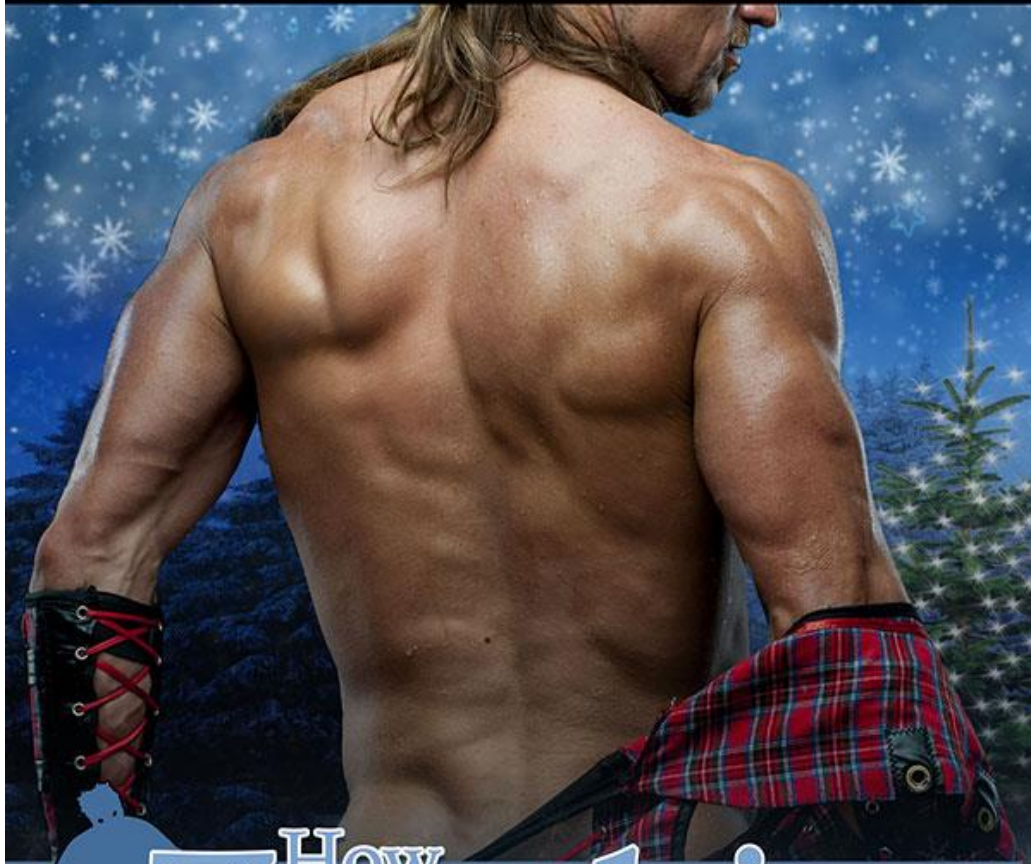




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How
Zombies
Stole Christmas

SIDNEY
BRISTOL

*A Winter
Realm
Story*

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Published By: Taliesin Publishing, LLC, PO Box 155, Sanford, MI 48657
www.taliesinpublishing.com

How Zombie Stole Christmas

Copyright © 2013 by Sidney Bristol
Digital Release: December 2013
ISBN: 978-1-62916-016-0

Cover Artist: James Caldwell

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HOW ZOMBIES STOLE CHRISTMAS BY SIDNEY BRISTOL

Every creature in Haven snuggled down in their beds, ready for another Christmas, they liked it a lot. But not everyone in this magical land shares their holiday cheer...

Evelina Frost is a woman used to staying in the shadows, but this year Christmas needs a hero, and with Santa away, it's up to her to save the holiday from ruin.

A figure dressed in white cast a spell and from the frozen land, ghastly zombies appear.

Kameron is a creature out-of-place in the frigid land, but he's carved out a life, away from his Highland moors and pastures, happy to live alone. Until a woman barges into his life, and awakens urges he hasn't known in centuries.

"I'll take their Christmas, their cheer and their hope," the figure says, as zombies descend on the Snow Palace, ripping the trees and presents from the hearth.

Together, Evelina and Kameron delve into the history of their land, fighting a magical blizzard, ice zombies and an all-consuming lust for each other as magic seeks to create another fairy tale from their lives. They must fight together against the odds and save Christmas, though they might lose their hearts in the bargain.

Dedication

For every ugly duckling who has learned to love themselves.

Chapter One

Bitter cold sliced through the layers of fur, leather, nylon, and polyester. The driving snow had crystallized on Evelina's eyelashes, and her fingertips had begun to lose feeling. Blizzards in this remote part of Siberia killed without regard for race on a regular basis. Normally, she would have no business being out in this weather with her husky, even if she was the daughter of Jack Frost. But tonight there was a very good reason for risking her neck.

Ice zombies.

A gust of wind punched her with the power of a mountain troll. She grabbed hold of Maddox's leather harness. The husky hunched down, anchoring them both in the snow and ice. She dug her trekking pole into the fresh powder, cursing under her breath. This storm was as unnatural as the ice zombies that had raided the Snow Palace.

As if her nerves needed any more prodding, Maddox whined and hunched further into the fresh powder. His stillness had her wanting to tuck tail and run back to the palace. The snow dog was always in motion, a fierce protector, which was unusual for a husky.

She squinted at the faint tracks the blizzard hadn't hidden. The wind continued to blow flurries across their path and erased the last bits of evidence of the creatures' passing. Evelina could fight creatures of flesh, blood, or magic. She was a damn Guardian, for fuck's sake, but against the weather she might as well be a full-blooded human. In the face of this unnatural scourge, she didn't know if there was time to save both Christmas and the kidnapped Snow Maiden.

Her feet sank into the footprints, crunching and demanding more from her overworked muscles. She'd been working on fumes, pitching in help with the last of the Christmas preparations, when the attack happened. It had been the worst moment possible. They should have been ready.

The one saving grace was that the strange tracks made by shuffling ice zombie feet were easier to follow, even in the driving snow. The shallower tracks were gone, but their frozen limbs punctured deep into the snow, leaving pockets that took longer to fill in. Evelina clicked the flashlight hanging around her wrist and the beam bounced off the lip of the gouging tracks. This far north, they were in eternal night, with only the light of the moon, which was currently hidden by a thick covering of clouds. The storm had blown up so suddenly, even her smart phone hadn't given her a single warning of the impending weather. The forecast had been crystal clear for the next four days, heralding a beautiful Christmas holiday. Or what would have been beautiful had the frozen undead not attacked the Snow Palace and made her world hell.

The *Ubezishche* was many things, but safe and peaceful it was not. A haven for fae, magical creatures, and monsters alike, located along the border of Siberia and Russia. A no-man's land where humans wouldn't notice several hundred acres of earth

simply missing, shielded by a protective bubble. One reason this area had been selected was that the Snow Palace was located there, and several indigenous fae groups had permanent settlements. They'd been able to transform it in a matter of months. Evelina had helped. By then, she'd lived at the Snow Palace for a decade or two. It was the only place on earth Evelina could live out her unnatural life. But just because the *Ubezhishche* was a haven it didn't mean it was safe.

She paused and peered into the deeper darkness. The driving snow easily concealed any movement as close as five feet away. She was alone and vulnerable.

"What do you see, Maddox?"

Her voice was muffled by the collar of her fur *shuba* coat. Maddox tilted his snout up and whined at her again. Or at least she thought he might have. The sound was stolen away by the wind.

"I don't like it either, but they took Snow."

She shone her light across the snow. It glinted back at her in places where ice had frozen solid over the powder. Despite the fur, her skin broke out in goose bumps under the heavy *shuba* coat. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and the Snow Maid still carried the Russian Santa Guardian, Ded Moroz's, staff. As his handmaiden, it was tradition.

The first Snow Maid had been the original Ded Moroz's daughter. She'd been a warrior in her own right, and fought side by side with her father. After her death, her father's successor had passed the honor on to a warrior princess of the winter fae. As the times became less dangerous and the Snow Maidens ornamental, another position had been created.

Guardians.

And that was where Evelina came in.

Protecting the Snow Maid was Evelina's responsibility, and the Snow Maid kept Ded Moroz's staff. The real danger lay in that staff falling into the wrong hands. While Ded Moroz used it for good, to bring happiness and defend the helpless, it could also do great evil. And Snow had been in possession of the staff when the creatures abducted her.

Evelina licked her chapped lips and stabbed one of her trekking poles into the broken snow ahead of her to test the ground. The poles had sharpened tips made to crack through ice, and to hold in snow and ice. Maddox stuck close to her, his canine eyes better at keeping them on the path.

Her stomach dropped as she realized which direction the tracks were swinging.

Toward *Temnyy Les*.

The Dark Forest.

They'd gone in a large circle around the yeti's lair, for which she'd been grateful. She did not want to run into an abominable snowman in the middle of a blizzard. A close second was venturing into the *Temnyy Les*, where all sorts of malicious creatures roamed.

"Fucking fairy pricks and their dark forests," she muttered into the cowl of her coat.

Night Mares, magically warped wolves, *akhlut*, *jotun*, and *hrimthurs* were a few of the known habitants of these woods. If she ran into any of them before she found the Snow Maid, Evelina didn't know if she could protect herself. She only had minor magics, and her ability was exhausted for the time being.

Evelina strayed from the wide path the shambling ice zombies had cut through the forest. The hair on the back of her neck rose, and the skin between her shoulder blades prickled. She didn't want to waste her time with stragglers when time was of the essence. Dealing with them would only slow her down. Whoever had sent the ice zombies in the first place had to be in the *Temnyy Les*. It made sense, a dark forest for a thieving bastard who sent ice zombies to kidnap an innocent woman and steal Ded Moroz's staff. It was common enough knowledge that the ornately carved staff held a nugget of ice gold, that strange substance mined from Jack Frosts' lands. While Ded Moroz was a warrior in his own right, the staff was a symbol of his power.

The forest decreased her visibility, cutting off the meager amount of light but also shielding her slightly from the blizzard. The wind shoved and battered at her, but the trees and shrubbery protected her from the icy projectiles. She shuddered, shaking off some of the flakes, and trudged forward. Her clear goggles had broken when she'd taken a nasty tumble earlier.

Maddox bounded ahead of her and sniffed a tree before scampering back to her side. He didn't wag his tail, but neither did he growl. Sometimes she wished that in this land of magic and myth she could at least understand her dog.

"What did you smell?"

The dog's bright blue eyes held secrets she'd never know. Maddox, unlike most of the inhabitants of the magical haven, was normal.

Evelina went to the tree and peered around. Nothing but white flecks, shadows, and darkness. She couldn't use a tracking spell because the blizzard's magic would warp and destroy it. Hell, even her cell phone was useless. This far out she couldn't get a signal—not that many people used technology in this part of the world. They were all about tradition and living according to the old ways. She grumbled and pressed onward, determined to do what she could.

Tomorrow was Christmas Eve.

Who would steal from a Santa Guardian? Only someone of the worst variety. Which was why Evelina had to rescue the Snow Maid and retrieve the staff before Ded Moroz began visiting children.

That didn't leave much time.

She walked for what felt like an age, guided by Maddox. Every now and then, she shone her flashlight on the swiftly fading tracks, and then kept going, deeper and deeper into the forest. Her mouth was dry and her shirt drenched with sweat without the battering of snow and wind. She wanted to strip off the fur coat and hat, but she'd freeze to death even with her affinity for winter weather. There was still half of her that was human. Instead, she paused to loosen the neck of her *shuba* and part the layers of clothing at her wrist.

A silver band with a crystal face ticked down the months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds until Christmas.

Zero months. Zero weeks. One day. Twenty hours. Fifty-nine minutes. Sixteen seconds.

More than enough time to rescue a pampered fae and return a deadly Guardian weapon.

No sweat.

Yeah right.

Evelina adjusted her clothing and glanced around. She couldn't see her dog anywhere. Huskies were fantastic dogs, but not the most obedient.

"Damn dog," she whispered. "Maddox?" Evelina didn't dare raise her voice—not with magic so heavy on the air she could practically taste it. Only fitting that at this time of year the flavor was warm sugar cookies and pumpkin pie. Not traditional Russian fare, but she'd never been much for tradition.

Silence.

Her heart beat painfully as fear danced over her nerves.

"Maddox?" she said a little louder.

Evelina cast her beam of light around, searching for a flash of tail, the glow of his eyes, or some other sign of where he'd gone. His tracks were small, and his ability to stay on top of the snow was so good that any paw print would be wiped away almost immediately. Evelina stabbed her pole into the powder and put on a little speed. No one could get into trouble faster than Maddox. She loved and hated that about him.

Ahead of her, a dog whined.

Maddox.

Her heart clenched, and she tasted bile.

Evelina did her best to run through the powder, but it sucked her feet down deep and held her there with each step. She pushed through a low hedge of brush and into a clearing. Three creatures with vaguely human forms gleamed under her light like freshly polished glass. They held Maddox down, their fanged mouths thrown open in ecstasy as they sucked the warmth and moisture from the husky.

Evelina had tended to the poor souls the zombies had left in their wake at the Snow Palace. Frozen husks of the fae she'd known.

Fucking ice zombies.

"No!" Evelina swung one trekking pole and knocked the closest zombie off Maddox. She kicked the second back against a rock, and the creature shattered.

Well, that was unexpected.

Maddox scrambled to his feet, growling and snapping his mouth at the third, who couldn't seem to decide who to go after—Maddox, or her.

All around them, shadows began to move, and the sound of groans and moaning broke the pristine night.

Adrenaline and fear shot through her. She reached out and touched the snow, driving all the magic left within her bones into the fresh powder. It hardened into a disc of ice. Evelina jumped on it and grabbed Maddox's harness as he circled close to her, his fangs bared at the ambush. Her flashlight dangled from her wrist, casting drunken pools of light around them and illuminating more horrors in the night. The husky didn't wait for her command. He charged ahead, pulling her ice sled along as he'd done a million times.

Maddox snapped at a zombie who got too close, and Evelina used her trekking poles to bludgeon the creatures away. The snow thinned, revealing the crystal limbs and icy stares. There were more. Lots more.

The zombies forced them to weave through the trees, but each jarring turn seemed to have them doubling back to end where they'd begun.

"Come on Maddox, good boy," she chanted.

Two zombies lunged for them, and the husky swerved.

"No, Maddox!" Evelina yanked on the harness but it was too late.

The sled hit a rock, and the thin ice shattered. Evelina tumbled head over heels, rolling and crashing into zombies, trees, and bushes alike. Her head reeled, but she shoved to her feet as soon as she could get them under her. She glanced around, searching for something to help defend herself. Her magical reserves were gone. Completely shot. She didn't see Maddox. One of her trekking poles lay nearby—a little bent, but it would work. She dove for it and brandished her make-shift weapon at an over eager zombie, its teeth chomping at her.

There were too many. Her light glinted off at least fifty different ice zombies, and she had a hunch that the blizzard concealed more.

A bark, followed by growls, let her know that Maddox was still nearby. She couldn't worry about both of them. She stood a better chance on her own.

"Maddox, go!" she yelled. "*Ukhodit*!"

The fray parted for a moment, and Evelina could see him. Everything stilled. He stared at her, ignoring the zombie gripping his harness. Confusion had his ears back and the whites of his eyes clearly visible.

"*Ukhodit*!" she cried again.

Maddox twisted and bit the arm of the zombie clean off before speeding through the forest. Away. To safety. Without her.

What a time for the damn dog to actually listen to her.

Evelina swung her trekking pole in a wide arc. It cleaved the leg of an ice zombie clean off. The creature's limb shattered, and its mouth gaped open. Its hissing scream was one of many. She kept moving, no time to focus on the one foe when there were so many.

She spun again, whacking one creeping up on her from behind. It gave her a small opening and she rushed to put her back against an old tree. The higher ground provided her a fraction of a better vantage, but the view crushed her.

The herd of frozen dead surrounded her, stretching through the trees in every direction. If she tried to make a break for it, she could outdistance a few of the shambling creatures, but there were too many. Her only other option meant climbing. Getting above them, but then what? She'd hang on until she fell asleep or froze to death, and they'd have her then.

Sweat trickled down her spine, and the fine hairs of her hat stuck to her brow.

Was this how she would die? In an attempt to rescue the Snow Maiden?

Again Evelina struck out, but her foot slipped on the snow and ice. Something snatched her coat, pulling her further off balance, and she tumbled into the snow. She rolled and kicked her limbs, fighting the grasping hands that rushed in for a chance to taste her warmth.

"No," she screamed.

Her meager magics were gone, almost all the moisture in her body bled dry. Sharp fingers bit into her skin, seeking more warmth, more moisture, anywhere it could be gained. Even from her blood.

A hand tightened around her throat, and her body went tight, bowing upward as she flashed cold. So cold it hurt.

The gaping, sightless eyes of the ice zombies leered down at her, their mouths full of razor sharp, icicle teeth.

She grasped for something, anything, and came up with only snow. Evelina threw it in their faces, but the zombies merely closed in, hungry for the taste of life they once possessed in another time.

Overhead, the winter moon circled the Siberian sky and broke through the thick clouds, shining brightly. How ironic; she would die in the middle of winter by creatures born from the same kind of magic that had created her.

Her father's people, the winter fae, were cruel. She didn't expect them to revere her, or even for her father to notice her passing, but this wasn't what she'd wanted.

Blood rushed in her ears, drowning out the keening cries of hunger. Snow pelted her body, and a white cloud rolled over her vision. The cries rose, heralding her last breath...but then the zombies scattered.

Evelina sucked in a deep breath, her lungs aching as she clasped both hands over her throat. The roar continued, not in her ears, but from something in the forest.

She sat up, coughing and groping for her trekking pole when the cloud turned a blue-veined face toward her. Great, dark orbs stared down at her, and a large mouth full of yellowed fangs gaped open. The creature's hot breath formed little clouds as it panted.

Evelina's warming blood turned to ice all over again.

The yeti.

The creature roared and swung its long arms, backhanding a half dozen of the zombies away. It kicked up snow and used the cover to charge the mass of frozen flesh, forcing them back.

Evelina scrambled to her feet, but they were numb. Her knees gave way, and she fell into the snow again. Her teeth chattered, and her extremities refused to obey her command to flee.

There was a new reason to fear now. There was only one abominable snowman in the *Ubezishche*, and it was a creature of legend and nightmare.

She used her pole to stagger away from the fray, where ice and fur and fang flew. Desperate for survival, she slapped at her throat for the dog whistle. Maybe she could summon a little magic and get away.

An icy hand slapped her across the face and dragged her down into the snow.

She was really getting sick of this.

Evelina rolled with the zombie. More hands grabbed her clothing. She was not going out like this. She thrashed and knocked at least two heads together, but there were more.

A roar ripped through the night, and the zombies scattered. Evelina flopped onto her back and sucked in a breath.

Could she hope the yeti was too distracted with the ice zombies to mess with her?

She levered herself up and glanced around. The blizzard hid the fleeing zombies, but there was an unnatural stillness she could feel despite the storm.

Evelina used the pole to get to her feet and dug out the dog whistle from around her neck. Either it was her imagination, or the wind suddenly raged harder, threatening to blow her over. She blew a few short bursts on the whistle. She needed a get-away ride, and Maddox was it.

The flashlight still hung from her wrist. She clicked it off and limped away, not caring which direction she went, so long as it was away from where the yeti was.

A snuffling, almost growl like sound kicked adrenaline into her system, yet she froze.

That was not Maddox.

Something was on her left, outside of her line of sight.

The yeti was stalking *her*, not the zombies.

Her breath was stolen away by the wind, which also hid any sound of the creature's movements. Did she run for it?

Evelina quickstepped to a large tree flanked by brush, which gave her some coverage. She peered through the darkness in the direction she'd heard the yeti, but all she spied was swirling snow and more shadows. She swung her head the other way and solid white filled her vision, stretching up, up, and up.

The yeti.

It grasped her around the waist with both hands, lifting her from the snow. She yelped and tried to struggle, but she was tired. She hurt, and her skin burned.

It growled at her and slung her over its shoulder. Ice and snow, clinging to its fur, melted against her face and created pinpricks of cold, while the creature's body heat warmed her.

Too late, she realized the yeti was loping through the forest, away from the zombies and away from where Maddox would search for her.

Snow was the last thing filling her vision before her world went black.

— • • —

Kameron watched the motionless lump in the middle of his bed with some trepidation. He'd never brought anyone, human or fae, into his home since his relocation to Haven. Injured animals, innocent creatures, yes, but nothing that could betray his secrets. He shoved a hand through his messy hair and stoked the main fire higher.

What was he going to do? Why hadn't he dumped the poor victim close to a civilization somewhere? There were a few settlements, lone houses fortified against the winter and magic. He hadn't needed to do more. Yet here he was.

The wind beat against the shutters and cathedral walls that had become his home.

Right. Because it was bitterly cold outside. Even he'd needed to find shelter. This was the worst blizzard in the hundred years he'd lived here. The poor soul hadn't stood a chance in these conditions.

Seemed that Kameron's humanity was still intact, and here he'd been wondering if there was anything human left in his bones.

Out of habit, he rubbed the centuries old scar bisecting his chest. It still ached after countless seasons.

His stomach rumbled. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, which meant he'd probably forgotten for a day or two. He'd never settled into the passing of seasons this far north, the way the moon never set in the winter, just went around in circles. In the summer, it was the sun who was a constant companion. It completely wrecked his sleep schedule, and he never knew when to rest, much less what time it was. It was a hellish way to live, but he had no choice.

The lump on the bed groaned and shifted.

Kameron stood from his place near the huge brazier and straightened his shoulders.

When was the last time he'd brushed his teeth or combed his hair? Hell, when was the last time he'd spoken to another sentient creature?

Again the person groaned. The bed fit for a yeti dwarfed it, swallowing the figure in a sea of furs and blankets. Under the massive fur coat it was impossible to tell if the person was male or female, and he hadn't been about to remove clothing he didn't recognize.

His guest pushed up on an elbow and lifted a hand to the small square of skin between the high neck of the coat and the low, folded brim of the cap—all of it covered in soft fur in the style of the indigenous people.

Kameron shifted his weight from foot to foot. Could he even communicate with whomever this was? Did they speak the same language?

He cleared his throat. "I hope ye didn't git knocked around too much."

The hand jerked away from the face and Kameron found himself falling into the most intense blue eyes he'd ever seen. They were almond shaped, like many of the fae, with thick lashes. The gaze drew him. He wanted to pitch forward and fall into their icy depths until he found the warm center.

"Are you in the habit of walking around naked?" It was a her. Her voice was an audible caress, stroking his skin and bringing heat crawling up his neck.

Kameron glanced down. "Aye, fuckers."

He strode over to a bench, grabbed a length of tartan, and wound it round his waist. It would have to do.

Bald sheep's asses. He'd exposed himself to a lass.

"Sorry, about that. I, uh, thought I could change right quick afair ye woke up." His tongue felt thick around the words. When was the last time he spoke to another creature? His Highland brogue was hard to understand even to his own ears.

The woman scrambled out of the bed. All he could see were her eyes, and they were enough to make any lad stop and take notice.

"I'm sorry. Was I supposed to understand that? Who are you? And where am I?" She turned a quick circle, and her gasp echoed. "The yeti's lair."

Lair?

He glanced at the marble floors, the vaulted ceiling, and gilt adornments of what had once been an Eastern Orthodox cathedral. It might be a little dusty, but it wasn't a lair. Lairs were dirty, nasty things. This was his home.

"I have to get out of here," she said, her voice cracking. She spun another circle, her panic rising high enough he could sense it. The yeti that shared his mind roused, enticed by potential prey.

"Nae, lass. Calm down." He spoke slowly and stepped toward her, one hand outreached. "Nae need to fear the fuzzy beast. He's gone. It's just ye and I." And the yeti inside of him.

"I'm sorry, come again? Who are you?" She rounded on him, her mittened hands balled into little plush fists. Not very threatening, but he backed off. Outside, the wind rattled the shutters and howled around the domed towers.

"My name is Kameron, and I mean ye nae harm, lass."

Her gaze narrowed. "I think you said your name was Kameron. Why are you here?"

"Aye, my name is Kameron. I live 'ere."

She stared at him for a moment. "With the yeti?"

Shit. He couldn't deny the scale of furniture was uniquely large and covered in white fur.

"Aye, lass. Wi' the yeti. Might I ask yer name?"

She didn't reply immediately. Her gaze skittered over his face, down his chest and examined the kilt with some fascination. What was it with women and kilts? He placed his hands on his hips and waited out her inspection, trying to not grin. It had been years since he'd ventured close to humanity, but it was nice to see at least one thing was still the same. Women liked a well-muscled chest as much as a man liked bare breasts.

At last she seemed to realize what she was doing and glanced away. "Evelina, but you can call me Evie."

"Evie." His lips curled around the word, tasting it and he found he liked it. He wanted to peel the furs off her and see what the rest of her looked like. Was she as alluring as her eyes hinted? He restrained himself from pulling back her coat. Restraint wasn't something he was good at. "Can I offer ye something, lass? Bevvvy? Food? A spot by the fire?"

"Bevvvy?" Her voice implied a lifted eyebrow and a twist of her lips. He wanted to see that.

"Aye. A bevvvy." He lifted a mug and pantomimed drinking.

Evelina tugged at the coat collar. "I could use some water, thank you. A bevvvy. Why's it hot in here?"

Double shit.

"Blizzard's raging outside. Hard to keep this drafty place warm. Plus I never gotten used to the colder temperatures up here." He smiled what he hoped was a disarming smile and rubbed at the scar again.

Evie chuckled, and he found himself wanting to know what her laugh sounded like. "Not surprising if you run around in your birthday suit. About that water?"

It was more complicated. The yeti didn't like the warmth. The warmer it was, the less chance there was he'd shift. That was the problem with being a magically cursed shifter and not a naturally born one. The shift was nothing he could control, and nothing he could trust the knowledge of to others.

"Right, water."

Kameron went to the large table he'd set up to one side of the fire-pit and grabbed a cup, which happened to be one of the chalices left by the previous occupants. It was a little dented, but he'd never minded. He'd also never had a guest to impress, either. Still, it was a far cry better than the earthen mugs he would have offered her were they back in his day, before the enchantment.

"Here ye go, lass."

She accepted the cup, but he couldn't tell what she thought with her face obscured by all the fur.

"Thank you." Evie turned her back to him, tipped the cup up, and drained the chalice dry. She gasped for breath and turned to him, shoving the drinking vessel into his hands. "More please."

"Of course." He'd give her whatever she wanted if she kept looking at him with those blue eyes. Kameron preceded Evelina to the table and ladled out more water from the bucket he used to boil snow. "What were ye doing out there, all alone? It's nae a safe place these days."

She took the chalice and again drained it with her back to him before replying. He was disappointed by the move, but it appeared his guest had something to hide. With fairy folk, it wasn't surprising. They were always hiding something, it seemed. Kameron busied his hands with selecting vegetables from the basket he'd set out for the stew instead of watching her like a hawk. The meat was already simmering over the fire.

Evelina didn't meet his gaze. "A friend wandered too far. She's not used to being outdoors. She's the stay inside and be pretty type." Evelina set the chalice down and rotated it absently. "I was trying to find her, to bring her home before the blizzard hit, when those things grabbed me."

