the right of the main arch — a service door used by the workers who delivered coal and ore.The door swung open with a whisper of well-oiled hinges.Thalia followed him into the narrow passage beyond, their way lit only by the distant glow of forge fires reflecting off the

stone walls. The air grew warmer with each step, the familiar scents of hot metal, coal, and sweat enveloping them like an embrace.

They emerged into the Howling Forge. By day, this space echoed with the clang of hammers and the shouts of instructors. Now it lay in half-darkness, the only light coming from the banked coals in the main hearth and a few scattered lanterns left burning for safety. The tools hung in perfect order along the walls, gleaming dully in the firelight.

"I'll stoke the fire at workstation three," Kaine said, already moving toward one of the smaller forges set into the wall. "You check the metal stores. We need a pure alloy — the best you can find."

Thalia nodded and headed toward the storage area at the back of the chamber. Rows of orderly shelves held ingots of various metals, each stamped with the mark of its origin and composition. She ran her fingers lightly over them, closing her eyes to better sense the magic that hummed within each piece.

Most of the metals sang false notes to her touch — the inferior alloys she'd identified weeks ago. Their resonance was muted, discordant, lacking the pure harmonies of properly forged metal. She moved deeper into the storeroom, searching more desperately now. They needed pure metal, not just for the decoy to be convincing but for the trace to work properly.

Finally, behind a stack of practice ingots used by first-years, she found what she was looking for — a small cache of steel alloy that sang true beneath her fingers. She selected one bar, then, on impulse, reached for a smaller ingot on a higher shelf. Aluminum — lightweight, rarely used for weapons due to its softness, but perfect for what she had in mind.

When she returned to workstation three, Kaine had the forge glowing hot, the coals a

fierce orange that cast dancing shadows across his concentrated face. He looked up as she approached, eyes questioning.

"Found some," she said, holding up the steel ingot. "Not much, though. Most of it's been replaced."

"And that?" He nodded toward the smaller aluminum piece.

"For the trace." Thalia set both metals down on the worktable. "Aluminum isn't typically used in weapons — too light, makes for a flimsy blade. If I weave a small amount into whatever we make, I'll be able to sense it from a distance. Like a thread I can follow."

"Will it affect the weapon's integrity?"

"Not if we do it right. Or at least, not enough to be noticed." She glanced at the glowing forge. "What are we making, anyway? Something that will catch their attention?"

Kaine frowned thoughtfully, then reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small, leather-bound book. Its edges were worn smooth, the cover darkened from years of handling. He flipped it open, and Thalia saw that each page bore detailed sketches of weapons — swords, daggers, axes, spears — each one annotated with tiny, precise handwriting.

He turned the pages slowly, and Thalia glimpsed designs more intricate than any she'd seen in her classes. A battle axe with channeled grooves for cryomancy enhancement. A dual-bladed sword with what appeared to be reinforced crossguards. A set of throwing knives with balance points marked in red ink.

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"You designed all these?" she asked, unable to keep the surprise from her voice.

Kaine nodded, still turning pages. "I had a lot of time to think in prison. Drawing helped pass the hours, and I kept the habit." There was no self-pity in his voice, just a simple statement of fact.

He stopped at a page near the middle of the book and held it out for her to see. The sketch showed a sleek, single-edged blade with a curved, almost wave-like pattern along the spine. The hilt was minimalist, wrapped in sturdy leather, and the guard bore an intricate engraving of interwoven lines — almost like the magical currents Thalia felt in the metals.

"It's called a falchion," Kaine explained. "Versatile, practical. One-handed, so you can use a shield or spell with your other hand. The wave pattern isn't just decorative — it strengthens the blade while reducing weight."

Thalia studied the design, impressed by the level of detail in the sketch. Next to the main drawing were smaller diagrams showing the tang construction, edge geometry, and what appeared to be channels for magical reinforcement.

"It's a good lure," Kaine continued. "A blade that looks valuable but isn't flashy enough to be questioned. Something practical, but unique — irresistible to the right kind of thief."

She took the notebook from him, running her fingers over the sketch as if she could feel the weapon itself taking shape beneath her touch. "You've really thought this through."

"I've been designing weapons longer than I've been using them." There was something unspoken in his words, something heavy with memory, but he didn't elaborate. Instead, he tapped the page where he'd noted the metal composition. "Ice-steel?"

Thalia nodded. "If we're trying to give it value, standard steel won't cut it." She handed the notebook back. "We'd better get started, then."

For the next hour, they worked in near-silence, communicating through gestures and brief words. Thalia heated the metal carefully, keeping an eye on the shifting colors that indicated temperature. Even though she'd found a pure alloy, she remained hypervigilant for flaws — nothing would slip past her, not tonight.

Kaine watched her work, occasionally correcting her form or adjusting the heat, but there was no impatience in his guidance. When the metal reached the right temperature — a bright, clear orange that made the surrounding air tremble — he nodded at her.

"Now," he said simply.

Thalia placed her hands on either side of the glowing metal, careful not to touch it directly. It was delicate work, threading ice magic into molten steel without cooling it too quickly. Like tracing the veins of a leaf without tearing the delicate structure. Cold flowed from her fingertips in controlled streams, sinking into the red-hot metal.

Where ice magic met molten steel, a curious reaction occurred — the metal neither solidified nor remained liquid, but entered a third state, semifluid and shimmering with pale blue light. This was the moment of creation, the birth of ice-steel, stronger and more receptive to magic than ordinary steel could ever be.

Kaine's eyes reflected the blue glow as he watched her work. His expression was

focused, intent, but there was something else there too — a kind of reverence, as if he were witnessing something sacred.

The process took nearly thirty minutes, Thalia's arms aching from the extended precision. When she finally stepped back, sweat beading on her forehead despite the ice magic flowing through her, the metal had taken on a subtle blue-silver sheen beneath its yellow heat.

Kaine didn't speak, but the appreciative nod he gave her conveyed more than words. He lifted the metal with tongs and submerged it in water, which hissed and steamed on contact. The water didn't cool the ice-steel fully — it needed to be heated again, shaped, and then given its final tempering in a special oil.

As Kaine returned the metal to the forge to heat it once more, he glanced at Thalia. "Are you ready to add the trace?"

She hesitated, suddenly uncertain. "I've never done anything like this before. What if I mess up the entire blade?"

"You won't." The certainty in his voice was absolute. He looked up from the forge, meeting her eyes directly. "You can do this, Thalia."

Something in his steady gaze bolstered her confidence. She nodded, taking the small nugget of aluminum and warming it in her hands. Unlike the steel, aluminum melted at a much lower temperature, making it easier to work with for this delicate operation.

When Kaine removed the ice-steel from the forge, now glowing again with heat, Thalia approached with the aluminum piece. With careful precision, she began to thread it into the blade, working the softer metal into a thin filament that she wove through the molten ice-steel. She used both her hands and her magic, guiding the aluminum so that it became part of the blade without compromising its integrity.



To anyone else, the aluminum would be invisible, indistinguishable from the steel itself. But to Thalia, with her sensitivity to metal compositions, it would always sing its distinct note — a beacon she could follow wherever the blade went.

As she worked, Kaine watched her quietly. The firelight played across his features, softening the hard lines of his face. Minutes passed in concentrated silence as she completed the trace, finally stepping back with a deep exhale.

Kaine took the blade then, moving it back to the anvil, where he began to shape it according to his design. The ring of hammer on metal echoed through the empty forge, a lonely sound in the night. As he worked, his strikes precise and measured, he glanced at Thalia briefly before returning his attention to the metal.

"There's something I've been wanting to tell you," he said, his voice barely audible over the hammering. "I feel like you deserve to know."

Thalia tilted her head, waiting. Something in his tone made her stomach tighten with anticipation.

Kaine exhaled slowly, continuing to shape the blade as he spoke. "About my father. About why I was really in prison."

Thalia tensed. She'd heard the rumors but had no idea what to make of them. Kaine had always been deliberately vague when he'd talked about his past.

He paused, as if gathering courage, then continued, his words matching the rhythm of his hammer. "My father was a respected man in our community. A master weaponsmith, a war hero." The hammer fell. "But behind closed doors, he was a different person entirely." Another strike, harder this time. "He was cruel. He was dangerous."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Thalia watched his face, the way the muscles in his jaw tightened with each word, the way his eyes never left the glowing metal before him. Kaine had told her about his father's abuse before, but there was a new intensity in his voice this time that made her breath catch in her throat. He almost seemed to be pleading for her understanding, desperate to shrug a burden from his shoulders.

"He broke my mother's arm once because dinner was cold. Another time, he held my sister's hand over a candle flame when she dropped a plate." The hammer strikes grew more forceful. "The night it happened, I came home from my apprenticeship early. Heard screams from inside the house. Like I told you before, I found him standing over her in the great room. She was unconscious. Bleeding. I couldn't tell if she was alive or dead."

Kaine paused, turning the blade, examining its edge before continuing. His voice had gone flat, emotionless, as if he were reciting facts from a metallurgy text.

"There was a forge hammer on the table. I grabbed it." Kaine's own hammer paused mid-strike. "I only meant to knock him away from her. But once I started hitting him, I couldn't stop." His voice dropped lower. "They found me still holding the hammer, hours later. My mother tried to claim she did it to protect me. No one believed her."

He resumed hammering, each strike more deliberate than before.

"I needed you to know. Senna's rumors are true." He finally looked up at her, his eyes reflecting the forge fire. "I... I lied to you the last time I tried to tell you what really happened. I told you I wasn't a murderer. But I am. I did kill him."

A heavy silence fell between them, broken only by the distant crackle of the forge fire and the soft hiss of cooling metal. Thalia stood perfectly still, processing everything she'd just heard, seeing Kaine — truly seeing him — perhaps for the first time.

"I've never regretted it, either," he said woodenly. "Only that I wasn't there sooner, before he hurt my mother. That I didn't stop him years before. I'm not just a murderer — I'm an unrepentant one. You... you deserve to know who I am. What kind of person I am. I...."

Without thinking, Thalia stepped closer, her voice soft but firm.

"You did what you had to do."

He looked startled, as if her response was the last thing he expected. "I'm a murderer," he repeated, the word hanging between them. It seemed to have more weight when Kaine said it; it was like a brand seared into his skin. Thalia realized then that even if he couldn't bring himself to regret the killing, he still felt guilt over it. His imprisonment hadn't taught him penitence, only self-loathing.

He expected her to hate him for this, the way his clan had hated him. The way his jailers had hated him. She could see it in the way he held himself — rigid, waiting for the blow that always came next. Not a fist, this time, but judgment. Rejection. Distrust.

Thalia shook her head. "No," she said with quiet conviction. "You were fighting to protect someone. Just like everyone here."

Kaine met her gaze, something unreadable in his expression — vulnerability mingled with disbelief, hope warring with old pain. The falchion lay forgotten on the anvil, its newly shaped edge gleaming in the firelight.

Neither of them moved for what felt like an eternity, the forge's heat wrapping around

them like a cocoon, separating them from the rest of the sleeping academy. Then, almost imperceptibly, the distance between them began to close.

The first touch was hesitant — Kaine's hand, rough with callouses but surprisingly gentle, brushing against her cheek. Thalia's heart hammered against her ribs as she leaned into his touch, her eyes never leaving his.

Their lips met slowly at first, a question more than a demand. But then the tension that had been building between them for so long — through shared secrets and dangerous discoveries, through quiet moments of understanding and fierce arguments — snapped like an overdrawn wire. Kaine's arm slid around her waist, pulling her closer as the kiss deepened.

The heat of the forge was nothing compared to this, the fire between them burning hotter than any flame. Thalia's hands found their way to his shoulders, then his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair. All the danger surrounding them, all the mysteries and threats, seemed distant and unimportant compared to this moment of connection.

But before they could sink further into the embrace, there was a sound — the unmistakable scuffle of boots on stone, followed by a metallic scrape.

They broke apart instantly, both going still as statues. Kaine's hand moved to the hammer he'd discarded, while Thalia's fingers curled, ready to call forth ice at a moment's notice.

Someone was in the forge with them.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thalia held her breath as shadows shifted between the weapon racks, the forge's dying embers casting just enough light to outline the intruders' forms. Her pulse

quickened as she pressed herself deeper into the alcove where she and Kaine had hidden at the first sound of approaching footsteps. The air hung thick with metal dust and the lingering heat of their interrupted work, making each silent breath an exercise in control. As the figures moved closer to the central workbench, the subtle glow illuminated familiar faces — Senna, flanked by her two closest allies, their movements precise and practiced as they examined the forge's contents.

Beside her, Kaine tensed. His shoulder pressed against hers in the narrow space, and Thalia felt the slight shift in his posture that meant he was preparing to move. She recognized the taller of Senna's companions as Ingrid, a third-year with a reputation for vicious efficiency in combat training. The other girl, Eira, was shorter but broader, her hands never far from the twin daggers at her belt.

Thalia's fingers brushed against the traced blade they'd been working on, still warm from the forge. The aluminum threads they'd woven into the steel hummed against her magical senses, a beacon she could follow anywhere in Frostforge. Their bait. If Senna was indeed the thief, then she needed to see this blade — but Thalia couldn't be too obvious in dangling the lure.

Kaine stepped out first, his movement so sudden that Senna's group was startled. Their hands flew to their weapons before recognition dawned.

"What are you doing here?" Kaine's voice cut through the silence, deep and commanding in the cavernous space.

Senna recovered first, straightening her spine as her surprise morphed into cold contempt. "I could ask you the same question." Her silver-gray eyes flicked past Kaine to where Thalia emerged from the shadows. Her lip curled. "Late-night forging with your Southern pet?"

Thalia stepped forward, refusing to be cowed. "Funny, I was about to ask why you're

prowling around the weapons stores after curfew. With lookouts, no less." She gestured to Ingrid and Eira, who had positioned themselves near the entrances.

"We're not the ones smuggling weapons out of the academy." Ingrid's accusation landed like a blow. "Everyone knows Southerners can't be trusted."

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The familiar prejudice stung. Thalia glanced over her shoulder, waiting for Kaine to stand up for her, but he said nothing, his expression unreadable. She blinked, taken aback; she could still feel the ghost sensation of his lips on hers, but he wouldn't defend her against Senna's vitriol. His silence hurt far more than Senna's insults.

Thalia set her jaw and turned back to Senna. "Interesting theory. Except I'm not the one conducting secret metallurgy experiments with stolen materials."

Senna's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I saw your hidden workshop." Thalia watched Senna's face carefully, noting the flicker of alarm that crossed her features before she masked it. "Those inferior alloys you've been creating — they're the same ones replacing the quality metals in student projects. The same metals causing golems to malfunction."

"You're accusing me of sabotage? That's rich, coming from someone who's skulking around the forge at night." Senna stepped closer, her voice dropping to a dangerous pitch. "If anyone's involved with these thefts, it's you. The outsider who doesn't belong here."

Kaine shifted, placing himself partially between them. "Enough. If you're not here to steal, then what exactly are you doing?"

Thalia used their distraction to subtly shift her body, making a show of moving the traced blade behind her back. She angled herself to ensure Senna caught the movement and caught sight of the steel edge.

Senna's gaze tracked the motion before returning to Kaine's face. "What were you two working on?" Her voice softened when addressing him.

"A project," Kaine replied flatly. "None of your concern."

"Everything in this forge is my concern when weapons are disappearing." Senna folded her arms. "Someone has been selling Frostforge weapons to Isle Wardens."

Thalia scoffed. "And you think that's me? Why would I arm the people who attacked this academy?"

"Your loyalties have always been suspect." Eira spoke from her position by the door, her Northern accent thickening with contempt.

