

To Death

An adaptation of Andersen's "The Snow Queen"

Based on Disney's *Frozen*

Written by T. S.

Prologue

*"Your future is bleak. Your kingdom will splinter.
Your land shall be cursed with unending winter.
With blasts of cold will come dark art
And a ruler with a frozen heart.
Then all will perish in snow and ice.
Unless you are freed with a sword sacrifice."*

- An ancient Troll Prophecy as related to King Alfred II of Arendelle

Johanna

The people of Arendelle have a saying: "True love will thaw the frozen heart."

It is supposed to be a cheerful platitude, one that gives comfort to the weary and hope to the unsophisticated masses. Oh, yes, true love. Doesn't it sound so pretty?

The people recite this clever truism to themselves as they go about their day, as they sweep the snow from their front steps, as they chop their firewood, as they blow out the lone candle on their bedside table and fall asleep with nothing but a tangle of blankets to protect them from the encroaching darkness. All of them know the saying, and yet no one thinks to ask the obvious question.

Maybe the heart is better off frozen.

A crash sounds from somewhere below me, the sound of ice shattering into fragments.

"Kai," I shout. "Idiot boy, come here at once!"

Kai appears from behind a wall of iridescent ice. He stares up at me with wide, empty eyes. He doesn't speak. He rarely does, unless I order him to.

"What were you doing back there?"

"Lighting the fire."

"Did you break anything?"

"I knocked over a plate, but I swept it up."

The incompetence I put up with. "Did you actually light the fire?"

"Yes."

I sweep past him without investigating. Kai is usually trustworthy, and I have every reason to believe he has done as he was told. Besides, I hate being in the same room as fire. I only light it for guests.

There is a pounding at the door. It causes the ice crystals to reverberate in the main hall, and high above me the frozen chandelier begins to sing. I take a moment to enjoy it, the song of the ice echoing through me. I reach a hand to the sky. We are connected, the ice and I. I can feel it weaving between my fingertips, resonating to my core. I squeeze my hand into a fist, crushing the invisible vibrations, and the ice stops singing. I smile. There is something satisfying about killing the song. About how quiet the room suddenly goes.

Kai is still standing there. Silent as the ice crystals.

"The goblin emissaries are here," I say. "Go set the table. Try not to drop anything this time."

Gerda

It has been six months to the day since Kai vanished. I miss him dreadfully.

I am sitting in the window box outside my bedroom, surrounded by a cluster of flowers that spill out of their pots like a billowing green cloud. A little bee bumbles from one daffodil to another. I look away. I do not want to think of bees and their queens. It reminds me of a story Kai's grandmother told us, back when Kai used to listen to his grandmother.

In the corner of my window box sits a rose bush. I look at the place where Kai's rose bush used to sit in the window box across from mine. The empty spot from which Kai tore it is still there, a splotch of dark earth among the green.

For twelve years of my life, Kai lived next door to me. We both lived with our grandmothers—our parents died in the Goblin Wars. Our houses were so close that our balconies touched. In the summer, we could climb out of our windows and play together. Kai and I were not related, but he was in every way my brother.

Then everything changed.

"Gerda?" My own grandmother is at the bedroom door. "Are you alright?"

"Of course, Grandma."

I crawl back into my room. I'm embarrassed to be seen sitting in the place where Kai used to sit. As if I can fill in the space where he isn't.

"Some of your school friends are at the door. They're asking if you'll come out and play."

"Not today," I say. I sit on my bed. Grandma steps inside and wipes her hands on an already flour-covered apron. Grandma is constantly baking, and she always smells of fresh pie dough.

"I know Kai's death has been hard on you," she says. She sits down on the bed next to me. "When I was young, I lost a friend to the river too. During the Great Snow of Queen Elsa's reign." She squeezes my shoulder. "It's never easy, but the memories live on."

"Thanks, Grandma." I embrace her in a tight hug. For a moment, we sit like that, until a burning smell invades the room.

"Oh!" she gasps. "My pie!" She jumps to her feet, then looks at me like she's not sure she should leave.

"Go save the pie!" I wave her away and giggle despite myself. Grandma leaves. I turn somber again.

Grandma has always been kind to me. Everyone is kind to me now, ever since Kai's death. They say it was a tragedy. They say he got lost in a snow storm, that he wandered onto the river and drowned under the ice. This would not be the first time it has happened, they say.

What would they say if I told them the truth?

That Kai isn't dead.

Johanna

The goblins are little men with pale pointy green ears and wide faces. They bring food and reports on the war. Nothing much to report. The illusion is working, they say, and they are slowly making progress on the war against Arendelle-Ciera. It would go much faster, they add, if I would just grant them an eternal winter.

"I have no reason to provide you with an eternal winter," I say. "I have told you under what conditions it would be granted, and you have yet to fulfill them."

"It is an impossible task," the head goblin mutters.

"Then try harder," I say.

Beside me, Kai is gnawing on a reindeer drumstick. He seems hungry. How often have I been feeding him? I don't have to eat as often as normal people do—the cold sustains me. It is easy to lose track of the eating habits of common folk.