Time had made Kameron wise to the ways of people and deception. She wasn't telling him the full truth, but he didn't doubt she was trying to find someone. If that person was truly a friend, or an enemy she was tracking down for other purposes, he couldn't tell. But did it matter to him? He knew nothing of her, but he was intrigued, and it had been a long time since another creature had interested him.

"Damn. Maybe she circled back and went home already?" He grabbed a knife from the block in the middle of the table and began chopping the vegetables into more manageable pieces.

"I hope so." Evelina turned and surveyed the rest of what had at one time been the main hall of a grand cathedral. "Love what you've done with the place."

"Thanks." He glanced around, trying to see it through her eyes, but it appeared the same gaudy tribute to a god he didn't know if he still believed in or not.

"You're welcome." She stood and stretched her arms toward the ceiling. He couldn't tell much of her form under the coat, but he wanted to peel it off and see what creature lived beneath. If she were human shaped. If she were an odd color. The fairy population was festive, to say the least. "Thanks for the water, but I need to get going and find my friend."

"Easy now, lass." The idea of her going back out into the night, alone, didn't appeal to him. He wanted to see more of her eyes. "That blizzard is blowin' somethin' fierce. Ye will lose yer way out there. Plus, ye just survived a serious attack. Have somethin' to eat and bevvie here with me. Get a wee rest and let this storm blow over. Besides, who knows what those things took out of ye?"

"Heat and water." Evelina adjusted the long, gown-like coat. "They're minor spirits trapped in a body of ice. The spirit wants warmth, and the magic needs moisture, but only the kind found in a living, breathing body." She crossed to a window, pulled her mitten off, and pressed her hand to the stained glass window.

Kameron blinked at her. The world had passed him by. Once he'd realized his enchantment prolonged his life beyond that of his kin, he'd taken to the most remote parts of the highlands where he'd stayed a phantom of the forest, untouched and unchanged until this relocation was forced upon him by other, well-meaning fae.

He shook his head. "I dinnae understand a word of it, but I will trust ye."

"Damn, the storm's really bad." She shook the small, pale hand. "What's up with the accent? What kind of fae are you?" Evelina crossed to the only stool and sank down on it. She propped an elbow on the table and leaned toward him. The cowl of her coat dipped enough to expose a bit of her cheekbones. The smooth, pale skin turned purple and puckered. A birthmark? Maybe a scar? He wanted to trace it, test the softness of her skin.

Kameron shook his head. He was having crazy ideas about a woman he'd known for a minute. "I'm nae fae, lass. Simple human caught up here. I'm from Scotland, where everyone talks like I do. What might ye be?"

He scraped the vegetables into a bowl and took them to the fire and dumped them into the simmering pot.

She shrugged and folded her hands together on the table, the one uncovered hand over the other. Her hand was small, fine boned. His fingers itched to pull the other glove off. Instead, he stirred the stew harder than was necessary.

Evelina proceeded without noticing his growing fascination with her. "I'm a half-blood. Part human. Part fae. There aren't many humans in the *Ubezhishche*."

"*Ubezhishche*? Yer accent, where's that from, hm?" He braced his hands on the table, enjoying the simple act of conversing. Some of the magical creatures could speak, but it was never for great lengths of time. He'd never realized he missed it. Or maybe it was the sound of her voice, the crisp, clear tones curling through the air.

"*Ubezhishche*—haven." Evelina shrugged, but her posture stiffened. He kicked himself for hitting on a sore subject. "I'm from *here*. Russia. The bastard child of two worlds."

"I'm sorry to hear that." His earliest memories were full of family, hearth, and home. They hadn't been rich, but they'd been together and happy.

She shook her head. "Don't be. It's an unremarkable story here, I'm sure you'll come to learn as much. More water, please?"

"For a lovely lass like yerself? Of course." He scooped up the chalice and poured her more water. "Would ye like anythin' else? I am sure I have somethin' in the cellar I can offer ye besides water."

He turned toward her, amused to find her gaze trained on his chest.

Evelina's gaze snapped to his face, and she sputtered, "What? No. No, thank you."

He grinned and pushed the water to her.

She'd have to remove the coat to eat, and then he'd get to see the rest of her. Those blue eyes were enough to captivate a man, and he figured they both needed to lose a layer or two of clothing.

Chapter Two

Evelina watched Kameron move around the table. It was big enough to seat at least a score of people. Everything in the cathedral was on scale for a creature much larger than either of them.

Say, yeti-sized.

Where was the creature?

She was too exhausted to fear the yeti would return. But if it tolerated the Scotsman maybe there was more going on than she realized. Or maybe she was a prisoner. The possibilities when dealing with fae were endless, and at some point a girl had to take what she was given with a little blind faith.

What she needed was a plan for how to rescue the Snow Maid and return Ded Moroz's staff before Christmas Eve. She could feel the time ticking down, and there wasn't a lot of it left.

This attack underscored why she thought the Snow Palace needed guards or some kind of protection. The Snow Palace still operated under the same staff and direction it had for hundreds of years—long before this haven with its mixed populace was established. Things needed to change. While Evelina had faith in her abilities, she was a half-blood, only capable of so much, and the current Ded Moroz was aging. Another Ashman would take his place in a year or two, but that didn't help her now.

"What are ye thinkin' about, lass?"

Her gaze focused on what she'd been staring at, which was a twelve inch, jagged scar on Kameron's chest.

His bare chest.

She shook her head. "Sorry, spaced out for a moment."

His chuckle rolled over her, stroking something deep within. Heat blossomed in her belly, warming her all over. It wasn't a comfortable sensation at all and made her squirm on the stool. She was hot already. Fur stuck to her face, her clothing stuck to her body, and she was losing as much of the water she'd drank, and yet she was still loathe to take off the *shuba* and hat. Kameron might be human, but he was ruggedly attractive, and her own physical deformities couldn't be more obvious. She knew how beautiful people looked at her. Evelina might have grown to love her appearance, but she couldn't expect the same of others.

Kameron circled the table until a few inches separated them. He leaned his hip against the table and clasped his hands in front of him. His chest was eye level and very distracting, what with the ladder of muscle crawling up his stomach to the planes of his chest. He was handsome enough to catch any fairy's eye. Maybe that was how he'd wound up here. The discarded lover of a fae lady. There were stranger tales.

"It's all right. What's got ye tied up in knots? Yer friend?"

She shook her head and chuckled. "I can understand about half of what you say."
"Sorry, lass."

"It's okay. I'm not used to the way you talk." Evelina pushed the stray thoughts from her mind and wrinkled her nose. "I don't know if you'd call us friends, but yes, I'm concerned about her." The shutters rattled against the windows underscoring the perils of nature.

He held her gaze for a moment, and she felt unseen hands stroking the core of her that was fae. That curious pulling of magic. Evelina's stomach twisted into knots. When magic took notice of you, it always left a mark. She resisted the urge to tug the collar of her coat higher. She was older and wiser about the ways of magic and man now.

You won't twist me around this time, she pledged.

Kameron's voice broke through her turmoil. "Ye puttin' yerself out there for someone ye don't even like?"

She took a deep breath and shook off the idea that magic might be taking note of her once again. "It's my job."

"Ah." He nodded. "That makes more sense. What do ye plan on doing? Nae offense, but ye are in nae shape to go runnin' around all willy-nilly like, lass."

Evelina frowned against the high collar of her coat, the effect completely lost on Kameron, who studied her with his dark gaze. She could stare into those eyes for hours. She could all too easily recall how he'd appeared without the kilt now hanging low on his hips. He was a large man. A large, *attractive* man who was focusing solely on her, and she couldn't even enjoy it. But he hadn't seen her face yet. He'd treat her differently then.

Everyone did.

"I don't know." Maddox would have returned to the Snow Palace by now, if something hadn't caught his attention. Sometimes she wondered about the dog's attention span. Backtracking to get him would waste too much time. She was going to do this alone once the blizzard cleared.

Kameron slapped the tabletop with one hand. "I always think better wi' a full belly. Dinner's about ready."

He placed two wooden bowls on the table. It seemed his kitchen was comprised of pieces worthy to grace any court and humble utensils made by unskilled hands. Her drinking vessel was a solid gold chalice. If she had to guess, it dated back a century or two before the *Ubezhishche*. The bowl he set before her was a crude wooden creation and the spoon dented silver.

Kameron didn't eat immediately. He produced a candelabrum which he set in the middle of the table, and lit the tapers. She cringed away from the light. Shadows were more forgiving to her appearance, but she couldn't escape what was coming. Besides, if he was repulsed by her appearance maybe the magic taking interest in them could be dispelled.

Evelina took a deep breath and began unfastening the closures that ran down her chest. She turned toward a low bench that bore the weight of discarded blankets, clothing, and a leather contraption that appeared to be a yeti-sized harness. She didn't want to know what it was for.

She sighed as the cooler air wrapped around her chest and shivered as it danced over her wet clothing. Her lungs hurt in an odd way, and the skin around her neck itched. She touched it gingerly and was surprised to find large portions chapped and

peeling. Evelina tossed her hat down on the bench and pulled her sleeves up to examine her wrists.

The same pattern on her neck was repeated on her forearms. The skin was angry and red, chapped and peeling.

“What did those things do to ye, lass?”

Kameron cradled her arm in his hand, his brows knit together.

Evelina stared at the top of his head. She hadn’t realized he had come around the table.

Her face, he was going to see—

“Lass, did those things do this to ye?” His brown gaze flicked over her face, touching the ice lines running through her body.

Evelina knew what he saw. Wild red tresses, ice blue eyes, and skin pale as snow but webbed with black scars over one cheek and across her forehead. The skin around the black lines was dark to light blue with tinges of purple. Frostbite and black ice.

The melding of human and fae.

“No.” She pulled her arm out of his grasp. “I was born like this. Fae and human blood doesn’t always mix well. The ice zombies did this.” She pointed at the chapped skin at her wrists and neck.

He didn’t retreat or glance away from her face. Instead he studied her. He lifted his hand and touched her hair, coasted his fingertips over the lines crossing her face and the scar tissue that puckered and marred her flesh. The shock of skin-to-skin contact froze her in place. People went out of their way to keep from touching her. She’d forgotten what it felt like. At the Snow Palace people had become used to her. It was one of the reasons she never ventured too far.

Her breath slowed to a stop, and her heart rate picked up. Everything in her said to duck her head, flinch, avert her gaze, but this was who she was. She wasn’t going to allow anyone, not even a handsome human, to make her feel any less about her appearance.

Kameron withdrew his hand, rubbing his fingertips together.

“I apologize. I am nae used to polite company, especially ladies.” He inclined his head slightly and went back to the other side of the table.

Evelina couldn’t help but stare at his back. What did that mean? Was he trying to be polite?

He ladled out stew for himself. “I have a salve that might help yer wrists and neck, if yer interested.”

She ran her fingers over the roughened skin. It didn’t hurt right now, but she didn’t doubt that it would. “Yes, thank you.”

“Eat.” He gestured to her untouched bowl.

Evelina gaped at him for a moment, unsure of what to think about his reaction. He’d stared, but there’d been no disgust, no repulsive comment. The iron-fast grip she’d held on herself loosened, and she tipped off-kilter.

Had her plan backfired?

She picked up the utensil and spooned a big bite of the stew into her mouth. It tasted earthy, heavy on the meat and potatoes, but with enough herbs that the flavoring was interesting. She moaned around the mouthful and tucked into the meal with gusto. She did need to rest and recharge before she faced off against the ice zombies again.

“Might I ask about the other markings, lass?” he asked, as if he were asking her about the weather, or something perfectly normal. It was unexpected. It was refreshing.

“My father is Jack Frost, my mother human. This,” she ran her fingertips along the most prominent line of puckered flesh on her cheek, “was how I was born. Lines of frostbite. The ice zombies didn’t do it.”

“Jack Frost?” Kameron leaned a hip against the table and spooned some of the stew into his mouth.

“Yes, Jack Frost. Heard of him?” She quirked a brow.

“Aye, it’s just ’ard to wrap my head around fairy tales bein’ real.”

“You’re living with a yeti, a born and true fairy tale, and you find my father hard to believe?”

He chuckled and set his bowl down. “Ye got me there. What gave it away?”

“The furniture. You’re a big man, but you aren’t that big. And the cathedral. It’s the only one in the area, and everyone knows the yeti lives in it.”

Kameron held her gaze, smiling as if her face weren’t horribly disfigured. Oh she knew she had strange eyes and that her hair was her only true beautiful feature, but she also was aware that she looked something like a broken china doll glued back together with dollar store materials. She shifted in her seat when he didn’t break away, and she found that she couldn’t look anywhere else.

“Ye have the most bonnie eyes, lass. Forgive me for starin’, I can’t help myself.” One side of his mouth hitched up, and he shook his head, breaking whatever spell held them.

“Um, thanks.” She picked up her bowl and picked at her food. She could feel something wrap around her, ensnaring her, but she couldn’t stop it. Magic, once in motion, was nearly impossible to stop without a greater force. As a daughter of Jack Frost, her magic was rooted in winter. The blizzard, and the energy fueling it, only amplified the pull of magic between Kameron and her. “The stew’s good.”

“Thank ye. Help yerself to more. I’m going grab some firewood.”

Evelina was relieved for a momentary respite from her host’s company. There was something about Kameron that piqued her interest. He sure as hell distracted her from what she should be worried about, which was finding Snow.

She finished the stew, and since there wasn’t an obvious area to wash up, she left the bowl sitting on the table in favor of taking a peek at the cathedral. Evelina had never subscribed to any religion, but she’d attended enough services with her mortal mother to be familiar with the relics, depictions of saints, and the over-the-top decoration that was uniquely Russian. She loved the artistic style of the paintings and how it reminded her of her mother’s time.

“See somethin’ ye like?” Evelina whirled around to find Kameron inches away. “Sorry, lass. Dinnae mean to startle ye.”

“I didn’t hear you.” The scent of the wilderness, evergreen trees, wood smoke, and something masculine wrapped around her, pulling her toward the wall of man inches away from her. She swayed toward him. The muscles in her abdomen tensed as warmth seeped into her bones.

“I have practice bein’ quiet.” He winked at her and lifted an earthenware jar. “I got the salve while I was in the storage room.”

“Thanks.”

She reached for the jar, but he didn’t release it.

“Let me help. Ye dinnea want to get it in yer hair.”

Evelina rocked back on her heels. She wanted him to apply the salve and she didn't.

“Okay,” she said against her better judgment. She wasn't in a state to take care of herself, much less go about rescuing someone if her brain was this addled.

They returned to the stool, where she sat, and he laid out strips of cloth bandages and opened the jar. It smelled sharply of spring herbs. It was pleasant, and better than the modern gunk humans manufactured. There were some things contemporary innovation had improved, but a few things were better left unchanged.

“Hold out yer arms for me and push yer sleeves up.”

“I think I'm starting to understand you. Not sure if I should be worried about what that means for me, or if you're getting easier to understand.”

“It's a lack of practice, lass. Not many to talk to 'round these parts.”

She did as he asked, sitting with her back straight and her tailbone digging into the wooden surface. He smeared the salve over one wrist, touching her gently with his fingertips. Sensation danced up and down her arms, curling around her body and working sensual magic to her nether regions. Kameron's sudden silence didn't help, either, as he coated one wrist and then the other in a generous amount of salve. He glanced up and winked at her before grabbing a length of cloth and winding it around her arm.

“You're very good at this.” Her mouth was dry. She needed another drink of water that was for sure.

“Growin' up, I was always gettin' into scrapes. Mum got real tired of patchin' me up. I learned how to do it myself. It's come in handy.” He grinned at her, meeting her gaze for one heart stopping moment. There wasn't an ounce of repulsion there. “Would ye lift it up for me?”

She was fully clothed. Why did it feel as if she were exposed?

Evelina wrapped her hair around her fist and rested it on top of her head.

He tapped her jaw with his knuckle. “Chin up, lass.”

She lifted her gaze to the vaulted ceiling. The firelight glinted off hammered gold set into the arches and around the tiny, hand painted squares. Kameron's hands coasted over her skin. He didn't use just his fingertips this time, but his whole hand.

“Does this hurt?”

“Nope.” Evelina swallowed and kept her gaze on the ceiling. His lips had to be close to her cheek from the feel of his breath.

“Good. Let me know if it does.”

Kameron began kneading the muscles in the back of her neck and smoothing his fingers around her throat. Her head lolled to the side, and she leaned back a bit more and let her eyes close. It felt nice, relaxing and a bit sensual, though she tried to ignore that. He dug his fingers into the muscles and dragged his hands around to the front. The force of the move rocked her forward. Her knees hit Kameron and his breath fanned against her chin.

Evelina sucked in air through her teeth. Her panties were growing damp because of a freaking neck rub. Clearly she needed to get laid if this was turning her on. She couldn't take much more of his hands on her.

This was a mistake. A horrible mistake. She couldn't tell if she was drawn to him or if it was the magic.

Soft flesh aligned with her lips and Kameron's mouth moved against hers. She gasped at the contact but couldn't move away from him.

Was he a mind reader as well?

His hands circled her neck. His knee was between her thighs and his mouth gently danced over her flesh. She was frozen in indecision. Did she kiss him back and give magic that opening?

Kameron pulled back a fraction of an inch, only to tilt his head to the side and suckle her lower lip, drawing her into a deeper kiss. Her breath shuddered in her chest, and she leaned forward.

Evelina placed her free hand against his chest. The sensation of puckered flesh against her palm was familiar.

Kameron jerked back as if she'd struck him.

"Sorry," she said, though she didn't know what for.

"Nae, lass." He rubbed his palm over the scar. "I forget it dinnae hurt anymore."

She tucked her hair behind her ear and flicked her fingers over the scar on her forehead. "I know the feeling."

Kameron smoothed his thumb over the line running across her chin and cheek. "Do they hurt?"

She leaned into the touch. "In the summer, sometimes. Ice and heat don't mix."

Their gazes locked. Neither moved. His eyes were a mix of deep chocolate and warm caramel flecks. There was a hint of wildness in their depths.

"Sorry, lass." His voice was a low rumble "It's the eyes. They draw me. Let me put the bandages on and I'll keep my distance."

Did Evelina want him to stay away? She wasn't a saint where men were concerned. Magic was pulling them together, and any resolve she'd had was dissolving. She swallowed and watched Kameron shake out several lengths of bandages. She offered her wrist. Kameron carefully wrapped it, his focus entirely on her injury, his hair falling forward to hide his face.

Her breath stuttered to a stop when he lifted his chin and met her gaze. His lips parted, and he glanced at her mouth.

"Yer hair?"

"Yeah."

Kameron wound the bandages around her neck while she held her hair and watched him. His cheeks were taut, faint color stained the sharp planes, and not once did he acknowledge she was watching him.

She let her hair fall and dug her fingers into his thick locks. His gaze widened as she pulled him closer and sealed her lips over his. Evelina might have surprised him, but Kameron was quick to adapt. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her flush to his chest, pressing closer. His mouth closed around hers, suckling her lower lip.

This was crazy.

Her stomach fluttered, and her panties were uncomfortably wet. She pressed closer to him, and his hold around her waist tightened.

Screw it.

And screw him.

Evelina pulled back, but he kept coming, nipping at her lips and seducing her with the talent of his mouth. She splayed her hand against his chest and pushed.

Kameron went still, completely tense. The wildness was back in his gaze, perhaps stronger than before. Was he human? Or something else, like her?

"This might be completely crazy, but then again we live in one of the last remaining magical havens in the mortal world. Crazy is subjective. What I mean is, I want to do you in that big bed over there."

Kameron stared at her.

Heat crawled up her neck. She wasn't in the habit of propositioning men, but she didn't think he'd reject her outright.

"Well, never mind," she muttered.

He stopped her with his hands on her shoulders. "This doing me—does that involve ye naked, by chance?"

"Uh, if you insist, though you don't really have to remove all clothing. It's an option."

"I would opt for no clothing at all."

She peered down at the kilt, which was tented, and quirked a brow. "Noticed."

Kameron swept her off her feet and strode to the bed. She wrapped her arms around his neck and laughed. The situation was crazy, outlandish, and entirely typical of everything fairy. Evelina breathed deep and exhaled all her doubts, the human hang-ups and worries. Fae did as they pleased, and doing him would please her. At least for now. Pregnancy and diseases were impossible due to her half-blooded lineage. There wasn't a reason to not unwrap something.

Kameron could be her Christmas present.

He laid her gently down on the bed. She scooted back as he began crawling toward her and over her body until she was forced down to her back. He settled his weight on his elbows and in the cradle of her body.

"This, *doing*, what else does it entail?" Kameron's lips were close. They brushed her cheek and mouth as he spoke.

Her legs moved restlessly on the bed, and her body softened under the weight of him. She nuzzled his cheek and swallowed. "What do you want it to entail?"

Kameron levered up and stared down at her.

"Everythin'."

The one word reply had her heart stuttering in her chest and the muscles in her stomach tightening. He meant her body, a home run, full orgasm. Nothing more. Anything else was silly.

Evelina tipped her head back and gave him her best cocky grin. "You'd better come and get it then."

"Oh, I plan on it, lass." Kameron pushed up to his knees and studied her clothing. "What is this?" He ran his fingers over her thermal shirt and the snow pants she'd pulled on over her jeans. He studied them as if he'd never seen the materials before. Then again, he didn't seem to be up to date on current trends. If she pulled out her dead cell phone he'd probably think it was a rock.

"Clothing?"

"Does it come off?"

"Well, yeah."

"Good."

He grabbed the hem of her two shirts and pulled the fabric up over her head. She shivered and curled her arms around her, splaying her hands across her scars. Dark lines wrapped around her body and bisected her chest.

Kameron flattened his hand over her stomach and followed the line with his fingers as it curved and followed her sternum up between her breasts and over her shoulder. She tried not to squirm too much, but the caresses ran deep, stoking the fire in her belly.

His gaze rose to her face. The intensity was hard to bear, but she kept her eyes on his face. "This dinnae hurt?"

"No." She wiggled a little as his fingers coasted over her collarbone and lower again. "Might be a little more sensitive."

He grinned. "Good."

Kameron figured out both the Velcro fastening on her snow pants and the zipper on her jeans easily enough to prove he wasn't a complete stranger to clothing. She watched his face all the while, but he never strayed from the single minded determination to methodically strip her bare.

He sat back between her legs and studied her. Left in thermal socks, panties, and her bra, there wasn't much left to the imagination.

Kameron traced a line on her leg and watched her face.

Evelina bit her lip and kept her gaze locked with his. She could feel the caress all the way to her core. Her pussy wept. She was soaking. It was as if he could touch that part of her that was all magic, stir it up and use it to entrance her. Evelina's legs shifted, and his smile widened.

He found another line on her other thigh and bent his head, never breaking eye contact as he licked it slowly.

She gasped and rose to her elbows. Her toes curled, and it took a great deal of effort to keep her eyes open.

"Ye like that, lass?"

"I do."

"I'm doing well then, huh?" His breath fanned against the apex of her thighs.

"You could be doing more." She hiked her knee up and flipped the corner of his kilt back, exposing part of his thigh.

"Do ye want me to do more?"

"Wasn't that the point?"

"I have a good point for ye, lass." He winked and pitched forward, catching himself on his hands, and then lowered his body the rest of the way until he pressed against her, shoulder to knee. He stared into her eyes as if he could read her soul there. "Why do I feel as if I've known ye forever? Why do I want ye so much, when I haven't craved another being's companionship in ages?"

"Magic." Though the word felt ripped from her lips, she had to be honest.

He shook his head. "Nae, lass. Magic has nothing to do with it."

"Yes, it does." She ran her fingers through his hair. She was near panting with desire. No one had ever stroked her scar lines. She didn't even know they were erogenous zones until now. Still, she had to level with him. "I'm half-fae, and you're a human in the middle of a highly concentrated magical area. It's like asking for a fairy tale. It'll weave around us and make us feel and do things we wouldn't do otherwise. It fades. Enjoy it for now."

He cradled her face with one hand and ran his thumb over the line on her cheek. "Magic doesn't make the heart beat, lass. It just changes how it thumps."

She didn't have a hope of understanding him. Hell, half the time she couldn't make out what he was saying. She smiled, pulled him to her, and took his mouth in a kiss. If he wanted to believe there was more than magic, attraction, and a little lust between them, well, Merry Christmas.

Evelina grabbed the knot of fabric at his hip and pulled it free. He chuckled against her mouth and shifted. The material rustled as he pulled it from between their bodies until she felt the hot, hard length of him through her panties.

His gaze dropped to her bra, and his brow furrowed. He traced the line of one cup and then the other. "Women's underpinnings have grown strange."

"You've never seen a bra?" She arched her back and contorted her arm until she could flick the fastening open.

"Bra? No."

"How about breasts? Seen any of those?"

"Hm, I don't know. It's been a while. Maybe ye should refresh my memory?"

She laughed and shrugged out of the bra. It wasn't even a nice one, pity that.

Kameron moved down her body until he could prop his chin up over her ribcage. He seemed to study her pink tipped nipples, which were tightly furled into hard nubs. She settled back on the bed and tried to not move or beg for his touch.

"Should I be doing anythin' specific, lass?"

Evelina rolled her eyes. "You could be fucking me already." But she liked this playful banter, and the intense way he focused solely on her. Like she was special or something.

"That's a bit hasty, but if that's what ye want, lass." He grinned and licked one nipple. The sensation shot straight to her pussy, and her thighs squeezed him tight. He switched to the other nipple and plucked the bud with his fingertips.

She arched her back and moaned. Her breasts were free from scars, but they were just as sensitive as her scarred flesh.

A thick finger pressed against her pussy. She shifted her hips, finding more friction, but he removed his hand. He reared back and grabbed her panties. The sound of fabric ripping broke through the fog of lust.

He'd ripped her damn underwear. People only did that in books and shit.

Evelina gaped at the cotton panties that went sailing off the bed.

"Somethin' wrong, lass?" Kameron placed the head of his cock against her entrance.

"You aren't doing me yet."

"How remiss of me." His hips flexed, and he slid into her slick channel.

Evelina grabbed handfuls of the blankets. Though she couldn't see Kameron in all his naked glory, the feel of their joining flesh, the intensity of his gaze on her body melded together into a kind of magic she'd never experienced before. She gasped and let her head fall back on the mattress.

The bed dipped as Kameron leaned over her. It was too much to watch him and feel him entering her. She focused on the sensations. The way his hair-roughened legs held her thighs open. The way her body warmed and softened under and against him. The way she could sense his gaze on her stomach, breasts, and flicking up to her face without seeing it for herself.

“Lass,” he growled.

“Fuck me already,” she snapped back, bucking her hips.

He moved with her and kept her from impaling herself on his length.

“Would that be the doing portion?” She could feel his breath against her face.

Evelina glared up at him and grabbed a handful of his hair. “You would be a smart ass.”

Kameron grinned. “I am smart.”

“Really? A—”

Her retort was cut off. He thrust and slid into her. Her internal muscles squeezed him and pulled him deeper. Kameron stared into her eyes and thrust again. They gasped, their breath mingling as sweat broke out over her skin.

He touched every bit of her, his fingers gliding over scar lines, his cock delving deep inside of her, and his gaze taking it all in and searching out more.

Kameron grasped her knee, brought it up over his arm, and sank in the rest of the way. She gasped, little bursts of light going off behind her eyelids as she traded the blankets for a handful of his hair, and dug her nails into his shoulder. He seemed to like that. She tightened her hold. She’d leave marks but good sex always did.