"I've been tracking a smuggling ring," Senna continued, ignoring the interruption. "According to a message from my relatives, Frostforge blades have been showing up in Isle Warden raids. Our weapons in the hands of our sworn enemies." Her voice rose, passion coloring her words. "It's an insult to everything the North stands for — traitors arming our enemies while we train to fight them."

Thalia studied Senna as she spoke. The anger vibrating through her words sounded genuine, but there was something performative about it — like she was speaking lines she'd rehearsed. The way her eyes kept darting to the shadows of the forge. The slight tension in her shoulders suggested she was hiding something.

"If you've been tracking smugglers, why haven't you reported it to the instructors?" Thalia challenged. "Seems like the kind of thing Maven would want to know about."

"The leadership here is slow to act." Senna's lip curled with disdain. "By the time they organize an investigation, the real culprits would be long gone. I need hard proof



before I make accusations."

"Unlike you," Eira added pointedly.

Thalia remembered the fragment of broken golem that Senna had pocketed after the malfunction incident."And your secret workshop?The experiments with inferior metals?That's just part of your investigation, I suppose?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Senna snapped.

"I know what I saw."Thalia held her ground."Those metals you're creating are identical to the ones causing golems to go berserk.Students could have been killed."

"I've created no alloys.You're throwing accusations to cover your own tracks."Senna stepped closer, her voice low and dangerous."You've been an outsider from the moment you arrived.Why should anyone believe you over me?"

The accusation stung more than Thalia wanted to admit."I've bled for Frostforge just like everyone else.I've faced the same trials, the same dangers."Her voice steadied as she continued."If you think I'd side with the Isle Wardens, then you might as well accuse Kaine, too.Or maybe you already have."

Senna's expression flickered, her gaze shifting to Kaine."Kaine would never betray Frostforge," she murmured, then added with unmistakable meaning, "Some people are above suspicion."

The implication hung in the air between them — that Thalia wasn't one of those people.That she would never be, in Senna's eyes.

Senna's shoulders relaxed slightly.She tipped up her chin to regard Thalia as though looking down at her."And some are beneath it."

Kaine folded his arms across his chest, the muscles in his jaw tightening.

"We were working on a project," he finally said, his voice firm. "Nothing more. And nothing that concerns you or your...investigation."

The word carried a weight of doubt that Thalia hadn't expected from him. Did he not believe Senna was involved?

Senna held his gaze for several heartbeats before nodding slightly. "Fine. We're done here anyway." She turned to her companions. "Let's go."

As they moved toward the exit, Senna paused, throwing one last glance toward Thalia as she withdrew the traced blade from hiding. A flicker of interest crossed Senna's face before she turned away.

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Once the echo of their footsteps faded completely, Thalia released a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. "She took the bait," she whispered, excitement threading through her voice. "Did you see how she looked at me while I hid the blade?"

Kaine didn't share her enthusiasm. He ran a hand through his short hair, his expression troubled. "I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean? You saw how she reacted when I mentioned the workshop. She's hiding something."

"Senna may be many things, but she's not a traitor to the North." Kaine moved back to the forge, stoking the embers back to life with practiced movements. "She would never arm Isle Wardens. Her family has been hunting them for generations."

Thalia stared at him, incredulous. "Are you defending her? After everything — the secret workshop, the sabotage last year, her constant suspicion of anyone who isn't Northern?"

"I'm saying we should be certain before we accuse anyone." The fire flared, casting harsh shadows across his face. "There's more going on here than we understand."

"She was seen lurking around the room where we found the inferior alloys," Thalia insisted, frustration building inside her. "The same ones causing golems to malfunction. People could die, Kaine."

Kaine shook his head. "It wasn't Senna. She said she didn't do it, and I believe her."

Thalia felt as though the ground beneath her had shifted. Just an hour ago, they had been working side by side, sharing confidences, their kiss still lingering between them. Now, he was defending Senna — the same woman who looked at Thalia with contempt, who claimed some sort of ownership over Kaine. Did he accept that claim? Did he welcome it?

"You care about her," Thalia said quietly, the realization settling like a cold weight in her stomach.

Kaine's shoulders tensed. "It's not about that."

"Then what is it about? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're taking her side."

"I'm not taking sides." His voice hardened. "I'm trying to see the whole picture. Something you might want to try."

The accusation stung. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're so determined to blame Senna that you might be missing something important." He turned to face her, the fire behind him casting his face in stark relief. "What if she's not the thief? What if she really is tracking someone else?"

Thalia wanted to argue, to point out all the evidence against Senna, but Kaine's expression stopped her. There was something in his eyes — a history she wasn't part of, a connection to Senna that ran deeper than rivalry.

"Fine," she said finally, swallowing her anger. "I guess we'll know soon enough. If Senna or someone in her group is involved, they'll come back for the traced weapon."

Kaine nodded, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "And if they don't, we keep

looking."

They returned to the workbench, finishing the final touches on the blade in silence. Thalia ran her fingers along the steel, feeling the aluminum threads singing beneath her touch. The metal responded to her magic, warming slightly, the connection clear and strong.

But the comfortable companionship they'd shared earlier had vanished. In its place was a strained silence broken only by the soft sounds of their work. The forge felt colder somehow despite the renewed fire. Thalia kept her focus on the blade, trying not to think about the moment they'd shared before the interruption — the warmth of Kaine's lips against hers, the way his arms had encircled her as though she belonged there.

She pushed the memory away, channeling her frustration into her work. The blade was nearly complete now, its edge honed to lethal sharpness, the aluminum threads invisible to anyone who couldn't sense metals as she could. A perfect trap.

All they had to do was wait for the thief to take it.

Whether it was Senna or someone else entirely, the truth would reveal itself soon enough. Thalia only hoped that when it did, she and Kaine would still be standing on the same side.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Thalia's fingers hovered over the gleaming length of ice steel, feeling the metal's essence pulsing beneath her fingertips like a heartbeat. The forge around her glowed with the dying embers of the day's work, casting long shadows across the polished stone floor. Across the workbench, Kaine hunched over the half-finished hilt, his profile illuminated by the amber light of his smaller forge flame. They hadn't spoken

more than ten words to each other since they'd arrived three hours ago, the memory of their interrupted kiss and subsequent disagreement hanging in the air between them like smoke — visible, suffocating, impossible to ignore.

"Pass the tin flux," Kaine said, not looking up from his work.

Thalia slid the small pot across the table, careful not to let her fingers brush against his. The air between them crackled with unspoken tension, as palpable as the heat from the forge.

The blade they'd crafted was beautiful — a masterpiece of metallurgy that would have earned both of them top marks had they submitted it as a class project. Thirty-six inches of folded ice steel, the blade caught the forge light and broke it into a thousand glittering fragments. The edge was so fine it could split a hair, sharp enough to slice through armor yet flexible enough to bend without breaking. What made it truly special, however, was invisible to the naked eye: the thread of aluminum woven through the core of the blade, a magical tracker that only Thalia could sense.

She closed her eyes, extending her awareness into the metal. The aluminum signature hummed beneath her consciousness, distinct from the surrounding steel. She nudged it with her magic, strengthening the connection, making sure she could follow its trail no matter where it went. It was like tuning an instrument.

"The aluminum trace is set," she said, her voice sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet forge. "I'll be able to track it anywhere within the academy grounds."

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Kaine grunted in acknowledgment, his hands never pausing in their work. His fingers moved with practiced precision, wrapping thin strips of leather around the hilt with painstaking care. Each layer was secured with a drop of resin, building up a grip that would eventually feel as if it had been molded specifically for the wielder's hand.

Thalia watched him from the corner of her eye, her gaze lingering on the intense focus in his face, the slight furrow between his brows, the way his lips pressed together when he concentrated. She remembered how those lips had felt against hers, just hours ago in this very forge — warm, gentle.

Then Senna had interrupted them, and everything had fallen apart.

Thalia turned her attention back to the blade, adjusting the final connections between the aluminum trace and her own magical signature. She couldn't afford to be distracted, not when their plan depended on the precision of her work. Yet her mind kept circling back to the argument that had fractured the fragile thing growing between them.

Across the table, Kaine finished the final wrap on the hilt, cutting the leather with a precise flick of his knife. He reached for a small vial of protective oil, applying it to the leather with careful passes of a soft cloth. The rich, earthy scent mixed with the usual forge smells of smoke and hot metal.

"Hilt's done," he said, his voice neutral.

Thalia nodded, pushing back from the table. "Let's test it."

They met at the end of the workbench, the completed weapon lying between them. Kaine lifted it first, testing the balance, then offered it to Thalia. Their fingers brushed as she took it from him, sending an unwelcome spark of awareness through her body.

The blade felt perfect in her hand — balanced, responsive, alive with possibility. She executed a simple pattern, the weapon slicing through the air with a whisper. Through her connection to the metal, she could feel the aluminum thread vibrating with each movement, a beacon she could follow across any distance.

"It's ready," she said, lowering the blade.

Kaine nodded, his ice-blue eyes meeting hers for the first time that evening. For a moment, something flickered in their depths — regret, maybe, or longing. Before she could decide, he looked away, reaching for the sword.

"I'll put it in the weapons rack near storage," he said. "It'll be visible enough to tempt someone, but not so obvious that it looks like a trap."

Thalia handed him the weapon, careful to maintain her magical connection to the aluminum thread. "I'll be able to sense when it moves. As soon as it does —"

"We follow it," Kaine finished. "I know the plan."

The slight edge in his voice made her bristle. "I was just making sure we're on the same page, since we've apparently been reading different books lately."

Kaine's jaw tightened, but he didn't rise to the bait. Instead, he wrapped the blade in a cloth and tucked it under his arm. "I'll put this with the other weapons. You should get some rest."



They stood there for a moment longer, the silence between them growing heavier with each passing second. Thalia found herself wishing he would say something — anything — to bridge the gap that had opened between them. But the words that might have mended things remained unspoken on both sides.

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Five days had passed since they'd placed the traced blade in the weapons rack, and still it remained untouched. Thalia checked its position each morning and evening, her magic reaching out to confirm the aluminum signature remained exactly where they'd left it. Meanwhile, the academy had descended into a state of barely controlled chaos. That morning alone, she'd witnessed three more golems fail catastrophically — one freezing mid-activation, another spinning its limbs wildly until it broke a workbench, and a third melting from the inside out, leaving a puddle of inferior alloy on the workshop floor. Frostforge, once a place of fierce but orderly competition, now seethed with fear and suspicion like a pot left too long over a flame.

Thalia slipped through the crowded corridors, navigating around clusters of agitated students. Fragments of conversations swirled around her, anxiety thickening the air.

"— third time it's fallen apart —"

"— just seized up completely —"

"— the Gauntlet's in three weeks, and I've got nothing —"

Thalia kept moving, her stomach clenching. The Forge Gauntlet loomed over them all like a storm cloud on the horizon. Failure meant a lowered class rank at best, and at Frostforge, a lower rank spelled disaster. Students' end-of-year rankings dictated their privileges and their unspoken pecking order. And with the sabotaged materials causing golems to malfunction left and right, panic was spreading through the student

body like wildfire.

But Thalia knew that failure in the Gauntlet was the least of their concerns. Before the term was out, she was certain that these faulty golems would take lives.

In the main hall, a crowd had gathered around a tall girl with a shock of copper hair. Her voice carried across the space, sharp with accusation.

"— can't be a coincidence that this started happening when they let more Southerners in!" she was saying, her finger jabbing toward a group of students from Thalia's homeland. "They can't match our skill level, so they're sabotaging our work!"

Murmurs of agreement rippled through the crowd. Thalia paused at the edge, tension coiling in her chest. The copper-haired girl's gaze swept across the courtyard and locked momentarily with Thalia's. Her lips curled into a sneer before she turned back to her audience.

"Look at Greenspire over there — somehow her golem works perfectly while the rest of us struggle. How convenient."

Heat flushed through Thalia's body, anger and embarrassment warring within her. She opened her mouth to respond, but a hand caught her elbow, tugging her away from the confrontation.

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"Not worth it," Luna whispered, her dark eyes flicking toward the crowd. "That's exactly what they want."

Thalia allowed herself to be pulled away, though everything in her wanted to stand her ground. "They're blaming us for their own sabotaged materials."

"Of course they are," Luna replied, guiding her toward the eastern workshops where they'd been assigned space for their golem projects. "People grab the easiest explanation when they're frightened. And right now, everyone's terrified of failing the Gauntlet."

The workshop was quieter than the corridors, though no less tense. Students hunched over their workstations, faces drawn with concentration and worry. Some worked in pairs, others alone, but all moved with the frenetic energy of mounting desperation. The Forge Gauntlet wasn't just a test — it was a crucible designed to identify weaknesses, to separate those worthy of continuing at Frostforge from those who weren't.

Thalia settled at her station, where her half-completed golem waited beneath a protective cloth. She glanced around, noting the furtive looks thrown her way, the mixture of resentment and curiosity on her classmates' faces. Word had spread that her project was one of the few progressing without issues. She felt almost guilty for her success, even though she wasn't the only one who had built a working golem. Other students had gotten lucky with pure alloys. In Thalia's case, though, it wasn't luck; her choices of metal throughout the term had been careful, deliberate.

Luna slid onto the stool beside her. "Any movement on your special project?" she

asked quietly, the question carefully phrased to remain cryptic to any eavesdroppers.

Thalia shook her head. "Still exactly where we left it."

"Interesting." Luna tapped her fingers thoughtfully against the workbench. "Either our suspect hasn't taken the bait, or —"

"Or we're wrong about who's behind this," Thalia finished, her stomach sinking at the thought. If Senna wasn't the thief, they were back to square one.

She pulled back the cloth covering her golem, revealing her work in progress. Unlike many students who chose iron or steel for their constructs, Thalia had selected brass for the main components, with tungsten reinforcements for the joints and critical structural elements. The golem's chest cavity gleamed with polished brass plates, intricate gears visible through strategic openings. One arm was fully articulated, fingers curling and extending smoothly when she flexed them. The other arm remained incomplete, wires and metal sinews exposed.

Thalia placed her palm against the brass heart casing, extending her awareness into the metal. The alloy responded to her touch, vibrating with a pure, untainted resonance. This was quality material, free from the impurities plaguing so many other students' projects.

"How do you always know?" Luna asked, watching Thalia's assessment with fascination. "Even the instructors can't tell the good metal from the bad before it fails."

Thalia's fingers traced the seam where two plates joined, feeling the way the metals sang together in harmony. "It's like...listening to a song. Pure metals have a clear tone. The sabotaged alloys are discordant — notes that don't belong mixed in with the melody."

While other students grabbed whatever metals were available in the stockroom, Thalia tested each piece before incorporating it into her design. She'd gravitated toward the tungsten for joints and silver for the heart not out of preference, but necessity; they were less popular choices, which meant their supplies hadn't been extensively tampered with.

Another crash sounded from across the workshop, followed by a string of curses. A boy stood over the smoking remains of what had been a nearly completed golem torso, his hands shaking with rage or despair — possibly both. The acrid smell of burnt metal and melted solder filled the air.

"That's the third one this week," someone muttered nearby.

Thalia felt another twist of guilt in her stomach as she turned back to her own project. Her golem was coming along beautifully, each component responding perfectly to her magic. She'd even begun incorporating some of the more advanced enchantments Instructor Wolfe had mentioned offhandedly in class — not required for second-years, but challenging and useful additions that would set her work apart.

"You should be proud," Luna said, noting her expression. "You don't have to feel bad for succeeding."

"Easy to say when half the academy isn't struggling to create something functional," Thalia replied, keeping her voice low. "I could tell them, you know. About the metals."

Luna chuckled. "And explain how you can magically sense metal purity when no one else can? They'd laugh that right off. Or it would just fuel their suspicions that you're involved somehow."

