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The Winter Gate

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Shards Beneath the Snow
- **Chapter 2** The Whispering Wind
- **Chapter 3** Eyes in the Mist
- **Chapter 4** Frostbound Strangers
- **Chapter 5** Flight from Greylake
- **Chapter 6** Icebound Horizons
- **Chapter 7** The Knight's Shadow
- **Chapter 8** The Scholar's Burden
- **Chapter 9** Winter's Teeth
- **Chapter 10** A Fractured Trust
- **Chapter 11** Echoes of the Gate
- **Chapter 12** Ciphers in Ice
- **Chapter 13** The Hidden War
- **Chapter 14** Awakened Magic
- **Chapter 15** The Child's Secret
- **Chapter 16** A Noble's Ambition
- **Chapter 17** Predators in Darkness
- **Chapter 18** Bonds Unraveling
- **Chapter 19** Of Monsters and Men
- **Chapter 20** The Price of Hope
- **Chapter 21** The Sundered Path
- **Chapter 22** Heartfires and Terrors
- **Chapter 23** The Winter Gate Opens
- **Chapter 24** Choice on the Brink
- **Chapter 25** Dawnbreak

Introduction

Greylake stood shivering at the edge of the world, clinging desperately to memory and myth beneath the weight of endless winter. Snow draped every roof and branch, burying the village in a hush broken only by the sigh of cold wind through brittle reeds. With each passing year, the ice crept closer, gnawing at the crumbling fences and choking the last stubborn plots of earth that once fed the villagers. Few remembered the warmth of the sun; fewer dared to hope it would ever return.

In this bleak landscape, life was a matter of survival—of scraping together firewood and hope in equal measure. Each day dawned in faded light, and each night fell heavy with the knowledge that warmth, like kindness, had become a rare thing. Everyone watched for omens in the swirling frost. The elders whispered that Greylake was cursed for some forgotten sin, punished by gods who looked away. In the silence between the wind's howls, their stories wandered—half prayer, half warning—about the days before the snows, and the gate that had once bridged worlds.

Anwen Frost, neither child nor wholly grown, learned not to listen too closely to old tales or promises. Orphaned, small for her age, and unfavored by fortune, she haunted the margins of Greylake much as the cold haunts its bones. If she expected little from life, it did not fail to oblige. Her tasks were thankless—the splitting of wood, the mending of roofs, the quiet work on behalf of those who rarely remembered to thank her. Yet in the solitude of her chores, Anwen's mind wandered further than most. She saw patterns in the snowdrifts and shapes in the reflecting ice, secrets just out of sight.

Superstition ran thick as blood in Greylake. People muttered about shadows moving at the tree line, and children dared each other to approach the old stones carved with runes nearly worn away by time. They all remembered, too keenly, the legend of the Winter Gate—a doorway said to sleep somewhere in the frozen wilds, keeping something ancient and hungry from returning. Most believed it a bedtime threat, but in lean winters, when the winds moaned and lights danced eerily in the north, the fear came stomping on heavy boots.

That fear shaped Anwen's world as much as any storm. Outcasts, especially orphans, made convenient scapegoats, and stories of the Gate's curse followed her through the village like blowing snow. Yet beneath the frost's oppression, the land held its secrets closely, waiting for the moment when someone desperate and overlooked might notice a glimmer in the drift—a hint of the world beneath.

All things slept in winter, the villagers said, but not all things should be woken. In the

days that followed, beneath the silent trees and the vast, indifferent sky, Anwen Frost would discover how truth and legend are sometimes only separated by the thickness of ice, and how even the quietest voices might rouse monsters, or—just maybe—break a curse that has lingered too long.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shards Beneath the Snow

The biting wind, a constant companion in Greylake, whipped Anwen's threadbare cloak around her as she trudged deeper into the skeletal woods. Her breath plumed white, instantly snatched away by the frigid air. Today's chore, assigned by Old Man Hemlock with a gruff dismissal, was to scavenge for fallen branches sturdy enough for kindling. Most villagers considered it a waste of time; the deeper one went, the less promising the pickings, and the more unsettling the silence. But Anwen preferred the solitude to the pitying glances or outright scorn she received in the village. Here, only the cold judged her.