I cut a slice of reindeer with a knife made of pure ice. Everything in my court is made of ice. We dine at a table of ice, eating on plates of ice, using cutlery made of ice. I am something of an artist when it comes to ice. My early attempts were crude and unsophisticated, but now everything I make comes together with a flick of the wrist.

I wish I could lay claim to creating the Ice Palace itself. It is a feat truly worthy of a queen, an elaborate, intricate maze of ice tunnels and ice halls, wide cavernous ballrooms, dazzling in their opalescence, stairways bright as crystal and walls sleek as silver. How I would have been proud to create such a masterpiece!

But it was not mine. I found it like this. A secret paradise, empty and untouched. A tragedy to neglect something so beautiful. I took it in, I spoke to the ice and promised it companionship, and I made it mine.

The head goblin is babbling on about an illusion, gesticulating animatedly with his little pale green hands. Goblins are proud of their illusions, as if their pretty games of make-believe constitute real magic. Everyone knows that it's their cousins, the trolls, that possess real magical abilities.

"You are boring me," I snap finally. "If it is not relevant, I do not want to hear it."

I have frightened the second goblin. He drops his plate on the floor. It shatters. I sweep my hand across the table and the plate reassembles itself in front of him.

"Perhaps you will find this relevant," says the head goblin. He looks unfazed, and I am impressed by his nonchalance. I do not care much for heavy displays of feeling. "The mages of Arendelle-Ciera are trying to reassemble the Mirror of Opposites and revoke its illusion."

A few years ago, the goblins created a mirror that would show its viewer the opposite of the truth. They shattered it and scattered the pieces, fine as sand, across Arendelle-Ciera. The confusion caused by the pieces is what has allowed them to gain ground in the war. No one can tell what's real anymore. No one knows who is illuded and who isn't. It was a clever little trick.

"Revoke the Illusion?" I echo. "Is that possible?"

"Theoretically," he says. "Queen Elsa was collecting the pieces during her lifetime, unbeknownst to us. It seems that the mirror has been half-assembled already. If they find a powerful enough spell and succeed in breaking the illusion, the war is certainly lost for us."

"How tragic." I swivel my finger around the top of a goblet, making the ice sing. "Why should I care?"

"I think you know exactly why."

The goblin smiles. Damn that clever little green man.

"Assuming that such a spell exists," I ask in order to distract him from his minor victory, "is there a mage in Arendelle-Ciera strong enough to perform it?"

"That's questionable," he says. His pointed teeth are showing. "Queen Elsa would be strong enough, certainly."

"Queen Elsa is dead."

"And yet you believe the dead can return."

He is irritating me. Outside, the snow is falling thick and fast. The wind begins to howl. "Under certain conditions."

"Who is to say her death did not fulfill those conditions?"

The wind batters at the crystal walls, causing the ice to screech. My fists uncurl, sending shards of ice flying from my hands. They crash against the wall and embed themselves, protruding from the smooth ice like knives from a freshly killed animal.

"Unless it is pertinent, I do not want to hear another word about my mother." I rise from the table. "This meeting is over."

Gerda

I rise early. I am going to visit the river today.

I tip toe into my grandmother's room and plant a goodbye kiss on her soft cheek. She rolls over in bed but does not wake. I am not sure what I would tell her if she did.

Back in my own room, I open the window and say goodbye to the flowers. I have always been able to speak to flowers. Though it is an uncommon magic, it is one that my grandmother and I share. We can also speak to several birds, though she is far better with birds than I.

Kai used to like to hear me speak in the languages of the flowers. I taught him a little bit of the language of roses. He picked it up pretty well, though his accent was funny. When Kai grew sour, illused by goblin magic, he forgot the roses. He only mocked me for speaking nonsense words.

I lean out the window and inhale the scent of my garden.

'Goodbye,' I whisper to each flower in its own language.

'Goodbye, Gerda,' say the daffodils, the tulips, the sweet peas, and the hyacinths. 'Come back safely to us.'

My roses wish me luck.

'We hope you find your friend,' they say. I can tell they miss their friend too, the rosebush that used to rest across from them in Kai's window box.

'When I return with Kai,' I promise them, 'we will plant a new rose bush where the old one once grew.'

My roses rustle happily. I will miss them most of all.

I close the window all but a crack. Then I pause and look around. If the river has taken Kai, and I ask for him back, it will want something in return. I don't have much. A little bed, a wooden desk, a few dolls on a shelf and my clothes in the wardrobe. I open the wardrobe and pull out a pair of red shoes. The shoes are unscuffed. They shine like ripe cherries. For a moment, I hold them close to my heart. I can still smell the fresh leather. I don't want to give them up.

But I love Kai, and the river will love these shoes.

I set off down the street. I pray that the river has Kai. If he's not dead, and if he's not with the river, then the alternative is much worse.

Johanna

We finish what's left of the meal in silence. Only the sound of the storm howling outside. The second goblin glances nervously at the first one. He does not trust me.

Wise of him.

I finish the reindeer on my plate and order Kai to store the rest for later. Reindeer is not a pleasing dish. The meat is course, tough. I expect it was over-cooked, though time and again I have demanded for it to be rare.