She was right, of course. Thalia's unique abilities already marked her as different; revealing the full extent of her talent would only isolate her further. And yet, watching

her classmates struggle with materials doomed to fail filled her with a sickening helplessness.

"I still can't believe Maven dismissed your concerns," Luna said, picking up a small gear and examining it. "You'd think the instructors would want to know if someone was sabotaging materials."

Thalia remembered Maven's dismissive wave, the cold indifference in her single eye as she'd accused Thalia of trying to make excuses for students' failures. "Maven thinks it's just poor craftsmanship. She believes in 'natural selection' — only the truly skilled deserve to advance."

"Charming philosophy," Luna muttered, setting down the gear. "Meanwhile, half these students might be hurt or lose standing for something entirely outside their control."

The guilt in Thalia's chest hardened into resolve. "Which is why we need to catch whoever's responsible — and soon."

As the afternoon workshop session drew to a close, Thalia carefully covered her golem and secured her tools. Students filed out around her, shoulders hunched, faces drawn with exhaustion and worry. The copper-haired girl from the courtyard passed by, her gaze lingering on Thalia's workstation with naked hostility.

"Typical Southern scum," she said to her companion, loud enough for Thalia to hear. "Cheating's the only way they know how to compete."

Thalia's hands curled into fists, but Luna's warning look kept her silent. When the workshop had emptied, they gathered their things and headed toward the weapons storage area where the traced blade waited.

They found Kaine already there, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, observing the rack from a distance. His posture was casual, but Thalia recognized the alertness in his stance — a predator waiting patiently for prey.

"Still there," he said without preamble as they approached.

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Thalia extended her awareness toward the blade, confirming his assessment. The aluminum signature pulsed steadily, exactly where they'd left it five days ago.

"I don't understand," she said, frustration coloring her voice. "It's the highest quality ice-steel in the rack. Anyone with even basic metallurgy knowledge would recognize its value."

"Maybe our thief is being cautious," Luna suggested. "Or maybe they've found another source."

"Or maybe it's because Senna is the thief, and she knows we're onto her," Thalia growled.

Kaine shook his head. "Or maybe we've been looking at this all wrong."

Thalia shot him a sharp glance, their earlier argument hovering unspoken between them. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," he said, his voice measured, "that perhaps the weapon thefts and the material sabotage are separate issues. Different goals, different perpetrators."

"That's...actually possible," Luna said slowly. "The timing overlaps, but that could be coincidence."

Thalia wanted to dismiss the idea, but she couldn't ignore the logic. The traced blade remained untouched while golems continued to fail across the academy. If Senna or someone else was replacing quality metals with inferior alloys, why weren't they also



taking the weapons?

"If that's true," she said, "we need a new plan."

Kaine's gaze met hers, and for a moment, the tension between them softened into something approaching their old companionship. "I have some ideas," he said. "But first, we need to figure out which problem we're trying to solve."

"Both," Thalia replied without hesitation. "We need to solve both."

Luna glanced between them, a knowing look in her eyes. "I'll keep tracking Senna and her friends," she offered. "Maybe I can catch them in the act of tampering with the metals."

"And I'll start mapping the pattern of which materials have been affected," Kaine added. "There might be a logic to it we're missing."

Thalia nodded, her resolve strengthening despite the complexity of the situation. "I'll continue checking the blade, just in case. And I need to find a way to warn people about the bad metals without exposing myself."

As they parted ways — Luna to follow Senna, Kaine to the metalworks archives, Thalia back to her dormitory to think—she felt the weight of the academy's problems pressing down on her shoulders. The Forge Gauntlet was approaching, tensions were rising, and they were no closer to identifying who was responsible for the chaos enveloping Frostforge.

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Frost crystals bloomed across the surface of Thalia's palm, delicate geometric patterns spreading from the center outward like frozen stars. The cryomancy

classroom was deliberately kept at near-freezing temperatures, their breath escaping in visible puffs as twenty students sat in a circle, practicing the careful art of ice manipulation. Thalia glanced across the formation to where Roran sat, his usually animated face drawn and distant. His frost patterns, normally among the most intricate in the class — swirling, complex designs that reflected his natural affinity for magic — were today little more than crude, jagged shards. When Instructor Virek passed behind him with a disapproving click of his tongue, Roran didn't even react, staring at his half-formed creation as though seeing something far beyond the classroom walls.

"Control the temperature gradient," Instructor Virek intoned, his tall, gaunt figure circling the room like a winter wraith. His white hair was pulled back severely from his face, accentuating sharp cheekbones. "The difference between artistry and chaos lies in precision."

Thalia refocused on her own palm, drawing heat away from the center while maintaining the delicate balance needed to form complex crystalline structures rather than simple ice.

"Remember," Virek continued, "in the field, your ability to instantly form ice barriers or bridges could mean the difference between life and death. The Gauntlet will test not just your golem's capabilities, but your own magical responsiveness."

A collective tension rippled through the room at the mention of the Gauntlet. Thalia noticed several students glance anxiously at their struggling frost patterns, no doubt imagining the consequences of failure.

Across the circle, Roran's pattern collapsed entirely, melting into a small puddle of water in his palm. His shoulders sagged almost imperceptibly, a muscle in his jaw tightening as he stared at the failure.

"Pathetic, Bright," said a boy with a sharp undercut, sitting on Roran's left — Nash,

one of the main instigators in Roran's previous altercations."But you'd rather work with storm magic than cryomancy, isn't that right?"

Roran didn't respond, didn't even look up. This absence of his usual quick-witted comeback concerned Thalia more than anything else. The Roran she knew would never let such a barb go unanswered, his verbal ripostes as swift and precise as his fighting style.

Instructor Virek approached the center of the circle, clapping his hands together to produce a shower of ice crystals. "Partner work," he announced. "One creates, one disrupts, then switch. Find your balance."

The circle broke apart as students paired up. Thalia moved swiftly across the room, heading straight toward Roran.

"You look like you could use a friendly face," she said quietly, settling cross-legged on the cold stone floor before him.

Roran glanced up, a flicker of his old self briefly animating his features. "That obvious, huh?"

"Only to someone who's looking," Thalia lied.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

They began the exercise, Thalia creating a small ice sculpture while Roran attempted to disrupt its formation without destroying it completely — a test of fine control. As Virek moved to the far side of the room to correct a particularly disastrous attempt, Thalia leaned forward.

"I wanted to apologize," she said in a low voice, continuing to shape the ice between them as cover for their conversation. "For intervening in that fight with Nash and his cronies. You were right — it wasn't my place."

Roran's hands paused mid-gesture, surprise evident in his dark eyes. He exhaled sharply, then shook his head. "I should be the one apologizing," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "You were just trying to help — and I owe you one for that."

"You don't owe me anything," Thalia countered, sculpting a delicate arch of ice between her fingertips. "I'm your friend. Friends defend each other."

The word seemed to settle between them, heavy with meaning. Friend. In the harsh environment of Frostforge, true friendship was as rare and precious as the purest metals.

"I'm tired, Thalia," Roran admitted after a moment, his focus ostensibly on the ice sculpture as he sent a controlled pulse of magic to alter its structure. "Tired of proving myself. Tired of the accusations. Tired of being watched every moment as if I'm about to reveal myself as a traitor."

The raw honesty in his voice made something in Thalia's chest ache. She remembered their conversation after his fight, how he'd revealed he'd been searching for the

raiders who killed his family. The weight of that grief, combined with the constant suspicion he faced, would crush most people — yet here he was, still standing, still fighting, even if his defenses were beginning to crack.

"Switch," called Instructor Virek from across the room. Partners reversed roles, creators becoming disruptors and vice versa.

Roran began crafting an ice formation, his movements mechanical, lacking his usual flair. "It's maddening," he continued, voice pitched for her ears alone, "being accused of spying for the very people who took everything from me." His fingers tightened, causing a spike of ice to shoot upward through his creation. "My father, my mother, my little brother — all gone in a single raid. Our home burned to ash. And now I have to smile and nod while these Northern bastards call me an Isle Warden spy?"

Anger flashed through Thalia, hot and protective. "They're ignorant," she said fiercely. "They've never lost anything, never had to fight for every scrap. They were born into their positions, handed their power and status."

"Like Nash," Roran agreed, nodding toward the boy across the room who was now creating an unnecessarily elaborate ice structure, showing off for Virek's benefit. "His father's some high-ranking military commander. He's spent his whole life being told he's special."

Thalia sent a pulse of carefully controlled magic to reshape part of Roran's ice sculpture, smoothing an irregular edge. "People like that can't understand people like us."

"People from the South?" Roran asked, a hint of his old humor lighting his eyes. "Because Brynn seems to get along with them just fine. Or at least, she pretends to."

"People who've had to struggle," Thalia clarified. "Who know what it means to lose."

The air between them grew quieter, more intimate despite the classroom setting. Roran's hands moved with greater confidence now, his ice patterns regaining some of their former complexity.

"I've heard you and Luna have been working to catch the actual thieves," he said, changing the subject slightly. "That's why I wanted to apologize. I should be helping, not wallowing."

"You haven't been wallowing," Thalia protested. "You've been fighting your own battles."

"Still." He completed a particularly intricate frost pattern, the first genuine display of his talent that day. "I'd like to help, if you'll have me. Just don't expect me to be any good at forging — I'm rubbish at that."

The self-deprecating comment, delivered with a flash of his familiar crooked smile, broke the tension between them. For the first time in weeks, Thalia caught a glimpse of the Roran she'd befriended last year — charming, quick-witted, resilient despite the burdens he carried. Relief washed through her. He was still there, beneath the layers of grief and frustration and exhaustion.

"Final minute," Virek called, beginning his circuit of the room for final assessments. He paced toward Thalia and Roran first.

The instructor examined their ice creation with a critical eye. "Acceptable structure," he pronounced, which from Virek was high praise indeed. "Though your temperature control is still lacking, Bright. More precision, less force."

"Yes, sir," Roran replied, the formality not quite hiding the renewed spark in his eyes.

As class ended and students filed out into the marginally warmer corridor, Roran caught Thalia's arm. "Thank you," he said simply. "For still believing in me."

"Always," she responded without hesitation. "We're going to catch the real culprits, Roran. We're going to prove your innocence."

He squeezed her arm once before letting go, a genuine smile warming his features for the first time in days. "I know. Between your metal-sense, Luna's sneakiness, and Kaine's..." he paused, noting her expression, "...whatever redeeming qualities Kaine might have, we make a formidable team."

Thalia couldn't help but laugh, the sound echoing in the stone corridor. "Careful. Your charm is showing again."

"Good," he said, falling into step beside her.

As they walked toward their next classes, Thalia felt something within her settle. The problems at Frostforge remained unsolved — the thief still at large, the sabotaged metals still threatening students' futures, the Gauntlet still looming on the horizon. But somehow, seeing that spark of Roran's good humor return made the challenges ahead seem more manageable.

They would solve this mystery together. And when they did, perhaps the shadows hanging over all of them would finally begin to lift.

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Thalia entered the Howling Forge with her shoulders tense, eyes immediately seeking out the storage rack where they'd placed the traced blade seven days prior. Dawn light filtered through the high windows, catching on floating motes of metal dust and casting long shadows across the floor. The familiar symphony of the forge — hammers striking anvils, the hiss of hot metal plunged into water, the low hum of activated golem cores — surrounded her, but she tuned it out, focusing only on the empty space where their bait should have been.

She blinked twice, as if the absence might resolve itself into the familiar form of the silver-steel dagger. It didn't. The blade was gone, leaving behind only the faintest trace of its magical signature, like a whisper against her senses.

Thalia's head snapped up, gaze cutting across the wide expanse of the forge to where Kaine stood at his workstation. He was already looking in her direction, his ice-blue eyes sharp and alert. Their gazes locked, a silent message passing between them. Thalia gave a small, almost imperceptible nod toward the empty rack. Kaine's expression hardened, his jaw setting into a determined line before he returned her nod once, definitively.

Someone had taken the bait.

Thalia closed her eyes, extending her awareness outward, feeling for the unique signature of the aluminum trace they'd woven into the blade. Unlike the practice sessions with Kaine, where she'd been able to track the metal anywhere in the forge, now the signature was frustratingly faint — present, but distant, like a star glimpsed through heavy clouds. The thief had taken it far from the forge, as they'd anticipated.



She pressed her fingertips against her temples, trying to strengthen the connection. The background noise of the forge — the clang of metal, the shouts of students, the constant thrumming of active golem cores — made it difficult to concentrate on something so subtle. She would need quiet and time to properly track it.

Opening her eyes, Thalia started across the forge toward Kaine's station, weaving between workbenches and half-assembled constructs. The forge was especially busy today, with the Forge Gauntlet just days away. Students hunched over benches, making final adjustments to their golems, desperately trying to ensure they would perform properly during the trials. None of them seemed to be paying any attention to the missing blade — their focus consumed by their own success in the upcoming event.

Thalia was halfway to Kaine when a shout rang out from the far side of the forge, followed by a crash and the sound of splintering wood. She froze, along with everyone else in the room, as the cacophony escalated.

"Control it! Control your construct!" Someone yelled, their voice tight with panic.

A second crash, louder than the first. Thalia whirled toward the source of the commotion, just in time to see a fully-formed iron golem — nearly seven feet tall, with articulated limbs — sweep its massive arm across a workbench, sending tools and components flying. Its creator, a thin boy with Northern features that Thalia recognized from her metallurgy class, was frantically gesturing to the construct.

"Stop! Deactivate!" he commanded, his voice cracking with fear.

The golem's eyes — circular lenses of crystal — flickered erratically, shifting from a steady blue glow to pulsing flashes. It lurched forward suddenly, its movements jerky and unpredictable. With terrifying speed, it lashed out, its fist connecting with the

boy's temple. The impact sent him flying backward into a rack of forge tools, where he crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

For a heartbeat, the forge fell silent.

Then the golem turned, its head swiveling unnaturally as its gaze fell on the nearest students. A girl screamed as the construct took a step toward her, its foot leaving a dent in the stone floor.

"It's gone rogue!" someone shouted.

The forge erupted into chaos. Students scrambled away from the malfunctioning golem as it lurched forward, arms swinging wildly, catching another student across the chest and sending them sprawling.

Thalia didn't think — she moved. Darting to the nearest weapons rack, she grabbed an ice-metal short sword, the blue-tinged blade humming with cold energy against her palm. Across the room, she saw Kaine doing the same, snatching up a heavy hammer.

"The core!" Thalia shouted to him over the din. "We need to disrupt its core!"

Kaine nodded, already moving to flank the construct as it smashed through another workbench, sending splinters flying. Thalia circled in the opposite direction, keeping her sword low, ready to strike.

The golem's movements were uncoordinated but powerful, each swing of its arms threatening devastating damage. Its eyes pulsed frantically, the magical energy within fluctuating wildly — a sure sign of inferior materials, Thalia recognized with grim certainty.

"Hey!" Kaine shouted, drawing the construct's attention. "Over here, you pile of

scrap!"

The golem's head snapped toward him, giving Thalia an opening. She darted forward, aiming to slip behind it and strike at the core housing on its back. But the golem sensed her approach, whirling with unexpected speed. Its massive fist swept toward her face.

Thalia dropped, the blow passing mere inches above her head. She felt the displacement of air ruffle her hair as she rolled away, coming up in a crouch. Too close. The construct advanced on her, backing her toward a wall of forge equipment.

"Kaine!" she called, her voice tight.

He was already moving, leaping onto a workbench and using the height advantage to launch himself at the golem's back. The hammer came down with crushing force on the construct's shoulder, the impact sending a shudder through its frame. The golem staggered, momentarily off-balance, its attention divided.

Thalia seized her chance, darting forward and slicing at the exposed wiring at the construct's knee joint. The ice-metal blade cut through with surprising ease — further evidence of the substandard alloys. The golem listed to one side, its mobility compromised.