The tendons on the side of his neck stood out, and the wildness in the depths of his gaze grew feral. He reared back and slammed into her hard enough she gasped. Shockwaves rippled through her body.

Kameron froze, his mouth working without sound, his face creasing.

Evelina rolled her hips.

“Again,” she moaned.

He blinked at her as if he hadn’t understood the word.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and brought his mouth to hers. His shoulders shuddered, and she squeezed her legs and arms around him, savoring the complete surrender, the freedom of sensation.

Kameron levered up, the wildness abated a bit. He repeated the motion that had her gasping, except this time his hand tightened over a line on her thigh, ratcheting up the sensations in her body and the torrent of feelings buzzing around inside of her.

“Do it like that, lass?” he muttered against her cheek and followed it up with a sweet kiss.

“Yes, damn it.”

“As ye wish, lass.”

He began a steady, pounding rhythm. The massive bed frame creaked under them. Evelina tossed her head back and forth and kept her hand in his hair, holding his face close to hers. The invisible tide built inside her, rolling up through her core to crash against her in wave upon wave of pleasure. She arched her back and cried out as the orgasm caused her muscles to clamp down, hugging his length and milking his cock.

Kameron collapsed over her, supported on his elbows for several minutes, as they panted for breath. They rolled to their sides. Kameron kept their legs intertwined and her head against his chest.

Her body was limp, exhaustion weighed her down, but her mind was running a hundred miles a minute.

“Need anythin’, lass?”

“Water.”

Kameron grunted and rolled away from her. She shivered without his warmth and crawled to the head of the bed. The blankets were tossed back, which made it easy to burrow under them.

She watched Kameron finish pouring water into a second tankard. He was so muscular, lean, and handsome. He glanced up and caught her watching. A smile broke out on his face, and she couldn't help but grin in return.

He crossed back to the bed, unconcerned with his nudity, and offered the water to her. She took it from him and sucked it dry.

"More?" He chuckled.

"Please?"

"Here." He handed her the second tankard.

"Thanks."

Evelina drank deeply of the second but left some. She wiped her face and handed it to Kameron. His expression had gone serious, his gaze on her shoulder where the lines of black ice spread.

"Something wrong?" she asked.

He took the mug and set it on the floor, but didn't join her in the bed. She wasn't big on making sex out to be more than it was, but even she liked a post-sex cuddle.

"I dinnea think about..."

All the warm fuzzy sensations went cold. Couldn't he take a fuck for what it was?

"You didn't think about protection." She rolled her eyes and threw the blankets back. Most of her clothing was discarded around the bed. She began pulling it on. "Don't worry about it. I can't have kids. These scars," Evelina gestured to her face, "they run deeper than my skin. My womb is dead. And I can't catch any diseases either. Least not yet."

"Evie—"

She held up her hand. "Please don't say anything. I've heard it all. We had a good screw. I need to sleep."

"I didna—"

Men were stupid, ridiculous creatures. At least now she was cured of any false ideas that the magic flowing between them was anything but synthetic.

Chapter Three

Kameron gazed out at the fresh powder that lay like perfectly carded wool, pristine and perfect for the moment. The snow had stopped for a bit, but the wind still howled over the hills and through the trees. It hadn't blown itself out, and he was thinking it might go on for a week. He should wake Evelina, but he didn't want to. Not yet. He didn't know what to say to her.

He didn't know her, but he wanted to. He'd spent decades without so much as a, "Good mornin'," to another human, and he could go another fifty years on his own. But he liked watching her and listening to her talk. She spoke of the fae and human worlds, when all he'd known was his glen in Scotland and now his yeti's lair here in this Haven-turned-prison.

Maybe he could help her, though whatever aid he offered would be indirect. She wouldn't accept the yeti. He'd seen that in her gaze the moment he'd laid eyes on her. But perhaps she could see the man first, and that'd make her less apprehensive about the creature that shared his soul.

He shivered and backed away from the window. His gaze landed on the bed, where she lay wrapped in furs and blankets. He'd left her alone, so she could rest and he could ponder what he'd done to offend her, but it would be worse if he didn't alert her to the change in the weather.

Halfway to the bed, he paused and sniffed the air.

An added bonus of the enchantment was that he shared the yeti's heightened senses. Sight, sound, hearing—they were all better.

There was something in his cathedral. Something that wasn't supposed to be there.

Deep inside, the yeti stirred, growling and roaring in his mind at the intrusion. No.

He spun around, searching for whatever creature had intruded on his home, but saw nothing. The multiple braziers and fireplaces kept the space well lit. Kameron sucked in deep, calming breaths, but the beast continued to claw at his control. He doubled over, dug a hand in his hair and thought of baby lambs, a calm brook.

The last thing he wanted was for Evelina to see him like this. Not now.

From the archway leading to the monastic cells, two glowing eyes pierced the darkness, and a growl broke the stillness.

That was the final straw.

His vision blossomed in a flurry of blue and white sparks, as the magic triggered the shift. His chest reverberated with a roar that tore through the cathedral, resonating off the domed ceilings and amplified to eardrum-shattering heights.

The interloper snarled and jumped at him. The yeti was vulnerable during the change. Kameron and his inner beast struggled for control of his disoriented body.

Something latched onto the fur at his neck. From the corner of his eye he could see Evelina scrambling out of the bed, and her mouth was moving, but her voice was lost amidst the snarls and growls of the two beasts. His, and the trespasser's.

He swung around and swiped at what turned out to be a dog. He broke its hold and threw it to the ground. The thick coat protected him from more than the cold. With three layers of hair, almost nothing could penetrate to the flesh. The dog leapt at him again, weaving between his legs.

He stumbled backward and hit the large, double doors, throwing them open and pushing him deeper into the mind of the yeti, where only rage and hunger reigned. He watched through the eyes of the beast as Evelina edged past the doors, holding what appeared to be his carving knife in her hands. She lifted one arm, and a tiny pinprick of light blossomed in the darkness. It was beautiful and scary. Evelina hurled the ball of magic at him.

Cold pierced his chest. The yeti's anger rose. He threw his mouth open and howled silently as magic chilled him to the bone.

"Maddox, go!"

The walls shook with the volume of his roar. In moments of rage, it was hard to tell where the yeti ended and Kameron began. The cold wind thundered into the cathedral, wiping out candles and the braziers.

Evelina and the dog shot through the doors and into the snow.

He shook himself, and the spell diminished a bit. He focused on the blur of movement. He charged after them, hands outstretched and grasping.

At the threshold, the second figure turned for a moment, and he glimpsed two icy blue eyes, wide in fear. The dog barked, and Evelina spun to face it. She pushed a disc of something onto the snow and grabbed hold of Maddox, who plunged forward, digging up snow in its wake.

Kameron had scared her away.

Because he was the yeti.

He stood in the doorway to his lair and bellowed into the night, cursing the witch who'd enchanted him many hundreds of years ago.

— ••• —

Evelina stepped off the sled and sank in at least six inches of fresh powder. More snow was beginning to fall, but it wasn't heavy yet.

She couldn't be certain, but she suspected they were close to the trail of the ice zombies. The tracks were long since gone, covered by the blizzard, but there were marks on the tree trunks from where her poles, shattered limbs of ice, and the yeti's claws had gouged the ancient giants.

Evelina glanced over her shoulder, as she'd been doing since they escaped the yeti. She'd allowed herself to be lulled into a false sense of security by Kameron. It was a common trick in the fairy lands, and she'd walked into it. A creature, like the yeti, would use a slave or other fae kind to lure in prey, and when they weren't expecting it, the trap would snap shut. She couldn't believe it hadn't occurred to her.

Except Kameron had felt real. He hadn't truly tried to keep her, had he? Why would a yeti keep a human alive? Why not make a quick snack of him? Where had

Kameron been when the yeti attacked? Why had Kameron left her? Why had he kissed her?

There were too many questions and not enough time. Christmas Eve was bearing down on her, and she needed to get the Snow Maid and the staff before Ded Moroz arrived from his briefing at the North Pole.

Evelina tromped through the snow to where she suspected the zombies might have taken her down the last time and gingerly prodded the new snow. Fat flakes hit the snow, pelted the branches, and created a blanket of white noise around her.

Her feet squeaked and crunched as she made her way around in a circle, feeling with her boots for anything unyielding. Maddox watched, flopped over on his side, tongue lolling out.

“You’re no help,” she muttered at the dog.

Still, she was lucky to have Maddox. Simple dog or no, he’d faced down a yeti for her. She didn’t know of a person who would do the same.

“Ah-ha!”

She dug in the snow and grasped the long trekking pole. Its mate was long gone, lost somewhere between where they were and the yeti’s lair, but at least she had one more tool. The knife she’d stolen from Kameron’s make-shift kitchen was in her coat pocket for the time being.

“Come on, Maddox.”

She returned to the sled, and the husky obligingly got to his feet, shaking the snow off his fur before putting his weight into pulling her. Evelina balanced on one foot and used the other to push the sled along. Maddox didn’t need her command to know to go slow. After the quick getaway, neither could manage a faster pace.

They crept through the trees, coasting nearly silently thanks to her sled and the husky’s unique snowshoe-like feet. What sound they did make was covered by the wind and snowfall.

They swept back and forth along the path Evelina thought the zombies might have taken, but the farther they went, the less evidence there was of the creatures’ passing. The blizzard had swept their trail clean, but she didn’t give up.

Around them, the forest was unnaturally still. As if the trees and creatures inhabiting it knew what danger she stalked.

Or was she the one being stalked?

Evelina glanced over her shoulder for what had to be the five-hundredth time, but still saw nothing. No sign of the yeti or Kameron.

Why did her heart clench at the memory of him? They’d fucked, nothing more. She didn’t know him, and he didn’t know her. This wasn’t a story. One kiss to find your true love was for those folk blessed by fairy. A mirror was all it took for Evelina to know that she was not destined to fall in love like that. No, love was a realm she didn’t dare seek admittance to. It did not look kindly on those like her.

Maddox whined and danced in place.

“What is it?” she whispered and shook off the bitter thoughts as she peered through the trees.

He tossed his head and plunged to their left through dense brush, pulling her along behind him.

“Maddox—”

A low hanging branch slapped her in the face. Thrown off balance, Evelina sat down hard in the powder, and sank several inches. Maddox spun around and crawled toward her on his belly.

“What’s wrong with you?” she whispered.

The wind kicked up a notch, howled through the trees, and blew more snow off the overhanging boughs. Through the ambient noise, she heard an ominous sound.

Crunch.

Crunch. Crunch.

Moan.

Squeak. Squish.

Crunch.

The sound of many feet moving through the snow.

The ice zombies.

If she heard them over the blizzard, then they had to be close.

Evelina’s heart rate kicked up. There was no way they could outrun them. They needed to hide.

She rolled over onto her belly and scooted under the bush she’d forced her way through. Maddox crawled after her pressed close to her side.

Whatever was out there, even her husky didn’t like it.

Evelina pulled her left glove off and placed it in the snow next to her. Closing her eyes, she concentrated, calling up that strange, fae part of herself and imagined the snow knitting together into ice, reforming into a solid shield over her and Maddox. She could feel the chill press down on her as the ice crept over her shoulders, across her spine, and down her ribs. She wiggled her chilled feet in her boots. She was still scooping at the bottom of her well for magic, despite getting some sleep, food, and plenty of water.

She rested her forehead on her crossed arms and panted into the snow. Her time in the yeti’s lair had recharged her somewhat but not nearly enough. A week’s worth of sleep was what she needed.

Maddox nuzzled her arm, but he didn’t whine.

The sounds were getting close.

Lifting her head, she peered through the scraggly branches to see what was out there. The wind continued to blow snow across their path, disguising their tracks. Not that she was concerned about the zombies tracking her. They were more drawn by sound, heat and water. Her neck and wrists itched at the memory of what their touch could do.

Unless it was her imagination, the snow was starting to come down heavier. Just her luck.

Evelina and Maddox remained still for several long minutes before she saw the first sign of their enemy.

The little bit of moonlight peeking through the clouds glinted off something. The twinkling reflection captivated the eye as it bobbed closer, drawing nearer. One glittery object became many as the ice zombies materialized from the depths of the *Temnyy Les*. The whistling wind grew louder as their mouths worked incessantly, their dagger-like teeth slicing the air.

There were more of them. The group that had attacked the Snow Palace had been close to two dozen. There’d been at least twice that many when she’d caught up to them, and now she couldn’t begin to count them.

Forward they marched, their shuffling lines moving into the wind. Their heads swung this way and that, no doubt searching for some smell or sound of prey.

Evelina held her breath, as the first wave altered their course to go around her little bit of hedge.

They weren't smart, but they did choose the path of least resistance.

Five, ten, fifteen.

Some were missing limbs, a few had branches, a sword and even a bullet frozen in their chests.

She wasn't the only person they'd run into.

What poor souls had they overrun?

And where was the Snow Maid?

Thirty. Forty-five.

More crept from the dark.

They were everywhere.

An ice zombie missing a foot staggered toward her hiding spot. Its head was pointed in the direction the other zombies were going, but its off-balance footing wasn't cooperating. She held her breath as it stumbled and put its shoulder into the bushes. The frozen branches snapped, and the zombie thrashed around, bending toward her hiding spot. It moaned and hissed, wiggling about. The stump kicked snow in her face when it finally pushed its torso off the brush and tottered off after the others.

She'd lost count of the horde of frozen undead, but there were more than enough to overpower almost any of the settlements that had cropped up in *Ubezhishe*.

Evelina willed more snow to fall to hide her from the passing zombies. She didn't dare to so much as breathe while the vanguard marched on. The cold snow leached away warmth from her front, and the ice pulled it from her back until she shivered and chattered her teeth into her gloves. There was no helping it. She'd last a hell of a lot longer than a human in adverse winter conditions, but she was still half mortal and just as easily killed as someone fully mortal.

She kept her face buried in the snow until the last glimmering creature had crept past her, stragglers and all. Then she waited a while longer, until the feeling in her hands and toes was almost gone, and it was either freeze to death or make a go of it.

Evelina cracked their icy covering and shimmied out of their burrow. Maddox emerged blinking and looking for all the world as if he'd roused from a nap. The damn dog probably had fallen asleep.

She peered over the hedge, but the snow and trees limited her line of sight to a dozen yards.

"Come on, Maddox." She began trudging through the snow, using the tracks to guide her way and make it easier on her.

There wasn't enough magic left in her to make another sled. She'd have to rely on her own strength for now. It was better that way. She'd never excelled at magic, but her hands, a sword, and these days, a well-aimed gun, were her best weapons.

She stabbed the bent trekking pole into the snow and pressed onward. There wasn't another choice open to her. If the fae could be convinced to adopt modern conveniences, like cell phones, maybe she could get a little backup, call in a favor, or at least let Ded Moroz know where she was, but that wasn't their way.

It was wishful thinking at its best.

A hand reached out of the powder and grabbed her calf. Startled, Evelina pitched to the side as the glistening maw of frozen teeth rose from the snow. She kicked out and struck the creature in the shoulder doing no more than revealing the mangled body of a partial zombie left for dead in the snow.

Maddox sprang around the creature, growling and snapping his teeth.

“No, shh, Maddox.”

Evelina stabbed the creature through its glassy eye with the trekking pole. Its body went limp and lifeless.

“Guess head shots still work,” she murmured.

Behind her, something snapped.

— • • —

Kameron loped through the forest at one with the yeti.

The wind rustled his fur, and snow crunched underfoot. Nature accepted him, the trees parted for him, and he melded with the landscape. The siren call of such belonging was a familiar one. He’d succumbed to its pull in the early years, and for a time here and there, remained the beast more than the man.

This time, the yeti and he were on the same page.

Behind him, moans and the crunching of many feet drove him on. One moment he’d been shadowing Evelina, keeping his distance, and the next, she’d simply vanished. The zombies had appeared out of the blizzard as if by sorcery, and considering they were in Haven, magic must have something to do with it.

He slowed his gait and listened to the forest, feeling the ebb-and-flow heartbeat of the woods. He could smell the bitter water scent that he’d finally identified as unique to the creatures.

This was one thing the yeti had given him—an awareness of life he’d never had before. It was beautiful, and now, useful.

The herd of zombies was behind him some drifting to his left in a flanking maneuver. He had to wonder if it was intentional or happenstance. Was someone guiding them? Or did they operate as a mindless entity?

Where was Evelina?

Kameron strained to hear anything else over the wind and zombies, but all other creatures were tucked away in hiding, as they should be. Kameron had his size and speed to stay away from the cursed undead.

There seemed to be more of the ice zombies.

Many, many more.

He didn’t know how these creatures operated, but someone or something was making more.

A scream rent the night startling birds from the trees and a frenzy of moans from those on his trail.

Kameron’s heart beat painfully, and his vision hazed red.

Evelina.

He swung to his right, where the sound came from, and set off in a ground-eating gallop. Branches whipped at his face and ripped out his fur, but it didn’t matter because Evelina was out there trying to face down these things on her own.

He was vaguely aware of passing the zombies pursuing him. The forest seemed to open up, working with him. Moonlight filtered between the trees to light his path, showing him the way.

Kameron crashed through what seemed to be a woven wall of brush and tree branches. Wood splintered as he forced past the barrier and into a clearing. A short, wooden fence lay broken at his feet. He squinted, barely able to make out a dozen houses and barns through the snow, which had begun to fall heavily again. He headed toward the nearest structure, swinging his head back and forth, searching for some sign of Evelina.

Light streamed from shattered windows. One barn was on fire, and people ran screaming from the frozen limbs clawing at them. He could see at least two prone people with a few of the zombies hanging over them.

A cluster of people stood in the bed of an empty wagon, weapons in hand. An older man raised his hands, and sparks of green magic blossomed from his fingertips. The scent of moors and green things blossomed on the air, carried toward him on the wind.

These weren't humans.

They were fae.

Fae had cursed Kameron to his life, and as a rule he avoided them at all costs.

A child screamed, its cries piercing above the moans and yells of the others, summoning the voice of another child long since passed.

He sucked in a deep breath and bellowed. All movement in the clearing ceased for a single moment; even the wind abated in the wake of his battle cry.

The sounds of ice creaking and breaking filled the night, as one by one the zombies turned toward him, their cold gaze falling upon him with hunger.

Kameron grabbed a tree limb lying forgotten on the ground and strode toward the cluster of zombies around the wagon. The people seemed to gather their wits and began striking out and hitting the zombies.

He pushed forward, mowing down those individual beings of ice caught in his path, and stomping them underfoot. He waded into the cluster of grasping hands and biting teeth and swung his makeshift club. He kicked and struck out with his other arm, knocking them back.

Magic whizzed past him, melting the zombies where they stood until all that was left were stubs of their legs sticking out of the snow.

The spell-caster met his gaze briefly and jerked his head in a rough nod. His creased face, green eyes, and beard made him think of leprechauns, but weren't they supposed to be small folk?

Hands grasped his fur, and teeth tried to find his flesh under layers of hair. He roared and swiped the creature off his feet.

"Molly!" someone on the wagon yelled. The woman's arm was thrown out toward one of the houses.

Kameron followed her gaze, peering through the now driving snow, to where an adolescent girl clung to the eaves of one of the houses, her feet pulled up as far as she could but still mere inches away from the outstretched hands of zombies who had climbed up on snow drifts.

He growled and charged the cluster of creatures, swinging his club and stomping on the ones who fell. The others scattered, growing marginally wiser. He swept the girl

up and let her lay across his shoulder. She screamed and thrashed against him, but at least she'd come to less harm in his grasp.

Molly screamed louder and yanked on his hair, as a zombie tried to scale him by grabbing fistfuls of fur. He slammed his backside into the house and crushed the zombie to bits.

"Padraig! No! Padraig!" Molly cried.

Kameron swung the girl down and followed close behind as she rushed to an adjacent barn and threw open a door.

A young boy balanced atop a stack of hay, wide-eyed and grasping a pitchfork that wasn't doing him any good.

Another figure he almost mistook as a scarecrow lay withered on the barn floor. The young girl yelped and held her hands over her face. Kameron stepped between her and the creatures, who were still intent on the boy. He glanced at the prone body and did a double take as the scent of death blossomed on the air. Whatever was in front of him had been a living, breathing person moments before. A layer of what appeared to be frosty mist rose off the body, crystallizing into ice, growing limbs and becoming a zombie.

Kameron bypassed the new zombie and pushed the girl aside while he started swinging his club and taking out the two dozen zombies trying to scale the hay bales. As soon as he could, he scooped the young boy off the mountain of hay and turned toward the entrance. The last thing he wanted was to get hemmed in by a bunch of death mongers.

Molly, equipped with a rake, watched as the zombie finished forming from the remains of someone she'd once known. Her young, innocent face was a mask of horror, confusion, and fear. Kameron swept her up along with Padraig and loped out of the barn.

The zombies were a faceless lot, they'd never be able to tell that one from the others, but the girl would never forget this nightmare. For that he was sorry.

Kameron slid to a stop, blinking at the relative stillness of the night. The snow still fell, and the wind still blew, but zombies hobbled into the forest in haste, as if they had some purpose. Something calling them.

Evelina.



Maddox pushed forward with more speed. All that was left for Evelina to do was hold onto his harness, hunker down, and not fall off the sled. Sucking down so much water at the cathedral had given her a decent reserve for her magic; without it she wouldn't keep the sled together. She glanced over her shoulder but couldn't make out any sign of the ice zombies through the driving snow.

Within minutes she could make out faint lights between the trees and smell the scent of wood smoke. Maddox pulled her up to the tree line and stopped, well within coverage of the forest.

A hunting lodge took up most of the space in the clearing. It was a long building, with a barn off to one side. The blizzard had collected drifts up to the windows. Light spilled from all of the windows, illuminating trampled snow with a fresh layer of powder

over it around the perimeter of the structure. There weren't guards or any sign to indicate who was in residence, and honestly, the lodge could belong to anyone or no one.

Did she dare venture into the lodge and hope to find someone who could help her? She was running out of time.

What choice did she have?

Evelina prodded the snow before stepping off the sled. She only sank a few inches. Since they were at the back of the lodge, there were fewer windows and less chance of the occupants spying their approach. As carefully as possible, she crossed the open expanse and crawled up the embankment of snow under one of the windows.

Maddox followed, her ever-faithful shadow, and sat panting next to her.

"At least warn me if anyone creeps up on us, okay?" she muttered to the husky.

Maddox yawned in reply, as if to say, "Do you think so little of me?"

She rolled her eyes and turned her attention toward the window. She army crawled until she could peer through one of the fogged panes and tried to make out the interior. She didn't see anyone, but the interior of the lodge seemed to be in good repair.

Evelina glanced behind her, scanning for any sign of the ice zombies, but they appeared to be gone. She pushed up on her hands and knees to get a better view in the lodge, as something inside moved. She dropped, flattening her body against the snow and waited, panting, for something to happen.

But there were no moans.

No cries to capture the intruder.

Nothing at all.

Evelina peered past the window casing into the lodge, and her jaw nearly came unhinged.

The Snow Maid sat in a plush leather chair, her feet up on a stool, and a mug in her hand.

Evelina waited and watched, searching for some other person—the mastermind behind the ice zombies—but no one presented themselves.

That left one other, very important, question.

Where was Ded Moroz's staff?

And now what did she do? And could she rescue both the Snow Maid and herself? What other protections or spells might be on the lodge to prevent them from leaving?

Evelina was sadly under-prepared. Even if her cell phone had a single battery cell, there wasn't anyone she could call for help. There needed to be a cell phone spell for dummies.

"Come on, Maddox."

She scooted away from the window until she could safely get to her feet. It was time to make a plan. She was a Guardian, for fuck's sake. She was resourceful.

Evelina jogged to the barn, the only other structure in sight. Two steeds, distant relations to the Sons of the West Wind, lifted their heads from a hay trough to peer at her with little to no interest. Though the West Wind and her sons were fearsome creatures, too grand to be called horses, these relatives were beautiful, but less than intelligent. At least they were loyal to their bellies.

She closed the gate behind her and crept through the barn. There was a sled, the trappings for the horses, and more equipment.

But what would the Snow Maid's horses be doing at a lodge far away from the Snow Palace? Granted, Snow only lived at the palace during the winter months,

choosing instead to live with her family during the summertime. These animals usually stayed there, but occasionally came to the palace with Snow.

Unease prickled the skin between her shoulder blades.

Something wasn't right.

Evelina went back to the horses' tack and flipped the blankets over, her heart dropping as the crest for the Snow Palace lay emblazoned in the corner.

The horses and sled hadn't been stolen. They'd been driven right out from the palace.

Chapter Four

Evelina pushed the front door to the lodge open, a weight in her gut. The truth was screaming in the back of her mind, but she had to be certain.

Please let me be wrong.

Snow sat up, startled by the noise, and turned toward the door. Her eyes were large and innocent. It was hard to imagine her capable of anything except typical, female cattiness. That was something Evelina was used to from Snow, and the woman had used that against not only Evelina, but also against everyone who loved them. She didn't have to guess that Snow hid a darker nature. Evelina could see it in the way Snow's eyes flashed before she tilted her nose up and shuttered her gaze.

How could she?

Inside, Evelina was screaming, and the part of her that believed in the inherent good of others cried.

She let the door close behind her, but not all the way. "Hello, Snow."

"About time someone came to rescue me," Snow huffed, covering up her surprise in arrogance.

"Apologies, the blizzard made finding you difficult."

Snow quirked a perfectly arched brow. All Snow Maids were the same: beautiful, perfectly-formed fae women, chosen from among the indigenous population to serve alongside Ded Moroz. It was an honor, but this woman treated it as if it were her due. She'd never totally fit in at the Snow Palace, where people came to give to others, she only took.

"You're the half-mortal daughter of Jack Frost. What's a little snowstorm to you?"

The only person who reminded Evelina of her sub-par heritage was this Snow Maid. Betrayal turned to rage in Evelina's breast. The first Snow Maid she'd served had treated her as a daughter. As if being even part human were a gift, an eye into the rest of the world. And now, for the last decade, Evelina had allowed this imposter of a Snow Maiden to treat her as less than fae. Less than human.

Evelina let the jab slide. It was yet another reminder why this Snow Maid failed in her role. A true Snow Maid was an ambassador of good will and charity. This woman only took.

"You're right. The storm wasn't that big of a problem. I'm glad I found you, though. There's not much time left before Christmas Eve." She took a deep breath and forced the rest of the words out. "We should go now, before those creatures return."

Snow folded her hands in her lap. She wore the traditional, layered garments of Russian nobility from generations past. The rich fabrics were couched and beaded with gold, pearls, and gemstones. Her headdress and veil gave her the appearance of a halo. And to her left, Ded Moroz's staff lay across a padded bench.

Evelina's heart mourned the first Snow Maid she'd served. The role was tarnished by this woman wearing the traditional garments. There wasn't a shred of kindness in her, not as there had been in her predecessors. This Snow Maid was not fit to carry the title.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go." Evelina flung the door open, letting in a burst of frigid air.

The veils billowed out behind Snow, and she had to press her hands against the headboard to keep it from acting as a sail and blowing her over.

Snow pointed at the heavy wooden door. "*Zakroyte dver.*"

The door didn't budge. Ice coated the hinges, locking the door in place, and Snow's magic wasn't strong enough alone to budge the power of nature and Evelina's magic. Snow growled and turned her icy glare on Evelina.