When I was a child, my Uncle Kristoff had a pet reindeer. It had a name. Perhaps I am eating a thing with a name. A feeling flutters inside of my chest, like a heartbeat. I silence it. I don't care. Even if the creature had a name, I wouldn't care. Emotions are beneath me. They are tumultuous, messy things, bursting inside of you, exploding like hot magma when you least expect it. It is better to be frozen.

Queen Elsa taught me long ago that emotions are to be embraced. She was wrong. I picture her in the courtyard of Arendelle Castle, her long blond hair falling in a braid down her back. She waves her hand, and the gushing fountains freeze instantly into intricate, lace-like curls. They sparkle like diamonds in the summer sun. I am young. I try to mimic what she did to the fountains, but only a lumpy sheet of ice appears at my feet. Frustrated, I stomp on it, trying to shatter the ugly thing, but it only thickens and spikes. The jagged edges nearly pierce my copper-colored shoes.

She smiles and strokes my hair. "Love will thaw, Johanna."

"I don't love it." I stomp again. A spike shoots up to the sky. "It won't curl like yours."

"Don't give up, Sweetheart. I've had a lot more practice than you, after all. I had to learn the hard way how to love." She laughs, waves her hand. The courtyard becomes an ice rink. "Come on. Call Aunt Anna and we'll practice."

I don't think there's an easy way to learn how to love. It irritates me, to think back on her laughing when I was right all along. Love may thaw the heart, but it could not keep her from foolishly running after my father when she heard he had been killed. Embracing that emotion did not save her. It did not save my father. And it did not save Julian.

I am angry at the goblins for bringing her up in the first place and causing me to remember things that have no place in my life anymore. I raise the wind. A window at the far end of the hall flies open. The second goblin lets out a nervous yelp. I smile.

Kai appears at my side. He has moved the reindeer meat to a crystalline ice box where I keep all of the food the goblins bring me. Kai has done well.

"Go warm yourself by the fire," I say. He sits in front of the fireplace and warms his hands on the dying embers. The goblins take that as their cue to leave. They put on their black coats, button the brass buttons, wrap thick black scarves around their ridiculous ears.

The Head Goblin stops at the door and offers a little bow. "Your Majesty. We will return if there is any more to report."

"Very well."

"In the meantime, you might consider, ah, the possibility of an eternal winter. I know you have suggested otherwise, but ..."

He prattles on. They know the conditions under which I would consider exerting the effort. To suggest otherwise is sheer impudence.

"You might consider shutting your mouth," I say. I raise my hand, and the door slams in his face. An icy lock curls around the handles, locking him out. The curls blossom outward, like a flower. I touch the blossom. My chest flutters again.

I squeeze my fist, and the blossom shatters.

Gerda

The river is cold between my toes. I clutch my red shoes tightly in my right hand as I wade into the ankle-deep water. Tall grasses rustle at my feet and cling to my legs.

This river flows north for miles and miles, emptying finally into the fjord of Arendelle. Grandmother tells me that Arendelle-Ciera wasn't always one kingdom. A few years before I was born, our King Frederick of Ciera married Queen Elsa of Arendelle, and the kingdoms merged into one. Now we live in one big kingdom that stretches the length of the river.

The water is up to my knees. I shiver as the cold water rushes past me, but I press on. If Kai has been here, the river will certainly know.

I hold my shoes into the air.

"River," I say. "I bring you my red shoes, never worn. They were a gift from my father before he left to fight in the Goblin Wars." There is a lump in my throat. "I will give you these shoes in exchange for Kai. Please bring him back safe."

I mean to toss the shoes far, far into the middle of the river and watch them sink out of sight, but they slip from my hands. The tide pulls them back into shore.

Frustrated, I gather my skirts and wade back to shore. I pick up the shoes, shining still, but now sopping wet. I am not sure I have the strength to throw them again.

A little boat is moored to a dock not far from me. It is the perfect size for a twelve-year-old girl. I scamper over to the boat and climb in. I can take the boat out to the middle of the river and drop the shoes straight down, where no tide will catch them. Then I can paddle back to shore.

I lift the heavy rope that is holding the boat to the dock. Almost immediately, the current pulls me to the deepest part of the river. Once more, I lift my shoes.

"River," I say, "I ask only for Kai's safety." I drop the shoes. They hit the cold water with a splash. Droplets of water land on my skirt. I am satisfied. I have done all that the river could ask of me. Now all that is left is to paddle back to shore.

The boat has no oars.

I search under the seats, but the boat is so little. There is nowhere for oars to be hiding. I begin to rock the boat back and forth, hoping to use my weight to nudge it towards shore.

"River!" I shout. "River, let me go! I need to go home!"

The river does not hear me. If it hears, it does nothing.

A swallow flutters by in the trees overhead. It was a swallow who first told me that Kai had not died, who swore that he had been watching the river that day and Kai had been nowhere near it. I am usually good with swallows. I speak their language better than that of most birds.

'Swallow!' I call. 'Please help!'

This swallow is a stranger though. He does not take notice of me.

The wooden dock grows smaller and smaller at my back. The last thing I see before it falls out of view is the wink of red shoes, which have settled back onto the shore. I shout in frustration. How will I save Kai now?