But it wasn't finished. Whirling with alarming quickness, it caught Kaine with a backhand that sent him flying into a tool rack. Thalia's heart leapt into her throat as he crashed to the ground, grimacing in pain before rising unsteadily to his feet.

The golem turned back to her, its damaged leg dragging slightly as it advanced. When she saw Kaine in position, Thalia made her move. She feinted left, then darted right, sliding between the golem's legs and slashing at its good knee. As it lurched forward, off-balance, Kaine vaulted onto its back, gripping the ridges of its shoulders for

purchase.

With a single, powerful thrust, he drove his hammer into the exposed core in the golem's chest. The construct froze, a strange keening sound emanating from its chest cavity. The blue light in its eyes flickered once, twice — then faded to dull, lifeless crystal.

The golem swayed, then collapsed with a resounding crash that echoed through the now-silent forge.

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For several long seconds, no one moved. Thalia stood, breathing hard, the ice-metal sword still clutched in her white-knuckled grip. Kaine remained atop the fallen construct, his expression grim as he withdrew his blade from its chest.

The silence was broken by slow, deliberate applause.

"Well, well," came Instructor Wolfe's cold voice as she emerged from the shadows near the forge entrance. "How very heroic."

"Instructor," Kaine acknowledged, climbing off the fallen golem with careful dignity.

Wolfe surveyed the destruction — the unconscious student being tended to by his peers, the smashed workbenches, the scattered tools. Her expression was thunderous.

"Would someone care to explain," she said, her voice dangerously soft, "how a second-year student managed to create a construct that nearly killed him and his classmates?"

No one answered. Thalia opened her mouth, ready to explain about the substituted materials, the pattern of failures, but Wolfe continued before she could speak.

"I have never," Wolfe said, each word sharp as a blade, "in twenty-five years of teaching at this academy, seen such widespread incompetence. You," she pointed at the unconscious boy's friends, "get him to the infirmary. The rest of you," her gaze swept the room, "clean up this mess. Now."

Students scrambled to obey, the tension in the room thick enough to cut with a

blade. Thalia stayed where she was, frustration building in her chest.

"Instructor," she said, stepping forward. "This isn't the first malfunction. There's something wrong with the—"

"With the students, clearly," Wolfe cut her off. "Sloppy work. Careless construction. Rushing to complete projects without proper attention to detail." She looked directly at Thalia, her gaze cold. "You think the enemy will care about your excuses when your weapons fail on the battlefield? You think the Isle Wardens will pause while you explain why your golems aren't functioning properly?"

Thalia felt heat rise in her cheeks. "That's not what I —"

"I don't want to hear it, Greenspire," Wolfe snapped. "This generation has been coddled. You lack discipline. You lack focus." She gestured to the fallen golem. "This is the result. And when time comes — and it will come — this entitled attitude will get you all killed."

With that, she turned sharply and strode from the forge, leaving a wake of stunned silence behind her.

Thalia stood rigid, anger and frustration coursing through her veins. How could Wolfe be so blind? This wasn't about entitled students or lack of discipline — it was about sabotage, pure and simple. The same sabotage that had led to the weapons theft, the same sabotage that was endangering everyone at the academy.

But no one in authority seemed willing to listen.

With a sharp exhale, Thalia returned the ice-metal sword to its rack and stalked back to her own workstation. Her golem sat partially assembled on her bench. Unlike the rampaging construct, hers had a more delicate build, designed for precision rather

than brute force.

She placed her hand on its dormant core, feeling the faint pulse of magical energy responding to her touch. Over the past weeks, as she'd crafted each component with painstaking care, she'd begun to form a bond with the construct. It wasn't alive, not in the traditional sense, but there was something...responsive about it. Something that recognized her.

"At least you're not going to go berserk on me," she murmured, adjusting a loose connection in its shoulder joint.

"I wouldn't be too confident." Kaine's voice came from behind her, pitched low so only she could hear. "Not with what's happening."

Thalia turned to find him standing at her bench, his expression somber. A bruise was beginning to form on his jaw where he'd hit the tool rack.

"Are you alright?" she asked, resisting the urge to reach out and touch the injury.

He shrugged. "I've had worse." His eyes flicked to the fallen golem, now being disassembled by a team of students under another instructor's supervision. "That could have been much worse."

"It will be worse," Thalia said grimly. "In the Gauntlet. If golems start malfunctioning during the trials..."

"Catastrophe," Kaine finished for her, leaning closer. "That's why you need to focus on that now, not on the blade."

Thalia blinked. "But the thief —"

"I'll handle it," Kaine said firmly. "The Gauntlet is in three days, Thalia. You need to make sure your golem is ready, that you're ready. I'll track the blade in the meantime."

She frowned. "You might not be able to sense the aluminum trace. It's subtle."

"I'll do my best," he said. "And you can help once you've survived the trials. But right now, this," he gestured to the chaos in the forge, "is the more immediate threat."

Thalia looked down at her partially completed golem, considering. He was right, of course. As much as she wanted to solve the mystery of the stolen weapons, the Forge Gauntlet was looming. Failing it wasn't an option — not if she wanted to survive the academy in the long run.



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"Alright," she agreed reluctantly. "But as soon as the Gauntlet is over—"

"We hunt down the thief together," Kaine promised. "Though you might be valuable in the arena for other reasons too. You can sense which golems are made with the inferior metals, can't you?"

Thalia nodded slowly. "To an extent. If I'm close enough, I can feel the instability in the magical currents."

"Then you can warn the other students if their constructs are about to malfunction," Kaine said. "It could save lives."

Thalia hadn't considered that aspect. She'd been so focused on catching the thief, on solving the mystery, that she hadn't fully grasped how she might help prevent disaster during the trials.

"You're right," she said, a new sense of purpose settling over her. She turned back to her golem, examining its half-finished state with fresh eyes. "I need to finish this, and it needs to be perfect."

Kaine's hand touched her shoulder briefly — a rare gesture of affection that sent warmth through her despite the circumstances.

"It will be," he said quietly. "Because you made it."

With that, he returned to his own workstation, leaving Thalia to contemplate the dual challenges ahead: surviving the Forge Gauntlet and stopping whoever was sabotaging

the academy — before it was too late.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Dawn painted the Crystalline Plateau in shades of fire and blood, the pale light fracturing across the jagged arena surface like a premonition. Thalia stood at the edge, her breath forming small clouds in the bitter morning air as she surveyed what would soon become a battlefield. Below her boots, the translucent crystal floor revealed dizzying depths—a reminder that in Frostforge, even the ground beneath your feet held secrets. The arena had been constructed overnight, metal barriers rising from slots in the crystal, creating a perfect circle for the Forge Gauntlet that would determine not just skill, but survival.

Students gathered along the perimeter, their faces etched with varying degrees of confidence and terror. Golems of all shapes and sizes stood sentinel beside their creators — metal guardians whose very existence had been drawn from the depths of imagination and forged in the unforgiving heat of the academy's workshops. Some gleamed like polished mirrors in the rising sun, while others bore a dull, lifeless sheen, depending on the metals their creators had chosen.

The spectator stands filled quickly with senior students and instructors, their dark uniforms creating a grim backdrop against the crystalline surroundings. Thalia spotted Maven among them, the Survival instructor's face impassive as she surveyed her students' creations. Near the arena entrance, a scoreboard flickered to life, brackets appearing in glowing blue runes that listed the day's matches.

How many students were walking into this competition with fatally flawed creations? She glanced at her own golem standing tall beside her, its brass joints catching the morning light. Unlike many of the constructs around her, hers was crafted from pure alloys—a fact that now felt less like accomplishment and more like unearned advantage.

The scoreboard flashed, drawing her attention to the first round of matchups. Her eyes scanned the glowing text until she found her name: THALIA GREENSPIRE vs. MATTHIAS STEELMAW.

She knew Matthias from her advanced metallurgy class — a quiet Northerner with quick hands and a quicker temper. He'd been one of the few who hadn't openly sneered at her success with golem animation, though his silence had felt more like calculation than kindness. Thalia flexed her fingers, the familiar tingle of magic flowing through them. She could beat him — knew it with a certainty that felt almost cruel given what she'd discovered about the sabotaged materials. His golem's joints had the telltale discordant signature of the inferior alloys.

"I should warn him," she murmured to herself, eyes searching the crowd for Matthias's lanky frame. It wasn't his fault his creation was compromised. Yet what would she say? That someone had been systematically replacing the academy's metal stores with subpar materials? That she believed Senna — or someone — was deliberately sabotaging the other students? Without proof, her warnings would sound like excuses or, worse, attempts to undermine his confidence before their match.

Continuing her scan of the brackets, Thalia noted other significant pairings. Luna would face Levi Halloway in one of the opening bouts. Further down, she spotted a matchup that made her breath catch: BRYNN FIRSTBORN vs. ASHE REDWOOD.

"That'll be one to watch," she whispered. Both had built their golems from pure alloys — Brynn through luck, hard work, and repeated failure; Ashe, with guidance from Thalia.

Some of the brackets were particularly concerning. NASH IRONHALL vs. RORAN BRIGHT, in particular. Thalia frowned, scanning the gathered students. Nash's crisp undercut and perpetual sneer were nowhere to be seen, nor were several of his usual companions.

"Strange," she murmured. Students didn't simply skip the Forge Gauntlet — it accounted for nearly a quarter of their term's evaluation. Something was wrong, but she didn't have time to unravel that mystery now. The first matches would begin soon, and she needed to ensure her golem was ready. Besides — if Nash didn't show up, that was all the better. Thalia wasn't worried about what he would do to Roran; it was more the other way around. Perhaps Nash had opted not to turn up for his bout for this precise reason, fearing Roran's righteous retribution in the arena.

Thalia returned to her waiting construct, its burnished face catching the morning light. Unlike many of the angular, intimidating designs chosen by the Northern students, her golem had a more organic form — curves where others had sharp edges, flexibility where others had rigid strength. She'd named it Falchion in her mind, for the blade she and Kaine had forged together; she'd never spoken the name aloud, fearing the ridicule such sentimentality would surely bring.

"Ready for today?" she asked quietly, placing her palm against the warm metal of its chest plate. The golem's eyes, crafted from quartz, flickered with inner light as it registered her touch. Through the metal, she felt the subtle vibration of its core responding to her, a resonance that had grown stronger with each practice session.

Thalia ran through their pre-combat routine, a series of movements and commands they'd perfected over weeks of late-night sessions in empty practice rooms. She directed it to raise an arm, twist at the waist, crouch in defensive posture — each motion executed with fluid precision that belied the golem's metal construction.

"Good," she whispered, feeling the familiar comfort of working with a creation that responded perfectly to her will. It felt less like commanding a separate entity and more like dancing with a partner who anticipated her every move. "We're going to be fine."

The first match was called, and Thalia moved to the edge of the arena to watch. Luna stepped into the ring, her small frame nearly dwarfed by her golem — a sleek, steel

construct that moved with uncanny speed. Across from her, Levi Halloway directed his bulkier creation forward, its heavy iron fists raised in a boxer's stance.

"Begin!" Maven's voice echoed across the plateau.

What followed was less a battle than a demonstration. Luna's golem darted around its opponent with a grace that seemed impossible for something made of metal, striking at joints and vulnerable connections while evading the slower golem's powerful blows. Meanwhile, Luna herself engaged Levi directly, her movements almost as quick as her construct's. She wielded a thin blade that seemed to find every gap in Levi's defenses.

Within minutes, Levi's golem faltered, one arm hanging useless at its side while Luna's creation continued its relentless assault. Levi himself fared little better, managing only defensive parries against Luna's flurry of attacks. When Maven finally called the match, Levi was backed against the arena barrier, disarmed and breathing hard, while his golem lay motionless on the frost-covered ground.

"Victory to Luna Meadows!" Maven announced, to scattered applause and murmurs of appreciation from the spectators.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

Thalia watched Luna exit the arena, noting the casual way she patted her golem's shoulder, as if congratulating a friend on a job well done. Their connection was impressive — Luna had clearly spent as many hours refining her control as Thalia had.

Several more matches followed, each revealing the stark difference between those with properly constructed golems and those whose creations harbored hidden flaws. Twice, Thalia winced as golems malfunctioned mid-battle, their movements becoming erratic or seizing entirely. The instructors merely noted these failures as technical forfeitures, showing no recognition of the pattern forming before their eyes.

Then came the match Thalia had been waiting for: Brynn Firstborn versus Ashe Redwood.

The two women entered from opposite sides of the arena, each projecting confidence in her own way — Brynn with her characteristic aristocratic poise, Ashe with the measured stride of a clan warrior. Their golems followed, both impressive specimens. Ashe's was iron, while Brynn's was an unusual, nickel-rich steel that gave it a darker hue.

"This should be interesting," murmured a voice at Thalia's side. She turned to find Roran standing next to her, his dark curls tied back, eyes fixed on the arena.

Below, Brynn had drawn her signature dual blades — elegant weapons with curved guards that caught the light as she spun them in a practiced flourish. Across from her, Ashe extended her metal staff, its ends capped with weighted spheres.

At Falcroft's signal, both women launched into motion. Their golems crashed together in the center of the arena, metal meeting metal in a sound that echoed across the plateau. But it was the duel between Brynn and Ashe that drew Thalia's eye — a deadly dance of precision and power.

Brynn moved like a full-force blizzard, her blades extensions of her arms as she flowed around Ashe's staff strikes. She was speed incarnate, never in the same place for more than a heartbeat, her attacks coming from impossible angles. Ashe countered with the disciplined technique of her clan's combat style, using her staff's reach to keep Brynn at a distance, the weighted ends creating arcs of threatening force that even Brynn had to respect.

Their golems mirrored the intensity of their battle, though with less finesse. Brynn's construct — sleek and angular like its creator — executed a series of rapid punches that drove Ashe's more solidly built golem backward. But Ashe's creation absorbed the blows, its heavier frame allowing it to withstand damage that would have crippled a lighter opponent.

"She's good," Roran commented, nodding toward Brynn as she executed a perfect backflip to avoid Ashe's sweeping staff.

"Too good," Thalia agreed. Brynn's movements spoke of years of professional training, not the kind of skill one picked up in standard Southern combat classes. As the eldest daughter of a wealthy noble family, she'd clearly had access to resources beyond what most Southern recruits could dream of.

The fight intensified, both women now sporting minor injuries — a bruise blossoming on Ashe's forearm, a torn sleeve revealing a scratch on Brynn's shoulder. Their breath came in controlled gasps, neither willing to show fatigue despite the grueling pace.

Then, in a moment of overconfidence or miscalculation, Ashe extended too far with a thrust of her staff. Brynn's response was immediate and vicious. She deflected the staff with one blade while the other sliced forward in a silver arc — a move that should have been pulled short in a training match.

But it wasn't.

Blood beaded along Ashe's cheek where Brynn's blade had cut a thin line from cheekbone to jaw. The crowd went silent, all eyes on the two women frozen in the aftermath of that strike.

Ashe's face transformed, shock giving way to cold fury. She whirled her staff in a renewed assault, but something had changed — her movements now held the edge of real anger, making them more powerful but less precise.

Brynn smiled, a predator sensing weakness. She danced away from Ashe's increasingly aggressive attacks, conserving her energy while her opponent expended hers in powerful but ultimately futile strikes. Meanwhile, their golems continued their separate battle, Brynn's construct slowly gaining the upper hand as it targeted the joints of Ashe's heavier golem.

The end came with brutal efficiency. As Ashe launched an overhead strike with her staff, Brynn darted inside her guard, one blade pinning the staff while the other pressed against Ashe's throat — not touching, but close enough that the match was clearly over. At the same moment, Brynn's golem delivered a precision strike to the back of Ashe's construct's knee, sending it crashing to the crystal floor.