"You meddlesome half-blood." Snow balled her hands into fists. All that was missing from this tantrum was a good foot stomping.

"Yup, that's me. What else, Snow?"

This was like a bad movie. All they needed now was a magic mirror and cave dwarves.

Evelina circled the chairs arranged around a central brazier. It hurt her deep inside that this woman, entrusted with the spirit of Christmas, thought so poorly of the gift she'd been given. She was lucky to be allowed the privilege of being part of the magic and flesh that brought Christmas to people all over Russia, even if she worked in the background.

Snow rolled her eyes. "And what? Whine to you about why I stole the staff? No, thank you. Run along, Evie, or I'll destroy you. Jack Frost can't protect you from my kind."

That made Evelina pause. Fae were always warring with each other over something. But the *Ubezishche* belonged to no one. "Why do you need the staff?"

Snow whirled and snatched the staff from the bench. She held it at arm's length, as if the staff were a shield. "I'm not telling you."

"Someone put you up to this. You can still go back to the Snow Palace with me. It's not too late to set things right." Snow was not smart enough to put this all together. That meant there was someone else out there determined to ruin Christmas.

Someone who could call up a blizzard and create ice zombies.

"No one made me do this. I wanted the staff! No more walking behind that old man, carrying presents for the ungrateful indigents. No more being in someone else's shadow." Snow slammed the end of the staff on the ground. "No more!"

The crystal snowflake embedded into the wooden latticework at the top of the staff twinkled. The *pyha* was what gave the staff its magical powers, and it was not an object to treat carelessly. Evelina held up her hands and took a step back. Even in the hands of an unskilled person it could do damage.

"Calm down, Snow. We can talk about this." At least until Evelina got close enough to give the woman the black eye she wanted to gift her.

Snow lunged and pointed the business end of the staff at Evelina. "No, we can't!"

Evelina braced for a blow—something, anything—but nothing happened.

She wasn't going to wait for Snow to figure it out or her merry band of shamblers to come calling. Evelina grasped the broken handle of the knife she'd stolen from Kameron and forced her magic into it. The burst of cold and flurries of snow helped her

along as a strong layer of ice lengthened the blade to two feet long in a matter of seconds.

Evelina vaulted over a throne-like chair. Snow shrieked and scampered backward, clenching the staff and her headdress. The time for protecting Snow was over. She seemed to remember halfway through her retreat that she had magical powers of her own, and tipped the top of the staff toward Evelina, but she was already closing in on the pampered maiden.

The blade felt right in Evelina's hand. She kept low and charged in, kicking the staff out of her way and almost knocking it from Snow's grip. Evelina drew back her left arm and landed a punch to Snow's jaw, sending the fairy woman toppling over, screaming and grasping her face.

The staff fell to the ground, and Evelina scooped it up.

"Who isn't the fairest in the land anymore, bitch?"

Snow White references were the easiest way to piss the Snow Maids off. The Maid history went back farther than the fairy tale princess and remained a sore topic.

The moment Evelina touched the worn wood a jolt of magic shot through her. It coasted over her body as if investigating who she was and finding she wasn't who it expected. Evelina drew her magic deep within herself. The *pyha* was nearly a living thing but in magic form.

It was breathtaking.

Cold, so bitter it drove the breath from her lungs, wrapped around her chest and neck. Her eyes snapped open. Evelina didn't remember closing them.

Ice zombies crawled over the furniture, knocking things over, all intent on her. Two had their hands on her.

Evelina swung the staff in an arc, breaking their hold, and used her ice blade to slash at the creatures. The moment her blade touched the ice zombies sparks of snow and magic erupted, and her blade and the zombie exploded in a burst of shards and powder.

Maddox howled from somewhere outside the lodge, but she wasn't about to call him into the building amidst the fray. There were zombies everywhere. Where had they all come from?

She used the knife handle to crack the skull of a zombie that got too close and clubbed another across the shoulders with the staff. Evelina danced backward, too far from a window and nowhere near an exit.

Nowhere for her to escape.

Nowhere to make a stand.

— • • —

Kameron spied lights glinting off ice and put on an extra burst of speed. His lungs burned with the cold, but his body was hot. He'd left the survivors without a backward glance and followed the zombies all the way here through the rising blizzard.

Zombies pressed in on all sides around a large hunting lodge. A small door, set into a larger one, stood open. Everything was still. He didn't hear anything, but if there was trouble, he had a hard time believing Evelina wasn't at the center of it.

A gray shadow zipped through the forest and a familiar scent blossomed on the night air.

Maddox.

Evelina's dog.

A scream rent the night for the second time, but this one he knew. He recognized that voice.

Evie.

His vision hazed red, and Kameron bellowed his rage. He ripped another tree limb off one of the sleeping giants and charged the lodge. The outermost wave of zombies didn't stand a chance. He stomped over them, swinging his arms and the branch, and crushed bodies. He kept pushing his way toward the doors, wading through the zombies.

The wind picked up, battering at him, seemingly on his side, as it both pushed him forward and tipped the zombies off balance. He forced his way to the large double doors, big enough to accommodate wagons and teams of animals should the weather get bad enough to need all that body heat in one place. Now, it worked in his favor, being more than yeti-sized.

Kameron shoved the door open, grunting under the weight of the snowdrift in front of it and the zombies keeping the wood from swinging freely on its hinges.

The inside of the lodge teamed with ice zombies. The floor was covered in water as the creatures began to melt. In the middle of the room, a large brazier had overturned and the charred wood and ashes churned into muck. A woman in grand robes, and a hat that looked like a spade perched on her head, stumbled back, a staff in her hand. A cluster of zombies grappled for something on the floor, and the other zombies struggled to get closer or had turned their soulless gaze on him.

A howl rent the momentary stillness, spurring Kameron to action. He grabbed a chair and used it to bludgeon through the nearest zombies until it splintered into bits. The zombies kept coming. At least two of the creatures clung to his back and still more pressed in on all sides.

Sweat began to bead on his skin, dampening the under-layer of fur. The lodge was too well insulated to let all the heat out through the doors.

Fear gave him another burst of energy, and he ploughed over ten feet of icy flesh, flinging furniture and zombies out of his way. The oddly garbed woman screamed something at him and shook her staff. An invisible force slammed into him, and he flew into the wall. Glass shattered, and pain lanced his left arm. He bellowed his rage and pushed to his feet.

It was so hot.

His vision began to swim.

No. No. No!

Kameron roared again and shoved the zombies back as far as he could before the change washed over him. His vision filled with sparks of color. Up became down, and left became right. The zombies, lodge, and the woman all grew several feet. He slumped to the ground panting and exhausted. While the yeti seemed to never grow weary, Kameron could only go so far.

He was human after all.

"What is this?" the staff-wielding woman said. She stepped toward him, holding the hem of her gowns up off the damp ground. The zombies skittered back out of her way.

Kameron pushed to his feet, swaying dangerously.

“Good gods,” the woman held a hand up, as if to ward him away, her eyes open wide. “Where are your clothes?”

“Yetis dinnae need clothes,” he said with a slight slur to his words.

A gray, furry creature leapt through the broken window, snarling and plunging into the still thick cluster of zombies. The woman screeched and backpedaled, putting her in easy reach of Kameron.

He didn’t think, he just reacted.

Kameron grabbed the staff and slammed it into the woman’s head. She reeled back, her bell rung hard.

Evelina was searching for a staff. Fancy that he should find one here.

Kameron charged the zombies, who were only mildly perturbed by the presence of the dog. He pushed through them, knocking them back with the staff. They shrank, falling like dominos at the lightest touch, moaning and visibly afraid.

Evelina lay curled up on her side, the skin he could see red and chapped. The dog rushed in, whining and licking her face.

“*Poluchit’ yego*,” the woman yelled.

Kameron scooped Evelina up, stumbling under her weight and pulled off balance by grasping hands. Maddox, however, leapt into the fray, pushing the zombies back, even breaking off a grasping hand in his sharp teeth.

“*Poluchit’ yego!*” the woman with the ridiculous hat shrieked again.

The zombies surged forward, their dead eyes locked on Evelina and him. They shied away from the staff, but clearly the woman’s hold on them was stronger than their fear.

If he’d ever needed the yeti in his life, it was now. The enchantment that held him prisoner also had rules, and it wasn’t cold enough in the lodge to trigger a shift.

He needed to get outside.

Kameron threw his weight forward. Icy hands grasped at him, and for a second he was paralyzed by cold shooting through his body, but he kept going. The initial blast of frigid sensation wouldn’t be enough. His core temperature needed to drop. The staff fell from his grip, and he let it go. Saving Evelina was his priority. The zombies pulled at him, but he wasn’t about to let them win. The dog ran around his legs, snarling and biting at the monsters, running interference.

The woman shrieked something else he couldn’t understand, and a blast flattened the zombies nearest her. Kameron stumbled under the force, but he saw his opening. He rushed forward and tossed Evelina unceremoniously out the window. He muttered an apology, hoping the snow was soft enough to cushion her fall.

Hands grasped his ankles, and he groaned at the chill seeping into his bones, eating away at his grasp of reality. How had Evelina held on?

Kameron whirled on the creature, punching it as hard as he could. In human form, the blow knocked the zombie’s head to the side, but still the creature held on. Another staggered to him and grasped his other arm.

The two zombies held him as if he were a prisoner, their frozen touch shooting painful jabs down his arms and spine.

The woman paced slowly towards him. She had the staff back now and tapped it against the ground with every other stride.

“You *ublyudok*,” she spat.

“Does yer mother know ye speak like that, lass? She’d wash yer mouth out, aye.” Kameron grinned at the woman as he had every fae who’d thought to make him their prisoner.

“*Chelovecheskiy musor*,” she screeched and slapped him across one cheek.

He could feel scratches across his face. The cold seeped into the wounds, rousing the yeti. “If ye wanted my attention, lassie, all ye had to do was say hello.”

“Unbearable man. I will see you dead.” She held the end of the staff to his chest and he shivered.

“I would prefer ye nae see me at all.” He leaned toward the window, soaking in all the cold, all the frigid Russian winter.

She began to chant, but Kameron’s head was already abuzz with magic of another nature. He could feel the moment of shifting like a wave about to crash on the shore.

Wait for it.

Wait.

Just a moment more.

His core temperature reached the point that triggered the yeti. Kameron roared and broke the zombie’s hold on him in one move. He jerked the staff from the woman’s hands and kicked her legs out from under her. She fell with a scream and a curse on her lips. Before the shift could fully take him, Kameron vaulted through the window, ignoring the glass slicing his hands, legs, and feet, and crouched in the snow, nearly a dozen zombies closing in on the prone form of Evelina, who was guarded by her dog. He hadn’t even noticed the animal leaving the lodge, but he was glad for its protection.

The shift rippled through him, and he roared. He scooped Evelina and the staff up in his arms and sprinted for the forest, the dog at his heels.



Evelina’s journey to consciousness felt a lot like freefalling. She awoke to her body being jerked against the pull of gravity and the scent of something herbal and familiar all around her.

The world was white, but not the white of snow. She grasped handfuls of fur and pushed herself up, away from the back of the yeti carrying her as if she were no more than a bag of turnips. Trees, fields, and snow went by in a blur.

The last thing she could remember was the clawing hold of too many zombies and a loud roar. Then everything went black.

The yeti had saved her.

There were many things in fairy that were strange, wondrous, and terrifying. The yeti was one of those. But first, she had to get it to slow down. Even if Snow was a traitor, she still had the staff, and Evelina needed to get that back.

Red stained the fur on the creature’s back.

Please let it belong to something else.

“Stop. Stop, please,” she called out, hoping that the yeti understood her. If Kameron could live with the creature, it had to have intelligence.

At some point she’d decided that Kameron couldn’t have been bait. He’d been real with her, and something else was going on here.

The jostling stride slowed, but that was the only indication that the yeti heard her.

A bit of the shadows chasing them materialized into the form of Maddox, loping along behind, his ears and tail perked up. Evelina breathed a sigh of relief. At least they were together, and if the husky wasn't alarmed she'd take it as a good sign.

Several minutes later, they slowed in a thick tangle of brush and tree that broke the wind that still blew with the fury of the West Wind herself. The branches blocked out most of the light. Palms as wide as her ribcage and fingers longer than her arms. Hands as big as her chest gently lifted her up and set her atop a flat rock. He steadied her, as she found her balance, yet she couldn't make out any part of the creature's face, features, or wounds.

The yeti had been a fixture of *Ubezishche* since it was rolled out, and for an equal amount of time stories of its fearsome exploits had served as fodder for late night stories. The fae relocated to the haven weren't familiar with the winter monsters, and the locals had their fair share of fun with it.

She'd never considered the yeti as more than a monster, a creature to be avoided and feared. Was it possible she was wrong? That the yeti, like many other creatures, was simply misunderstood?

Maddox shoved past the yeti and butted her thigh. She scratched his head and ran her hands over his body quickly to feel for any injury.

"Where are we?" she asked, peering around them and trying to not bolt around the tree to hide from the yeti.

The yeti dipped its head and warm breath fanned her face. It pushed aside a branch to reveal a large compound, the likes of which a *boyar*, or Russian princeling, might have resided in. Now all the windows shone with the multi-hued brilliance of fairy fire.

"Who lives there?" Evelina turned her gaze back on the yeti.

The yeti in turn stared at her, its eyes glittering even in the dim light, but this time she wasn't afraid.

"Do you know them?" She thumbed at the building.

The yeti swung its head from side to side.

"I can't go up to a random stronghold like that and expect help. Not everyone was relocated here willingly—some are even hostile." She pushed the branches back and shivered. Her gloves were gone, and now that she could feel again, she ached everywhere. Turning her head hurt, and the skin on her arms was on fire.

"There."

She pointed at a barn set outside of the walls of the compound. It was falling into disrepair, she could see that much by the sagging roof, but it was large enough for the yeti and could provide them shelter enough to recuperate.

"Follow me. Maddox, *idti*."

Evelina touched the snow, solidifying it into a small sled and grabbed hold of the husky's harness. She could feel her strength leaving her. Between the mad dash in the blizzard, facing off against the zombies, Kameron, and the Snow Maid's betrayal, it was amazing she wasn't dead on her feet.

The yeti followed them. If she hadn't glanced back to catch a glimpse of the lumbering giant, she'd never have known he was there. Maddox was quiet in the snow, but the yeti put even the husky to shame.

They stopped at the brush line and watched the barn for several long moments. The roof sagged under the weight of new snow, but it didn't appear to be as bad as she'd feared.

"I'll go first," she whispered, and crept out of the forest. The shadows cast by the barn and the still falling snow hid her from sight of the castle. She wasn't too afraid of being seen.

Evelina had to put her weight into getting the door open, but eventually it slid on the tracks far enough that the yeti should be able to enter. Some unintentionally helpful individual had left a flashlight on a hook. Hers had been left behind at the cathedral during her hasty retreat. She grabbed it and clicked it on, breathing a sigh of relief when the light flickered and held.

Maddox was already nosing around what appeared to be some sort of hay barn and large animal shelter. The design was Russian. All she needed to do was find the heating system. The most economical way to heat buildings like this was an in-floor system.

Old straw was piled in an open area to her right, and on her left dividers partitioned off open stalls around a large fireplace. Above was a loft, probably for hay, maybe some servant quarters.

Evelina turned and studied the tree line. The yeti was completely invisible, yet she could feel his gaze. She could close the door and leave him there, but he'd helped her twice now. Instead, she waved and left the door open while she rummaged around for firewood. There was enough in one of the stalls that she thought they might make it several hours warm and toasty.

She cleaned the debris out from the fireplace and found the hatch for the heating system in the bottom of it. Heat would radiate out and warm the bricks that formed the floor.

Behind her the barn door squeaked, and the dim light from the moon slowly disappeared.

Evelina was alone with the yeti.

She took a deep breath and glanced sideways at Maddox, who seemed entirely undisturbed by the yeti's presence. Since the husky had never steered her wrong about a person, she took a deep breath and finished setting the fire.

"That should do it. It should warm up in here pretty soon." She dusted her hands off on her thighs and stood to face her new companion.

The yeti had retreated to crouch in the farthest corner where the shadows were thickest. Did she leave it be? Or did she try to draw it out?

She ached from head to toe, but if she could get enough water into her it would solve her ails. Since her magic worked off snow, ice, wind, and cold, it was imperative that she stay well hydrated. With enough water in her system, she could heal faster, work more magic, and go longer. The yeti, however, had fur matted with blood.

Evelina walked toward the sliding door and spied a stack of milk pails. "I'm going to heat some snow up for some water. Will you let me tend to your wounds?"

The yeti rumbled in reply. She couldn't tell if that was an affirmative or a warning. Either way, she needed water. Digging around a bit more she found a scrub brush and crept outside to clean the buckets as well as she could and filled them with snow. She set four buckets on the hearth and settled on the warming bricks to rest for a bit.

Evelina closed her eyes for what felt like a second, but judging by the way her joints ached and the sweat coating her under the *shuba* coat, she'd fallen asleep for a long time. Her throat was parched and dry. She grabbed the nearest pail and lifted it to her lips, drinking deeply of the tepid water and allowing it to splash on her.

Maddox padded out of the shadows and sat on his haunches waiting his turn. She pushed the bucket to him and shrugged out of her coat. She could sleep for an age, but sleeping wouldn't make Christmas happen.

She glanced at her wrist.

Eight hours. Forty-five minutes. Ten seconds.

Christmas was closing in.

Ded Moroz had to have returned from the North Pole and discovered what happened. She didn't know what to expect—a rescue, an army—but something needed to happen soon, or the holiday would be ruined, and children across the continent would wake up to nothing.

Evelina stood and hung her coat over a partition. She checked on the other two buckets of snow water, ensuring that they were melted. Prepared, she took a deep breath and turned toward the third member of their party.

"I fell asleep. Sorry about that. Can I take a peek at your back?"

For a moment the paler bit of shadow didn't move or even make a sound. She had to wonder if she was even addressing the yeti. It rumbled and stood, rising and rising.

"I swear you get taller and bigger all the time," she muttered.

The yeti snorted, which she could only guess was laughter. If yetis laughed. Did they? The yeti lumbered toward her. With each step it came into the light and revealed more of its features and form.

The creature was easily somewhere between eight and nine feet tall, almost hitting the high ceiling beams. The yeti was covered in white fur, making it a true abominable snowman. The fur wasn't yellowed, but as pure as the newly-fallen-snow-white. Its face was pale pink and blue, ridged in an oddly beautiful manner. Its eyes were dark, soulful orbs.

The yeti brought its arm around from behind it and held out the last thing she expected.

The staff.

Evelina's jaw dropped.

"How did you—? Where—? Oh, my gosh, thank you!"

She didn't think, she just walked into the furry chest of the yeti and hugged it.

A great, furred hand patted her on the shoulder. Nails brushed against her back, reminding her that the yeti was still a dangerous creature. She accepted the staff, touching it with only her fingertips. The magic sang to her.

"Thank you so much. Really."

The cool sensation of the staff's magic, enhanced with ice gold, danced up her arm. It was an alluring, seductive sensation. She could understand Snow's stealing the staff, but she couldn't forgive it.

Evelina set the staff against the wall and rolled her sleeves up. Her skin was still dry, cracking, and painful, but she was alive and healing even now.

She'd misjudged the yeti.

"Let's get you cleaned up, okay? Hmm, can you sit with your back toward the fire?"

The yeti turned in a slow circle and lowered to the ground. The bricks were dirty, but they would be warm. It was some consolation.

She gasped at the bloody, matted fur covering the yeti's back.

"Oh my, I'm sorry. Thank you for rescuing me. Twice. But I'm sorry."

The yeti sat still as stone and gave her no indication it'd heard her. Evelina took a deep breath and began parting the fur, searching for the source of the blood. This creature, a veritable stranger, had put himself at risk. For her. Was Kameron somehow involved? She couldn't think about the yeti without the man coming to mind, and where he was concerned her heart danced.

"Well, it seems that there's only one deep cut and a few scratches. I have no idea where all this blood came from. I'm going to wash it out. This might hurt a bit."

Evelina dipped her handkerchief into the water and spread the thick, soft fur back from the deepest gash.

"I guess it's kind of a good thing the zombies are ice. There's nothing to get stuck in these cuts when you go all yeti smash on their asses."

The yeti snorted. Again. It seemed amused by her commentary. She cleaned the wound as best she could with water, rinsing the rag out every few moments.

"Thank you for saving me. I feel like a fool. I expected you to be this big, scary monster. Just goes to show that in fairy things aren't always as they appear. I should have thought as much when Kameron stood up for you. He's a good guy."

Blue and white sparks cascaded from the yeti and a swirl of magic enveloped its form, growing larger. It was a silent vortex in the middle of the barn that shrunk down on itself, swallowing the yeti whole.

And leaving a man.

"Kameron?"

Chapter Five

Kameron blinked away the spots swimming in his vision.

“Kameron?” a wavering voice said behind him.

He glanced down at his body. A much less hairy, very human, and naked body. The shift had come upon him unexpectedly. He didn’t quite know what to make of it.

A cold nose pressed against his thigh. He absently patted the dog’s head.

“Sorry, lass.” His voice was rough, as if he’d been gargling gravel. Kameron tipped his head back and stared at her.

Evelina stood silhouetted by the flames on the hearth. He could make out enough of her features to read her shock and surprise. He braced for the screaming and name calling. A little piece of himself died each time someone made the connection.

She sidestepped until she could look him in the face. Her forehead was creased, her eyes were large, and her mouth worked without sound.

Evelina shook her head. “What? How? You’re a yeti?”

He mustered a cheeky grin he didn’t feel. “Only part of the time.”

Her gaze was shrewd, curious. Not what he’d expected. “I wasn’t aware there was such a thing as yeti shifters.”

Kameron pushed to his feet and turned to face her.

Evelina’s face creased, and she smothered a chuckle. “You’re not fond of clothing.”

He glanced down at his nudity. It had been ages since he’d experienced shame or been embarrassed in his skin. “Yetis dinnae really believe in pants, I’m afraid.”

She sputtered and laughed, pressing her hands to her face. “This is too crazy.”

“Aye.” He chuckled. A dusty length of cloth lay over a partition. He grabbed the molding fabric and wrapped it around his hips. It wouldn’t accomplish anything to walk around with his prick leading him. Gazing at her smiling face was enough to have him growing hard.

“I don’t even know where to begin—your back!” Her fingers glided over his skin, shooting awareness up and down his spine.

He held perfectly still, muscles tensing.

“The wounds. They’re gone,” she muttered. She stepped around him and peered up at his face. “I think you need to explain this to me.”

Kameron’s skin felt too tight, sounds and smells too vivid. He squeezed his eyes closed and shoved the yeti into the back of his mind. He knew next to nothing about how natural born shifters worked. His size or his human condition made interacting with them dangerous to his continued health, and as much as he cursed his long life, he was used to living.

“What’s to explain lass?” he replied, unprepared to share his entire, sordid history.

She took a step away from him. Maddox padded over to sit next to her, his tongue lolled out to one side. "Shifting should help heal the wounds, not make them go away like that."

Kameron grimaced. "When I shift I take dinnae injuries with me. Good as new. Perk of being the abominable snowman, eh?"

Evelina took another step back. "I've never heard of a yeti shifter before."

He was going to have to tell her. His shoulders fell.

"Evie, it's an enchantment. I am a human who becomes a yeti. Is that out of the ordinary here?" He gestured, encompassing Haven beyond them. He could feel anger bubbling up inside of him. He'd never asked for this, for the curse of immortality or the beast he shared his life with.

He pivoted, shoved his hands through his hair, and stalked toward the fire. Either his anger or the cold would bring about a shift.

Evelina didn't reply immediately, and when she did, her tones were soothing—and closer. "It's definitely not normal, but you're right. There are stranger things out there. I'm curious why I've never seen you. I mean, you as a human. Where have you been?" She leaned against the fireplace and peered up at his face. "If it's an enchantment, it can be broken."

"No, lass. It can't." He braced one arm against the fireplace and faced her. "The witch who cursed me died, and none other can break the spell. It was made with her lifeblood."

She blinked a few times and shook her head. "I'm not well versed on witches or enchantments. There has to be another way to break it."

"Lass, I have been a furry bugger for over a thousand years. I will live." He nodded toward the staff. "I do believe that we're on a deadline."

She followed his gaze to the staff and her face hardened. "I can't believe she stole it." Evelina rubbed her hands over her face and groaned.

"Those things, the ice zombies? I followed them. They were killing people. Children."

"I thought as much." She leaned against the bricks, lines of exhaustion creasing her face. "There weren't more than two dozen that attacked the Snow Palace. Everyone was out getting ready for Christmas. It was almost empty. She must have planned that. Now, there's so many. How many has she killed?"

Kameron took a deep breath to cool the rising anger. Children were precious, no matter where they came from. "Why would she do this? What's to gain?"

"*Ubezshishche* was created to be a haven. A safe place to relocate fairy folk to. Not everyone can cross over to the fairy realms. I can't. People like you and me needed a place to go. I couldn't live in St. Petersburg or Moscow anymore." She shrugged. "Siberia's still mostly empty. No one noticed humans being relocated, towns going dead. It was a convenient place. But there were already fae here. I was. So was the Snow Palace. Not everyone is okay with sharing their territory with others."

Kameron shook his head. "I still dinnae understand."

"Which part?"

"How does the Snow Maid factor into this?"

"Okay, Ded Moroz is, for lack of a better description, the Slavic Santa Claus. He's a fairy guardian we call *prazdnik voinov*, or *voinov* for short. Kind of like a berserker. Other cultures have different names for them. They are warriors who centuries ago

tested their abilities against each other by sneaking into the homes of humans and leaving presents as compensation for their intrusion. Since they aren't needed for war much anymore, they've become Santa Claus, one for each region. They protect the fae, keep belief in magic alive, and maintain something like the fairy census.

"Ded Moroz is unique among the *voinov*. He's the only Santa that goes to meet children and people face to face, and he always has a helper. The Snow Maid. The local Winter Fae have always provided a young woman to be this helper, for fifteen years at a time, and then another woman takes her place. It's complicated, but the politics of it is that Ded Moroz has more power with more fae living in the *Ubezhishche*. The Winter Fae want to use his power, his staff, to get rid of all the fae who don't belong. You. Me. Everyone."

He grasped the staff and rolled it in his hand, studying it. "And a staff can do this?"

Evelina grabbed it, but he didn't let go. "It's more than a staff."

"What is it?"

A cloud passed over her gaze.

"Evie, all I want to do is understand what's going on and help ye." And keep her. He wanted her. Her laughter. Her fierceness. Everything about her, he wanted.

"Each *voinov* has a *pyha*, an object of power. It's like their badge of honor. Their mark of being a true warrior. I'm not sure what happened, but a long time ago, before I was born, the *voinov* helped my father. I get the idea it really chaps his ass, so it probably had to do with a woman. Anyways, each of the *pyha* has a nugget of ice gold in it. Some of the objects are a piece of jewelry. The *pyha* is the manifestation of the *voinov* power. With it, they're near invincible warriors. Most use it to fulfill their post as Santa, coming and going without being seen. Moving faster than the eye can track. But the *pyha* can also be used to fight, and whoever can use the staff will be near invincible."