The trees grew denser with each crunch of her boots on the packed snow, their branches draped with heavy white shrouds, ancient and unyielding. The air here was different, thinner, carrying a faint, metallic tang. It was a smell Anwen had never quite placed, but it always intensified the deeper she ventured. The old stories whispered of this part of the woods, of places where the very air was said to hum with forgotten power, or sorrow.

She'd almost given up, her small sack still depressingly light, when her foot caught on something unyielding beneath a low-hanging fir bough. She stumbled, falling to one knee in a drift, the sudden jolt rattling her teeth. Muttering a curse, more from frustration than pain, she braced herself to push up, her gloved hand sinking deeper into the snow to steady herself.

Instead of solid earth or frozen roots, her fingers brushed against something unnaturally smooth and cold, colder even than the surrounding ice. Curiosity, a dangerous trait in Greylake where questioning anything often led to trouble, pricked at her. She dug deeper, her breath frosting around her face as she worked. The snow gave way grudgingly, revealing a patch of earth that felt strangely softer, less compacted than the frozen ground around it.

It took several minutes of painstaking effort, her fingers growing numb despite the thick wool of her gloves, before the object fully emerged. It wasn't wood, or stone, or ice. It was a shard, fragmented and jagged, yet radiating an inner luminescence that seemed to defy the dim light filtering through the snow-laden canopy. It was about the size of her palm, multifaceted like a crude gemstone, and pulsed with a faint, almost imperceptible blue light.

Anwen gasped, the sound a small puff of steam. She had never seen anything like it. It was beautiful, undeniably, but also unsettling. The air around it felt charged, raising the fine hairs on her arms. It wasn't just cold; it hummed with a different kind of chill,

one that seemed to sink into her bones and stir something dormant within her. As she held it, the blue light intensified, casting fleeting shadows that danced on the snow.

A sharp, almost musical hum resonated from the shard, vibrating through her fingers and up her arm. It was too beautiful, too alien, to be a simple rock or forgotten piece of glass. This was something else entirely. Her mind, usually so practical, reached for the old stories—the ones about fragments of lost worlds, of magic splintered and hidden. But those were just tales, weren't they? Villagers spoke of them to scare children or to explain away an unfortunate harvest.

But then, as if in response to her unspoken thought, the hum grew louder, a low thrumming that she felt more than heard. The blue light flared, briefly blinding her, and the shard warmed in her hand, a surprising heat that banished the biting cold. For a moment, the world around her seemed to shimmer, the outlines of the trees blurring, and the air crackled with an energy that made her teeth ache. She felt a strange pull, a sense of something ancient stirring, stretching, after a long sleep.

Before she could process what was happening, a sharp crack echoed through the silence of the woods. Not the snap of a branch under snow, but something deeper, more resonant, like ice fracturing in a massive, unseen glacier. The trees around her seemed to groan, their branches swaying as if in a sudden, invisible gale. A shower of snow cascaded from above, startling her.

The blue light from the shard abruptly dimmed, returning to its faint pulse, and the strange warmth vanished, leaving her hand colder than before. The humming faded to a barely perceptible whisper. Anwen stared at the shard, then frantically around her. Nothing seemed overtly different, yet the stillness of the woods felt heavier, more watchful. She shivered, not from cold, but from a profound sense of unease.

She knew, with a certainty that settled cold and heavy in her stomach, that she shouldn't have touched it. Whatever this was, it was not meant to be found. The old tales of the Winter Gate spoke of ancient powers, of things best left undisturbed. Yet, the shard felt impossibly significant in her hand, as if it had been waiting for her, specifically.

Clutching the artifact tightly, Anwen scrambled to her feet. The weight of the shard in her pocket felt like a leaden secret, pulling her away from the innocent search for kindling and into something far more dangerous. The familiar path back to Greylake now seemed to stretch into an unknown future, and the quiet woods, once a refuge, now held a newfound, unsettling presence. She quickened her pace, desperate to outrun the sudden, prickling sense that she was no longer alone in the ancient, frozen forest. Something had stirred, and she had been the one to wake it.

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