Johanna

The goblins have gone. Good riddance. They are boring creatures and tedious conversationalists.

I sit on the throne in the upper hall, where the balcony looks out over the Northern Mountains. Their frozen peaks glisten even in the grey light of the storm. Outside, the wind screeches. The snow twists into a series of angry whirlwinds. I close my eyes, reach out with my mind, and send it spinning faster and faster. It's a game I play with myself. See how fast I can make it go!

I squeeze the liquid crystals into balls of ice and turn them loose. Hail the size of a tightly clenched fist breaks free of the whirlwind and spirals out into the night.

I can feel the place where the goblins are moving down the mountains. They form shapes that the snow beats against but cannot move through. I slow the wind in that area so that they can journey safely. I dislike them, but I want them alive.

Kai sits at my feet. The storm is too much for him. He shivers. I touch his forehead, and he stops.

I have grown fond of Kai. I did not expect to. I thought I might keep him for a week, maybe send him to the goblins after that. They are always looking for illused children to use as spies.

I came across him twice, quite by chance. The first time he ran, frightened. The second time I took him with me, though that was his own fault. The foolish boy had chained his little sled to mine as part of some game the village children played. I might have cut him loose, let him die alone in a frozen valley somewhere. Instead I brought him to my Ice Palace and let him stay. I can be charitable when the mood strikes me.

I could see immediately that Kai was illused by goblin magic. To ordinary folk, they say, shards of the Mirror of Opposites are indistinguishable from rain or snow. I cannot imagine how that can be. To those of us who can feel the snow— I say 'those of us' as though I am not the only one—the shards are obviously something other than ice. They feel all wrong. Wrong size, wrong texture, wrong flavor. Kai had a shard embedded deep in his heart.

Perhaps that is why he grew on me.

He is a clever little boy. He is silent until I call on him to speak, but then his thoughts come pouring out, spiraling around the room like a blizzard. He makes me laugh. That is a rare thing.

Sometimes, in my weaker moments, I think that if Julian and I had a son, he would have been like Kai.

It is pointless to think of Julian.

I raise a hand, and the wind slows. I reach deep, deep down the snow-covered mountains to where the goblins trek. I've changed my mind. I don't care anymore whether they live. I uncurl my fist, and a blast of icy wind slams into the little men. Their shapes slip and tumble down the hill. I laugh.

Kai, who cannot see what I see, laughs too.

"What are you laughing at?" I snap.

"Nothing." He averts his eyes.

The goblins lie still in the snow for a few minutes. Eventually, they climb to their feet and continue their journey.

Gerda

The river takes me far north, much further than I have ever gone. We sweep quickly through the town, which is still shaking off sleep on this quiet summer morning. I try to call out, but the few people I see are too far away to hear me.

Before long, the town is gone from view. On the riverbanks, milk cows meander across pastures, lazily chewing their cud. Sheep fill the air with their sorrowful bleating. Once, I see a brown mare sipping from the river, the shallow water beating ripples against her front hooves. She lifts her proud head and looks directly at me. Such a beautiful horse! I ache to reach out and bury my hands in her soft mane. But she, like everything else, gradually fades behind me. Even the farms grow sparse.

I have entered the uninhabited countryside that separates the two kingdoms. I catch glimpses of the dusty, broken road in between the woods and hills that roll around me.

Grandma says that when King Frederick and Queen Elsa ruled together, they built a road along the river so that travelers could move easily between Arendelle and Ciera. Once it was a busy,

well-protected trade route. But it has since fallen into disrepair. Today it is mostly empty except for highwaymen and a few brave caravans.

There is not a caravan in sight. I pray no highwaymen find me.

Having given up on escaping the current, I lay down on the dry bottom of the boat and watch the sky. I am thinking of Kai, of summer days when we used to rest on the hillside, the long grass tickling our feet, looking for shapes in the clouds. Half the time I never noticed shapes until he pointed them out. He was always cleverer than me, even before the goblins illused him. Maybe that's why so few people noticed that he had been illused.

"Kai is just growing up," they told me. They were wrong. My Kai would never make me feel stupid. Kai cared about me. Growing up couldn't change that.

In the winter, when the skies grew dark and the clouds held only angry shapes, we would stay inside and my grandmother would make us cookies. Or we would visit his grandmother, who would sit us down by the fire and tell us stories. It was from her that we first heard about the Snow Queen and the Goblin Wars.

It started with the ancient troll prophecy, she said. Long ago, the trolls warned that a ruler with a frozen heart would bring about unending winter and destroy the kingdom. Everyone thought at first that it would be Queen Elsa, especially after she caused the Great Snow in the first days of her reign. But once she learned to control her magic, Queen Elsa was a kind and generous ruler. When her daughter, Princess Johanna, was born with the same power, everyone had been prepared to give her the benefit of the doubt.

She betrayed them. She betrayed us.

The Goblin Wars have been going on for most of my life. No one expected the goblins to pose a real threat, but then a crafty old goblin created the Mirror of Opposites. The shattered pieces mixed in with the snow and the rain, and anyone who was caught in a storm could easily be infected. The shards sowed confusion and mistrust among neighbors. No one can tell who's illused. Except Queen Elsa, but she's dead now.