"Use it to defeat the Snow Maid."

Evie shook her head and took the staff back from him. She rolled it in her hand gently before setting it against the wall again. "I can't. I'm too human. It's too powerful for me or you to use. Snow could, if she knew what she was doing, but she can barely use her own magic. That's the only thing saving us right now."

"How can a woman who knows so little put together a plan like this?"

"I don't think she did. I think there's someone out there telling her what to do."

Kameron's gut twisted into knots. He'd stayed away from people and fae alike. These were waters he didn't know. His talents lay in smashing and hunting, not picking apart intricate plots to kill off an entire race. But looking at Evelina he knew that for her, he'd waded into the fray to protect her, because that's where she would be. He'd known her long enough to know that. She was a warrior. His desire to be by her side didn't make sense, but she was worth figuring it out. She was worth taking the chance on.

He closed the distance between them and cupped her cheek. "We keep the staff from them then."

Evelina shook her head. "That's not enough. We have to get the staff back to the palace." She pulled her sleeve up and examined a watch-like object with a crystal face. "We have six hours before the Christmas Eve festivities start."

"We cannae go out right now. The storm's picked back up. Nothing can move out there. We're stuck for now."

"This isn't good."

“Nae, but when the storm breaks we can make a run for it.”

“The Winter Fae have to know she’s failed, though. Someone has to be making the blizzard, because this isn’t natural.”

“They dinnae have the staff. We do.”

“But I have to get the staff back to the palace before Christmas Eve. We went in the wrong direction. The zombies and Snow are between us and the palace.”

Kameron cupped her face and forced her to meet his gaze. “Hey. We’ll do it. We’ll save Christmas.”

Her face was lined with worry and her eyes clouded with doubt, but she didn’t argue with him.

He dipped his head and brushed his lips across hers. She tipped her chin up, offering her mouth to him. He slid a hand into her hair and edged closer.

Kameron wasn’t a knight, he wasn’t a hero, he wasn’t any of the things she deserved, but he’d keep her safe. He couldn’t explain why Evelina drew him, be it magic or something special about her, but he planned to hold on tight as he could. Maybe she wasn’t ready for the yeti, but she’d accepted the man once. He wanted her to again.

The floor was warm beneath his feet, not a trace of chill to be had. Kameron gathered Evelina close to his chest, and she wound her arms around his neck, holding on to him as if he were her saving grace.

He liked it.

Maybe too much, but for once he could be the hero.

If only for now.

“Kameron,” she moaned between kisses.

The sound of his name on her lips was something he wanted to hear again. The one time wasn’t enough.

He kissed his way down her neck. “What is it, lass?”

“Shouldn’t we do something?”

Her desire to do her duty was admirable, if ill-timed. He returned to her mouth, plying it with soft, lingering kisses until she leaned against him, boneless and panting.

“What is there to do? The blizzard is still ragin’. We cannae go anywhere. The Winter Fae cannae find us. What else is there?”

Evelina rocked back on her heels. Her eyes, startlingly bright blue. He forgot what he’d been saying.

“You’re right.” She nodded. “No reason to waste time worrying about it.” She grabbed the blanket around his hips and yanked it loose. Her gaze went to his cock.

“Ye dinnae beat around the bush, do ye, lass?”

She smirked and peered up at him through her lashes. “I’d beat around your bush if you asked me nicely.”

He laughed, caught off guard by the innuendo.

“You don’t want me to mess with your bush?” Evelina grinned and stepped in close. Her hand flattened against his stomach and coasted down his abdomen.

“It would be ungentlemanly to say nae,” he retorted and returned her grin.

“How polite,” she purred.

Evelina circled the base of his cock with her small, pale fingers and pumped it once. Both their gazes watched the slow progress of her hand over his flesh until her palm cupped the mushroom shaped head. She swiped her thumb over the sensitive tip and tilted her head to the side.

Kameron wrapped her long, red locks around his hand, forcing her head back, and took her mouth in a vicious kiss, nipping her lip until she moaned, and her hand squeezed him tighter. He rocked his hips, thrusting into her grasp.

He needed to feel her again, touch her, hear her moan and gasp. He tugged the hem of her shirt up over her breasts and found the dark line bisecting her stomach. She was unique, a melding of two worlds, something to be treasured and cared for.

She gasped and danced in place as he followed the line up between her breasts. Her blue eyes were open wide, staring without seeing him.

"Perfect," he muttered.

Evelina released her hold long enough for him to whisk her shirt off and toss it away from the fire. He pried the fastening on her first set of pants open, fumbled with the second. She laughed at his thick-fingered attempt and brushed him away, tabbing the jeans open and shimmying out of them and her boots.

Since he'd torn her panties earlier, she was naked besides the bra, which he wasn't about to touch. The contraption was too complicated. He wrapped his arms around her waist and took them to the ground, him on bottom. The heated stones warmed his backside, and the woman laughing above him more than warmed his front.

There was something beautiful about her uninhibited laughter. The way she simply accepted her abnormalities and owned who she was. He'd spent lifetimes in seclusion because of what he turned into. She didn't even have that. How much had he missed out on? No more. That stopped now.

Evelina leaned forward, so her hair fell all around them. The fire glinted off her tresses, bathing them in a coppery glow. She pressed her mouth against his, threaded her fingers through his hair, and gave it a tug.

He found the spread of scars on her thighs and fanned his fingers across them. Her hips bucked against his, and her chin snapped up. Kameron watched as her pupils dilated, eating up the blue to a thin ring, and her mouth dropped open. He followed the lines higher to the red thatch of curls covering her nether region. She lifted up on her knees, and he took the invitation to plunge his fingers into her channel.

Evelina gasped and dug her hands into his hair so hard she ripped some from their roots. He pumped her slowly, feeling the drag of slick skin on skin, and the way her muscles clamped around him.

"Ye feel good, lass."

"Mm, more. Need more."

More he could give her.

Kameron sat up, forcing Evelina back on her knees, but kept her close with an arm around her waist. He wasn't about to lay her down on the dirty barn floor. She steadied herself with a hand on his shoulders, the other dug into his hair.

He positioned the head of his cock at her entrance and she thrust down, impaling herself on his rigid flesh. She yanked his hair, forcing him to meet her gaze. She rolled her hips and sank another glorious inch. Their breath mingled, chests slid against each other as they adjusted, hands coasting over flesh, each seeking their pleasure in the other's body.

The fire popped, spitting embers onto the stones, but neither of them paid it attention. Instead, Kameron tightened his grip around her waist and lifted, guiding her motions up and down slowly. Their first coupling had been too fast, a whirlwind of

colors, sounds, light, and pleasure. He was determined to relish this one and bring her to new heights. He might be out of practice, but he knew what made a woman quiver.

Evelina began to move on her own, up and down. Her nails dug furrows into his shoulders, and their foreheads pressed together.

Kameron reached between them, through her curls, and found the hard nubbin of her pleasure. He gently rolled it between his fingers, paying special attention to the way her breath hitched and how her nails dug in even deeper. Her hips worked on him, back and forth, up and down.

Her body shuddered, and the hold on his dick tightened. He grunted and stared past her at something he couldn't see while tingles crept up his spine.

Evelina shoved at his shoulders, forcing him onto his back. She leaned over him, her hands on his shoulders. He caressed the scar line on her chest and flicked her clit back and forth. Her back bowed, and she threw her head back. Her mouth opened on a silent shout, and her internal muscles clamped down on him.

She was beautiful in her pleasure—free, innocent, and sensual.

Kameron thrust up into her grasp, and she moaned. He shifted his legs until his knees supported her back and continued to press deeper and deeper into her sheath. Her nails dug into his thigh, and she steadied herself against him.

The skin along his spine prickled, and his orgasm rolled up through him. His muscles went taut, and his vision hazed.

Evelina collapsed against his chest, her hair falling over them like a cape. She pillowed her head against his shoulder, and he wrapped her in his arms, kissed her forehead.

Again wouldn't be enough. He was hooked on her, and he didn't know if he could let her go.



Evelina stared into the fire and listened to the blizzard with one ear, Kameron's heartbeat with the other.

She was in trouble, and it was coming from all directions. There was no way to tell if what she felt was magic or real.

Kameron threaded his fingers through her hair, stroking the long strands. It was easy to relax into his touch, this man she'd known for a handful of hours and in the least opportune circumstances.

"I can hear ye thinking, lass." His voice rumbled all around her, reverberating through his chest and vibrating against her.

She pillowed her chin on his chest and met his gaze. He had an arm curled under his head and studied her. It wasn't fair to let him believe the emotions were real. As tempting as it would be to have a man hidden away to keep all to herself, she *couldn't*.

He pushed his fingers through the hair at her temple. "What are ye thinking about?"

She sighed and let her gaze drop to the top of the scar on his chest. "We have similar scars."

Kameron rubbed the bit of scar before tapping her chin with his knuckle.

"How'd you get it?" she asked before he could ask her to divulge the information she didn't want to broach.

He grimaced and turned to stare into the fire. Lines creased his face, and his mouth screwed up.

"You don't have to tell me."

"I will, lass. It's a hard story to tell. Where to start?" He sighed. "It was a long, long time ago. Before these newfangled times, before electricity, countries or even taxes." He chuckled. "My family and I were poor, but we had what we needed to survive. We lived in the Highlands of Scotland. Shepherders. Farmers. Honest folk. One day, this woman comes to town. We, my brothers and I, weren't there but people made sure to tell us about it.

"This woman was a witch, but we dinnae know that then. We assumed she was a holy woman, sent by the gods.

"She told us to give her a house, so everyone chipped in and built her the finest house. Craftsmen carved the likenesses of our gods into the wood, and the women planted flowers under her windows.

"She told us she needed food, so everyone donated a percentage of their crops to fill her cellar. Everything she needed we gave her. A girl to clean her house. A boy to tend the garden. Someone to do her errands. We were proud to have her."

"What changed?" Evelina bit her lip. Fae could be cruel, twisting and warping human's minds to see what they wanted them to see.

"One of the little girls that cleaned her house was slow. Bonnie lass, fair skin, red hair—much lighter than yours—but her mind, it was slow. She had an accident in the witch's house. Everyone grieved. We'd had years of fighting with a nearby clan, so all the children were precious. But accidents happen, and another girl went in her place. Two months later, she died. After that people began to talk. Began to look at what the witch wanted from us, what we were getting in return, and we began to wise up, but we still thought she was sent by the gods. What do you say to someone with their backing?"

"Nothing." She shook her head, squeezing back the memories. "I know how this ends. Shit, I wish I didn't."

"Want me to stop?"

"No, keep going."

"The witch decided she wanted my wee sister. We considered nae sending her. Leaving early for the distant pastures, but the others told us we had to send her. So we did. But we didn't just send her. Nae, my sister cleaned the house while I did work outside. Always stuck my head in, every so often, to check on them. Saw some things I wish I hadn't. Gael was scared most of the time.

"One night the witch said she needed Gael to stay late, and I couldn't wait for her. I didn't leave but waited outside. I got tired, so I pried one of the windows open to spy on them and watched the witch give my sister a draught of something. Gael went to sleep, and the witch slashed Gael's hand and bled her. The witch did a spell with it, and when Gael woke up a few minutes later, the witch told her she had an accident and should go home and rest.

"It scared us, Evie. We were ignorant farmers. Didn't know what the witch was, what was going to happen to us, or, if we defended ourselves, if our gods would be angry with us. That sort of thing, you cannae keep quiet either. Our neighbors found out, they told others, and before noon we had half the clan in our backyard telling us we had to give the witch my sister. We wanted to run, but the clan put people at our house, made Gael go alone."

Kameron grew quiet, staring into the flames, his gaze lost in history.

"What did you do?" Evelina whispered, her voice sounding too loud in the space.

He redirected his gaze to her face and one side of his mouth hitched up. "I snuck out of our house, of course. We'd spent so long fighting when I was a lad, getting in and out of a space I knew better than the clan wasn't that hard. Thinking what might happen to the rest of my family? That was different."

Her heart warmed at the memory of family. Evelina had relatives both on the mortal side and fae, but she hadn't been close to either in years. She hungered for that sense of family, though.

"I went back to the spot I had watched from the night before, and the witch had Gael tied down. I don't know what she was doin', but it looked bad. I'd never seen anyone do something like that to a person before.

"I reacted. I slipped in. The witch was too focused on what she was doin' to pay attention to me. She had this crystal dish and a mirror. She was muttering things, and I saw her throw some holly into the water. I was able to cut my sister loose, but she was catatonic. Not moving. I thought she was dead. Witch saw me, so I reacted. Pushed the crystal over. It shattered, and there was a loud boom. Gael woke up screaming, so I grabbed her and got out of there.

"By that time, the whole clan was mobilized, but when they heard that, they thought we were under attack. We slipped back to our home, got the family and ran.

"What I know now was that this witch was hiding and using our people to disguise her. That flare up was a big, We Are Here sign. The woods came alive and walked through the town. The witch changed into this white haired, blue skinned creature in the middle of town and fled."

"How did you end up with the enchantment?"

"We were too afraid to go back to the clan. Stayed up in the highlands all summer and into the fall. It was winter when she found us, but we dinnae know it was her. She'd changed her shape, was an old man, lost and alone out in the snow. I took him to a hut we used when watching sheep in a high pasture. Middle of the night I wake up, and there's this blue and white creature above me. I slashed it, and it split me open. Family was out looking for me, they chased the witch off and found me. With this."

He touched his chest.

Blue and white creature? Evelina ran through her mental rolodex of fae and couldn't come up with any European, much less Scottish, fairy folk that fit that description. Not that it was her specialty, but she could easily think of five other types of fae that fit that description. All indigenous to her part of the world.

"Next time I went outside, I became a yeti. Brothers thought the creature had returned and attacked me. I spent the rest of the winter as the yeti. Family thought I had died. Woke up in the spring, naked, in the mud. Wandered around until I found the trail back to the clan and headed that way. Family was scared after being terrorized by a white, furry monster all winter. I wasn't sane. I couldn't remember where I had been, what happened to me. We tried to put our lives together, but the clan wanted answers about the witch.

"There was a family that liked to pretend they were in charge, but they were bullies. They tried to strong arm me into taking their side in making their patriarch the new clan chief, and I said nae. They threatened my sister, and *bam!* I became the yeti and tore them in half. In front of my sister. We figured it out then, but I couldn't handle

my anger. Things got bad trying to keep it quiet. I shifted in the middle of the house one night and nearly destroyed it. Realized then that I was going to get them killed, so I left and dinnae come back unless it was the height of summer.”

“Why did you call her a witch?”

“Seemed like the best thing to call her. No one’s ever been able to tell me what she could be. Had a few people over the ages try to break the enchantment, but nae luck.”

“Your accent isn’t as strong.”

Kameron blinked at her for a moment. “I haven’t had much occasion to speak before ye, lass.”

Evelina smiled, warmed by the ridiculous idea that she, above all others, was special. “It sounds to me like she might have been a Winter Fae. They’re cruel and sometimes banish their own kind. The summer fae don’t take kindly to interlopers. Not that the winter bunch do either, which is how we’re in this predicament.”

“Sounds like a possibility. We’ll never know though.”

“We might be able to find out. There are ways, Kameron.”

He smiled at her and coasted his hand over her back. His fingers danced over several thin scar lines, which stroked down into her core. She let her eyes close and enjoyed the sensation.

“What’s your story?” he whispered.

Evelina’s smile withered, and she levered up, moving to sit on the blanket Kameron had worn for a short time. “Is that where we are now? You tell me your story, I’ll tell you mine?”

“Curiosity more than anythin’ else.” Kameron rolled to his side and propped his head on his palm, watching her.

Evelina drew her legs up and let her hair fan out, covering her like a cloak.

There was nothing wrong with telling him her story, it was unremarkable in fairy, but it was still hers.

“Remember how I told you that magic pulls people together?” She let her eyes go unfocused, the blurs of yellow, orange, and red flames becoming the dancing feathers of a firebird.

“Aye.”

“Isn’t it strange how almost all cultures have stories about the poor, beautiful youth who is clever, lucky, or special enough to capture the attention of the prince or princess, they fall in love and live happily ever after?”

“I am nae well read, but aye, I have heard a few in my time.”

“It’s magic. It pulls people together, especially those with even a tiny drop of fae blood in them. Most of the kings and queens through time have had it. The fairy folk are drawn to the power and prestige. Then there are the unfortunately beautiful common folk who are their playthings.

“My mother’s family had a drop of magic in their line, but they were poor. My mother happened to be beautiful. Her mother died, and her father remarried, but of course the new wife didn’t like my mother. I could tell you her story, but it would sound like any you’ve heard before. Poor step daughter forced to care for her family. Except my mother caught the attention of Baba Yaga, who you probably don’t know since she’s tied to the Winter Fae, though she’s something else entirely.

“Baba Yaga recognized where my mother was headed and killed her family, thinking to force her on a different path. Instead, my mother taught herself how to weave the most beautiful tapestries. They were so wonderful the czar himself had to come see them to purchase one for his bedchamber. He got the tapestry and my mother. In any retelling that’s where the story ends, her with child and them in love.”

“But there’s always more to the story.”

“There is.”

“Was that child ye?”

“No, that was my human brother, Ivan. He’s the only one of my mother’s children we knew was not touched by fae.”

Kameron didn’t ask her a question, nor did he prompt her to keep going. She would have liked to stop, but once the story was started, Evelina felt the need to tell him. Make him understand that the same thing that had destroyed her mother was now at work between them.

“My mother was now the wife of the czar. A beautiful woman with skills to be envied and favored by the drop of magic in her veins. Fairy folk can be cruel. The gods, as they were called, didn’t recognize her as anything other than a creature they wanted.

“She was kidnapped by an immortal, rescued by the czar’s hero, and a few months later had another son. He was still suckling when an enchantment went over the palace, and for two weeks no one could move. Everything was frozen. It went away, and my mother was almost mad. A few months later they discovered she was again with child. My eldest sister was born, and the palace servants tried to drown her, but she could breathe under water.

“The czar and my mother were estranged after that. She was half mad and shut away with her two suspect children. She was a human woman. She couldn’t protect herself against what happened to her, and she didn’t understand. I won’t say what my step-father did was right or wrong, except that I can understand how difficult it must have been for him to be powerless. Magic knit them together, yet it also tore them apart.

“She stayed separate for a few years, until in the dead of winter my father, Jack Frost, found her standing barefoot and almost naked on her balcony. She was going to freeze to death. My father is a trickster, and he likes to play with people, pull the strings that bind them. My mother was a puzzle to him. He established himself as a *boyar*, a guest in her house, and began to know her story. I don’t know what he planned to do, but I don’t think he expected to fall in love with her.

“I know that he taught my two older siblings about themselves and arranged for them to go away. He did a good thing for them. For all of his faults, he took care of the children the others had created and left. My mother regained the pieces of her sanity through him. I don’t know if I was an accident, or if my mother wanted a child with him, or if she even had any choice, but I was conceived. I know he was there through my birth and that he tried to take me away from my mother, but she wouldn’t give me up.

“Through all of this, rumors were taken back to the czar, and he called for her to join him. My father went with her, and even accompanied her to the first meeting. All the servants know this story, which is why I found out about it. He walked into a private audience chamber, my mother on his arm. He turned to her and bowed, then to the czar. He told the czar that he had a very special wife and that others would try to steal her away, but deep down she was bound to the czar in a way that none would ever be able to take her permanently. He admitted to wanting her for himself but that it wasn’t to be.

The magic that bound her to the czar was too strong. He broke it off with my mother then and there. She cried snowflakes. It was about to be spring and they were set on by a horrible blizzard. It was so bad people had to sleep in communal beds to keep warm.

"The czar and my mother were inseparable after that."

"What happened to ye?"

"I grew up at the palace. Everyone knew I was a fairy's daughter. They could only guess at my two missing siblings, but me they knew. It's rather difficult to ignore." She gestured to her broken face. "I look a little like her in the eyes and the shape of my face. No idea where the red hair came from. My father is all I can imagine."

"Yer father dinnae try to take ye?"

"He visited a few times. Always in the dead of winter, when the world was at its darkest. The first time, I was a little scared of him, but when he could sit on the windowsill with me and not catch chill, I realized we had to be related. I wasn't stupid. He didn't tell me then he was my father, but I figured it out. I asked him the next time I saw him, and he said he was. Also asked if I wanted to leave with him."

"Did ye?"

"No. My mother had had an episode. She was aging, but you couldn't tell. We thought it was nothing, but she had another child. This one had midnight skin and purple eyes. It was stillborn, but of fairy make. I couldn't leave her. We weren't close, but she was my mother, and I understood part of her no one else did."

"What about the czar?"

"After meeting Jack Frost he understood what was going on with her, and he never turned his back on her again. There was no real love there, but magic had them so interwoven they couldn't be apart. No matter that she had three more children that weren't his, he made sure they were kept safe, and my father took them all away when they were old enough."

"When did ye leave?"

"After my mother's death. She outlived the czar and made sure her son took his place and married a woman of average appearance but of sharp mind. Safe. My brother would have kept me on, but we were never close."

"Where did yer father take ye?"

"He has his own place, one that borders the mortal world and the fairy lands. It's strange, and he has too many secrets. I couldn't stay there, so I left. Spent some time wandering, exploring, before Ded Moroz found me and offered me a job. Here I am, three hundred years later."

"Only three hundred years? Ye look mighty fine for a woman of yer age."

Kameron waggled his eyebrows and grinned.

Evelina snorted and slapped his ribs. He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. His gaze held hers. Where his mouth touched her knuckles, invisible fire blazed. She wanted to lean forward, kiss him, and get drunk on the lust and magic, but it would be a lie.

"It's yer mother's fate that keeps ye thinking this thing between us is a bad idea?"

"I know it is." Her voice cracked, and her mouth was suddenly dry.

"How?"

"Can't you feel the magic?"

"I feel ye."

"Maybe you can't feel it, but it's there. You're an enchanted human, a magically warped thing that begs to be twisted and moved and formed. I'm from both worlds. It's the half-blood children who get jerked around the worst. Trust me. I know." She pulled her hand from his and swallowed down the bubble of bitterness in her throat.

"How?"

"How what?" She rolled her eyes and glared at him.

"How do ye know?"

"Because you're not the first man magic tried to tie me to. The first one? He was a courtier in my step-father's court. Handsome, fairy touched and knew how to live in both worlds—a great match on paper. He wouldn't marry me, even though we were both madly in love. He wanted to marry a pretty little *boyarina*, and keep me as his mistress. He wanted a woman to show off, and one to warm his bed. It hurt leaving him, but after a week I woke up and realized it wasn't him I loved. It was nothing but magic."

"And are ye sure that's what this is?"

"I know it, Kameron. I'm sorry." She stood up and glared at him. "I shouldn't have fallen into bed with you. I accept that." She grabbed her shirts, pulled them on, and stepped into her pants.

"Evie."

"You don't—"

"Evie." Kameron pushed to his feet and reached for her, but she jerked out of his grasp.

Maddox's growl silenced their bickering.

They spun toward where Maddox stood by the barn door, his hackles raised.

Evelina fastened her pants and hopped into her boots. Kameron padded to the door and put his eye to a crack in the door.

"What do you see?" she whispered as she crept toward them.

"Not much. It's still blowing out there, but it's calmed down a lot. I can see the trees."

"The snow cover would be perfect. The ice zombies will be hard to see in the flurries. Snow has some minor powers, nothing much on her own, but we don't know who she's working with, and what they could do." A sickening feeling settled in her gut.

"Wha' aren't ye saying, lass?"

"This isn't even a real storm."

"What do ye mean, not a real storm?"

"This storm is fueled by magic. A storm to make us run to ground, make us easy targets. Shit." She shoved her hands through her hair. Why hadn't they pushed through the blizzard? Oh right, she'd been near death, and the yeti had been bleeding and exhausted. Not that they were in better shape now. Kameron was human, and she'd only regained some of her powers.

But they had the staff and Snow and her people didn't. There was still hope for Christmas so long as that stayed fact.

Chapter Six

Kameron narrowed his gaze. The snow flurries swirled together, masking any movement. He'd catch a glimpse of something that might be a creature moving through the drifts, but then it would dissolve into snow blown sideways.

He turned toward Evelina, and his heart clenched. She was beautiful, fierce, and she didn't see it. Not only did she not see it, but she refused to open herself up to good things that might happen. "I will go out there. I will blend into the snow."

Her chin snapped up and her icy blue eyes flashed. "What? No. You can't go out there by yourself. You could be walking into an ambush."

"I'm touched, lass. Ye do care."

Her gaze narrowed. "Of course I do."

He put his hands on his hips. "But you're nae willing to think there could be more between us?"

"I'm trying to be a realist, Kameron."

"I think yer scared."

Her jaw dropped.

"One man rejected ye years ago, and ye are nae willing to give it another go."

"I've had relationships before, and you know what happens? After a while, someone wants children, and I can't have any. Plus, I know the difference between a relationship that happens naturally and one that's rooted in magic. I'm not willing to put myself through hell for something that's going to end. If that makes me a coward in your eyes," she shook her head, "so be it."

Kameron glanced away first. He didn't agree with her reasoning, but neither could he argue with it. Magic and children were foreign languages to him. He couldn't hope to understand magic as she did, but he knew what was stirring in his chest, and it was natural. Right.

"I don't see anything out there. We need to make a plan," Evelina said, changing the subject.

Kameron couldn't see what set the husky off, either, and the yeti was silent. "Maybe there's nothing out there. We could run for it before they find us. Me out first, shift, and ye follow with the staff and Maddox."

"And where would we go?" She glanced up at him.

He paused. "The church, then back to yer palace."

Where he would be forced to say goodbye. A palace was no place for a yeti.

She checked her wristwatch again and grimaced. "We're running out of time, and the blizzard isn't easing up."

"Let's make a run for it. If Maddox cannae pull ye, I can carry ye."

Evelina pushed a hand through her wild tresses and groaned. “I don’t like this plan, but there isn’t another option. We can’t wait much longer, and the storm doesn’t look like it’s going to stop anytime soon. This has to be magic. It’s too coincidental.”

“Get yer coat and Maddox. I will slip outside and shift.” He didn’t relish the frozen grip that would paralyze him in the sub-zero temperatures, but it was a necessity under the circumstances.

“Kameron, wait.” She grabbed his arm as he reached for the door. She tipped her chin up and studied his face, her lip caught between her teeth.

He ducked his head and pressed his mouth to hers, swallowing her gasp and suckling her lips. She leaned against him, winding one hand into his hair and the other around his shoulders. Heat swelled in his belly, and he had to force himself to place his hands on her shoulders and gently put her away from him.

“Be careful,” she panted.

“Dinnae take too long.” He winked and slid the barn door open.

Icy wind and daggers of snow and ice pelted his bare skin. The cold seeped down to his bones. Kameron’s teeth began knocking together, and the feeling in his hands, feet, and face crescendoed to searing pain. He staggered away from the barn and fell to his knees. Wrapping his arms around himself, Kameron squeezed his eyes shut and welcomed the familiar bubble of warmth from deep within.

His perspective of the world changed. The ground became farther away, the barn to his side grew smaller, and the pain and cold faded.

The yeti was a gangly creature, all sinew and lean muscle, built for traveling long distances and brute strength. He tipped his head back and sniffed the air, filtering through the scents the wind brought him, but everything was muddled by the wind and snow.

