

FROSTFIRE

JAMIE SMITH

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CHAPTER ONE

ONE YEAR EARLIER

"HOW MUCH LONGER?" Sabira asked. She and her parents stood on top of the ice wall surrounding the city, waiting. She walked to the edge of the wall and peered briefly down into the valley. She spun on her heels, turning toward the mountain and the shrine for the hundredth time, half expecting her brother to emerge at last. But the path remained empty. She took a few steps and turned again to the valley.

"He's going to be fine, either way," her father said soothingly. "You don't have to pace like that while you're waiting. What are you going to be like when I go off in a few weeks' time? It'll be for months, you know."

Sabira's father was a respected healer and had been invited on an important diplomatic trip to Ignata. Sabira shook her head. "This is different. This is Kyran's whole future at stake," she said, walking faster than ever.

“It *would* be easier if they told us the schedule,” said Taranna, her mother. She was anxious too, but instead of pacing, she fiddled with the two red ribbons on her upper arm—representing her two children. Her father had identical ribbons tied around his arm. “Your father’s right, Sabira. Stop pacing. You’re making me even more nervous.”

Sabira stopped and sighed. They waited along with a few other family groups near the frost-cleric temple where Sabira had her lessons, its great glass greenhouse and domed observatory glinting in the sunlight. It was Choosing Day, and along with the other children of Adranna who had reached the age of fourteen, Sabira’s brother was undergoing tests to determine if he was worthy of bonding with a frostslover.

Only one in a hundred was destined to succeed, but Sabira thought they’d choose Kyran. He was strong and clever and everything a big brother should be. He’d climb up to the glacier above on Aderast’s highest slopes and cut a piece of it for himself, a piece of a god to grant him the powers he’d always dreamt about. She just wished she knew it for sure.

“So . . . how much longer *can* it be?” Sabira asked, jittering in place as she stared at her scuffed snow boots on the painted ice.

“Look!” her mother said, pointing up to the shrine.

A figure had emerged from the low, peak-roofed building: Kyran. He strode down toward their parents, and Sabira felt her heart thumping as she tried to read his expression for an answer. Suddenly, to Sabira’s eyes, he looked very

grown-up—even though he was only one year older than her. He hesitated in front of his family.

“Well?” said Sabira’s father.

“Yeah,” he eventually said, almost in a whisper. “They picked me. I’m going to have a frostslover!” A smile broke across his face.

Her mother and father cried out, scooping Sabira and Kyran into a tight embrace. Sabira clung to her brother. All sorts of feelings ran through her in a shiver. Joy for the magic that had come into Kyran’s life, the magic he’d longed for since he was a small boy. Pride for the older brother she loved. A little bit of jealousy that he was the one who’d been chosen, not her. Worry for him making the dangerous climb up the bonding path.

“That’s amazing, son,” said their father, pulling away, his eyes shining.

“Well done, Kyran. Well done,” their mother added, squeezing Kyran’s shoulder as she released him.

But Sabira didn’t let go. She could feel her eyes stinging.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Kyran asked, concerned, prying her away gently.

“You’re really going . . . up there to the glacier?” Sabira asked haltingly. “Some people don’t come back.”

“I’ll come back!” Kyran replied, full of confidence. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

Sabira’s parents walked ahead, leaving her and Kyran wandering down toward the city as the sun started to

sink. For a while, they were quiet, each lost in their own thoughts.

“I guess in all the excitement it feels like your birthday has been forgotten,” he said quietly.

Sabira blinked. She’d even forgotten herself: She was thirteen today. “It doesn’t matter. Your Choosing is more important,” she said sincerely.

“Of course it matters. You’re thirteen now—that means you’ve only got one more year left until your own Choosing. Have you thought about it yet, about what you want?”

Sabira shrugged. She had thought about her own Choosing—of course she had. But it had always felt so distant, like a daydream. Now her stomach clenched in nervousness. What if she wasn’t good enough for a frostslover? What if she *was*?

“Anyway, as you’ve only got one year of official childhood left, I thought I’d give you something special.” He reached into his pocket and drew something out. “Happy birthday, Sabira.” He handed her a small wooden figurine, hand-carved and smooth. Sabira took the creature. To her surprise, it had little posable legs, so you could make the figurine stand or sit. It had a long, lithe body and a fierce face.

“Is it an ash-cat?” she asked, grinning. Her brother nodded.

“I made it myself,” he said a little shyly. “I know how curious you are about Ignata.”

“I love it!” she said, hugging him for the second time that afternoon. “Thank you!”

He squeezed her back.

When she pulled away, she cradled the ash-cat carefully in her hand as they carried on walking home. “Everything’s changing, isn’t it? You’ll have your frostslover. Father’s going to leave on the Ignatian delegation in a few weeks . . . soon it will just be me and Mother.” Sabira felt a sharp tug in her heart at the thought. She loved her mother, of course, but it would be weird with the family cut in half.

“It’ll be all right. Think of everything I’ll be able to achieve once I’m bonded!” Kyran’s eyes grew suddenly dreamy. “Everyone with a frostslover does something important. One day, maybe I can go on trips like Father. I bet you could come too, Sabira—we could see the world, from Ignata to the plains nations! Won’t you like that? You’re always talking about traveling. Maybe you’ll have a frostslover by then too.” He grinned at her. “You’ll see, everything will turn out for the best.”

Sabira smiled. She hoped he was right. Her brother had all the courage in the world, but she wasn’t sure if that was enough. Something was niggling at the back of her mind, some darkness or foreboding. Maybe she was worrying over nothing. Yes, that was it. He’d head up the path in a week’s time and be home a day or two later, a frostslover around his neck and magical frostfire running through his fingers, just like he’d always wanted.