Queen Johanna might be able to tell, but she won't help us. She sits in the North Mountain and casts heavy snows over Arendelle-Ciera, stirring up pieces of the illusion and making it worse. Occasionally she comes down in a sleigh made of ice and rides through the streets, as if to remind us that Arendelle-Ciera is still her kingdom. A kingdom of ice and snow for an evil snow queen.

The boat has stopped. I sit up. The river has taken me to land. I clamber onto the sandy shore and kiss the earth, I am so grateful to be on solid ground.

In front of me a cottage sits, cozily nestled in the midst of a valley. The cottage is beautiful, trimmed in blue and white like icing on a Christmas cookie. In the distance, an orchard of some kind spreads across the land. What stuns me, though, is the garden. I have never seen flowers bloom so beautifully.

Summers have been colder since Queen Johanna took the throne. The eternal winter of the troll prophecy has not yet come to pass, but the flowers tell me that it used to be so much warmer. The sun used to be stronger, they say, feeding them with its heat and strength. They would bloom brighter, colors splashing across every garden, filling the world with their sweet fragrance. Often flowers say they're sorry that I could not see them in their full glory.

I have wondered what such a garden would look like. Now I imagine it would look something like this one.

A grey stone path leads to the cottage door. At the foot of this path I spy a rose bush. Yellow roses blossom, round and bright like the incandescent sun. The roses sing a joyful greeting to me, and my heart swells with hope. Perhaps it means nothing, and yet I can't stop hoping that it means something.

Perhaps the river has brought me to Kai after all.

Johanna

I stand knee-deep in mountain snow. My shoulders are wrapped in a white fur cloak, my feet laced in boots of ice, but the outfit is more for show than anything. The cold has never bothered me.

The sun is setting over Arendelle, gold and lavender sinking into dark violet and blue. During the summer, Arendelle glows in the soft evening light. It is picturesque, like a city in a snow globe just waiting for the ice to cover everything. I think of calling in a snowfall but decide against it. Let the people have their lukewarm summer. It is easier to call in a snowfall during the winter, when the winds are already moving in my favor.

When I was a child, King Frederick gave Queen Elsa a snow globe he'd bought in France. It was a stupid thing. The snow inside wasn't real. It felt dead. Anyone could tell that it was just bits of porcelain.

Queen Elsa loved it.

"Why do you like this stupid thing?" I said. I tried to move the fake snow, but it wouldn't obey me.

"Because it's a gift, Jo," she said.

"It's fake."

"It's only a symbol." She smiled. "It was given in love, and so it's dear to me."

"Hmph." I made frost appear on the window pane.

She rustled my hair, pale blond and plaited like hers. "Would you like a real one?"

I nodded.

Queen Elsa thought for a moment. Then she pressed her hands together. When she separated them, a ball of pure ice balanced on her open palm. It was rough and chipped.

"Blow on it," she said. I blew. The ball of ice became smooth, clear, and hollow. Inside glittered a tiny carved city made of ice. The city was covered in snow—real snow! Queen Elsa twirled a gold-ringed finger, and a base appeared beneath the orb. She set it on the windowsill.

"Do you like it?" she said.

I ordered the snow to move. It rose inside the globe and swirled around and around. My own tiny blizzard.

"I love it," I said. I let the snow settle. For years I kept the snow globe at my bedside.

When Julian left, I shattered it. I shattered everything.

The goblins have journeyed beyond the North Mountains. I can't sense them anymore. The range of what I can feel is limited to only a few miles. I can send storms much further, but I can't control them. Queen Elsa had a much further range. She was not better than me, of course, only more experienced. Except in one thing.

For all of my talents, I cannot make a snow globe.

Gerda

A woman answers the cottage door when I knock. She is about my grandmother's age, wearing a broad hat and gardening gloves. Her silver hair is tied back in a long braid. She smiles. I like her immediately. She looks kind, if a little sad.

"Is Kai here?" I say, breathless.

"Who?"

"My friend Kai. He's my age. He has brown eyes like me, and brown hair."

"Oh sweetheart," she laughs. "You're the first visitor I've had in years."

The hope drains out of me. I have been on the river for half a day, with no food, no water, the summer sun beating down on me. All for what? I begin to cry. Tears run down my cheeks and splash against the warm brown earth at my bare feet. The woman looks stricken.

"Don't cry, sweetheart! It's not as bad as all that." She opens the door. "Come inside. We'll get you fed and cleaned up. It will be alright."

Inside, the house is cool and dry. She fixes sandwiched for both of us and pours me a cup of goat's milk. Over supper I tell her everything, how Kai and I grew up together, how he was struck by a goblin's illusion, and no one would believe me that he was alive, and it's up to me to find him. I start to tell her what I think really happened to Kai, and the tears begin to fall again.

"I'm s-sorry," I stammer. I wipe my nose on my sleeve. "I d-don't mean to cry so much."

She smiles understandingly and strokes my hair.

"It's alright. You're afraid. We're all afraid sometimes. Can I give you a piece of advice my father gave to me when I was your age?"