Behind him, the barn door squeaked and rattled. Evelina muttered curses while Maddox charged out into the snow, ran a circle around him, and dashed back to his mistress.

As the yeti, he was able to watch Evelina without being bothered by the driving snow. She had the staff in one hand and stepped onto one of her solid ice sleds. He’d have to ask her later how she did that. For now, he watched her grab hold of Maddox’s harness and tuck the staff under her arm.

“Come on, Maddox.”

Kameron pushed to his feet and shook off the excess snow that had caught in his fur. He stepped forward, and he sank almost a foot into the fresh powder. It would be worse for Evelina, who was not made for winter weather as he was.

But Maddox was.

The husky trotted forward and pulled his human companion along. They both hunkered down against the wind battering at them. Kameron moved to break some of the wind for them, and they began a slow trek across the open field. With the snow cover, they were safe enough from an attack from the compound.

It was slow going but not unbearable. The husky picked up his stride, and Kameron set his gaze on the land around them. His internal compass knew the direction his home lay, which was good since the whole world was bathed in white.

He didn’t let his guard down, though. The husky had been set off by something, and it was still out there, whatever *it* was.

Maddox pulled up, stopping unexpectedly. Evelina wobbled and cursed, but her words were stolen away by the wind. Kameron tipped his head to the side to better catch a scent and listened for the husky.

He smelled it for a second. A strange odor, like musty water, molded fabric, and the refuse in the bottom of a cellar at the end of winter.

“What is it?” Evelina yelled over the storm.

He shook his head, incapable of speech as a yeti. He strode forward, and Maddox reluctantly followed, his hackles lifted and gaze darting around. There wasn’t anything out there. Kameron’s sight in the blizzard was on par with the husky’s.

Maddox leapt forward, and Evelina nearly lost her hold on his harness. Kameron reached to steady her, but something caught his fur as they sped by, spurred on by whatever had spooked the dog. He glanced down but couldn’t see anything.

A scream pierced the howl of the storm. Kameron whirled around and felt a patch of hair ripped free.

Evelina lay on the ground, Maddox at her side. She had an arm upraised against—nothing.

Kameron strode toward her, but something had hold of his legs. He peered down at the snow. The white flurries bent around a form. He grabbed at the thing, and uprooted an ice zombie.

An ambush.

He roared and pulled the creature apart. He began furiously stomping, smashing the creatures underfoot. The broken limbs acted like knives and sliced into the pads of his feet. Blood stained the snow, handy whenever he trod over a zombie, and it didn’t stay down.

Evelina used the staff to knock against the creatures’ heads, and Maddox snapped at the ones who got too close.

Kameron tried to get closer, but there were zombies crawling up out of the snow all around them. He swung his arms, knocked them back, and closed the distance a little bit.

The scent was all around him now.

Kameron bellowed and scooped up several of the creatures. He threw them with the wind, and a dazzling explosion of ice puffed up before it was blown away.

If they didn’t move soon, the sheer numbers of the ice zombies were going to overpower them. Then there would be no future opportunity to win Evelina over. No more beautifully pale skin contrasted by black lines. No more icy blue eyes with their penetrating stare. No more soft moans while they made love. No more proving her wrong about the future.

Rage lent him strength. He pulled two of the zombies up, yanked off their arms, and used them as clubs. When one fractured into pieces, he used the other, until he cleared a path to where Evelina stood on a growing patch of ice with shards all around her. Together, they set their backs against each other and tried to stay on their feet as the wind continued to batter at them.

A dark shape took form in the snow, and a sled pulled by two nervous, dark horses approached through the blizzard. The scent of molding cloth, musty water, and winter refuse intensified. The source seemed to be a man, standing with the reins and a whip in hand, his head uncovered and white hair spilling out behind him. Kameron didn’t know who this was, but he bellowed anyway.

Evelina yelled something, but her voice was stolen away by the wind. Her posture, arms flung wide, hunched over, said enough to him. Whoever this man was, she recognized him.

The snow parted as if invisible hands drew it away and took the raging wind with it, leaving them in sudden calm. It was a show of power that unnerved him. No one should be able to control nature; it was a force in and of itself, apart from humanity.

Another figure unfolded itself from the sled and moved to stand next to the man. A person he recognized.

The Snow Maid.

She placed her hand on the other fae's arm and narrowed her gaze at Kameron and Evelina.

"Guardian, you have something I want," the man called out. He kept a tight rein on the horses, who danced in place, snorting their displeasure. "Call your abominable snowman off."

Snow leaned forward, bracing herself on the front of the sled. "Give it to us."

Evelina spun the staff. At some point she'd removed her mittens, stripping down to thin gloves that molded to her hands. "You'll have to pry it from my cold, dead fingers, Triglav."

"Come now, Guardian. You know the realm of the dead is within my power." Triglav glared at Snow and handed her the reins. He jumped off the sled and sank well over a foot into the fresh snow. He frowned, muttered a word, and stepped onto the surface, which held him as he moved to stand in front of Evelina. "Stand with us. Your resources are being consumed, your services taken advantage of, and no thanks has been offered since the *Ubezhishche* was created. This is not the place for the more mild-mannered fae. They belong somewhere else. You and your creature, you belong alongside us." Triglav gestured to the Snow Maid, who continued to glare daggers at them.

"You hold no power over the living or dead. I've seen what you would do. I've seen how your monsters kill and destroy. That's why you were cast down when I was a girl."

"Because we have not been made victims in our own land by those who have come here? We cannot raise our children or women in peace."

"You don't want peace, Triglav. You never have. You reign over bitterness and hate. With the *pyha*, you wouldn't be satisfied with everyone gone, you would want more, and I'm not willing to stand beside you. Where are your other two faces?"

Kameron glanced around, searching for anyone else amidst the zombies. Did the man literally have two faces, like masks? Or were there more people around them?

"We don't need you," Snow called out while she struggled to keep the two horses in place.

The man ground his teeth so loud Kameron could hear it. "Then give me the *pyha* and stand aside."

The silence was disarming.

Kameron flicked his gaze around them, and dread gripped his chest, digging in icy fingers of panic. The zombies had formed an icy wall around them. The wind still blew, and the snow still fell, covering and disguising them from the outside world, but he could see them. Their mouths worked soundlessly, and outside of their calm bubble,

he could imagine the scrape of ice on ice, the gnashing of teeth, and the howl of the wind over their jagged features.

"It doesn't work like that. You know that if you take the *pyha* you will call down the wrath of all the *voinov*."

"To hell with the *voinov*." Snow tossed her head, and the veil still attached to her ridiculous headgear fluttered behind her.

Triglav slapped his hip and laughed. "Those pompous fools? They're warriors no more. Let them make their toys and sneak around human homes. They're no match for us."

Snow slapped the reins against her palm. "You don't want to stand in our way."

"You, be quiet," Triglav snapped at his companion. "When you have earned the right to speak again I will tell you."

Snow's jaw clicked together.

"You don't want to do this." Evelina tucked one arm behind her and made a gesture with her fingers.

While Kameron didn't understand, Maddox did. The husky turned in a circle a few times until he faced the outer circle of ice zombies. He never thought he'd take pointers from a dog, but Kameron shifted his weight and eyed the opposition.

They'd have to break through the ring and fight through the press, and that wasn't counting what the two Winter Fae would throw at them, either.

"Yes, I do. It's time the rest of fairy took notice of us. Fae have grown too complacent in the recent years."

"Is that what you want? A war with fairy?" Evelina shook her head, her hand moved in an intricate circle behind her, fingers curling and the snow at her feet began to stir. "No, Triglav, I'll not help you, and I won't stand aside."

Evelina whirled, and Maddox sprinted with her. They broke out of the calm bubble and crashed through the first ring of zombies.

Kameron was a second behind them. He'd been ready for it and let out a deafening roar. The team of horses reared, squealing and neighing. He swiped at them, not so much to hurt them, but if Triglav and Snow couldn't follow on the sled, that was all the better. Wood splintered and part of the sled cracked in the front.

Triglav gestured, threw his hands out toward Kameron, and an invisible ball of the coldest ring of hell slammed into him and threw him backward.

"Kameron!"

He hit zombies, their sharp appendages and jagged forms cutting into his fur, slicing through his flesh. He shook his head and rolled over. Whatever happened, Evelina had to get away.

A spike of ice whizzed past him and took off the head of a zombie, aided by the blizzard winds. A wave of them rammed into the nearest grasping hands, sending up a cloud of ice chunks and dust.

"Kameron, come on!"

He whirled and pushed through the few remaining zombies, glancing over his shoulder long enough to see the baleful glare of Triglav holding the heads of the two nervous horses, one arm outstretched in their direction. All around him, the blizzard raged, alive with the hungry maws of ice zombies.

There wasn't a second to lose. Kameron vaulted in front of Evelina and Maddox, grabbed the first two zombies in his path, and used them to beat aside the next. This far out from the epicenter of the blizzard their numbers weren't as thick.

He flinched as another icy spike missed him by inches and drove into a zombie in front of him.

"Sorry," Evelina called out. He heard the slush of her sled over the snow, as Maddox pulled her in his wake.

Kameron lengthened his stride. He could make out the tree line through the nearly whiteout conditions. The wind at his back lent him speed, and the fewer zombies made for a faster escape.

Another dark figure emerged from the winter wonderland, coming on fast. Kameron grabbed handfuls of snow and ice and threw them at the unknown assailant, but it charged on, forming into a midnight dark horse with Triglav on its back.

"Run, Kameron! Triglav is three people! Run!"

A line of zombies stepped through the trees, a neat flanking maneuver he hadn't seen coming. A burst of cold penetrated his thick fur, and the next thing he knew, Kameron was falling, his mind fuzzy and warm, sounds distant, and the ground soft.

•••

Evelina screamed as the second Triglav sent Kameron to the ground with nothing more than an outstretched hand and a quick spell. Kameron's white fur faded into the snow, and with the blizzard driving more powder, he was quickly being covered over.

Maddox slid to a stop, almost on top of the Kameron-sized lump in the snow, and she went to her knees, feeling for his face. Her hands had long since gone numb, but she had to touch him, had to feel that life still flowed in his veins.

His breath stirred the flurries, and his eyes were narrow slits. Dazed, not dead.

"Guardian, I tire of this," the second Triglav said above the storm. This one didn't stop the onslaught, but allowed the wind and snow to continue to batter at her.

It was hopeless. The third Triglav was out there somewhere, waiting and watching for them. She could barely hold her own against Snow; the three forms of Triglav were beyond her ability. He was ancient, powerful, and banished from the fairy lands.

How was a half-blood, an enchanted human, and a dog supposed to face off against one of the most powerful Slavic deities?

She couldn't.

"Did you hear me, Guardian?" The leather saddle creaked, and the massive, magic-born horse pawed the snow.

Evelina peered at the face of her trusted friend. Blue eyes stared up at her with such faith. She couldn't save them all, but she could save her dog. "Maddox, *ukhodit'*."

The husky locked his legs and stared at her.

"Maddox, *ukhodit'*. *Ukhodit'*."

He continued to watch her and showed no desire to obey her command.

"Damn huskies," she muttered and pushed to her feet.

Triglav held out his hand, and the horse danced sideways toward her, almost treading on Kameron. "Give me the staff, and I won't kill you."

"I told your first face that you'd have to pry it from my—"

“Cold, dead fingers. Yes, I know. That can be arranged.” The wind whipped his long locks over his shoulder.

Try as she might, this close to him the snow would not obey her command.

“How kind of you,” she replied and shifted the staff to lie across both hands.

There might not be a Christmas this year. That weighed on her. She’d grown to love it; the pageantry, the joy, and all of the children’s smiling faces. It was a world apart from what she’d known as a child, but she’d spent years making it happen. She’d go to her grave happily with that behind her.

The staff hummed in her hands, speaking to that part of her that was born of magic and her father’s brand of trickery.

Evelina was a daughter of Jack Frost.

She’d lived her own path, and if she was going to die, it would be on her terms.

Triglav narrowed his gaze and leaned forward in the saddle. “Don’t make me come and get the staff, girl. You won’t like it.”

“Considering how long you’ve spent on the naughty list, I don’t care what you like.” She spun the staff in her grasp, hand over hand, keeping a tight grip on it, as the wind attempted to rip it from her.

Evelina set her feet shoulder width apart and reached deep into the chilled earth with her magic, grounding herself and searching for her center. The bitter bite of the blizzard faded away until all that was around her was the crackling embrace of magic.

“What are you doing?” Triglav vaulted from his horse, boots crunching in the snow.

“Help me, father,” she whispered. She mustered the magic at her command, forming it and spinning it into a funnel. “*Zamorozit’ mire!*”

Magic rushed out of her body, taking little pieces of her with it. She could feel the staff’s magic overpowering her own, twisting and warping her command into something else. The wind swirled around her, no longer blowing in one direction, but curving, whirling.

“*Ostanovit!*”

Triglav’s magic slammed into her, knocking her back a dozen feet. She landed and rolled in the heavy powder, connecting with the jagged part of a rock, a bit of hidden debris under the guise of a snow drift.

Evelina’s head spun. Her hat was gone, and her hair streamed out over the snow. Though she was disoriented, she tried levering herself up, but something snagged her hair and jerked her back. Her head cracked against something hard, and snowflakes swirled in her vision.

“You stupid bitch.” The shrill tones of Snow pierced the fog of pain, exhaustion, and the deep chill.

Magic might not be Evelina’s strong suit, but she knew how to fight a bitch.

Evelina grasped Snow’s wrist, twisted and kicked out, taking Snow’s feet out from under her. She fell in a heap of fur and flounces. Evelina pushed to her feet and grabbed the first thing she could, which wound up being Snow’s elaborate, fan shaped headdress. Evelina ripped it from the fae woman’s head and tossed it aside.

“How dare—”

“Oh, I dare!”

Evelina pulled her fist back and let it fly. She connected with Snow’s delicate jaw. Pain blossomed up her arm, needles of cold and hot, but it felt good.

For a split second she watched as Snow sprawled back in the drift, howling and holding her snow white face, staring at her with eyes gone large and round. Though Evelina had served Ded Moroz happily for over a century.

“Ne dvigat’sya.”

Evelina’s body locked up, her limbs stopped obeying her, and even her mouth froze against her command. Magic had saved her, and now magic held her prisoner.

“Stop toying around.” The third Triglav strode from between the trees. The blizzard began to taper off the closer he came.

Where was Maddox?

And Kameron?

Ice zombies shamled toward her. With the blizzard letting up, she could see more of the hoard Triglav had collected, and her heart sank. How many had he killed to make this army? How many more would die before they were stopped? Where was Ded Moroz?

Shame curdled her stomach. She hadn’t been able to stop them, and she wasn’t saving Christmas. Not on her own.

“You were supposed to stay in reserve,” the second Triglav spoke from behind Evelina.

Since she couldn’t turn to see them, she focused on listening to what she could hear. The sound of boots crunching through snow over her left shoulder. Horses snorting and stomping the snow. Muttering, which would be the first Triglav, probably dealing with the sled.

Where were Maddox and Kameron?

The third Triglav strode past her. She could make out the distinct sound of hands slapping against wood and the familiar whistle of wind through the carved head of Ded Moroz’s staff.

Evelina had failed.

“You horrid half-blood.” Snow stomped around her, hands clenched into fists at her side, and glared at Evelina. “I want to kill her. Let me.”

Triglav stepped into her peripheral vision, staff in hand. This one was clothed entirely in black, from head to foot, making his white hair and pale skin stand out in comparison. His eyes were like two blocks of ice, focused on Snow.

“You deserve nothing. Your incompetence has wasted time. Move aside.”

Snow whirled on him, her mouth agape. “What? You can’t say that to me.”

“I can, and I will. Move.” He shoved her unceremoniously aside.

Evelina stared straight ahead. Not that the spell on her gave her any choice, but mentally she gathered all that was left of her close to her heart.

She regretted coming to terms with her appearance so late in life.

She regretted not trying to know her family better.

She regretted never adopting a child.

She regretted never loving and being loved.

She regretted telling Kameron it was never to be between them.

“There is no place for anyone of your ilk here.” He lifted the staff and brought it inches from her forehead. The *pyha* embedded in the wood twinkled with magic. “Be gone—”

A roar rent the stillness and Triglav jerked around, his gaze wide as he stared at something behind her.

“*Poluchit’ etu veshch’!*” one of the three Triglav’s cried out.

The gathering mob of ice zombies surged forward, their jerking gait and chomping mouths purposeful. Snow shrieked and scurried to the side of the third Triglav, who was already back peddling.

A huge, white blur charged past Evelina and grasped both Triglav and Snow in each hand.

Kameron had come back to life.

Evelina’s heart leapt to her throat, and she tried to force her limbs to move, her magic to stir, but nothing would break the hold on her. She watched as Kameron shook the two like rag dolls. The staff fell to the snow, and the zombies closed ranks, reaching and grabbing for Kameron.

A bark cracked through the hissing and moans from the hoard, and Maddox bounded around her, snapping and charging any of the stragglers who turned their sights on her. Two zombies bent almost double and shuffled after the husky, but toppled heels over head in the snow.

The second Triglav sprinted into view, arm outstretched. “*Ne dvigat’sya!*”

Kameron whirled and roared at the fae. He threw the crumpled body of Snow at Triglav, and both man and woman fell to the ground. Kameron shook off the zombies and swiped the staff from where it had fallen. He brandished it at the zombies, cracking skulls and shattering limbs with it. He reared back and shook Triglav, roaring with palpable rage.

Cold iron pressed against her throat, and the first Triglav spoke against her ear. “Call off your beast.”

Maddox whirled, snarling and snapping his teeth at Triglav, but didn’t come any closer, as if he knew a wrong move would be bad.

The magic hold on her loosened slightly. She tried her limbs, but they were still frozen in place.

“Fuck you, Triglav.”

“Are you ready to die, Guardian?”

Kameron swung his head back and forth, his gaze roving over the zombies.

What was he searching for?

He half turned, and that’s when she knew.

Kameron’s gaze landed on her, and magic shimmered off his white fur.

“Are you?” she threw back at Triglav.

Kameron kicked the zombies out of the way and advanced on them. In her peripheral vision, Evelina could see Snow and the other Triglav regaining their feet and retreating. The remaining Triglav hung limp in Kameron’s grip.

“Hold it right there, *snezhnyy chelovek*, or I’ll kill your Guardian.”

“I don’t think he understands you,” she taunted. So be it if she died, but if Kameron could get the staff away from them, it would be worth it.

Kameron kept coming, a low, rumbling growl reverberating deep within his chest. It sounded more ominous than the moans from the zombies.

Triglav slid the blade along her throat. The single line of contact burned as the sharp edge sliced through her skin to draw the first drops of blood.

“I’ll not warn you again, beast,” Triglav yelled.

Kameron opened his mouth and roared in return. Zombies clung to his fur, their mouths seeking purchase through the thick pelt, but he ignored them, his gaze trained on her and the blade.

The Triglav with Snow at his back called out an incantation Evelina couldn't decipher, but she saw the wave of magic build, crest and crash into Kameron. His shoulders hunched, and the spell took hold. But a curious thing happened. He threw his head back, shook his shoulders and the spell dissolved.

Kameron wheeled around, shook both the fae man and staff. The *pyha* flared to life and a ring of magic enveloped him, pushing outward. It lifted the nearest zombies off their feet and threw them into their brothers, shattering and breaking them. The magic washed over her, and the spell holding her in place tightened, clamping down until it was a struggle to breathe. The knife at her throat dropped to the ground, and she heard a thud and grunt behind her.

The wind stopped blowing, and the snow stopped falling.

All around them, not a soul, not a creature, not even a branch stirred.

Even the wind forgot to blow, the snow didn't stir and the world held its breath for a moment.

Maddox trotted up to sit at her feet, tongue lolling out to one side and twisted his head backward and around to stare at her, as if to say, *look at me!*

Kameron swung left, then right, surveying the stillness all around them. He huffed out a breath, and a low rumble shook him.

In the distance, the compound seemed to blaze to life, fairy lanterns in the windows blossomed and glistened on snow along the roofs.

"Kill the bitch already, and stop that thing," Snow shrieked from where she'd been toppled yet again into the drifts.

Kameron swung to face her, leaning forward on the balls of his feet, and growled.

The ice zombies slowly swiveled their heads toward Snow, their bodies following in that shaky, jerking gait that characterized the cannibalistic feeders.

"What are they doing? Triglav, make them stop." She lunged for the dark clad fairy, clinging to his arm.

Triglav held out his hands. "*Ya prikazyvayu tebe ostanovit'sya!*"

The magic seemed to bounce off the zombies and dissipate.

"*Ya prikazyvayu tebe ostanovit'sya!*"

Evelina's throat constricted, and fear clenched her chest.

The ice zombies shambled past her, their moans and hissing sounds growing.

"What's happening to them?" the Triglav behind her called out.

Kameron dropped the Triglav in his grasp, and the nearest zombies dove for the body, four or five deep.

The Snow Maid screamed and flailed as two got their hands on her. A third lunged for her throat, and crimson stained the ice and snow.

Kameron's hulking figure blocked the rest of the carnage from view, but the image of the fair skin being rent by teeth and nails was burned into Evelina's mind. This was not what Christmas Eve should be. She could hear the frantic calls of the other two Triglavs, and over that, the unmistakable sound of hunting horns and the grating of stone on stone. The inhabitants of the compound had finally seen them, but they were too late.

The Christmas Eve when zombies came to town. This would be a story they told for ages to come.

Kameron gently picked her up and cradled her in his arms. He shifted her until he could carry Evie and the staff. With a final glance over his shoulder, he plunged into the forest, leaving behind the zombies and their prey to become another *Temnyy Les* legend.

Chapter Seven

The yeti hauled two loads of firewood into the main room of the cathedral and fed the embers left in the braziers. The heating system had kept it warm, but both Evelina and he needed heat. He was still bleeding badly, and the only thing that would heal him at this point was shifting.

Kameron watched Evelina through the yeti's eyes. He glanced at her hunched form, seated on one of the benches. She had the staff lying across both palms, and her gaze was lost in the grain of the wood, Maddox curled up at her feet. Neither had spoken since fleeing the forest and the grisly scene with the zombies.

Part of him wondered what had happened after they'd left. Had the zombies killed everyone? Or had the people from the compound crushed them?

Rage had overcome him toward the end. They were going to kill her and he couldn't let that happen. Not her.

Though now that he'd saved her, she'd leave him soon.

As if she heard his thoughts, Evelina stood and turned toward him. Her face was creased, her gaze lowered to the floor.

Since he couldn't speak, Kameron crossed the floor and crouched in front of her so that she had to look at him. Her gaze skipped to his face. She wore sadness like a cloak, and for the life of him he couldn't figure out why.

"I have to go soon. There's not much time left." She pulled back her sleeve and sighed. "There isn't any left. I need to go."

For the millionth time he cursed his enchantment for robbing him of simple human abilities like speech. He tried to form words, and they came out as a long groan. Gently he brought her to his chest. She dug her hands into his fur and leaned against him.

A knock at the door reverberated through the cavernous hall. Evelina jerked back, and Kameron stood. Would Triglav follow them back to simply knock on his door?

Evelina glanced at him, but he had no answer. He shrugged instead. Together they padded across the marble floors to the doors he'd braced with a tree trunk. There were no windows, so they were left to chance.

"Open it." She spun the staff in her hand and pointed the business end at the door.

He did as she asked, hefting the tree trunk out of the way and setting it against the wall. Evelina grasped the handles and hauled back, letting the door crack open a few inches.

A man dressed in red robes with white fur designs and a curling, white beard that reached halfway to the ground stood on the top of the steps. He had a face lined with age and kind eyes.

"*Privet*, comrade."

“Ded Moroz,” Evelina gasped and flung herself out between the doors and into the elderly man’s embrace. She stepped back and thrust the staff into his hands. “I’m sorry. I’ve screwed it all up.”

Ded Moroz gingerly accepted the staff and examined its length, rolled it in his hands and after a few, long moments, set one end on the ground and turned his attention back to her.

He leaned on the staff, and his mustache twitched as if he were smiling. “I’ve heard a great deal about monsters of ice, a kidnapped princess, an abominable snowman, a three headed devil, and how one woman seemed to defeat them all.”

“What?” Evelina glanced at Kameron, then back to Ded Moroz. “That’s not right at all.”

“That’s the rumor at the Snow Palace. Do you say otherwise?”

“Yes. That’s not what happened at all.” She shook her head and pulled her coat closer around her.

“Invite me in. I’m sure you have much to tell, my Guardian.”

Kameron stepped back, and his two guests entered. He secured the door once more while Evelina cleaned off a chair for the Ashman. Kameron made do with sitting on his bed, which in yeti form doubled as a couch.

“Everyone was gone, getting things ready for Christmas. I was helping out in the kitchen when one of the boys ran in crying about ice monsters. I ran out to the courtyard but they’d already entered the gates and were attacking people.” Evelina’s gaze was on the floor, her face twisted in the horror of the memory. “They killed Sasha and Alex and Sergi. Maybe more. I was trying to save Lina when I heard screaming. I saw them carrying the Snow Maid out.”

Her gaze rose to stare at Ded Moroz. “She had your staff. I thought maybe she was protecting the house, that she was a victim. I couldn’t leave for a while. As soon as I’d try to help someone else, another one of the things would rise from the dead, like a zombie, but made of ice. I followed them as soon as I could. They ambushed me in the *Temnyy Les*.” She nodded at Kameron. “He saved me, though.”

Ded Moroz turned to Kameron, and his piercing gaze seemed to see more than skin deep.

“Hm, interesting.” To Evelina he said, “Keep going child.”

Evelina nodded. It was crazy, but in many ways, Ded Moroz was more of a father to her than Jack Frost. She tried to not fidget, but she dearly wanted him to think well of her.

“We found Snow in a hunting lodge in the forest. I found her sled, first, and figured it out from there. Those creatures didn’t attack the Snow Palace, she made them. Created them, perhaps. We got the staff from her there, but we had to run away from the Snow Palace. Snow and Triglav brought the ice zombies to us. Triglav wants a war on fairy and to cleanse the *Ubezshische*. We got away from them and only made it this far.” She slouched on the bench, as if the telling had taken the last of her energy.

“And you did all that in a blizzard, child?”

“Well, yes.”

“With nothing more than Maddox and an abominable snowman to help you?”

Evelina glanced at him and her cheeks turned pink. “Well...”

Kameron's skin prickled and tingles started in his toes and raced up to the top of his head. He shifted fast and was left with his ass on the still chilly marble floor, buck naked. He quickly pulled a blanket over himself and shoved his hair out of the way.

"I see." Ded Moroz chuckled. "Thank you for helping my Guardian."

"Yer welcome." Kameron glanced from Evelina to the Ashman. "I hate to bring up more bad news, but the ice zombies, there were a lot of them left, and they need to be eradicated."

"Done, I assure you."

"What?" Evelina echoed Kameron's thoughts.

"You didn't really think I was sitting around, waiting for you to bring this back to me, did you?" Ded Moroz's mustache twitched, and Kameron caught a flash of teeth that appeared sharp. The old man might appear kindly, but Evelina had said he was a warrior in his own right.

"Well I..."