"Victory to Brynn Firstborn!" Maven announced, his voice cutting through the tense silence.

Brynn stepped back, sheathing her blades with a flourish. Ashe remained still for a



moment, chest heaving, before lowering her staff. The cut on her cheek still bled, a vivid streak of red against her pale skin.

"Good match," Brynn said, loud enough for the audience to hear, her tone carrying the unmistakable note of someone who had never doubted the outcome.

Ashe didn't respond. She recalled her golem with a sharp gesture and left the arena, her straight back and measured stride betraying nothing of what must have been bitter disappointment.

The crowd erupted in excited chatter, senior students pointing out particular moves and techniques to their neighbors. Clearly, this match had lived up to its anticipated drama, though Thalia couldn't help feeling uneasy about the unnecessary cut Brynn had delivered. In a school where accidents could be fatal, such deliberate aggression crossed an unspoken line.

"That was unnecessary," Thalia muttered.

Roran nodded. "But effective. She got in Ashe's head after that cut. Classic tactic."

Before Thalia could respond, Luna appeared at her side, her usual distracted demeanor replaced by focused intensity.

"Nice work out there," Thalia offered, nodding toward the arena where Luna had so handily defeated Levi.

Luna waved away the compliment. "That's not important. I have something to show you." She glanced around before pulling Thalia a few steps away from the crowd, into the shadow of one of the crystal formations that dotted the plateau.

From inside her jacket, Luna withdrew a small, folded parchment, its edges worn as if

it had been handled repeatedly."I found this a few minutes ago," she said, voice barely above a whisper as she unfolded it."It's a ledger — records of all the stolen materials and who they were sold to."

Thalia's pulse quickened as she scanned the neat columns of figures and names. Quantities of various metals, dates of transactions, payment amounts — all recorded with meticulous precision. And at the bottom of each page, a signature that made her stomach clench.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"Nash," she breathed, recognizing the name of the Northern student who had confronted Roran — the same student who was conspicuously absent from today's competition. "And these others — they're all Northern students."

"Yes," Luna confirmed, her finger tracing a column of names. "But do you notice who isn't on this list? Senna. Her name doesn't appear anywhere."

Thalia frowned, reading through the ledger again. Luna was right — despite all their suspicions, there was no evidence linking Senna to the thefts or the sabotage.

"Where did you find this?" Thalia asked, her mind racing to reconcile this new information with everything they'd observed.

"Hidden in Nash's dorm room," Luna explained. "After he didn't show up for the roll call, I thought it was worth investigating."

"This doesn't make sense," Thalia argued, frustration building in her chest. "We saw Senna in that hidden room. We know she was collecting the broken golem pieces. Why would she do that if she wasn't involved?"

Luna shook her head. "I don't know. But this —" she tapped the ledger "— this is hard proof. These students were stealing materials, replacing them with inferior metals, and selling the originals along with stolen weapons outside the academy. From the looks of these names, they were selling to Isle Wardens."

Thalia stared at the parchment, doubt gnawing at her certainty. Could they have been wrong about Senna all along? Or was this ledger itself a clever misdirection — one

final act of sabotage designed to throw suspicion elsewhere?

"It could be a decoy," she suggested. "Something left behind to mislead us."

Luna's expression hardened with rare intensity. "I don't think so. The details are too specific, and it matches exactly with what we know about the thefts. Senna may be many things, but she's not our thief."

Before Thalia could argue further, a voice boomed across the plateau: "THALIA GREENSPIRE AND MATTHIAS STEELMAW, PREPARE FOR COMBAT!"

Thalia's head snapped up, her match completely forgotten in the wake of Luna's revelation. Across the arena, she could see Matthias already taking his position, his golem standing ready beside him.

"We're not done with this," she told Luna, folding the ledger and handing it back. "Keep that safe."

As Thalia strode toward the arena, her mind churned with conflicting thoughts. If Nash and his friends were the thieves, what had they been doing with the stolen materials? And why had they chosen now to disappear? Most troubling of all — if Senna wasn't the culprit they'd been hunting, what had she been doing in that hidden room?

The answers would have to wait. For now, she had a battle to fight. She glanced at Matthias, at his golem with its compromised metals, and felt a weight settle in her chest.

Falchion fell into step beside her, metal footfalls ringing against the frost-hardened soil as they approached the arena's edge. Whatever came next, at least she wasn't facing it alone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Thalia stepped into the combat arena, her golem moving beside her with fluid grace that belied its size. The crowd's roar washed over her in waves — some cheering, many jeering. She fixed her gaze on Matthias, her Northern opponent, who strutted toward the center with the confident swagger of someone who had never tasted defeat. His ice-iron golem stomped behind him, each footfall sending vibrations through the packed dirt floor. Thalia took a steadying breath, centering herself as she had practiced countless times in the forge. This wasn't just about winning anymore — with every malfunctioning golem she'd witnessed, the stakes had risen far beyond a simple tournament.

"Show the Southern slum-dweller what a real fight looks like, Matthias!" someone shouted from the stands. Laughter rippled through the crowd, sharp and cutting, followed by the disgruntled mutters of Southerners.

"Send her back to picking herbs in the gutter!" called another.

Thalia's jaw tightened, but she refused to look at them. Instead, she focused on the feel of her ice-brass golem beside her, its core humming with life.

The contrast between the constructs couldn't have been more stark. Matthias's golem stood nearly nine feet tall, a hulking beast of dark, soot-colored ice-iron with shoulders as broad as a doorway. Its limbs were thick as tree trunks, hands ending in blunt, hammer-like appendages designed for crushing strikes. The construct's head was little more than a brutish wedge with two glowing blue eyes sunken deep into the metal, giving it a perpetually angry expression. It emanated raw, unrefined power.

Her own creation was a different creature entirely. Standing just over six feet, Thalia's golem was lighter, sleeker. Its ice-brass frame gleamed with a warm, golden hue in the arena's harsh lighting, the metal polished to a mirror finish. The limbs were lean and

articulated with twice as many joints as standard models, allowing for fluid, almost human-like movement. Its face appeared more innocent, with wider eyes that glowed a steady blue. Where Matthias's golem was built to intimidate through size and strength, hers was designed to outmaneuver and outsmart.

"The rules remain as stated," said Maven. "Your golems will engage until one is disabled. Fighters will likewise engage until one surrenders, or until the judges declare a winner. Injury to your opponent is highly discouraged." She looked between them. "Are the combatants ready?"

Matthias nodded eagerly, already shifting into a fighting stance. Thalia met the judge's eyes and gave her own nod, more measured but no less determined.

"Begin!"

Matthias wasted no time. With a sharp gesture from his right hand, his golem charged forward, its massive legs eating up the distance between them with surprising speed. The ice-iron construct raised both arms above its head, ready to bring them down in a devastating hammer blow that would have shattered a lesser golem on impact.

Thalia didn't panic. She'd spent hours studying Northern combat tactics, knew their preference for overwhelming force in the opening moments. Rather than meeting strength with strength, she extended her left hand with a quick flicking motion, sending her golem sliding to the right — a move more reminiscent of a dancer than a warrior.

The massive blow from Matthias's golem struck only dirt, sending up a cloud of dust and creating a small crater in the arena floor. A collective "ooh" rose from the audience, punctuated by disappointed groans from the Northerners.

Thalia maintained her defensive posture, keeping her golem light on its feet as it circled Matthias's lumbering creation. She watched his movements carefully, noting the way he favored his right side, the slight delay between his commands and his golem's execution. Fighting directly would be suicide — his golem had at least twice the raw power of hers — but wearing him down, forcing him to waste energy on missed attacks, that was a strategy she could work with.

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The Northern golem pivoted with surprising agility for its size, launching another assault. This time, it swept one massive arm in a horizontal arc, aiming to catch Thalia's construct in the midsection. Again, she dodged, but more narrowly this time, the edge of the blow grazing her golem's shoulder and causing it to stumble slightly.

As she regained control, directing her golem to put more distance between them, Thalia instinctively reached out with her senses. She let her awareness brush against Matthias's golem.

The construct's core resonated with the same dissonant, jangling energy she'd detected in the failed golems. The magical currents weren't flowing smoothly through the alloy; instead, they bunched and knotted, creating dangerous pressure points throughout the construct. This golem wasn't just going to lose the match. It was going to catastrophically fail.

Matthias was preparing for another charge, a confident smile playing at his lips as he misjudged her defensive movements for fear. He had no idea his construct was seconds away from turning into a mindless, destructive force.

"Matthias!" she shouted across the arena, breaking the combatant's code of silent focus. "Disengage your golem! The alloy is compromised!"

His brow furrowed, confusion quickly replaced by scorn. "Nice try, Southerner. Your distraction tactics won't work on me."

"I'm serious!" she tried again, more urgently this time. "Your golem's core is unstable. It's made from the impure alloys. It's going to —"



"Silence during combat!"Maven barked, cutting her off.

Matthias smirked, interpreting her warning as a desperate ploy.He thrust both hands forward, sending his golem charging toward her again — but halfway across the arena, something changed.The construct's movements became jerky, its glowing eyes flickering like candles in a draft.It took one more stumbling step, then froze completely.

The arena fell silent.

For one tense heartbeat, nothing moved.Then, with a grinding shriek of metal on metal, the golem's head slowly rotated a full hundred and eighty degrees — until it was staring directly at its creator.

Matthias's smug expression dissolved into confusion, then dawning horror.

"What are you —" he began, raising his hands to regain control.

The golem's eyes flared blindingly bright.With a sound like tearing metal, it pivoted and lunged toward him with terrifying speed, one hammer-fist raised to crush its own master.

Thalia sprinted across the arena, Falchion moving in perfect synchronization beside her.At the last possible moment, she slammed her body into Matthias, shoving him sideways just as the corrupted golem brought its fist down.The blow missed him by inches, striking the ground with enough force to crack the packed earth and send shock waves rippling across the arena floor.

They tumbled together, rolling several feet before coming to a stop with Thalia half on top of him.She scrambled to her feet, yanking Matthias up by his collar.

"Move!" she shouted, pushing him toward the arena's edge.

The rogue golem was already recovering, its movements more fluid now that it was free from its master's control. The magical currents within it had broken free of constraint, feeding on their own chaotic energy. It turned toward them again, eyes pulsing erratically.

Thalia's brass construct moved with incredible speed, tackling the larger iron golem from the side before it could reach her and Matthias. The two ice-metal behemoths crashed to the ground in a tangle of limbs, the impact sending clouds of dust billowing around them.

The combat judge was shouting for security, but Thalia knew help would come too late. This was between the golems now.

Her golem was outmatched in terms of raw strength. The iron construct pinned it to the ground with one massive hand, raising the other to deliver a crushing blow to its head. Thalia felt a sympathetic pressure in her own chest, her connection to her creation making its peril viscerally real.

The corrupted golem froze mid-strike, its body shuddering as its internal instabilities compounded. Thalia could feel the currents through the metal casing; within the ice-iron, the natural energy was a tangled mess. Seizing the opportunity, Thalia's brass creation heaved upward with all its strength, breaking free of the iron golem's grip. In one fluid motion, it drove its fist directly into the larger construct's chest — not aiming for brute damage, but for the magical core.

The impact was like a tuning fork striking stone. A high-pitched whine filled the arena as the corrupted golem's chest plate cracked, exposing the glowing, pulsating core within. Thalia's golem struck again, more precisely this time, fingers plunging into the opening to grasp the unstable heart.

With a final wrench, it tore the core free.

The iron golem collapsed instantly, its limbs splaying at unnatural angles as the animating magic fled. What had moments ago been a terrifying force of destruction was now nothing more than an inert heap of flawed metal.

Thalia's golem stood over it, the extracted core still clutched in its hand. The orb's glow faded rapidly, leaving a dull, lifeless sphere of what should have been pure magical alloy but was instead riddled with cheaper substitutes.

The silence that followed was deafening. Then, gradually, murmurs spread through the crowd, rising into a confused mixture of applause, gasps, and accusations.

"Winner: Thalia Greenspire," the judge announced, though her eyes were fixed on the fallen golem with unmistakable concern.

Across the arena, Matthias sat on the ground where he had fallen, his face ashen. His gaze moved from his destroyed creation to Thalia, a riot of emotions playing across his features — shock, relief, suspicion, and most troublingly, a growing anger.

"How did you know?" he demanded, loud enough for those nearby to hear. "How did you know it would turn?"

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The question hung in the air, feeding the whispers that were already spreading through the crowd. How indeed had she known? Had she somehow sabotaged his golem? Was this some Southern trick?

Thalia didn't bother answering. The truth — that she could sense the flaws in the metal — would only raise more questions she wasn't prepared to answer. Instead, she turned away, directing her golem to follow as she strode toward the exit.

The next bout would be called soon. Her second-round matchup with Brynn was scheduled for later that afternoon, but a growing sense of urgency gnawed at her. The traced weapon they'd crafted, the aluminum-threaded blade — she needed to know if Kaine had found it, if they were any closer to uncovering who was behind the thefts and the dangerous alloy substitutions.

She couldn't wait around for her next match.

Once clear of the arena, she deactivated her golem and turned back toward the academy, descending the stone steps back into the fortress. The corridors of Frostforge were nearly empty, everyone having gathered to watch the tournament. Her footsteps echoed against the stone walls as she descended deeper into the academy, toward the Howling Forge where she had last seen Kaine.

As she ran, she extended her senses, searching for the unique signature of the aluminum-threaded weapon they had crafted. It was faint at first, barely perceptible among the sea of metals in Frostforge — other weapons, the school's iron reinforcements — but as she focused, it grew clearer. Not in the direction of the forge as she had expected, but deeper still, toward the foundations of the academy.

The path took her past the Howling Forge, through rarely used corridors lined with ancient tapestries depicting the founding of Frostforge. The magical residue grew stronger, pulling her toward a section of the academy she had never explored before. The stone here was older, rougher, lacking the refined finish of the upper levels.

She slowed to a walk, signaling her golem to move quietly beside her. The trail led to what appeared to be a dead end — a flat stone wall decorated with faded carvings of interlocking rings. But as she approached, her senses told her otherwise. The aluminum trace continued through the wall.

Running her fingers along the stone, she felt a nearly imperceptible seam — a perfect rectangle cut into the wall with such precision that it was invisible to the naked eye. Pressing her palm against it, she channeled a small pulse of magic into the metal components she could sense within the hidden mechanism.

The wall slid silently aside, revealing a narrow staircase descending into darkness.

Thalia hesitated only briefly before starting down, her golem following close behind. The air grew colder with each step, carrying the scent of damp stone and something else — the metallic tang of forge-work. The stairs seemed ancient, worn smooth by countless feet over centuries, yet they showed no signs of recent use. No footprints in the thin layer of dust, no disruption in the cobwebs that stretched across corners.

The aluminum signature grew stronger. She was close.

The staircase opened into a vast network of tunnels, some natural cave formations and others clearly carved by hand. Luminous lichen growing along the walls provided just enough light to navigate by, casting everything in an eerie blue glow. Thalia followed the pull of the metal, taking turns with confidence despite never having been

here before.

The tunnels gradually widened, eventually opening into an enormous cavern that took her breath away. The ceiling soared at least thirty feet above, supported by massive stone columns that might have been natural formations or the work of ancient builders — it was impossible to tell. The walls were lined with shelves and racks, all filled with weapons — swords, axes, spears, daggers, and more exotic implements she couldn't name.

And standing in the center of it all, illuminated by braziers whose flames cast long shadows across the stone floor, were Kaine and Senna.

They stood facing each other. Behind them, on a weapon rack, Thalia spotted the aluminum-threaded blade they had crafted, its distinctive shape reflecting the firelight.