I sniffle and nod.

"Conceal it, don't feel it. Don't let it show."

I wrinkle my nose. "'Conceal it, don't feel it.' What does that mean?"

"It means you can hide your feelings from others. Then you stop feeling them yourself." She pats my hand. "Imagine you're taking all those messy fears, shoving them into a bottle, and sticking a cork in the top. No one can see inside the bottle. There may be a storm raging under the glass, but all people see is the calm on the outside."

"I don't think I can ever stop missing Kai. Even if I try to hide it, the sadness is still there. How can I conceal that?"

"You can learn," she says. "It just takes practice." She stands up, goes to the cupboard. When she returns, she is holding a bowl of cherries. Bright red and ripe, like the color of my shoes.

"I was going to use these to make a pie," she says, "but I think we should eat them for dessert, don't you?"

I nod eagerly, but I wait until she plucks a cherry from the bowl and puts it to her lips before I take one too. I plop it into my mouth and bite down. It is so perfectly ripe, exploding with flavor, the right combination of tangy and sweet. Elated, I reach for another.

"You're very brave, going after your friend," the woman says. She rolls a ruby-red cherry between her gloved fingers before taking a bite out of it. "You remind me of my sister. When I was young, I ran away from home. Like you, she ran after me and brought me back. I owe her my life."

"What's your sister's name?" I ask.

She blinks a few times. "I don't remember." For a moment, she seems upset, like she's reaching for the memory but not finding it. Then she laughs. "Well. The things you forget when you get old."

I frown. How do you forget the name of the sister that saved your life?

I shrug it off and pop another cherry into my mouth. It is even better than the first one.

On second thought, it's not that odd, her poor memory. I've already forgotten the name of the person I've come here to find. I'm sure I'll remember in a minute.

Together, we polish off all of the cherries in the bowl. I'm sorry when they're gone. I have never tasted anything so delicious.

The woman sets the bowl aside. "I suppose you'll want to get going," she says.

"Why?" I say.

"I thought..." She looks at me, then down at the empty bowl, and back to me. "Didn't you say you had somewhere to be?"

I think hard. I can't imagine where else I would go when everything I want is right here.

"I think you're mistaken," I say politely.

"Well then. You may stay as long as you like."

That sounds wonderful. "Can I stay forever?"

"I suppose. I've always wanted a child to share my garden with," she muses. She holds out a gloved hand. "Come on, let's go outside and wash this bowl out in the hand pump."

I take the woman's hand and carry the bowl down the lane to the pump. The garden is beautiful, the yard bursting with color. I cannot wait to explore it.

I do go exploring later in the day. I greet all of the flowers in their own languages, and they say hello back. There is only one spot in the yard where nothing is growing: a grey patch of dirt at the foot of the stone path sits cold and empty. I reach down and touch the cold earth, puzzled. It seems as though something grew there earlier today, something important.

It's just I can't quite remember what.

Johanna

"Your Majesty," Kai whines. I slam my fork against the table, accidentally smashing a dent in the icy surface. We are eating leftover reindeer, and that already has me in a foul mood. Next time I see those goblins, I'll order them to bring me something other than tough, flavorless meat.

"Don't whine," I say. "You know how I hate it when children whine."

Kai clears his throat. "Your Majesty," he says. His voice is timid, but at least he is not whining.

"Better. Now what it is?"

"May I go? I need to find Gerda."

Not this again.

"Who's Gerda?" I ask him.

He looks at me blankly. He doesn't know. Neither do I. The question is an echo, a memory of someone he loved before he was illused. I can't fault Kai for this. Memories happen to the best of us.

I let my gaze drift to the fork I am holding, twirling it slowly, thoughtfully, in my fingers. Patterns of color dance and shift as it catches the light from different angles. Kai sits quietly, waiting for my response.

It is easy enough to distract Kai from his memories. I usually assign him an impossible task with the instructions to complete it before he goes. Once, I told him to find and pluck a real, live flower from the ice garden. Another time I ordered him to bring me the brightest snowflake on the North Mountain. After an hour or so of trying, he will forget why he wanted to leave in the first place.

I set my fork down. Its clinks gently against the table, the sound of ice against ice.

"First you must count every triangle that appears in my palace," I say. "Then you may go."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Kai leaps to his feet and runs out of the dining room. I continue my meal. The walls are covered in geometric shapes that repeat, blend, and shift in the changing light. There must be millions of triangles. Even I do not know the number. In about an hour I'll find Kai and tell him he can stop.

There is still a dent in the table where I slammed my fork only moments ago. I point a finger. A tiny jet of ice shoots out of my fingertip and fills in the gap.

When I run my hand over the table, it is smooth and even. The flat surface gleams up at me, unbroken. As if nothing had ever been remiss.

Gerda

The garden is missing something.

I don't know what it is, but I can feel it while I whisper with the tiger lilies, while I play hide and seek with the daisies, while I rest in the golden shade of the forsythia bush. On that first day, I tried to ask the flowers whether they feel the same thing. Their answers were vague and meandering.

