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# Frostbound

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## Introduction

Auroria is a land shrouded in perpetual winter, its glaciers and endless wastes shielding stories older than memory itself. The skies remain blanketed in cold blue, while the sun's warmth is a distant echo, withheld by curse or fate. To the villagers of Skeldar, survival is not merely a struggle—it is a relentless battle against the biting cold, gnawing hunger, and the ancient and unnamed terrors that stir in the snowbound darkness.

For Aelith, the world has never offered comfort. Orphaned at a young age, she grew among the frostbitten huts and wary glances of Skeldar, a place where kindness was as rare as the green of spring. Her only solace was in the company of the ice wolf—an enigmatic creature feared by all, yet drawn inexplicably to her. Though the villagers whispered of curses and old magic, Aelith found no malice in the wolf's frosted eyes, only a steady companionship in an otherwise merciless world.

Life in Skeldar was governed by unspoken rules and iron traditions—stray too far from the safety of torchlight, and the howling dark would claim you. But for Aelith, it was the cruel chill of suspicion and scorn from her own people that threatened to freeze her spirit. Each season, her presence became more unwelcome, every missed harvest or slight misfortune blamed upon the strangeness of a girl who walked beside a beast.

It was a single night—moonless, bitterly cold—that sealed her fate. An accident, a quarrel, or perhaps the deliberate malice of those who saw monsters where none existed. Accused and condemned, Aelith was cast out, sent to wander the ice where even the hardiest dared not linger. With nothing but a handful of provisions and the steadfast wolf at her side, she began her wandering—an exile with no promise of return.

Yet beneath the haze of grief and fear, a spark caught within her heart: tales the elders whispered by dying fires, of a place beyond the endless snow—a land where rivers ran free and trees wore the blush of spring blossoms. The Springlands. Some said it was a myth, a balm for desperate souls. For Aelith, it became a beacon. Each step into the brutal unknown was taken with this hope clenched in her fist—the hope that winter, no matter how long or lethal, could finally be undone.

As she stepped beyond the sight of Skeldar, forging her first tracks upon the untouched snow, Aelith had no way of knowing that her journey would unravel the secrets of a forsaken world, bind her fate with strangers and legends, and test the very core of her spirit. But in that vast, merciless silence, the promise of change whispered: every exile is still a traveler, and the frozen land of Auroria was waiting for

one who dared to seek the thaw.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Exile Beneath the Frozen Moon

The wind was a living thing, a predatory howl that raked across the open wastes, stinging Aelith's exposed skin and trying to tear the thin furs from her body. Each breath was a razor-sharp inhalation of frozen air, burning her lungs. Skeldar, the village that had once grudgingly offered her shelter, was now a smudge of distant, flickering lights swallowed by the encroaching blizzard. Its warmth, however meager, felt like a forgotten dream.

At her side, the ice wolf, whom she simply called 'Frost,' moved with an effortless grace that defied the treacherous terrain. His fur, the color of newly fallen snow, seemed to shimmer under the faint, diffused moonlight. His eyes, though, were what truly set him apart: chips of glacial blue that held an ancient wisdom, and a fierce, unwavering loyalty. He was her shadow, her protector, and in this desolate expanse, her only friend.

The exile had been swift, brutal, and utterly without appeal. The whispers had festered for years, accusations building like snowdrifts against her small, defiant presence. The final spark had been the disappearance of Old Man Theron's prize hunting dogs, followed by a blight on the meager winter harvest. In the desperate clutch of eternal winter, logic withered, and superstition bloomed. Aelith, the girl who spoke to wolves, was the easiest scapegoat.

"Monster child," they'd spat, their faces contorted by fear and frostbite. "Winter's curse."

She clutched the rough leather satchel tighter, the paltry provisions within it feeling impossibly heavy. A few strips of dried venison, a hunk of stale bread, and a flint and steel—gifts from Elara, the village healer, whose silent sympathy was a small, precious warmth in Aelith's memory. It was barely enough to survive a week, let alone a journey into the uncharted depths of Auroria.