"While you were following the real thief, I confronted Triglav's people. Triglav must have known I was coming, because he fled before I arrived. I've known he was plotting something, but I didn't know what." He shook his head and sighed. "Those that survived will be expelled from *Ubezhishche*. I must have found your battleground half an hour after you left, and the green land elves who live there had taken torches and fairy fire to all the snow and ice. The zombies are gone, and if any escaped, the elves will track their magic and put them down."

Evelina's face was paler than usual, not a drop of color left. "The Snow Maid—"

"Is dead. I know." Ded Moroz reached over and patted Evelina's hands. "She was a fickle woman I never trusted. Her death is sad, but she brought it about herself. Snow could have said no. She had us, and still she chose Triglav."

"I'm—"

"Don't say yer sorry," Kameron snapped, startling Evelina. "Say yer sorry for losin' the staff or nae protecting yer people, but dinnae apologize for that woman, lass."

Ded Moroz thumbed toward Kameron. "He's smart. Death is sad, but hers is not on your hands."

No, that was Kameron's honor. He'd felt the magic rise at the end, as if it were a living, breathing thing, and all he'd been able to think was to protect Evelina at all costs, even if that meant taking a life.

"Kameron, I am in your debt for the aid you gave my Guardian. What can I do to repay you?"

Kameron held up his hand. The two things he wanted most were not Ded Moroz's to give. "I need no thanks, sir."

"Hmm." Ded Moroz drew a long, red pouch out from under his coat and pulled the drawstrings until it opened enough for him to stick his hand in and rummage around. Finally he found what he was searching for and drew his hand out of the bag. "This is an old thing. Never mind how it looks, it's the magic that matters."

Kameron accepted a silver medallion necklace. The links were closely woven, like chainmail, and a deep, sapphire blue gem was clutched in the heart of a beaten silver plate. He didn't know what to make of the gift, and the idea of another magical item near him was a little unnerving.

"It will help you control that enchantment of yours."

Kameron's chin snapped up.

Evelina gasped. "You already knew?"

"Of course I did." Ded Moroz winked at her. "You don't think I would let a dangerous neighbor move in next door, do you?"

"Oh." Evelina blinked, glancing between Kameron and Ded Moroz.

"How does it work?" Kameron turned the medallion over.

"I haven't the slightest clue, but items like this," Ded Moroz reached over and tapped the medallion, "work with you. It's natural."

The idea of shifting at will, rather than at the whim of the weather, or his mood, was incredibly appealing. He'd lived so long without that control, though, he was cautious about such a gift.

Ded Moroz pushed to his feet and groaned. "Oh, of course this would all happen on Christmas Eve. Not a moment of rest for any of us."

"But what are we going to do?" Evelina stood as well, her face lined with worry, her crimson hair flowing out behind her like a cape.

"About what?"

"You need a Snow Maid. People expect her."

Ded Moroz eyed her from head to toe. "You're right, and I think I know the person for the job."

He twirled the staff in his hand, and the *pyha* sparkled and twinkled. A little, shimmering mote gathered around the top of the staff and after a moment flew straight to Evelina and circled the top of her head, like a crown. Streams of magic poured down, spinning and wrapping around her, creating a cocoon.

Kameron had seen quite enough magic in the last thirty-six hours. He glanced from Ded Moroz to Evelina's form. While their attention wasn't on him, he stood and knotted the same length of cloth around his hips. The medallion he left on the floor for now.

The magic slowly stopped spinning and thinned to reveal a woman with strawberry blond hair, braided and coiled around her head, one of the same ridiculous fan headdresses with a veil hanging down the back, and big, billowing, blue and white robes.

She gasped and stared at her hands, patted her face. "What? How?"

"It's an illusion. You've shadowed me so many times, you know what to do. No one will know you aren't the true Snow Maid, and for once I'll get someone who actually knows what they're doing."

Maddox sat back on his haunches and tilted his head from side to side. Clearly Kameron was not the only one bothered by the new appearance.

"Are you sure this is okay? I mean, I'm not a maiden..." The woman's face colored pink.

Kameron couldn't call this Snow Maid Evelina. It wasn't her. The eyes were deep blue, not piercing or cool. The hair was rose-gold, not blood red. The black lines of ice were gone, the network of scars erased, the sensual lines of her body washed away.

He didn't like it. Not one bit.

Ded Moroz's laughter boomed through the cathedral. "Evie, if any of the last five Snow Maids were maiden, I would shave my beard. Come now, there's much to do and little time to do it."

"All right."

They moved toward the doors, but at the last moment Evelina whirled around and went straight to Kameron. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Thank you."

He hugged her back, squeezing her.

This was it?

This was how it would end?

She stepped back with a smile so wide it nearly split her too-perfect face in two.

"Merry Christmas, lass."

"Merry Christmas, Kameron."

Ded Moroz was already out the doors and in a sleigh pulled by three sable horses with red leather trappings. Evelina picked up her robes and jogged after him, one hand flying to her head to hold the hat in place.

Maddox was the one who paused at the door to glance at him as if to ask why he wasn't coming.

"Go on, lad. Watch after her. She needs you."

Kameron followed slower and reached the door in time to see Ded Moroz crack a whip. The three horses charged forward, and the sleigh faded from view in a cloud of white powder.

"Merry Christmas," he muttered and slid the door shut.



Evelina stood against the wall behind Ded Moroz where she could watch the faces of the little elfin children as he handed out presents. One girl squealed and hugged the enchanted doll she'd been given. Evelina knew the type; it would dance like a ballerina. It was a beautiful piece of work. Another boy received a slingshot and a stern warning about toeing the line between naughty and nice.

The atmosphere at every stop, each secluded homestead, the villages, and grand halls the fae had constructed in this new home was joyous, festive. With such a diverse population, it was fascinating to see all the traditions from a front row seat.

She'd dreamed of seeing Ded Moroz's trek across the *Ubezishche* on Christmas Eve for decades. Every now and then, she'd get lucky and make it to one of the outlying villages around the Snow Palace to see Ded Moroz and the Snow Maid hand out presents.

For all of the joy and how much of a dream come true it was to play the part of the Snow Maid, it was also empty.

There was no place in the sleigh for Maddox, so her faithful friend had to stay at the palace. Then there was a chunk of her heart that felt empty, lost.

She missed Kameron.

Sometimes the way magic worked didn't make sense, and even though she barely knew Kameron, she liked him. He wasn't the traditional knight in shining armor, and he wasn't going to slay a dragon for her, but he'd stomped zombies and faced down a deity. All for her.

She watched the elves bundled up against the cold. A young couple stood out to her. They didn't have children, but they held each other, their heads together and smiles on their faces.

Evelina drew in a shaky breath and rubbed her hand over her stomach. Modern medicine had finally explained what magic and herb mothers could not. The scars ran more than skin deep. She'd never have a child, and it was the one thing she'd never come to grips with. Another hundred years, and maybe she would finally accept that fact.

"Evie," Ded Moroz whispered.

She started and glanced around. The gift giving had finished, and Ded Moroz was heading back to the sleigh.

"Sorry," she mumbled and hurried after him, careful to not step on one of the many ground-length layers of clothing. She'd never thought about how cumbersome the Snow Maiden garments were, but they were constricting and bulky. There was no place for a sword or dagger. It was entirely impractical, but she looked amazing. And totally unlike herself. She'd dreamt of this moment for years, and now she didn't want it anymore. She wanted to be herself.

Ded Moroz helped her into the sleigh and while she situated her costume, he turned to give the villagers a final wave farewell. He climbed in and with a theatrical crack of the whip they were off. The stupid headdress caught the wind, and her head snapped back.

"What is the fucking point of wearing this thing?" she grumbled.

Ded Moroz chuckled and activated a protection spell that shielded them from the wind. "The headdress used to be the sign of a woman's dowry."

"Well I don't need one."

"You can take it off, you know? That was our last stop."

Evelina untied the ribbons holding the headdress in place and tipped her chin up, examining the moon and stretching her muscles. Her head was foggy from lack of sleep, and parts of her still ached from the zombies, and the running, and the sex. This was the most surreal Christmas she'd ever had.

"What will you do for Christmas day?"

"I...don't know." Her heart clenched, and she knew where she wanted to be, where the magic was pulling her.

"I still haven't given you your gift." He turned on the bench and studied her.

"I think I'm too old for your presents." Evelina still smiled, thinking of the different things he'd given her over the years. Usually it was a knickknack, something that harkened back to her heritage and held sentimental value to her. He always knew what would hit the mark.

"Not all of them. Would you like to stay like this? No more scars. You could go anywhere. Leave and live a mortal life."

Her breath left her lungs in a whoosh. For lifetimes she'd wanted to appear normal at least. Anything but herself, and now she had the opportunity. But looks weren't everything, as she'd come to learn. Being pretty wouldn't give her children or a happy life.

"No, I think I like my old face." She smiled. "I've grown into myself. You can't give me what I want."

He sat up a little straighter. "I'm Santa Claus."

"And I'm the daughter of Jack Frost. What's your point?"

Ded Moroz harrumphed and tugged on the reins. "Don't underestimate your elders."

She laughed, and he chuckled. Now that she'd been the Snow Maid once, she was happy to go back to her role as Guardian. She was happier there. She'd found a place to belong.

Magic shimmered around her, and Evelina's clothing returned to her worn jeans, snow pants and layered shirts. She shivered and pulled a blanket kept in the sleigh over herself.

What was she going to do for Christmas?

There were quiet festivities tomorrow at the Snow Palace, but she didn't want to be there. Her heart was waiting for her elsewhere.

"Can you—can you take me back to the cathedral?"

"It's on the way."

"No, it's not."

"I was taking the scenic route."

Evelina stared at Ded Moroz. With most of his face covered by white, curling whiskers it was difficult to make out his features, but she knew him. She could see the slight quiver of his mustache, the creases around his eyes.

"I'm Santa Claus. I know things."

"Do you know what color my panties are too?"

"I know the ones lying on your friend's floor were green with candy canes on them."

"What?" Heat flared all over her body and she stared at the man, who was effectively her boss, in shock.

Ded Moroz laughed and hauled the reins to the left, bringing the sleigh around a bend. Ahead of them the cathedral sat atop a hill, beautiful and lonely set against the twilight sky.

Evelina couldn't think of anything else to say. Embarrassment and nerves had her frozen in place as they rushed toward her destination. Her thoughts still weren't organized into any semblance of order when the sleigh slowed at the foot of the stairs.

Ded Moroz wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against his chest. She hugged him and inhaled the scent of gingerbread, evergreens, and Christmas magic.

A strange, unnatural warmth spread through her body.

Magic.

Evelina pulled back slightly and stared up at him.

What tricks were up his sleeve?

Ded Moroz winked at her. She knew better than to ask. Surprises were part of the job description for him.

She took a deep breath, climbed out of the sleigh, and stared up at the doors with their hand-carved designs.

"Evie."

She glanced over her shoulder at Ded Moroz.

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," she replied around the knot in her throat.

Ded Moroz slapped the reins on the horse's haunches, and they trotted off at an easier pace than they'd maintained through the festivities.

Evelina didn't know how long she stood there, staring at the doors, her mind empty of anything coherent. Her body felt strange, warmed on the inside, yet her toes

and fingers were chilled. Her mind and heart didn't know which way to go, inside or home.

One door cracked open, and Kameron stuck his head out.

"Evie? What are ye doing here?" He stepped fully into view. The medallion hung against his bare chest, the tartan kilt low on his hips, and soft, leather boots on his feet. He looked like one of the romance cover models the kitchen girls liked to drool over.

Evelina shook her head. She was a Guardian. She'd fought ice zombies, golems, dragons, and held her own against fairy born. She marched up the stairs, put one hand on her hip, and gave him her best smile. Kameron, in turn, swept her with his eyes from head to toe.

He moved faster than she could react, wrapping his arms around her and tipping her backward. He held his face inches from hers, but his hair brushed her face. "I like this better."

She flattened her hands against his bare chest and told her heart to slow down. "Me too."

Kameron slowly lowered his mouth to hers. As much as she wanted to dig her hands into his hair and force the kiss, she let him lead, savoring the anticipation. His lips were firm against hers, unyielding, strong, and consuming. She sighed and wound her arms around his neck, allowing herself to freely admit that this was where she wanted to be. Caught up in him, the passion she felt from him, and yes, the magic that flowed between them.

A dog barked, and sharp claws bit into her calf.

Evelina grunted and jerked her head around to see what it was. She stared into a pair of cool, blue eyes full of mischief.

"Maddox? What are you doing here?"

Kameron pulled her upright and kept her close to his chest. "Lad showed up a few hours ago. He's been keepin' me company."

She twisted away and went to a knee. Maddox thrust his head through her hands and butted her shoulder.

"Oof!"

Evelina sat back on the stone cold steps. Maddox took the opportunity to attack her face with his tongue. She chuckled and scratched the husky behind his ears.

Kameron crouched next to her and stroked Maddox's fur.

"You haven't shifted. Oh my gosh, it's freezing out here, and you aren't wearing hardly anything." Evelina glanced at the goose flesh that covered Kameron's arms.

"Let's get inside." He offered her a hand and pulled them both to their feet.

Kameron didn't let go of her as he pulled her inside the cathedral and shut the door. Instead of the massive tree trunk bracing the door, he placed a large plank of wood.

Maddox abandoned them for a pile of blankets on the hearth near the fire. It appeared that her dog had made himself at home in her absence. She was amused and more than a little comforted by the husky's approval.

"Is the medallion working?" She peered at the beaten metal disc hanging almost directly between his pecs. It wasn't a distracting view at all.

"Appears so." He leaned against the door and studied her in return. "How did Christmas Eve go?"

“Good. No one realized I wasn’t a true Snow Maid, Christmas went off without a hitch, and now we can rest a bit. At least as far as the preparations go. I think there’s some plan to confront Triglav or the Winter Fae, but I don’t know.”

Kameron nodded. “That’s good to hear.”

She rubbed her hands against her hips. Her heart was beating itself to pieces against her ribs, and sweat had broken out along her spine. She could hear his unanswered question echoing in her ears.

What are you doing here?

“I thought about you. While we were out. And everything I said before.”

Kameron went still, seeming to stop breathing even.

Evelina rubbed her hands over her clothing again and willed herself to use complete sentences. “What if I was wrong?”

“About which part, lass?” He crossed his arms and took on a relaxed pose that was at odds with the intent expression on his face. “Ye said an awful lot.”

“What if I was wrong about the reasons we shouldn’t be together?”

“If?”

Leave it to a yeti to back her into a corner.

“Okay, I think I might have been wrong. A girl can be wrong once in three hundred years, can’t she?”

“Lass, ye dinnae look a day over one fifty.” He winked, and a grin spread across his face.

“Ugh, forget it.” She rolled her eyes and turned toward the heart of the space, the yeti bed, food prep area, and hearth.

“Now lass, that’s nae way to be on Christmas Eve.” Kameron swept her up off her feet and carried her to the benches. He sank down, holding her across his lap.

Evelina tried to keep her glare in place, but she felt too many things. Hope. Nerves. Lust. Something warm and fuzzy.

“What if ye weren’t wrong?” he asked and pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“But what if I was?”

He shrugged. “I dinnae know.”

“I don’t know either.” She rested her forehead against his and began finger combing his hair.

They lapsed into silence. Evelina craved this, being with him. Maybe it was magic, or biology or damn luck, but she couldn’t deny what she felt.

He tipped his head back and closed his eyes. She continued to toy with his hair, running the back of her knuckles along his jaw, brushing his face with her fingers.

Fuck it.

Evelina pushed her hands into his hair and pressed her lips to his. Kameron’s hold on her hip and thigh tightened. He pressed his mouth more firmly against hers, suckling her lip between his.

They broke apart, each panting a little.

“I want to be wrong.” When she’d thought she was going to die, not being with him had been her regret. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice, not when she’d been given another chance.

He stared at her for a moment, and in his gaze she could see the beast within, the other creature who shared his spirit. It quelled some of her ardor. Accepting Kameron meant accepting the yeti. But it was the yeti who'd first saved her. She owed him her life.

"I'm not a normal man, Evie... I can't tell you I won't be the yeti, even with this necklace. I'm old, and human, and used to the wild."

She cupped his face. "I'm not immortal. I'm half-human. And I'm a little obsessed with Christmas. There is no 'normal' when you're dealing with fae. I realize that we're both old and stuck in our ways, but what if we tried?"

Kameron shook his head, and her heart dropped. She couldn't keep watching him. She studied the place on her knee where the fabric was wearing thin.

"I dinnae see a point in nae trying, lass."

Her chin snapped up. Kameron's dark gaze twinkled, and one corner of his mouth screwed up in a smile.

He slapped her hip. "Up."

Evelina was stunned, and elated, and still holding her breath, expecting to wake up. She stood and stared as he put a bowl of water and another with food on the floor. He grabbed her hand, and without an explanation, led her to a door that blended seamlessly with the wall.

"Maddox, stay," Kameron said over her shoulder.

She glanced over her shoulder at Maddox, turning in circles on his make-shift dog bed, happily settling down.

Evelina peered into the dim hallway. Or what she thought was a corridor. "Where are we going?"

Shouldn't they be savoring the whole idea of being together? Not delving into the recesses of an old church.

"In here." He led her a short distance down the hall and pushed a door open.

Evelina gasped and stepped over the threshold. A fire burned in a six-foot-long fireplace. The walls were covered in hand-painted tiles, most of them covered in gold paint that glittered in the candlelight. The ceiling was solid gold-plating with two chandeliers casting warm light in what she realized, at a second glance, was an ornate bedchamber. Even the four-poster bed was painted and gilded.

The wall across from the door had been cleared of furniture, and a Christmas tree, complete with antique ornaments, sat in prominence. She crossed to the beautiful tree in a daze and touched one of the papier-mâché ornaments with its hand-painted scene.

The idea of the Christmas tree was fairly new, maybe one or two hundred years at most, but she loved them.

"When did you do this?" she asked.

"After ye left." Kameron wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against his chest. "Wishful thinking."

Evelina grinned and turned in his embrace. "You want to try this?"

"Aye, lass. I do."

"That's good enough for me."

Evelina hopped up and wrapped her legs around Kameron's waist. He chuckled and gripped her ass, hoisting her up higher so he could devour her mouth. He carried her to the bed and laid her on the edge with her legs hanging off. His weight kept her pinned to the bed, not that she wanted to be anywhere else.

“Lass, I want to do things to ye.”

She threaded her fingers through his hair. “I can actually understand you now, you know?”

Her words turned into a moan as Kameron kissed his way down her neck, nibbling on the tendons and stroking the lines on her shoulder through her clothing. She ground her pelvis against his, seeking more friction, more of him.

“Oh fuck me,” she muttered.

“I think we’re getting there.” He cupped the apex of her thighs, and she squirmed. “I will make ye scream.”

“So do it already.”

“What? Yer impatient?”

“All the time.”

He chuckled, and his gaze went dark. “Then maybe ye should wait.”

Evelina’s jaw dropped. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“Call it a wager.” Kameron unfastened both sets of pants and pulled them off in one, smooth motion. He was getting practiced at this.

She perched her feet on the edge of the bed, knees together in an odd moment of modesty. Kameron dropped her clothing on the floor, gaze locked with hers. Nothing could have been more intimate. Her breath left her lungs, and the room began to spin around the center point that was Kameron.

Here was a man who didn’t have to ask anything of her, who could have pleasure with no repercussions, and yet asked for more. Kameron had lived a solitary life to save his family from the monster he’d become, and now he’d saved her on nothing more than the chance of being at the right place at the wrong time.

“Why were you out in the blizzard?” she asked before she could stop herself.

Kameron leaned over her, hands bracketing her shoulders. “Dinna, lass. Was restless. Tired of bein’ cooped up in here alone.” He ran his knuckles over her cheek, grazing the scar. Tingles of sensation shot down the lines of black ice to her chest, and she shuddered. “Looks like it was a stroke of luck. I found ye.”

“You saved me.” She reached up and ran her fingers along the stubble that had broken out over his jaw. The slight rasp sensitized her skin, and she wondered what it might feel like in other places.

“Aye. I did.”

Evelina hooked her arm around Kameron’s neck and pulled him down. He came willingly, parting her knees, and pressing her against the coverlet with his body. He treated her lips with care, gently pressing his mouth to hers. His hands dug into her hair and cradled her face. She coasted her hands over his shoulders, down his back, relishing how his muscles rippled under his skin, how they bunched and coiled under her touch.

All too soon, he pulled away. Shadows hid his face, but if the tented kilt were any indication, she wasn’t the only one affected.

“Now lass, nae distractin’ me.” He waggled his finger at her and flashed his teeth in a grin.

She pinched the tartan fabric between her toes and tugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Nane of that.” He pushed her foot aside and held it against the bed.

“What are you talking about?” Evelina tried to smother her grin, but it was impossible. Instead, she ran her other foot up his thigh. Was it her imagination, or was the tent getting bigger?

“Yer going to pay fer that.”

Kameron forced her legs open wide and sank to his knees. The light caught his eyes at the right angle, and they glowed, like any shifter’s would. A shiver worked down her spine. Whatever Kameron had begun life as, he’d changed. This Kameron was wild, dangerous, and gentle with her. Maybe magic had brought her someone as warped as she. Someone who could fully understand her and grow to love her.

She didn’t have the capacity to think about what he was doing just feel. Palms slid up and down her thighs, crossing the lines of black ice. Each time his caress passed over them, she shuddered a little, and the need inside of her grew. How had she been unaware of the erogenous capabilities of those lines?

“Yer wet, lass.” Kameron’s voice was low, rough, and full of the same kind of need coursing through her veins.

“That happens, ya know?”

“Oh, I am aware.”

“That’s good.”

“I was just wonderin’ how wet you can get without me touchin’ ye anywhere but here.” He traced the largest line over her thigh, and her toes curled. “Here.” He coasted over one of the tiny scars near the crease where thigh met hip, and she gasped, fisting the blanket under her. “Or here.” One of the lines ran right up to her labia, and he touched it with his fingertips.

Evelina bit her lip and tried to smother the groan building inside her chest.

“Dinnae fight it, lass.”

Kameron’s brogue was thicker, darker, and pulling her into some kind of sensual spell. She had the coverlet fisted and twisted around her hands. His grip on her thighs kept her open to his mercy.

“Look at me.”

Evelina’s eyes snapped open at the command. She swallowed back the, “Sir, yes, sir,” quip on the tip of her tongue.

He lowered his cheek to her thigh and scraped the hypersensitive line of flesh with his chin. She gasped and bucked under his grip.

Kameron chuckled and administered tiny kisses to the area he’d abused, but each kiss rasped with the touch of stubble. She squirmed and little moans escaped her.

“I need to see how wet ye are. Will ye let me?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded, more than willing to comply with whatever he wanted.

Kameron released her legs and used both hands to spread her labia open. She fought the knee jerk reaction to squeeze her legs together and instead hooked her calves around his thighs. If she could be a captive, so could he.

He murmured something she didn’t hear entirely and slid his fingers up the length of her pussy. She groaned and arched into his hands, begging for more.

“Yer awfully wet, lass.”

“And you’re being a bastard,” she growled at him.

Kameron merely chuckled and lazily ran his fingers through her folds again. “Nae reason to be nasty.”

“Well there’s not any reason to wait, is there, laddie?” She grumbled and glared at him, but secretly she enjoyed this. The exploration, the careful way he paid attention to her. It was new and different. Her *boyar* had never shown her half as much tenderness as Kameron, and she’d been with her fiancé for years.

Kameron tossed his head back and laughed. His chest shuddered with mirth, and damn him, Evelina giggled and grinned.

“Come here.” He grabbed her arms and hoisted her up to a sitting position.

She wound her arms around his waist automatically and kissed the scar that had changed his life. He smoothed her hair down, and she could feel his gaze on her as she bent to follow the scar down over his abdomen. Because she wasn’t above being sneaky, she gripped the back of his thighs and slid her palms up to the bare globes of his ass.

“My, my, what aren’t we wearing under that kilt, mister?”

“I dinnae know. Maybe ye should investigate?”

“Hm.”

Evelina removed the pin holding the kilt together and let gravity do the rest of the work for her. The fabric uncoiled and fell to the ground. She tossed the pin on top of the tartan and placed her hands on his very bare hips.

“Looks like laundry day to me.”

“Laundry day?” He blinked at her.

She chuckled. “Never mind. That one went right over your head. We’ll work on your pop culture knowledge. Later.”

Evelina circled the thick girth of his cock with her hand and pumped it slowly. She watched as Kameron’s face tensed, his gaze narrowed and unfocused. She repeated the motion, gripping him tighter, relishing the way his breath hitched. Turnabout was fair play.

“Lass—”

She ignored whatever he was about to say. It could wait, and really, she was tired of his instructions. Now it was her turn.

Evelina bent her head and pressed an open mouthed kiss to head of his cock. She flicked her tongue over the slit, and his hips jerked toward her.

Clearly he liked it.

Kameron gathered her hair at the nape of her neck and held it there. Since he didn’t seem to want to interrupt what she was doing, she cupped his balls with her other hand. She took him into her mouth, sucking in her cheeks. He thrust gently, words she couldn’t understand falling from his lips.

“Nae, lass,” he growled out, sounding very much like the yeti.

The hand at her nape jerked her to her feet, rough enough to send a thrill of excitement coursing through her veins. He kissed her with bruising strength. She dug her hands into his hair and jerked him closer, returning the treatment.

Kameron stepped back, breaking their hold and grabbed the hem of her shirt. He yanked it up and off, leaving them both naked.

She moved first, pushing him backward several steps to an ornate chaise lounge. His calves hit it, and he wobbled off balance a little. She laughed and pushed his shoulders. He grinned and let himself fall on the cushions. She followed him down, sinking into his embrace and kissing his neck, shoulder, whatever skin was closest. She straddled his hips, the proud jut of his cock bobbing between them.

“Nae, lass.” Kameron moved in a flash, flipping them around so he was on top.

“What the—?”

“I said ye’d wait.” His dark gaze sparkled with mischief, and she could have punched him for that, but she’d grown accustomed to his face.

“You’re cruel.”

He laughed and grabbed her arm, directing her over onto her stomach. Instead of doing exactly as he wanted, she got up on her knees, hands on the back of the chaise.

“Hm.” Kameron’s thick fingers prodded her opening, sliding easily through her wet folds and circling her clit. He gave her no warning before sliding his fingers deep inside.

Evelina gasped and went down to her elbows, thrusting her hips back to meet him.

“Fuck, Evie.”

“Mm, yes, please.”

He removed his fingers, and she moaned at the loss of him.

“Easy, lass.”

The feel of his cock against her was a welcome relief. Kameron notched the crown against her opening and reached around with both hands to fan his fingers out over the sensitive lines of black ice. She gasped, and he thrust into her slick channel. The room filled with a keening cry. It took Evelina a moment to realize it came from her.

“OhMyYeti,” she panted.

Kameron sputtered in laughter behind her and leaned over her shoulder, hands on either side of her. He rasped his chin over her cheek and nipped her neck.

“Dinnae forget it.”

“M-kay,” was all she could get out.

He withdrew and thrust, seating himself deeper this time. They breathed in time for a moment before he began a steady rhythm, pistoning into her body, driving their passion higher. She pushed back to meet him each time, the sound of their panting and flesh meeting filling the room.

Evelina screamed as her orgasm hit her like a punch to the gut. Kameron grunted, and his motions became rough. He gripped her hands tight and slammed deep, his body shuddering with release. He covered her, folding his body to meet hers, and hugged her.