'I once saw a bird fly far overhead, a black speck in the distant sky,' said the tiger lily. 'I tried to call to him, but we didn't speak the same language.'

'Daisies love the summer sun,' said the daisies. 'The cold frightens us.'

'If gardens an oasis be,' said the forsythia, 'what be the desert? And from whence do weary travelers come?'

'None of you have answered my question at all,' I told them.

I have not asked in the months since then. It has not seemed important. Aside from the sense of missingness, I am quite content. Why spoil something wonderful by asking questions?

Today I sit in the branches of a cherry tree. The cherry orchard is surrounded by mountains, a secret haven hidden away from the rest of the world. Usually the trees on the mountains are green and lush. Now some of them are starting to turn orange and yellow. The sky over them is heavy and grey. Fall is coming, and with it rain.

I hop down from the tree and patter back to the garden, where it is still sunny. I find the woman on her knees weeding a patch of flowers by the back door. She is wearing a broad gardening hat with flower pictures on it.

The woman has become a friend to me in the past months. She wipes her forehead with a gloved hand and smiles up at me. There's always something sad in her smile. I wonder if she feels it too, the sense that something's missing. I've never thought to ask.

"Rain's coming," I tell her. "I saw it on the mountains."

She shakes her head. "It never comes here."

"Never? How does the garden grow without rain?"

"I water it."

"You don't water the cherry orchard."

"I suppose it's fed by underground streams. I've never had to worry about it."

It's true that it hasn't rained since I arrived. I guess I haven't worried about it either. "Does that mean it doesn't snow either?"

"Doesn't what, now?"

"It doesn't snow if it doesn't rain," I say. "Does it snow?"

She looks up at me as if I've said something confusing. I'm distracted by a flower pictured on her hat. I know I've seen it before, but it isn't in the garden. The garden has every flower. How have I never seen this one?

It takes me a moment to figure out what it is.

It's a rose.

"Your garden has no roses," I say.

"I've never needed any," she says.

"But you used to have roses. By the front gate. When I first arrived, I asked the roses about—"

Kai!

I was looking for Kai!

I've been here all these months without even thinking of him. How could I have forgotten?

"You're being silly, Gerda." She laughs. She dusts off her skirt and stands up. "Let's go inside. It's time for dinner."

I don't take my eyes off of her hat. I'm afraid if I do, I'll forget the roses, and I'll forget Kai again.

"I made cherry pie for dessert," she adds.

We eat a lot of cherry pie. Especially when I ask questions. An idea starts to form in my mind. I look out at the orchard. Hundreds of ripe, red cherries blink back at me like angry eyes.

"I'm not hungry!" I stomp my foot. She frowns down at me. I didn't mean to shout. "I mean, I'm not feeling well. I'd like to skip dinner."

"Are you feverish?" She pulls off a glove and feels my forehead with the back of her hand. "Oh, sweetheart! You're burning up!"

I don't think my forehead is burning. I think her hands are cold—they're like ice! I could get frostbite just from touching them.

The woman slides the glove back on.

"You'd better get straight to bed," she tells me. I rub my forehead to warm it up, but I don't contradict her. This is exactly what I'd hoped.

The moment she falls asleep, I'm going to run.

I lie in the dark, staring at the ceiling and willing myself to think of Kai. Like the time before he was illused, when his grandmother first told us the story of the Snow Queen who sailed through the streets on a sleigh of ice and painted frost upon the window panes.

"Can she come in here?" I asked nervously. I edged closer to the warm fire.

Kai put his arm around me. "Only let her come," he said. "I'll set her on the stove, and then she'll melt!"

I laughed. I made no such promise back. It never occurred to me that I would have to protect Kai.

It seems to take forever, waiting for the woman to finish dinner and go to bed. Finally, I hear her footsteps moving down the hall towards her bedroom. A soft click sounds as her door swings closed. I climb out of bed and stare out the window at the moonlit mountains. I'll run straight for the trees and never look back.

I count to one thousand and listen closely to make sure she's really asleep. Then I tiptoe down the stairs and out the door. When I reach the stone path, I start to run.

And stop.

The rose bush sits at the end of it, blooming as if it were never gone.

'Oh, roses,' I say. I am trying to be cautious, but there are tears in my eyes. I've missed having roses.

'Hello Gerda.' The roses sound tired.

'Where have you been?'

'Under the ground where the flowers go in winter.'

'That's awful!'

The rose bush shrugs. 'It is what it is.'

'How did you return?'

They rustle uneasily. 'There is a strange magic here.'

That I figured. 'Roses, you've been underground where the dead dwell. Was Kai down there?'

'No. We saw many souls, but not the one you seek.'

'Thank you. Grow well.'

I bend down to talk to a few flowers as I pass, ask them if they've seen him, as if hoping they'll tell me the roses are wrong. I don't want to admit to myself that I know what's happened to Kai. Their answers meander the way flowers' answers do in this garden. They have nothing to do with Kai.

I've delayed for far too long. It's time to stop kidding myself. I rise and turn to leave.

Something grabs my foot and I trip. I gasp, thinking the woman has stopped me, but it's only the narcissus. The flower uncoils itself from my leg and stands tall.