Frost nudged her hand with his cold snout, a silent reassurance that spoke louder than any human comfort. She leaned into his warmth for a moment, the dense fur offering a fleeting respite from the penetrating cold. He seemed to understand the futility of looking back, the necessity of moving forward. Their path lay westward, into the heart of the great ice desert, following the vague, hopeful direction of the legendary Springlands.

The silence was a palpable entity, broken only by the shriek of the wind and the crunch of their boots and paws on the packed snow. Every shadow seemed to harbor a

threat, every distant creak of ice a monster stirring. Aelith knew these lands were home to more than just the ubiquitous snow hares and winter foxes. Stories told of great frost bears, their claws like daggers, and the silent, terrifying predators known as the Shard-Dwellers, creatures born of the ice itself.

Her first night of exile was a testament to the unforgiving nature of her new reality. They found a shallow cave carved into a sheer ice cliff, barely large enough for them both. Aelith fumbled with the flint and steel, her fingers stiff and clumsy with cold. It took several attempts before a reluctant spark caught on the dry tinder she'd gathered near the village's edge. The tiny flame felt like a miracle, a defiant assertion of life against the pervasive death of the cold.

Frost settled near the meager fire, his eyes reflecting the flickering light. He didn't seem to mind the smoke. Aelith ate her dried venison slowly, savoring each tough bite, acutely aware that this might be her only meal for days. The weight of her situation pressed down on her, an invisible, crushing burden. She was alone, utterly and irrevocably alone, in a world that wanted her dead.

Yet, a stubborn refusal to yield simmered beneath her despair. The Springlands. The very name was a fragile hope, a whisper against the gale. If such a place existed, if the stories were true, then perhaps there was an end to this relentless winter, an end to the endless struggle. She had nothing left to lose, and everything to gain. The thought fueled her, a tiny ember in the vast darkness.

Sleep came fitfully, haunted by the howling wind and the gnawing fear of what lay beyond the meager protection of the cave. Frost remained vigilant, a silent sentinel, his senses attuned to the subtle shifts in the air, the distant tremors of the ice. Aelith woke periodically, shivering despite her furs, to find his luminous eyes fixed on the cave entrance, always watching, always protecting.

The next morning, the blizzard had abated, leaving behind a world pristine and blindingly white. The sun, a pale disc in the perpetually overcast sky, offered little warmth. Aelith packed her few belongings, her movements stiff from cold and restless sleep. The journey proper began now, away from the familiar, however hostile, into the utterly unknown.

They traversed vast, flat plains of ice, where the wind swept across, uninterrupted, creating intricate patterns of snowdrifts like frozen waves. The scale of the landscape was daunting, stretching out in every direction to meet the horizon in a hazy white line. There were no landmarks, no trees, only the endless, undulating expanse of snow and ice.

Aelith learned to read the subtle signs of the land: the slight blue tint in certain snowdrifts indicating a hidden crevice, the pattern of wind-sculpted ice signifying a

ridge. Frost, with his innate understanding of the wild, was her best guide, often leading her along paths that seemed less exposed or more stable. Their bond, forged in the silent isolation of her childhood, deepened with every shared hardship.

Food quickly became their primary concern. The dried venison was gone within a few days. They hunted together, a silent, efficient team. Frost, with his speed and keen senses, would corner a snow hare or a plump ptarmigan, and Aelith, though not a skilled hunter by village standards, learned to dispatch their prey swiftly and cleanly. They shared the meager meat, the raw warmth of it a vital boost against the draining cold.

One afternoon, a subtle tremor ran through the ice beneath their feet. Frost's ears perked, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. Aelith froze, her heart hammering against her ribs. The ground began to vibrate more intensely, and a deep, guttural roar echoed across the frozen plains. It was not the sound of a simple frost bear. This was deeper, more ancient.