Thalia froze, her mind racing to make sense of the scene. Had Kaine caught Senna in the act of theft? Was he working with her? Or was Luna's evidence correct — was someone else entirely behind the thefts, and these two had independently tracked the culprits to this hidden cache?

The moment stretched, taut as wire, as Thalia struggled to determine if she was witnessing a confrontation, a conspiracy, or something else entirely.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Kaine stepped forward, his palms raised. "It's not what it looks like, Thalia."

"It looks like you're both in a hidden chamber filled with stolen weapons," she replied, her voice brittle as poorly-tempered steel. "So please, tell me what it actually is."

"Senna isn't behind the thefts," Kaine said, his blue eyes steady on hers. "She's been hunting the real culprits."

Thalia's laugh was short and sharp. "Right. I suppose that's what she told you."

Senna stepped forward, her silver-gray eyes flashing with cold fury. "I already told you that I'd been tracking a smuggling ring. I decided to come down here and investigate during the Forge Gauntlet when the perpetrators were distracted."

"You'll forgive me if I find that difficult to believe," Thalia said, not lowering her blade. "Every 'accident' at this academy seems to have your shadow behind it."

Kaine touched Senna's arm, a gesture that made something twist in Thalia's stomach. "Senna has been investigating since the start of term."

"Why not report it?" Thalia asked, still skeptical.

Senna's laugh was colder than a Northern wind. "To whom? The instructors, half of whom are barely keeping the academy functioning? None of them can even detect the impurities in the alloy." She shook her head. "No. I needed evidence first. Proof."

"The alloy," Thalia breathed, taken aback. "You can feel it? The impurities?"

Senna nodded. Her eyes narrowed. "You thought you were the only one who could sense currents, slum dweller?"

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The twisting sensation in Thalia's gut intensified. Kaine's fingers were still resting gently on Senna's forearm; his eyes were on her. Since Thalia had arrived at Frostforge, her current-sensing ability had been her greatest source of pride, a shield against the constant accusations of inferiority that the Northerners hurled her way. And Kaine... Kaine had been impressed by that ability, drawn to her by a skill that Thalia had thought unique.

He's just as impressed by Senna, Thalia realized, the thought discomfiting. That's why he's been defending her. He respects her talent — maybe even trusts her more than he trusts me. A cold wave of doubt washed over her, but she forced herself to stay grounded. This was bigger than jealousy. This was about the truth hidden beneath the surface, about alliances shifting like fragile ice.

"When I realized the weapons were being replaced with inferior metals," Senna continued, her voice dropping to a controlled intensity, "I knew I had to act. Not just because of the theft — because of what it meant." She gestured sharply at the piles of weapons. "These aren't just disappearing. They're being sold. To Isle Wardens."

"How do you know that?" Thalia asked. The ledger Luna had found seemed to dance before her eyes, evidence that Senna couldn't have possibly seen.

"Because I tracked a shipment," Senna said. "I followed the trail to the coast. Saw the exchange myself." Her face contorted in disgust. "Northern students, selling our own weapons to the enemy. Using accusations against that Warden boy as cover."

Thalia's mind raced back to Roran, accused of being an Isle Warden spy. The convenient target. The easy scapegoat. "Roran's not an Isle Warden," she snapped.



"I suspected it was a trio of second-years," Senna continued as if Thalia hadn't spoken."Nash Ironhall and his hangers-on.But I needed proof before I made accusations."Her lips pressed into a thin line."I was getting close.And then you two started your nonsense with that traced blade.."

For a moment, Kaine looked genuinely apologetic."She's innocent, Thalia."

Thalia let out a breath, her certainty wavering."Luna brought me a ledger earlier today," she said slowly, watching their reactions."It had a list of names connected to the smuggling operation.Nash's was on it."

Senna's eyes widened, genuine surprise crossing her features before they hardened again into determination."That's the confirmation I needed.Nash and his two friends."

Thalia felt a grudging respect for Senna's insight."We should take our evidence to—" Thalia began but was cut off by a grinding sound behind her.

She whirled to see the iron door sealing shut, trapping them inside the chamber.The scrape of metal on stone drew their attention to the shadows on the far side of the room.

Three figures stepped into the dim light.Nash stood at the center, flanked by two other Northern students Thalia recognized from the advanced classes.His usual sneer had transformed into something more calculated, more dangerous.

"Well, well," Nash said, his voice echoing off the ancient walls."What a convenient gathering.The Southern street trash, the busybody, and the murderer."He looked around at the stolen weapons with a proprietary air."I see you've found our little operation."

Kaine moved beside Thalia, his body tense."How did you find us?"

“I followed you,” Nash sneered. “You weren’t exactly subtle, bumbling around the corridors instead of going up to the arena. I figured you might be onto us.”

"You're selling weapons to Isle Wardens!" Senna shouted, her voice overflowing with venom. "You're sabotaging Frostforge's resources! You're betraying the North! Our people!"

Nash's laugh was hollow. "Our people? Who exactly are our people, Senna? The elders who preach Northern superiority while lining their pockets with Southern nobles' gold? The generals who ally with Southern weaklings at this pathetic excuse for an academy?" He gestured dismissively. "The North you believe in doesn't exist anymore. It's a fairy tale they tell children."

One of Nash's companions, a broad-shouldered boy with close-cropped blond hair, stepped forward. "The Isle Wardens pay far more than any legitimate buyer would. And they were willing to pay triple if we weakened Frostforge's metals." He shrugged. "Business is business."

"Business?" Senna's voice rose, vibrating with fury. "You're arming the enemy! People who raid our shores kill our families!" She was trembling with rage, her hands gesturing wildly. "You dishonor every warrior who's ever died defending our lands! You stain the legacy of true Northern blood!"

"Save your speeches," Nash's other companion, a thin girl with frost-white hair, sneered. "The legacy of the North is profit. Always has been."

“So it was all you,” Thalia said quickly. She wanted the confirmation from his tongue, clear and indisputable. “You stole from the forges. You sabotaged the metals.”

Nash nodded, his lip curling. “Try to keep up, Southerner. It’s like Brice said. The Wardens wanted everything valuable they could take from Frostforge — but more

importantly, they wanted nothing of value left behind. I told them we could help with that, and now we have enough gold between the three of us to buy our own isle off the Northern coast.”

Senna shifted her stance, and Thalia could sense her anger boiling over, like pressure building in a sealed furnace. She'd seen enough of Senna's legendary temper to recognize the signs — the rigid posture, the white-knuckled fists, the slight tremble in her frame. Senna wasn't just angry; she was incandescent with rage.

"You," Senna whispered, her voice dropping dangerously low, "are no true Northerner."

Nash's smile faltered for just a moment. "And you're a fool clinging to ideals that died generations ago." He spread his hands. "Look around you, Senna. This academy — this alliance between North and South — is not built on honor or tradition. It's built on convenience. On desperation, even."

"Honor and tradition," Kaine said quietly, his eyes never leaving Nash. His voice was eerily calm, a stark contrast to Senna's explosive anger. "You're not exactly upholding honor or tradition, are you, Ironhall? Seeing as you're a simple thief."

"Far from simple," Nash replied. "Do you know how long it took to adjust those alloys? How much work do we put in?"

"I don't care how hard you worked," Kaine growled. "A thief is a thief, and a traitor is a traitor. You don't have an ounce of loyalty in you."

Nash's eyes narrowed at Kaine. "Bold words from a patricide. What would you know about loyalty?"

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Kaine's expression didn't change, but Thalia felt the air around him grow charged. "Shut your mouth," he said, each word precise and controlled.

Thalia turned away from them, her eyes finding the traced blade she'd come here seeking. It lay among the other stolen weapons, its hilt wrapped in dark leather, its metal calling to her. Without a word, she crossed the room and picked it up, testing its weight. The blade was perfectly balanced, just as she and Kaine had intended. High-quality metal, expertly forged.

She turned back to face Nash and his companions, the blade comfortable in her hand. There was no point in further conversation. The lines had been drawn.

Nash sighed theatrically. "I was hoping we could resolve this peacefully. Obviously, we can't let you leave this chamber with what you know. But it doesn't have to end violently." He gestured to the sealed door. "Stand down. Surrender your weapons."

The implication was clear. Surrender or die.

Senna stepped forward, her silver eyes glittering like the sun on ice. "You want us to surrender? After what you've done?" She drew her own blade — a Northern two-hander reinforced with ice steel. "Let's settle this the true Northern way. By blood and battle."

Thalia moved to stand beside her, the traced blade held ready. She'd never thought she'd find herself fighting alongside Senna, but in this moment, their shared disgust at Nash's betrayal forged an unlikely alliance.

"The weapons you've been replacing," Thalia said, her voice steady despite her racing pulse, "they're causing golems to malfunction. Students could have died in the Gauntlet. Some still might." She leveled the blade at Nash. "Did you even consider that?"

Nash shrugged, unconcerned. "Collateral damage. Nothing personal, just profit."

"Nothing personal," Thalia repeated, feeling a cold clarity settling over her. "Well, this is."

Kaine moved to flank Thalia's other side, grabbing a weapon of his own off the rack — a short battleaxe that gleamed even in the dim light. "Last chance," he said to Nash, his voice frighteningly calm. "Surrender."

For half a heartbeat, the chamber was utterly still. Thalia could feel the pulse of ancient magic beneath her feet, the whisper of metal all around her, the steady rhythm of her own heart. She adjusted her grip on the traced blade, bracing herself.

Then Nash's companions drew their weapons. The broad-shouldered boy hefted a Warhammer that hummed with ice magic. The white-haired girl produced twin daggers that seemed to bend the light around their edges. Nash himself unsheathed a long sword that Thalia immediately recognized as one of the military-grade weapons from the Howling Forge—the kind meant for seasoned warriors, not students.

The chamber filled with the hum of steel and magic as both sides prepared to clash in the ancient darkness beneath Frostforge Academy.

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Nash's face twisted into a cruel smile as he lunged forward, the blade in his hand catching the dim light of the cavern. Thalia barely had time to register the movement

before the three smugglers descended upon them like wolves, the confined space of the weapon-filled chamber suddenly alive with the screech of metal against metal. Her muscles tensed instinctively, her body remembering the countless drills from her training, but there was something different in the way Nash moved — something calculated and vicious that told her this wasn't just about stolen weapons anymore.

"You should have stayed at the tournament," Nash snarled as he advanced, his white-haired female accomplice flanking to the right while the broad-shouldered boy circled left. "Playing with your little toy golem instead of meddling in affairs beyond your understanding."

Kaine stepped forward; his forge hammer raised defensively. "Three against three seems fair to me," he said, his voice steady despite the dangerous glint in Nash's eyes.

"Fair?" Nash barked a laugh that echoed against the stone walls. "Nothing about Frostforge has ever been fair. Isn't that right, Southerner?"

The question hung in the air for only a heartbeat before Nash suddenly feinted toward Thalia. She raised her blade to block, anticipating the strike — but it never came. Instead, Nash pivoted with terrifying speed, reversing his grip and driving the heavy hilt of his sword directly into Kaine's exposed ribs.

The sound that followed would haunt Thalia for days to come: the sickening crunch of bone giving way beneath brutal force. Kaine's eyes widened in shock, his breath escaping in a strangled gasp as his knees buckled beneath him.

"Kaine!" Thalia lunged toward him, but the white-haired girl intercepted, slashing a curved blade that missed Thalia's throat by mere inches.

Kaine collapsed to the stone floor, one arm wrapped protectively around his torso, his face contorted in agony as he struggled to draw breath. Each labored inhale seemed to

cause him fresh pain, his normally rigid posture crumpled like discarded parchment.

"One down," Nash said with smug satisfaction, turning his attention to Thalia and Senna. "Two to go."

Thalia's mind raced. With Kaine incapacitated, they were now outnumbered. Her eyes met Senna's across the chamber — the same Senna who had tormented her since her arrival at Frostforge, the same Senna who viewed her as a rival for Kaine's affections. Yet, in that moment, something unspoken passed between them: a grudging recognition that their survival depended on cooperation.

Instinctively, Thalia backed toward Senna until they stood shoulder to shoulder, their weapons raised outward to form a defensive perimeter.

"Never thought I'd fight beside a Southerner," Senna muttered, her breath hot against Thalia's ear.

"Never thought I'd trust my back to you," Thalia returned, adjusting her grip on her blade. "But here we are."

Nash and his companions circled them like sharks, testing their defenses with quick, probing strikes. The broad-shouldered boy wielded a massive war hammer that whistled through the air with each swing, forcing Thalia to duck and weave to avoid being crushed. The white-haired girl was more precise, her twin daggers flashing in complex patterns designed to confuse and disorient.

The chamber filled with a symphony of battle: steel striking steel, the scrape of boots against stone, the harsh breathing of the combatants. Somewhere behind them, Kaine's pained gasps provided a grim counterpoint to the chaos.

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Thalia parried a strike from the broad-shouldered boy, the impact jarring up her arm and into her shoulder. Sweat stung her eyes as she pivoted to counter another attack. They couldn't keep this up — not against three opponents with fresh strength and clear intent to kill.

Then, amid the pressure of combat, Thalia felt something stir within her — that unique connection to metal that had first manifested during her golem training. She let her awareness expand, sensing the composition of the weapons and armor around her. Every piece of metal in the room called to her, whispering secrets about their make and quality.

There — a weakness in the riveting of the white-haired girl's shoulder plate. And there — a hairline fracture in Nash's blade where the steel had been improperly tempered.

The next time the white-haired girl lunged, Thalia didn't dodge away. Instead, she stepped into the attack, her own blade sliding along her opponent's weapon to strike precisely at the weak point in the armor. The girl cried out as the metal gave way, creating an opening that Thalia exploited with a sharp elbow to the exposed collarbone.

Behind her, Senna fought with savage intensity, her movements fueled by a rage that bordered on recklessness. Her face was a mask of cold fury as she countered Nash's attacks.

Despite her best efforts, Thalia felt herself tiring. A slash from the broad-shouldered boy's dagger caught her forearm, drawing a thin line of blood. Beside her, Senna was breathing hard, a bruise darkening on her cheekbone where she'd taken a glancing



blow.

Nash seemed to sense their flagging strength. His lips curled into a predatory smile as he pressed his advantage, forcing them back step by step toward the wall of the cavern.

"You should have minded your own business," he said, his voice almost conversational despite the violence of his attacks. "Now we'll have to make sure no one finds your bodies."

Thalia's heart hammered in her chest. Her limbs felt leaden, her reactions slowing by fractions with each exchange. Across the chamber, Kaine had managed to push himself to a sitting position against the wall, but his face was ashen, his breathing shallow. He was too weak to keep fighting, and though Senna fought with all the ferocity of a Rimwolf, she and Thalia were outnumbered.

The realization struck like lightning, searing through Thalia's veins. They were going to lose. Nash was going to kill them and make good on his promise. Nobody would even know what had happened down here.

Thalia gritted her teeth. Her thoughts turned to Mari. To the look in her sister's eyes during their goodbyes at the port.

I can't die here. I promised her I would come home.

Then the chamber door flew open with a resounding crash.

"Greenspire!"

Thalia risked a glance toward the entrance, her eyes widening at the sight of Roran standing in the doorway, twin short swords already drawn. His curly hair was wild

around his face, his chest heaving as if he'd run the entire way.

"Roran?" Thalia gasped, barely raising her blade in time to block a strike from the white-haired girl.

Nash's head snapped toward the newcomer, his expression darkening. "The Isle Warden spy. How fitting you'd join this pathetic resistance."

Roran stepped into the chamber, his movements fluid and controlled. "I bet you found those rumors useful," he said, his voice unnaturally calm. "Trying to cast suspicion on me while you ran your little smuggling operation."