The scent of evergreens permeated the air, coming from the tree too large for the space. The fireplace and tree were all she could see, but Kameron she felt deep inside her where no other had been before. It went beyond a joining of bodies; it reached past the physical, through magic to something she’d locked away years ago. Her heart.

•••

Kameron picked Evelina’s limp body up and carried her to bed. She wiggled under the blankets and turned toward him. Her face was different, more at ease, more beautiful. Something had changed between them, and he’d be damned if he didn’t intend to hold onto this with both hands.

He climbed in after her and pulled Evelina to his chest. They lay intertwined, neither saying a word.

A scratch at the door broke through the stillness. Rats? Most vermin stayed away from his “lair” as Evelina called it.

The door swung open, and Maddox trotted in, tongue lolling out to the side. He bounded from the floor to the bed at their feet.

"Maddox," Evelina grumbled.

The dog paid them no mind. He spun in a circle before flopping down across their feet.

Evelina turned her face into Kameron's shoulder and laughed. There was a sense of rightness, as if this was how he was supposed to live. He kissed the top of her head.

"Does he sleep with ye often?" he asked.

"Every night."

He snorted. "Guess we need a bigger bed."

"Maybe." She burrowed closer to his side and sighed.

"Evie, I want ye to know, that if ye cannae have children, I will nae leave ye."

She didn't reply for several moments, but he could feel the tenseness in her muscles, the utter stillness of her body.

"I can't carry a child to term. I got pregnant once, but it didn't stick. It wasn't until about fifteen years ago that a doctor could actually tell me why. My womb is so scarred that it can't hold a baby. I can't have kids."

The anguish in her voice was heartbreaking. She would have made a wonderful mother. He kissed the top of her head and hugged her tighter. It didn't change anything between them.

Evelina cleared her throat and drew little circles on his chest. "I have been thinking recently about adopting, though. There are a lot of children born here whose parents never adjust to living this far north and die."

Visions of little elfin children playing on the hills in front of the cathedral filled his mind, Evelina and Maddox chasing after them.

He liked it.

Maybe there was room for more than just her in his life.

Evelina propped her chin on her palm, gaze wary. "Is that too much to throw out there at once?"

"Nae, lass. It's a lot, but not too much. Ye would make a wonderful mum. I might need a little help, though." He tweaked her nose, and a smile spread across her face.

"Okay. I don't mean to go out tomorrow and adopt a kid, but later."

"Whatever ye wish, lass."

She crawled up over his chest and kissed him, pure joy radiating from her. And he was the lucky man who got to bask in her glow. If he got his wish, there would be many seasons full of this.

Epilogue

Four Months Later

Evelina shoved the sunglasses up on her forehead and glared at the sled making its slow procession to her doorstep. She pushed to her feet and placed a hand to her aching back. Kameron emerged from the cathedral doors, as if he'd sensed her movement, but then again, he probably had. Damn yeti senses. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pressed a kiss to her temple.

She tipped her head to the side and smiled. Kameron grinned as he'd been wont to do for the last few weeks. He was near intolerable.

Maddox dashed out to greet the sled as it eased to a stop, barking and wagging his tail.

"Evie, call off your deadly hound," Ded Moroz called out with a laugh. He still sank to his knee and scratched the dog's head. Maddox thrust his muzzle up into the old man's beard and wiggled his whole body.

"Serves you right." Evelina started toward her old friend, a mixture of joy and dread churning in her chest. She'd been putting this moment off, and it had come to her.

Kameron hurried to give her a hand down the stairs. The steps had been liberally salted, but Kameron was of the mind they could not be too careful.

Ded Moroz stood and spread his arms wide. Kameron let her go, and she walked into Ded Moroz's embrace, hugging him tight.

"Should you be doing that?" Ded Moroz laughed and held her gently.

"Shut your mouth, and hug me like you mean it."

He obliged her with a tight squeeze around her shoulders.

Kameron was there to shake hands as soon as they separated and gestured toward the cathedral. "Come inside."

"Thank you," Ded Moroz replied.

"What brings you all the way out here?" Evelina asked as they stepped over the threshold.

"I'm heading to the new council meeting. We've gotten almost all of the fairy groups to select a representative. I thought I would drop by and see how you were doing." The thread of humor in his voice clicked all the pieces into place.

Evelina wheeled on him, her hands on her hips. "You did this!"

Ded Moroz feigned surprise. "Did what, my dear?"

She thrust her finger in Ded Moroz's face and glared at Kameron. "He knows!"

Kameron merely grinned.

"Don't look so proud of yourself," she snapped at Kameron.

Ded Moroz held his hands up, grinning so wide she could glimpse his sharpened teeth through his beard. "Evie, I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

She wagged her finger at him. "Yes you do. That's not fair."

His face crumpled in laughter.

"Not fair!" And yet Evelina chuckled and smiled.

He winked. "I'm sorry, my dear. Comes with the job. May I?"

Evelina glanced at her stomach. "You can barely tell, but go ahead."

She'd watched pregnant women grow and glow, envying them the entire time.

And now it was her turn.

"I would know no matter what." Ded Moroz placed his palm against the swell of her stomach for a moment. "When are you due?"

"The twins are due in September."

"Hm." He winked at her again, and she knew what he was thinking.

"Congratulations are in order, I believe."

"How did you do it?" Evelina blurted. She'd turned over the hows of becoming pregnant, but modern medicine and ancient magics had both agreed before Christmas. She couldn't conceive.

And yet, she had.

Ded Moroz studied them for a moment. "It was the right time."

"What does that mean?" She shook her head, wanting desperately to understand. Was this a onetime thing? Could they only have these two babies? They hadn't even been born, and already both Kameron and she wanted more. They had a whole cathedral to fill with children, theirs and babies that needed a home.

"You're half-fae, Evie. Magic behaves differently around you. I've tried to help you before but my magic alone, even with the *pyha*, wasn't enough." He nodded at Kameron. "You needed the pull of magic between you. I think even the dissipating energy of the storm, all of it combined at the perfect moment to heal your womb."

Did that mean...?

She held her breath.

"Do you think she can conceive again?" Kameron asked when she couldn't form the words.

"I can't say for certain, but I think so." Ded Moroz's whiskers twitched, and the twinkle in his gaze just about drove Evelina crazy.

She blew out a breath, and tension eased from her body.

"Don't cry," Ded Moroz exclaimed, pulling her into another hug.

"Thank you." She clutched him in return, and felt the doors of opportunity opening up.

"No one else deserves it more." He kissed her forehead and held her at arm's length. "Though you might curse my name when you're wading through dirty diapers."

"We'll just bring them to visit then."

Kameron wrapped his arm around Evelina's shoulders. He was always touching her, and she found she didn't mind. She glanced at him and smiled, completely content with the unexpected direction her life had taken.

"Thank you, sir," Kameron replied.

"Evie, it probably doesn't come as any surprise that I will have to ask you to step aside, does it?"

Evelina shook her head and rested her hand against her stomach. “No, I was waiting until I was a little farther along. I didn’t want to jinx myself.”

“I don’t think you’ll have any problems,” Ded Moroz said with a knowing glint to his gaze. “By the way, I saw your father on Christmas. He asked about you.”

“What was he doing?” Evelina’s brow furrowed. Her father’s comings and goings were a mystery she would never figure out.

“He had a young woman with him—”

“Figures,” she muttered.

“—said she was his daughter he’d never met.”

Evelina’s brows rose. Another sister he’d lost? Was he trying to seed his own army? She shook her head and wondered where the poor girl was now. Maybe someday she’d meet this sibling of hers. It wasn’t as if there was a shortage of them to go around.

•••

Kameron stood back and allowed Evelina and Ded Moroz to say their goodbyes. Tension eased from his shoulders knowing Evelina could put aside her Guardian duties. It was something they’d discussed, or more accurately, Evelina had stressed over, and he’d listened and offered his opinions when she asked.

He still couldn’t figure out which of them was more shocked about her pregnancy, Evelina or him. Knowing the how and why still baffled him, but for once, he was grateful to the meddling ways of magic.

Magic had given him everything he wanted.

Family had once been the most important thing to him, and he’d lost it, only to find it once more in the most unexpected place possible. Hundreds of years in the future, in the heart of a magical land with a woman who wasn’t fully human. Their children were on the way, and there would be more. Whether they had more or adopted, or even a combination of the two, they were in agreement about wanting everything now that they’d found each other.

Kameron would never forget standing outside a wise woman’s hut on a frozen February night when Evelina was pronounced pregnant. They’d laughed and cried, totally shell shocked, for hours.

And they were happy.

He descended the stairs as Ded Moroz climbed back into his sled and wrapped his arms around Evelina’s increasing waist. She leaned against him and tipped her head back to smile at him.

“I love you,” she said, those words so sweet and simple.

He kissed her cheek. “Love ye too, lass.”

“Do you think we should start talking about baby names?”

“Aye, lass. What do ye think about calling the babes Christmas and Eve?”

She tipped her head back and laughed. “No, I am not calling our babies Christmas and Eve. I couldn’t say that and keep a straight face. What do you say when the kid asks why we named them that?”

“They were a Christmas present.”

“Yeah, that’s not awkward at all, yeti brain.”

“All right, so we’ll keep working.” He steered her back indoors, where he could better keep an eye on her.

“Hey, what do we have to eat?”

He threw his head back and laughed. If this was what the future had in store for him, he looked forward to the next lifetime of memories. With his family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It can never be said that Sidney Bristol has had a “normal” life. She is a recovering roller derby queen, former missionary, and tattoo addict. She grew up in a motorhome on the US highways (with an occasional jaunt into Canada and Mexico), traveling the rodeo circuit with her parents. Sidney has lived abroad in both Russia and Thailand, working with children and teenagers. She now lives in Texas where she splits her time between a job she loves, writing, reading, and belly dancing.

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THAT PEARLY DROP BY JIANNE CARLO

Étaín wrinkled her nose at Larkin's too-depictive command, but held her tongue until the three warriors departed. A stiff wind rattled the shingle attached to the shop into which he had disappeared. She hugged her arms, pretended a shiver, and mimicked a sneeze.

Cedilla gave her a sharp inspection. "Rory, run after the cart, and fetch milady's wool brat. Make haste and return to us. Did I not say 'twas too cold for that summer brat? Your da will have me whipped if you catch a chest chill again."

"Aye. You had the right of it Cedilla. I should have donned my heavy cloak. Forgive my stubbornness. Look, we are at the baker's pasty shop and his ovens fair heat the air. Wait here for Rory, while I warm my chilled flesh inside the shop." When Cedilla frowned down at her, Étaín added, "I will be but an ell away from you and the door is open. I will come to no harm."

Before her nurse could utter a word, Étaín ducked into the shop. 'Twas here she had seen him these past months, here and on the piers, but never had she dared enter when he was there

Shadows lay heavy in the hut's corners, but she ventured into the deep darkness drawn by his unique scent, man, the sea, and some arousing, unknown spice.

"Good morn, milady." The pasty maker's wife squatted to throw two logs under a brick oven. "What have you this day? Venison or swede pasty?"

"She will have one of each."

Étaín could not draw a breath when he stepped out of the shadows and into the flickering light of the oil lamp hanging from a rafter. His voice brought to mind an image of the giant oaks found in the Fathomless Forest overlooking Caul Cairlinne, deep timbered, gruff, and compelling.

He wore a raven-blue cloak pinned at his throat by a brass brooch in the shape of some mythical creature with wings, horns, and clawed hands and feet. A beast with ferocious features, yet she felt no timidity, no anxiety. Instead, her heart swelled and galloped fit to burst out of her chest.

She linked her fingers together to stop their violent trembling and gawked at him.

The dark hood concealing his features fell away. He took two great strides to the pasty maker's counter laden with steaming pies.

Étaín had memorized his face the first time they had stared at each other across the congested quay. The sun had woven its rays into the burnished chestnut of his hair, which fell in waves to the cusps of shoulders too broad to span in one glance. The bump in the middle of his nose spoke of battles long waged.

Dark brows pinched together when he drew coin from a purse and tossed the round metal onto the wooden counter.

The pasty maker's wife wrapped two pies in a large green leaf and handed them to him.

He spun around.

She marveled at the poetry of the way he moved, all animal supple, arrogant, and contained, like a fierce dragon crouched to pounce.

“For you, fair lady.” He sketched a courtier’s bow and she wondered if he, too, was of royal blood.

“My thanks.” Étaín’s knees quaked and she blushed under his intense scrutiny. She accepted the pasties, balanced the broad leaf in one hand, and tore it in half. Concentrating on her task but aware he studied her every action; she divided the pies in two, folded one of each into a leaf half, and offered him the larger portion. “Will you break your fast with me, my lord?”

“I am yours to command, my lady, in any way.

FROSTBITTEN BY BECCA JAMESON

Adonia smirked to herself as she stepped into her little cabin. She’d leave the preening white wolf outside to pick his jaw up off the ground. Did that man seriously believe she hadn’t noticed him? What rock had he crawled out from under when he got up this morning?

Granted, she would admit one thing, he probably had an agenda that went far beyond anything she could conjure in her mind. He definitely had the advantage there. She doubted he popped out of nowhere without ulterior motives. But, he didn’t hold all the cards. Most importantly, he hadn’t known she was part wolf. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have stood there in plain daylight all cocky, watching her work.

She’d sensed him before he’d breached the ridge. And she’d known he was her mate before she saw him out of her peripheral vision.

His senses were top notch, as any snow wolf’s would be, but she had the added advantage of being half fey. She’d never met her father, but his blood ran thick in her veins.

The door opened at her back, as she knew it would. She didn’t turn from where she stood at the sink washing dishes, humming to herself. “Well, shut the door. You’re letting the warm air out.”

Shuffling behind her indicated the man had at least stepped inside. A snick sounded as the winter was closed off from them. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Good, she had humbled him. She had decided half an hour ago to take the upper hand in this . . . thing between them. Huge white male wolves in the wilds of Siberia could be very domineering.

Adonia wasn’t one to be pushed around. It was time to see what she was up against.

She turned from the sink and leaned against the short counter, crossing her arms under her breasts. With an intentional scowl, she narrowed her gaze at the newcomer and gave him the onceover from the bottom up, pausing an inordinately long time to take in his package on the way and making him squirm under the scrutiny.

She wasn't disappointed. The clothes he'd conjured up to shift in were a good choice—well-worn jeans that hugged his cock to perfection and a white V-neck muscle shirt that left no room for doubt about his pecs and abs.

Oh, hell yeah. You'll do just fine.

When she reached his face, she paused to study his expression. Regardless of her intense perusal, he was grinning at her, still trying to hang on to the upper hand. "Are you pleased?" His voice was deep, probably deeper than it would be if he weren't so aroused.

She could scent his need. It matched her own. And she knew he would be well aware of that fact. Neither of them would be able to conceal their desire for the other. It was the way of wolf mates.

"I could do worse."

His mouth dropped open at her shrug, but she couldn't hold her form. Before he could retort, she started to giggle. Her mirth relaxed his expression and broke the standoff. "Imp."

"Cocky Alpha."

Now *he* grinned. Thank God. She was beginning to think his face was chiseled into a scowl.

"Sit." She pointed at one of two chairs next to the fire place. She took the other. It was plenty warm in her tiny cabin, but she enjoyed sitting in front of the fire most nights, watching the flames jump around. It soothed her. She didn't need the heat—both sides of her heredity were able to withstand very low temperatures—but she still loved the feelings it evoked. Home. Hearth. Heart.

"How did you find me?" She still had no doubt she'd been "found" rather than accidentally stumbled upon.

"It wasn't easy. Why are you living so very far away from civilization?" She could feel his gaze on her, boring into her, but she kept her eyes trained on the flames.

"I didn't choose this spot. My mother did. Many years ago."

He glanced around, and then his gaze landed back on hers. "Interesting location to set up camp." He spoke as though she were only here for a brief stop. In reality she'd been here her entire life.

"Did my mother send you?" Adonia narrowed her gaze at him. How had he managed to find her?

He shook his head. "No. Your father."

"My father? You've spoken to him?" She widened her eyes. He'd managed to shock her.

The man laughed. His thick blond hair fell across his brow. His deep blue eyes burrowed under her skin. "I work for your father. I have for many years."

The admission made Adonia pause. Perhaps this man wasn't trustworthy after all. Nothing in his demeanor spoke of ill intent, but what little information she had about her father wasn't admirable.

"Your father gave me very few details. In fact, he failed to mention you were half snow wolf." He smiled, an endearing dimple popping out on both cheeks. "The vague directions he knew about your location made it difficult to find you."

"I'm wondering how he even knew anything about me at all. To the best of my knowledge, he never knew I existed."

“Frost knows everything. However, in this case he overheard some of your snow wolf family discussing the bastard child of his who’d been banished to live alone in the wild. Where is your mother? He expected me to find both of you. Please tell me you don’t live out here alone.”

How much could she tell this stranger? A man who worked for Jack Frost? It wasn’t really any of his business that her mother had raised her out here alone with very little assistance. “She went to town for supplies. She’ll be back tomorrow.” She narrowed her gaze, daring him to mess with her in her mother’s absence.

Suddenly, he chuckled. “Damn. I haven’t even introduced myself. I’m Zephyr.” He stood and held out a hand. “And I suppose I should at least verify you are indeed Adonia.” His grin was infectious. “Hate to think I’d drag the wrong woman back to meet her father.” His hand hung in the air, waiting for her to take it.

Adonia stared at his large palm, rough from hard work. She finally remembered her manners and tentatively reached her smaller hand toward his larger one. “You’ve found the right woman, but you’ve lost your mind if you think I’d let anyone *drag* me anywhere.” As her skin touched his, she sucked in a sharp breath. His warmth radiated through her fingers and traveled up her arm, filling her entire body with . . . peace. She jerked out of his grasp when something awoke deep inside her. Lust?

Although Adonia had met few men in her life and had limited experience with other people, shifters or human, she wasn’t ignorant. Her mother had raised her well, educated her both academically as well as worldly.

Zephyr chuckled again. “Perhaps *drag* was a poor word choice. I’m not in the habit of coercing women against their will.”

“Good to know.” She rubbed her hands on her jeans. She couldn’t shake the feelings he’d evoked just moments ago. She squeezed her legs together. Her sexual awareness had made itself known as soon as she’d first caught his scent in the wind, but now that he’d touched her, she was shaking with the desire for more.

STARRY NIGHT BY LEA GRIFFITH

Her wind pants were soaked. The white bear-hide sloughed off as much as it could, but not even it could prevent the freezing water from reaching her.

“Tik, to me!” She stuck the pickaxe deep into the ice in front of her and pulled herself to the tiny shelf above the water.

She’d made it. It became more hazardous each trip because she was losing her ability to withstand the brutal cold. As a child of Jack Frost she was half-fae and should have no issues with the cold. But the last hundred years or so, even her ability to create ice chutes on the waves had waned. Fear whisked through her, and she beat it back.

She glanced around and grabbed her hat, barely keeping the wind from snatching it off her head. Tiktok yelped, and she located him shaking water off his fur as he stood precariously on a ledge a few yards from her.

“To me!” she yelled, but her words were taken and flung to sea. The arctic blue fox took off, climbing higher on the glacier before he found a nicer spot to watch her make her own way.

A buzzing sounded above her, too different to ignore. She glanced up. The clouds above her roiled, tossed by winds that had become fiercer since she’d left her berg. Black mixed with gray and pure white rolled and writhed together, forming a beautiful combination the weak light only enhanced. Tal wished for her palette and easel, her brushes and canvas—she’d give anything to be able to paint the gorgeous scene above her.

Her eyes struggled to keep up with the frothy, windswept clouds as they combined and separated over and over in an orgy of cumulus ecstasy. Drops of moisture touched her face, stinging but redolent with icy benediction. Her eyes closed as the cold seeped deep, touching her heart and ironically warming her soul. For a moment she wasn’t Talini, the lost princess of the Inuit. For just a precious second she was simply Talini Frost—lover of ice and angel of snow.

A short yip and Tal’s eyes flew open. The winds growled. She’d not tasted storms earlier, but now the air sang with danger. As her gaze caught on the black clouds above her fear trilled as they parted, and the sun speared her eyes.

She pulled a glove from her hand and wiped her eyes before the tears could freeze on her face. She hastily donned her glove. Looking back up, amazement filtered through her, sharp and piercing, as an enormous ship descended from the heavens.

What. The. Hell?

A spaceship? Before she’d been jettisoned from Earth there’d been only a small effort going on to colonize space. The Space Shuttle program had actually been shut down, as NASA had struggled to come up with new and better ways to explore the solar system. They must’ve been hella busy the last three hundred years.

Then again, who’d thought a spell-weaver could send a person to outer space? Dread made her indecisive. What if they weren’t human? What if all the crazy-assed UFO conspiracy theorists had been right, and they weren’t alone in the great big universe?

Panic notched in her chest finishing off what the bitter cold began. Tal struggled for breath and dug her spike-toed boots deeper into the ice, wrenched out the pickaxe, and reset it. Getting to the top of the glacier became her sole motivation. But what would she do there with zero cover?

Think, Tal! Move, Tal! Go, Tal!

“Talini!”

What the hell? Had she conjured her name from thin air?

“Talini Frost!”

She stopped and lifted her gaze. There, at the top lip of the glacier, was a person — a really, big *person*. She amended that decisively—it was a male person, if the outline of the body was anything to go by. *Impressive bulge you’ve got there, hoss.*

Tal shook her head. Three hundred years with nothing but a fox for company—of course the first thing she’d key on was the bulge in his pants. She closed her eyes and gulped—*of course*.

The man reached down, offered a hand, and Tal struggled with indecision. Friend or foe? Had her mother or father sent someone for her? No, Cikuq hadn’t sent anyone for her. Frost maybe, but not mommy dearest.

She searched deep inside and made a decision. She had limited powers, and the truth was she had a leg up on this deserted planet. She'd damn well take his hand and find out his reason for being here.

She reached up and found her hand engulfed in an enormous, gloved hand. The man's strength was conveyed in his grip, and she couldn't contain the tiny thrill that ran through her. Heat radiated up her arm, melting a portion of her that'd been frozen for over three centuries.

No, no, no! Panic of an entirely different sort speared Tal.

He pulled her over the lip with an ease that spoke to the large muscles delineated with lust-inspiring clarity by his suit. The weird visor over his face hid his expression but his perusal was tactile. Tal shivered and inwardly cursed herself for it.

"Who are you?" she yelled over the wind.

The big male tilted his head and reached for her hat. She sidestepped the move and backed out of his range. He took a step forward and refused to let her leave his reach. Tiktok whined from nearby and brushed against her leg, the quiver of his body echoed in her heart.

Who was this man?

He reached for her hat again, and in a move that had her startled at his quickness, ripped it from her head, sending her hair flying in all directions.

He stilled.

His hand tightened into a fist before he unclenched and moved it toward her. He stopped inches from her head, and Tal made her move. She ducked and stepped past him, turned at the last minute, and elbowed him in the kidney before she moved away several feet.

The man went to one knee, holding his side. Tal grinned. *Gutter fighter to the end, my man.* He'd decimate her in a hand-to-hand, but she was quick, and she'd found most people were unwary because of her size. She'd had to earn her way in the Unseelie court and learned the art of war from Iomlán's bastard sons.

He struggled for several seconds and finally stood, removing his visor as he took a deep breath. His muscled chest rose and fell roughly, but it was his face that took her senses.

Beautifully sculpted mahogany, his lovely brown skin highlighted the planes of his cheekbones—a delicious backdrop to his full lips and gray-green eyes. He smiled, or maybe grimaced, but it displayed even, white teeth, strong teeth she wanted to rub her tongue across before she delved into that mouth.

Caribbean maybe? God, he was beautiful. Her hands itched for a canvas, yet even as the thought formed she realized he *was* the canvas, and her hands wanted to play, stroke, and mold his features.

Her breath hitched as his gaze met hers, and he cocked an ebony eyebrow. She went wet beneath her seal hide. Tal couldn't move. She'd never experienced this type of immediate lust. Danger whistled around her, and all she wanted to do was climb up the incredible specimen before her and allow his hard edges to cradle her softer ones. She almost moaned the vision was so intense. Instead, she locked her knees and gazed at him, her brain daring him to do anything else to taunt her responses.

And, of course, once the dare had been given life in her thoughts, the man standing before her put it into action.

"You are Talini Frost?"

His voice kicked her in the solar plexus. She was afloat in a totally new sea—one of desire and need. Deep timbered, richly exotic—his voice tugged at her heart and her womb. The sound of it was soul-destroying. She closed her eyes and tried to force moisture back into her mouth; it had all departed to her nether regions.

He cleared his throat, and Tal realized she'd been devouring him with her eyes. She couldn't muster any anger though—the man was simply too damn beautiful to be angry at him.

“Are you deaf?” Something wicked glinted in his eyes, and his mouth quirked up.

Oh, goody...there it was. Sweet, sweet anger. “I'm not deaf. Are you stupid?” Her stance widened in automatic response to his mocking.

He threw back his head and laughed. The sound rippled through her.

And just that quickly, the Inuit princess, who had been lost three hundred years ago, was lost again.

UNMASKING THE WOLF BY CHRISTY GISSENDANER

Long after she'd gone, the scent of Gina lingered in the air.

Luke sat alone in his stark office, heels kicked up on his desk, head turned to gaze out the window. It was late evening, the sun already sinking in the sky and lights beginning to appear in nearby office buildings. There was work he needed to do, yet he lacked concentration. All he could do was sit and remember how she'd looked.

Gina.

The memory of every beautiful woman from his past was eclipsed by her. He could recall his mate's face down to the tiniest detail. He remembered every single freckle, every glimmer of gold in her extraordinary red hair. Hell, he even knew the shape of her teeth. Everything about her was imprinted on his brain.

But all of that was merely physical. He ached to know more about her. Did she have a temper? Surely she did. Not to be stereotypical, but with all of that red hair and Italian ancestry, she had to be a firecracker.

Lips twitching, he lifted his hand to his face. Anticipation at the battle of wills to come built within him. He'd shaken her hand when she'd left. The scent of her was still on his skin. He inhaled deeply, the sweet vanilla and luscious musk bringing him to a state of agonizing desire. What would it be like when it was the scent of her lust?

It was ridiculous how much he wanted her. He felt like a three-year-old seeing an enormous ice cream cone and then having it snatched away. When Dominic led her away from him, it had taken all he could do to watch them leave.

One thought repeated over and over again inside his head. She was his. Amazing, but true.

He'd never considered seeking out his mate. His career and Laura's education had been his obsession since he was twenty-one. He'd wanted to get out of the hellhole he'd grown up in, the dilapidated shanty where they'd struggled to survive. An orphan

since his late teens, he'd done all he could to keep his sister fed and clothed. He hadn't considered having more out of life. But now the possibilities opened up before him.

His nearly obscene wealth had come about by accident. No one had suspected he would have such a head for business. But now there was something happening to him beyond his control. He hadn't planned for Gina, but couldn't envision not having her. Would she feel the same if she knew? Should he tell her?

His thoughts screeched to a halt. He couldn't tell her. Not yet. Until L-12 went to trial, he couldn't risk leaking the news. Dominic had only good things to say about his cousin, but what if Gina accidentally revealed their testing? No, he couldn't tell her. Too much was at stake.

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