Suddenly, the ice ahead of them cracked, a spiderweb of fissures spreading rapidly. A colossal head, covered in shaggy white fur and crowned with jagged icicle-horns, erupted from beneath the snow. Its eyes, the color of frozen twilight, fixed on them with predatory intent. A frost wurm, a creature of legend, massive and terrifying, had awoken.

"Run, Frost!" Aelith yelled, not waiting to see if he'd follow. She scrambled backwards, her boots slipping on the slick surface. The wurm's head was immense, its maw opening to reveal rows of crystalline teeth. It moved with a surprising speed for its size, churning the snow as it rose from its icy lair.

Frost, however, did not run. Instead, he let out a defiant snarl, his posture low and ready. His eyes glowed with an intensity Aelith had never seen. He was not just a wolf; he was something more, something ancient and powerful, directly challenging the monstrous beast. A shimmer of blue energy, subtle but undeniable, seemed to pulse around his form.

The wurm roared again, a sound that vibrated in Aelith's bones, and lunged. Frost met its charge with an incredible agility, dodging the massive head with a fluid twist of his body. He darted in, a flash of white against white, and then darted out again, leaving a shallow, but bleeding, gash on the wurm's leathery hide.

Aelith knew she couldn't just stand there. She fumbled for the small hunting knife she carried, its blade dulled from years of use. It was utterly useless against a creature of this scale. But she had to do something. Her gaze darted around, searching for any advantage in the featureless landscape.

Her eyes landed on a series of jagged ice spikes protruding from a nearby ridge, remnants of some ancient glacial collapse. An idea, desperate and probably suicidal, sparked in her mind. "Frost! Lead it towards the spikes!" she screamed, her voice thin against the wind.

The ice wolf, as if understanding her impossible command, let out a sharp bark and began to bait the worm, weaving just out of reach, nipping at its flanks, always guiding it towards the treacherous ridge. The worm, enraged by the persistent, stinging attacks, followed, its massive body lumbering closer to the jagged outcroppings.

Aelith ran, scrambling up the less steep side of the ridge, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The worm, distracted by Frost, didn't notice her. When she reached the peak, she braced herself, searching for a loose, heavy shard of ice. Her hands closed around a sizable chunk, its edges sharp as obsidian.

With a primal scream, she launched herself down the slope, timing her descent to coincide with the worm's next clumsy lunge at Frost. She aimed for its head, specifically for the soft tissue behind its massive icicle-horn, a vulnerable point she'd only ever heard whispered in tales.

The ice shard flew, turning end over end, propelled by the last reserves of her adrenaline-fueled strength. It struck true, embedding itself with a sickening crunch. The worm let out a shriek of pain, a sound that was less a roar and more a wounded cry. Its immense body shuddered, and it began to thrash violently, inadvertently impaling itself further on the very ice spikes Aelith had intended to use as a trap.

The ground shook as the creature bucked and writhed, its life slowly ebbing away amidst the jagged ice. Frost stood a safe distance away, panting, a faint blue glow still clinging to his fur. Aelith stumbled to her knees, her body trembling uncontrollably, not just from the cold, but from the raw terror that was finally catching up to her.

She had faced death, stared it in the eye, and somehow, by a desperate gamble, had emerged victorious. Frost padded over to her, nudging her gently with his nose, his glacial eyes full of an almost human understanding. She wrapped her arms around his thick neck, burying her face in his fur, letting out a sob of relief and exhaustion.

The battle had taken its toll, but it had also forged something new within her. She was no longer just the exiled girl from Skeldar. She was a survivor, a fighter. And with Frost by her side, an impossible hope began to solidify into a fierce resolve. The Springlands, however mythical, felt a little less impossible now. The ice wolf had shown her that even in the heart of winter, there was power, and a strange, cold beauty in their shared fight for survival.

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