Nash didn't respond, merely bared his teeth in an animalistic snarl.

"I promised I'd help if I could," Roran said to Thalia, his eyes never leaving the smugglers. "So here I am."

Without another word, he launched himself into the fray, his twin blades moving in perfect synchronization. The fighting style was unlike anything taught at Frostforge — each strike flowing seamlessly into the next, his body twisting and turning as if dancing between his opponents' attacks.

Nash's broad-shouldered companion moved to intercept Roran, swinging his war hammer in a devastating arc. But Roran wasn't there anymore — he'd slipped under the blow and inside the boy's guard, landing three quick strikes before dancing away again.

The arrival of a new combatant changed the dynamics of the battle instantly. Nash and his companions were forced to divide their attention, creating openings that Thalia and Senna were quick to exploit.

Thalia found herself fighting alongside Roran as if they'd trained together for years. When she stepped left, he moved right. When she engaged one opponent, he handled another. There was an unspoken rhythm to their movements, a natural harmony that struck Thalia as both surprising and somehow inevitable.

During one exchange, as Roran's blade clashed with Nash's, Thalia caught a glimpse of something unusual — a crackling energy that seemed to dance along the edge of Roran's weapons, like miniature lightning trapped in steel. It was there and gone in an instant, so quick that Thalia couldn't be certain she hadn't imagined it.

The white-haired girl lunged at Thalia, forcing her attention back to her own opponent. Thalia parried and countered, her movements more confident now. The tide was turning.

Across the chamber, Senna had backed Nash into a corner. Her eyes blazed with righteous fury as she pressed her advantage, her blade a blur of motion. Nash's sneering confidence had evaporated, replaced by grim concentration as he fought to keep her at bay.

"You're a disgrace," Senna hissed, feinting high before striking low.

Nash barely blocked the blow, his arm trembling with the effort. "And you're a fool," he spat back.

Senna's response was not in words but in action. With a roar that seemed to shake the very walls of the cavern, she executed a complex maneuver that knocked Nash's sword aside and followed with a decisive strike to his solar plexus with the pommel of her weapon.

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The impact drove the air from Nash's lungs. He crumpled to his knees, his weapon clattering to the stone floor. Senna stood over him, blade pressed to his throat, chest heaving with exertion and rage.

For a heart-stopping moment, Thalia thought Senna might kill him. The Northern girl's eyes were cold, her knuckles white around the hilt of her blade. The edge dimpled the skin of Nash's neck, drawing a bead of blood that trailed down to stain his collar.

"Senna," Thalia called, her voice steady despite the chaos still swirling around them. "We need him alive to confess."

Something shifted in Senna's expression — a brief internal struggle visible in the tightening of her jaw. Then, with deliberate contempt, she withdrew her blade and struck Nash across the temple with the flat of it, sending him sprawling unconscious to the floor.

"You're not worth dirtying my blade," she muttered, turning away from him with a look of disgust.

With their leader fallen, the remaining smugglers faltered. Roran disarmed the broad-shouldered boy with a spectacular flourish that sent the war hammer spinning into the far wall. Thalia managed to trap the white-haired girl's arm in a lock she'd learned during combat training, forcing her to drop her weapons with a cry of pain.

"It's over," Thalia said, breathing hard. "Surrender, or we knock you out." She nodded toward Nash's unconscious form.

The fight drained from their opponents like water from a broken vessel. They lowered their weapons, shoulders slumping in defeat.

Thalia glanced around the chamber, looking for something to restrain their captives. Roran was already moving, collecting strips of leather from a nearby workbench and using them to bind the broad-shouldered boy's wrists. Senna tore a length of fabric from the white-haired girl's cloak, securing her hands with practiced efficiency.

With the immediate threat neutralized, Thalia rushed to Kaine's side. He had managed to push himself to his feet, one arm still wrapped protectively around his ribs, his face a mask of pain.

"How bad?" she asked, her hands hovering uncertainly, afraid to touch him and cause more damage.

"I've had worse," Kaine grimaced, the lie transparent in the tightness around his eyes. "At least three broken. Maybe four."

Thalia supported his weight as he leaned against her, his breathing labored but steadier than before. She could feel the heat of his body through his shirt, the tension in his muscles as he fought to remain upright.

Across the chamber, Senna stood over the three bound smugglers, her expression glacial. She spat on the ground next to Nash's still-unconscious form.

"Traitors," she said, the word filled with more venom than Thalia had ever heard from her. "They'll face justice for this. Theft is one thing, but to sell to Isle Wardens..." She trailed off, shaking her head in disgusted disbelief.

Roran approached Thalia and Kaine, his twin blades now sheathed, a concerned

frown creasing his forehead as he assessed Kaine's condition.

"We need to get him to the infirmary," he said, glancing over his shoulder at their captives."And someone needs to alert the instructors about what's happened here."

Thalia nodded, her mind already racing ahead to what came next: the explanations they would need to provide, the evidence they had gathered, the consequences that would follow. But underneath it all was a current of relief — they had survived, they had won, they had uncovered the truth.

And perhaps most surprisingly, they had done it together — Northerners and Southerners, rivals and allies, unlikely companions united by a common cause. The stolen weapons glinted silently around them, silent witnesses to a battle that had perhaps forged something stronger than steel.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The main hall pressed in around Thalia, the vast chamber of stone and iron filled to capacity with hundreds of bodies radiating tension and curiosity. Banners representing the Northern tribes and Southern kingdoms hung from iron brackets along the walls, their colors muted by the thin gray light filtering through frosted windows. Thalia stood among the second-years, her shoulders brushing against classmates who, for once, weren't regarding her with the academy's characteristic distrust. Instead, their sidelong glances carried something unfamiliar — a reluctant respect.

Three days had passed since the fight beneath the academy, yet her muscles still ached from the brutal confrontation with Nash and his accomplices. The bruise along her jaw had faded from angry purple to a sickly yellow-green, but at least she could chew without wincing now.

At the front of the hall, Instructor Maven paced like a caged predator, her single

amber eye scanning the gathered students. The polished metal plate covering her empty eye socket caught the light from the torch brackets, flashing with each sharp turn of her head. The legendary glacier bear claw hung around her neck on a leather cord, swinging with the rhythm of her steps.

"Attention," Maven barked, and the murmuring crowd fell silent instantly. Even the fourth-years straightened to attention. "As most of you have heard through the academy's impeccable rumor mill, the weapons smugglers have been identified and apprehended."

Maven didn't bother to explain how the traitors had been caught or who had caught them. Not once did her gaze drift toward Thalia, or Roran, or Senna. Kaine was absent — he'd been in the infirmary since the fight, his ribs broken, as he'd suspected. Thalia found she didn't mind the lack of formal recognition. The bruises on her face told enough of the story, and the whispers darting through the academy halls for the past three days had filled in the rest. Everyone knew that she, Kaine, Roran, and Senna had been the ones to uncover the conspiracy and defeat the traitors in the caverns beneath the school.

A tall Northern student standing to Thalia's right shifted his weight, deliberately creating enough space to acknowledge her presence without having to speak to her directly. A small gesture, but in the rigid hierarchy of Frostforge, it might as well have been a formal bow.

Thalia scanned the hall, finding Roran's familiar figure among the other Southern students. The cuts on his face hadn't healed as quickly as hers, a livid red line still visible across his cheekbone where one of Nash's cronies had landed a vicious blow. But his posture was different — shoulders back, chin lifted, no longer trying to make himself invisible. The other Southerners clustered around him, and Thalia noted with satisfaction that the suspicious glances that had dogged him for weeks had vanished. Being accused of spying for the Isle Wardens had nearly broken him;

proving his loyalty by helping capture real traitors had transformed him.

Senna stood with the other third-years, her back rigid, jaw set in a hard line. Unlike Roran, she seemed to hate the attention, her pale features flushed with discomfort or anger — Thalia couldn't tell which. When a classmate leaned over to whisper something to her, Senna's response was a sharp, dismissive gesture that left the other student flinching away.

"Bring them forward," Maven commanded, and the crowd parted to allow four senior students to march the bound prisoners to the front of the hall.

Thalia's breath caught when she saw Nash and his two accomplices. The fight in the cavern had been brutal, but she hadn't fully registered the damage they'd inflicted. Nash's face was a patchwork of bruises, his left eye swollen shut, crusted blood still visible at the corner of his mouth. The broad-shouldered boy limped heavily, his movements pained where Roran's well-placed strike had caught him in the leg. The white-haired girl seemed the least physically damaged, but her eyes were vacant, haunted by the knowledge of what was to come.



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"These three have confessed to stealing weapons from the Howling Forge and other academy armories," Maven announced, her voice cutting through the hall like a blade through flesh. "They have admitted to replacing quality ores with inferior materials, endangering their fellow students and compromising the integrity of your training."

The white-haired girl swayed slightly on her feet, and Thalia felt an unexpected pang of pity. She remembered how fiercely the girl had fought.

Maven's single eye flashed as she turned to face the assembled students. "Frostforge stands as the last unified institution on our continent. While our kingdoms and tribes battle for supremacy, we train warriors from all territories, side by side. This academy survives only through the balance of power and mutual respect."

Thalia fought the urge to roll her eyes. Maven's talk of unity rang particularly hollow coming from the instructor with the most disdain for Southern students.

Maven gestured to the prisoners with a contemptuous flick of her wrist. "These three sought to destroy that balance for their own gain. The punishment for such treason is clear."

The hall grew so quiet that Thalia could hear the distant howl of wind against the stone walls of the academy, a mournful counterpoint to Maven's next words.

"Nash Ironhall, Brice Rimestone, and Kara Frostmane are hereby exiled from the continent. They will be transported to the fjord's mouth and set adrift on a raft with basic provisions. What lies beyond our shores — be it the Isle Wardens, the storm-wracked seas, or whatever other powers linger beyond our knowledge — will

determine their fate."

A murmur rippled through the crowd. Exile beyond the shores was a sentence few could hope to survive. The seas surrounding the continent were treacherous enough, but the rumors of what waited beyond — the Isle Wardens with their storm magic, dangerous ocean beasts, the unforgiving lands of the archipelago — made such punishment effectively a death sentence, only slower and more terrifying than a simple execution.

The Northern students around Thalia reacted most strongly. Some nodded with grim satisfaction, tribal justice demanding that traitors face the harshest possible fate. Others looked troubled, perhaps recognizing that the line between loyalty to their people and loyalty to Frostforge was thinner than they'd realized. A few openly wept — friends of the condemned, Thalia guessed, struggling to reconcile the people they knew with the criminals now bound before them.

Nash raised his head, his one good eye searching the crowd until it locked onto Roran. Even from a distance, Thalia could see the hatred burning there, undiminished by defeat. Nash's lips moved, forming words too quiet to hear, but Thalia didn't need to hear them to know they were a promise of vengeance. Roran met his gaze steadily, refusing to look away until Nash was forced to break the contact first.

"The second matter at hand," Maven continued after allowing the significance of the punishment to settle over the assembly, "is the conclusion of the second-year Forge Gauntlet."

Thalia's attention snapped back to Maven. She'd almost forgotten about the tournament in the chaos of the past few days.

"Brynn Firstborn has been declared the victor of this year's trial."

A polite ripple of applause spread through the hall. Brynn stood at the edge of the second-year section, her posture radiating satisfaction. Her gaze found Thalia's across the crowd, one eyebrow arched in smug triumph. She lifted her chin in silent challenge: I won. You forfeited.

Thalia met her look with a calm she didn't entirely feel. Yes, technically she had forfeited her match against Brynn by leaving the tournament to track down the stolen blade. Her class rank would suffer for it. But she had accomplished something far more important — clearing Roran's name, exposing a conspiracy that threatened the academy itself.

Still, a small, proud part of her couldn't help but think that if she'd stayed, her golem would have bested Brynn's. The pure alloys she'd used in her creation, the connection she'd forged with the metal heart — together they had formed something special, something that even Brynn's technical precision couldn't have overcome.

"—and finally," Maven was saying as Thalia's focus returned to her words, "the fourth-year Command Challenge will commence next week. All other years are expected to observe the trial's opening ceremony, though attendance at individual challenges is optional."

With that, Maven gestured sharply, dismissing the assembly. The hall erupted into movement and sound as hundreds of students began filing toward the exits, voices rising in a wave of commentary on the punishments and announcements.

Thalia pushed against the flow of bodies, moving purposefully toward the section where the third-years were gathered. She caught glimpses of Senna's straight black hair as the older girl made her way toward one of the side exits. Breaking into a half-jog, Thalia cut through a group of startled first-years and intercepted Senna just before she reached the door.

"Senna," Thalia called, loud enough to be heard over the clamor of departing students. "Wait."

Senna turned, her silver-gray eyes narrowing when she spotted Thalia.

"What do you want, Greenspire?" Her voice was cold, the brief camaraderie of their shared battle apparently forgotten.

Thalia stepped closer, lowering her voice. "I wanted to thank you. For helping in the fight. We wouldn't have survived without you."

Senna's expression hardened. "I was fulfilling my duty to Frostforge. Nothing more." She glanced over Thalia's shoulder, as if checking to see who might be observing their conversation.

"We fought well together. That means something."

"It means we had a common enemy." Senna's silver eyes locked onto Thalia's with uncomfortable intensity. "My annual trials are complete, and I won't be here for the remainder of the term." Her chin lifted slightly. "I volunteered to help deliver the traitors to their fate."

The statement caught Thalia off guard. "You're leaving Frostforge?"

"Temporarily." A cold smile touched Senna's lips. "I'll accompany the escort ship to the fjord's mouth. It's a privilege Maven has granted me."

Thalia wondered if Senna had volunteered to escape the discomfort of remaining at the academy after all that had happened. The proud Northerner would rather face the danger of open seas than acknowledge that she had fought alongside a Southerner — and worse, that it had been Thalia.

Senna leaned forward suddenly, her voice dropping to a whisper edged with threat. "While I'm gone, remember your place, Greenspire. Stay away from him."

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Kaine. Before Thalia could respond, Senna brushed past her, the contact brief but deliberately forceful. Thalia watched her walk away, back straight, head high, every step projecting the confidence of someone who believed absolutely in her own superiority.

Their rivalry wasn't over. Perhaps it never would be. Fighting side by side had changed nothing — Senna was too stubborn, too deeply invested in her hatred of Southerners in general and Thalia in particular. The connection Thalia shared with Kaine only made things worse, fueling Senna's conviction that Thalia was stealing something that rightfully belonged to her.

As the crowd thinned and Thalia made her way toward the main exit, she found herself wondering what awaited Nash and the others beyond the fjord's mouth. She wondered, too, what Senna would see out there on the edge of their known world. Would it change her, as Frostforge had changed Thalia? Or would she return more entrenched than ever in her beliefs?

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

The infirmary doors loomed before Thalia like the entrance to some ancient Northern tomb. She wiped her palms against her tunic, unsure why her heart hammered so violently against her ribs. It was just Kaine, after all. Kaine with his broken ribs and the memory of a kiss that still burned on her lips whenever she allowed herself to think of it — which was far too often. She inhaled deeply, tasting the sharp tang of medicinal herbs that wafted from beneath the heavy oak doors, and gathered her courage.

"You're being ridiculous," she muttered to herself, pushing open the door before she could reconsider.

The infirmary was a long, narrow room lined with beds on either side, most of them empty now that the term was nearing its end. Filtered sunlight spilled through high, narrow windows, casting geometric patterns across the stone floor. The air was thick with the scent of healing tinctures — pungent yarrow and sweet honey, earthy comfrey and the bright sharpness of willow bark. Thalia recognized these from her mother's shop, though here they mingled with unfamiliar Northern herbs that carried notes of winter pine and frost-bitten berries. She'd spent plenty of time in the infirmary last year, helping the academy's healers when supply shortages had caused chaos. This year, she'd been too focused on building her golem to pay many visits.

Kaine occupied the bed farthest from the entrance, half-hidden behind a partially drawn curtain. His dark head was bent over a book, his profile etched sharply against the white linens. At the sound of her footsteps, he looked up, his ice-blue eyes finding hers across the room.

"You're alive, then," Thalia said, aiming for casual as she approached, though the slight wobble in her voice betrayed her.

"Disappointing many, I'm sure." His voice carried its usual edge, but his smile seemed genuine, if cautious. He shifted to sit up straighter and winced, one hand instinctively moving to his side.

"Careful," she said, quickening her steps to reach his bedside. "Those ribs won't heal if you keep moving around."

"So I've been told. Repeatedly." Kaine marked his place in the book and set it aside. "The healers here act like I've never had broken bones before."

Thalia pulled a wooden chair closer to the bed, its legs scraping against the stone floor. "Have you? Had broken bones before, I mean?"

"More than I care to count." He adjusted his position with careful precision, each movement measured to minimize pain. "But these ones are...inconvenient."

Thalia studied him, noting the pallor beneath his normally fair skin and the tightness around his mouth that spoke of pain he wasn't acknowledging. "How bad is it, really?"

"Could be worse." Kaine shrugged with his good shoulder, then grimaced at even that small movement. "Three broken ribs, apparently. One of them nearly punctured my lung, according to the very cheerful healer who woke me up at dawn to tell me so."

"That doesn't sound like 'could be worse.' That sounds like 'nearly died.'" Thalia frowned, the memory of him crumpling to the ground during the fight flashing unbidden through her mind.

"If I'd wanted to die, I would have done a more thorough job of it." His attempt at humor fell flat as Thalia's frown deepened. "It's fine, Thalia. I'll be out of here in a week or so."

A heavy silence settled between them, filled with things unsaid. Thalia focused on smoothing an invisible wrinkle from her tunic. "Maven gave a speech this morning."

"Did she now? Was it inspiring? Did it move you to tears?" Kaine's quiet voice dripped with sarcasm.

"It was...Maven." Thalia's mouth quirked up slightly. "She announced the traitors' punishment. They're being cast out to sea. Banished."

Kaine's expression darkened. "Better than what Nash deserves."



"That's what everyone's saying." Thalia picked at a loose thread on her sleeve. "Senna, in particular."

At the mention of Senna, Kaine's attention sharpened. "She hasn't been by. I thought that was strange. She never misses an opportunity to check on me, especially when I'm injured."

Thalia hesitated, unsure how to phrase her next words. "She...left. For the rest of the term."

"Left?" Kaine's surprise seemed genuine. "Why would she do that?"

"She volunteered to take the traitors to the fjord's mouth." Thalia shifted uncomfortably, the memory of her last encounter with Senna rising to the surface. "She did say one more thing before she left." The words felt heavy on her tongue. "She told me to stay away from you."

Kaine's face went through a series of micro-expressions — surprise, frustration, resignation — before settling into a weary mask. He rubbed his face with one hand, exhaling slowly through his nose. "Of course she did."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." He stared up at the ceiling, jaw tight. "Senna and I have a history. I'm sure she's told you all about it."

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"Actually, she hasn't," Thalia blurted out, sensing his reluctance but unable to stop herself. "What history?"

"It's not worth discussing." His tone was final, brooking no argument.

Thalia wanted to press further, to demand answers about Senna's strange fixation and what exactly lay between them, but something in Kaine's expression warned her off. Whatever history existed between him and Senna, he clearly wasn't ready to share it. Or perhaps he never would be.

"Fine," she said after a moment, deciding to change the subject. "The Forge Gauntlet finished while we were fighting the smugglers. Brynn won."

"Not surprising." Kaine's tone softened slightly, his posture relaxing at the safer topic. He studied Thalia's face. "How badly did your rank fall after you left?"

Thalia shrugged, surprised to find she didn't care as much as she might have expected. "From fourth to eleventh. Not a serious drop, considering."

"Still, that's not fair. You could have won if you'd stayed."

"Maybe." She couldn't be sure. Falchion was superior to Brynn's golem, but Brynn's combat skill was undeniable. "Or maybe not. Besides, if I hadn't left when I did..." She trailed off, the unspoken words hanging between them.

"We'd both be dead," Kaine finished for her, his voice low. "Senna and I never stood a chance against those three. I know that." His gaze held hers steadily. "Thank you. For

coming after me. For following that blade."

The intensity in his eyes made her stomach flutter, and she looked away, uncomfortable with the weight of his gratitude. "You'd have done the same for me."

"I would," he agreed simply, and the certainty in his voice made her cheeks warm.

A sudden realization struck her, and she straightened in her chair. "With everything that happened — the thieves, the sabotaged metals, the fight — I completely forgot about the 'Founder's Price' and that strange message you deciphered."

Kaine's expression shifted, becoming guarded in a way Thalia had come to recognize whenever the ancient symbols were mentioned. "There's still more to translate. More to uncover."

"What do you think it means? That the academy was built on top of an older secret?"

"I think," he said carefully, "that Frostforge has more history than anyone suspects. And maybe not all of it is something the instructors want us to know."

"But why? What could be so dangerous about the academy's origins?"

"I don't know yet." He adjusted his position again, wincing. "But I intend to find out."

"We'll find out," Thalia corrected him. "Together."

The corner of Kaine's mouth lifted in a half-smile.

A comfortable silence fell between them, marred only by the distant sounds of students passing by the infirmary, their voices muffled through the thick oak door. Thalia found herself thinking of home — of her mother's herb shop with its

cramped shelves and ever-simmering pots, of Mari's infectious laughter and the constant bustle of Verdant Port's harbor district.

"Are you going home for the break?" she asked suddenly.

Kaine's expression shuttered. "You know I don't have a home to go back to."

"I know, but..." She hesitated, then plunged ahead before she could reconsider. "You could come with me. To Verdant Port."

His eyes widened, genuine surprise written across his features. "What?"

"Come home with me," she repeated, more confidently this time. "Meet my family. See the South. You've never been, right?"

"No, I haven't." He sounded almost dazed. "You're...inviting me to your home?"

"That's generally what people do with friends," she said lightly, though her heart raced at her own boldness. "You know, when they're not busy solving mysteries and fighting traitors."

Kaine stared at her for a long moment, something unreadable flickering in his eyes. "I'm honored. Truly." His voice was soft, almost vulnerable. "But..."

"But?" Thalia prompted when he didn't continue.

"Ask me again next year." He shifted his gaze to the window, where snow was beginning to fall. "I've got some work I want to get done here at Frostforge. Research."

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Disappointment pricked at her, sharper than she'd expected. "Right. Of course."

"It's not that I don't want to," he added quickly, turning back to her. "It's just—"

"It's fine, Kaine," she interrupted, forcing a smile. "I understand. Next year."

He studied her face, as if searching for signs of hurt, then nodded slowly. "Next year," he agreed, and it sounded almost like a promise.

The infirmary door swung open then, admitting a stern-faced healer who frowned at the sight of Thalia. "Mr. Ember needs rest, not visitors. You'll have to come back later."

"I was just leaving," Thalia said, rising from her chair. To Kaine, she added, "I'll come by tomorrow before I leave for the port."

"I'd like that," he said, and the simple honesty in his voice made her smile a real smile this time.

As she walked back through the academy's stone corridors, Thalia found herself thinking of the kiss they'd shared in the forge — brief and unexpected, yet somehow inevitable. She touched her fingers to her lips, wondering if it would ever happen again, or if that moment had been stolen from them permanently by circumstance and secrets yet unrevealed.

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On the final night of the term, sleep eluded Thalia. She lay in her narrow bed, staring

at the stone ceiling as moonlight filtered through the frost-rimmed window, casting silver-blue shadows across her room. The events of the past weeks replayed in her mind with ruthless clarity — the battle in the cavern, Senna's enigmatic departure, Maven's cold pronouncement of the traitors' fate. And beneath it all, like a current running deep and strong, those mysterious words: "The Founder's Price." She turned onto her side, bunching the pillow beneath her head, but her thoughts continued their relentless spiral.

With an irritated sigh, she threw back the pelts on her bunk. The stone floor bit at her bare feet with cold so intense it almost burned. She quickly pulled on wool socks, wrapped herself in a thick fur cloak, and padded quietly to the door.

The hallway beyond was silent and empty, the usual clamor of student life muted in these late hours on the eve of term's end. Wall sconces held dancing flames that cast long, wavering shadows along the corridor. Thalia's footsteps echoed softly against the stone as she wandered, with no destination in mind beyond escape from her circular thoughts.

Frostforge felt different at night. The imposing architecture that seemed designed to intimidate during daylight hours now had an almost melancholy quality, as if the ancient stones themselves were weary. Thalia trailed her fingers along the wall as she walked, feeling the cold grit of centuries-old mortar beneath her fingertips.

She found herself drawn to the common area, a circular space with high vaulted ceilings and massive windows that overlooked the frozen landscape beyond the academy's walls. She expected it to be empty and was surprised to see a lone figure silhouetted against one of the windows, watching the snow fall.

Roran. His curly hair was loose around his shoulders, absorbing the dim torchlight until it seemed to form a dark halo. He didn't turn at her approach, though she knew he must have heard her. Instead, he continued gazing outward, where heavy flakes

drifted past in the torchlight like falling stars.

She hesitated, uncertain whether to retreat or advance. Before she could decide, Roran glanced over his shoulder, his eyes finding hers in the dim light. He didn't speak, merely shifted slightly to the side, making room on the window seat. Thalia took it as an invitation.

She crossed the room, her woolen socks muffling her steps against the stone, and settled beside him, not too close, but close enough to feel the subtle warmth radiating from him in the chilly room. The window beside them was rimmed with frost that crept inward like silver ferns, framing the night beyond in delicate crystalline patterns.

The stars above were impossibly bright in the clear mountain air, pinpricks of cold fire in a velvet sky. In the distance, the silhouette of the Rimspire range rose like the spine of some slumbering beast.

"Can't sleep?" Roran asked finally, his voice low and unexpectedly gentle.

Thalia shook her head. "Too many thoughts."

"I know that feeling." He exhaled against the glass, leaving a faint cloud on the pane. "My mind never shuts up either."

Thalia tucked her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and studied his profile. She studied his profile — the slope of his cheekbone, the hollow of his throat. The firelight played tricks with the shadows, outlining the stubble along his jaw, the tired set of his mouth. His usual easy smile was absent, replaced by something more pensive.

"Does it feel better?" she asked. "Now that everyone knows you weren't the thief? Now

that your name is cleared?"

A small smile curved Roran's lips, though he kept his eyes on the falling snow. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "It does."

"Good." Thalia nodded, feeling strangely satisfied. She remembered how the other students had accused him, how she had stepped in to defend him, and how he had brushed off her help. "And...thank you. For coming when you did. For helping us in the fight."

Roran turned to her then, his dark eyes reflecting the torchlight. His smile widened into something more familiar, more Roran-like. "I'm your friend," he said simply, echoing her own words from earlier in the term. "Friends defend each other."

The words settled around her like a soft blanket, and Thalia felt something unexpected unfurl in her chest — a bloom of warmth and affection, and the sudden desire to be closer to him. To lean into that comfort, to let herself rest in the safety of his presence.

They sat in silence for a while, watching as the snowfall thickened, transforming from gentle flurries to a proper storm. Wind began to howl around the corners of the academy, a lonely sound that made Thalia grateful for the solid walls and Roran's quiet company.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked eventually, breaking the silence. "Last break, I mean. When you were hunting the Isle Wardens who killed your family."

She regretted the question almost immediately as Roran's expression darkened, the shadows beneath his eyes suddenly more pronounced. He exhaled heavily, his shoulders dropping. "Not exactly," he said, his voice stripped of its usual warmth.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:15 pm*

"Are you going to keep searching?" The question came out softer than she'd intended, laced with concern that surprised her. It wasn't her business, not really, but the thought of Roran out there alone, hunting killers, made something cold and heavy settle in the pit of her stomach.

Roran was quiet for so long that Thalia thought he might not answer. When he did, his voice was steady again, resolved. "No. Not for now."

"No?" Thalia couldn't keep the relief from her voice.

He shook his head, and a few of his wild curls fell across his forehead. "I'm going home. To my village." The corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "I still have friends there I want to see. People who knew my family. It feels like...like the right thing to do right now."

The depth of emotion in his voice made Thalia's throat tighten. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak immediately. After a moment, she managed, "I'm glad."

"Are you?" He looked at her with a hint of his usual teasing glint returning to his eyes.

"I am," she confirmed, surprising herself with how much she meant it. "Chasing vengeance is—" She stopped, realizing how presumptuous she sounded.

"Dangerous?" Roran supplied. "Stupid? A good way to get myself killed?"

"All of the above," Thalia agreed, relieved he didn't seem offended.

Roran laughed softly, the sound mingling with the howl of the wind outside."Yeah, well.Maybe I'm learning to be slightly less reckless."

"Only slightly?"

"Let's not get carried away."His grin flashed bright and genuine in the dim light.

"You'd better make it back here in one piece," Thalia said, feeling heat rise in her cheeks."I don't want to hear more stories about how you were imprisoned at a checkpoint.I was worried about you."

Their eyes held.The space between them felt impossibly small.And then his fingers brushed hers — deliberate, slow, testing.Her skin prickled at the contact as though there was electricity in his touch.

"You worry about me, Greenspire?"he teased, but his voice had gone low, quiet.

"I do."The admission surprised her.So did how much she meant it.

"Huh."He let out a low chuckle, swaying back against the wall.His fingers retreated from hers, and Thalia had to resist the urge to lean forward and capture his hand again.His smile remained, but it had lost its sharp edges.Now it was softer, almost reverent, as he gazed at her."Well, that's good to know."

The air between them seemed to shift, as though charged with static.Thalia felt the change like a current, the same kind she could sense in metal — subtle, powerful, impossible to ignore.

They fell into another silence, the only sounds the crackling of the torches and the persistent whisper of snow against glass.Thalia, suddenly reluctant to meet his steady gaze, turned her attention to the delicate snowflakes clinging to the windowpane — each one a fragile, intricate design that lasted only moments before melting away,

undone by the subtle warmth of the storm that brewed between them.

After a moment, Roran cleared his throat, the casualness in his voice barely hiding the subtle shift between them. "It's late. You should get some rest — I know your ship leaves early tomorrow."

Thalia blinked, the words taking a moment to settle. She nodded slowly, uncurling from the window seat and stretching muscles that had stiffened without her noticing.

"See you next term, then," she said softly.

"Try not to miss me too much, Greenspire," he replied, his teasing tone carrying an unexpected warmth.

Thalia rolled her eyes but couldn't help the faint smile that tugged at her lips. "I'll do my best. Goodnight, Roran."

"Goodnight, Thalia," he replied, and the sound of her name in his voice followed her down the corridor like a whispered secret.

Back in her room, Thalia slipped beneath her furs, which had grown cold in her absence. She pulled them tight around her shoulders and curled onto her side, gazing out at the snowstorm that had intensified to a swirling white vortex beyond her window.

Her mind still turned to the mysterious symbols, to the strange message Kaine had uncovered — "The Founder's Price" — but the anxious edge had dulled. In its place was a curious anticipation, a hunger to uncover more when she returned to Frostforge next term.

As sleep finally began to claim her, Thalia's thoughts drifted between Kaine's ice-blue eyes and Roran's deep brown ones, between faith in her comrades and uncertainty

over their secrets, between memories of violence and moments of peace. Next term, she knew, would bring more of both the calm and the storm — and she would navigate them both with a quiet resolve that no tempest could break.