'You didn't ask me,' it says.

My heart leaps. 'Do you know about Kai?'

'No, but I know about the most beautiful flower in the world, and that is myself.'

'Tell someone else, Narcissus!' I yell. The flower rustles, insulted, but I don't care. If the river doesn't have Kai, and the ground doesn't have Kai, and the birds and the flowers haven't seen Kai, then that only leaves one likely option. The snow has Kai.

I jump to my feet and run and run, ignoring the indignant calls of the narcissus behind me. I don't stop until I'm halfway up the mountain with the chill of the fall air on my skin and the icy rain on my face. The woman and the garden and the cherry orchard are far, far below me. I slow to a walk and shiver. Rain drips from my hair onto my shoulders. I can't cross the mountain in one night. I have to find a place to sleep.

It is past midnight when I come across a fat pine tree. Its fallen needles make a bed that is mostly dry. I crawl inside and fall asleep almost immediately.

Johanna

I wake to an angry pounding at the palace door. The ice catches the sound, sending it echoing down long, polished halls. By the time it reaches my bedchamber, it's been magnified into a deafening roar.

"Kai!" I shout. I sit up, shoving aside sheets of white eiderdown. "Go get the door."

There is no answer. I lift myself from the bed and throw off the remains of sleep. These days my sleep is mercifully dreamless. That wasn't always the case.

The spot at the foot of my bed where Kai sleeps is empty, his little white blanket crumpled up and tossed aside. Kai has already gone to get the door. My mood lightens. At least I can depend on something in this world other than goblins waking me at all hours to chatter on about this war that never seems to go anywhere.

The goblins didn't send word about a visit today. I hope it's them and not soldiers from Arendelle-Ciera. The soldiers have come for me a few times, storming up the palace steps with lanterns burning and swords drawn. They never make it past the front door. The men are no match for me, but I will be furious if they hurt Kai.

"Don't open the door to any soldiers!" I order.

By the time I descend the central staircase into the main hall, the door is already open. Six goblins stand in the hall, stomping snow from their feet and gawking at the chandelier on the ceiling. One is a whole head shorter than the others, though they are all pathetic little creatures. Only the Head Goblin, the one I recognize from before, looks comfortable standing in my doorway.

"Kai, shut the door already," I say. Kai pushes against the giant front door but slips on ice. I will not have my servants embarrassing me. I raise my arms and the ice doors slam shut of their own accord.

Kai looks down, shame-faced. He knows he's failed me.

"Six of you?" I say. I stand on the stairs with my arms folded across my chest. "Last summer there were only two."

"Last summer you nearly killed the two of us," the Head Goblin says drily. "I thought it would increase the chances of one of us getting home alive."

"Getting home alive was never part of our agreement."

Four of the goblins look about nervously.

The Head Goblin puts his long, spindly hands on his hips. "With all due respect, Your Majesty, your lack of curiosity is a disappointment. We have traveled all the way here unannounced, and yet you don't inquire about our news."

"Curiosity requires interest. I have no interest in goblin affairs."

"The news we bring today doesn't pertain to goblin affairs."

"Then what does it pertain to?"

"The spell."

"What spell?"

The Head Goblin fixes me with his beady eyes. "*The* spell."

I grip the banister tightly to keep a beam of ice from shooting out of my hand.

"You said it was impossible."

"And you said to try harder. We did."

Despite my efforts to contain myself, spikes fly out from beneath my fingers. They wrap around the railing, twisting into a jagged ring.

"No lies," I say, "and no illusions. If this isn't true, I will make sure that none of you get out of here alive."

"We know," says the Head Goblin, "which is why you can believe us when we say this is no lie."

The inside of my chest flutters, but I will it to be still. I descend the stairs.

"Kai," I say. "Light a fire for our guests."

Kai disappears into the guest room.

"Understand this," I say. "You are committed, all of you. You cannot disappoint me. You're in too deep to fail now." I raise a wind in the room just so they get the message. It spirals into a bitter whirlwind, biting cold. Two of them shiver. A third chatters his teeth. I lower the wind again. "So tell me," I say, "what makes you so sure you've found the proper spell after all this time?"

Five goblins turn in one motion to face the sixth. It is the short, fat one they're looking at, the one who has yet to unbundle himself. He unwraps his scarf, removes his tattered hat and coat. Then he lifts his squashed brown face to look up at mine.

This isn't a goblin at all.

It's a troll.

Gerda

I wake hungry. I've skipped dinner, and now I've missed breakfast as well.

I crawl out of my hiding place, being careful not to get mud on my skirt. My feet and calves are already caked in it. My clothes are clean but damp, and I'm not wearing any shoes. When I left home it was summer, but now I'm feeling the chill of the changing seasons.

I look to the sky. At least the rain has stopped.

I think briefly on the cozy cottage and the orchard of ripe cherries that I left behind, and my stomach growls. But I don't trust that food. The only thing to do is move on and find more. I start to climb.

After only a few minutes of hiking up muddy trails, I know I've made the right decision. In front of me sits a ligonberry bush, its dark red berries in full bloom. If the ligonberries are blooming, that must mean it's already mid to late fall. I need to get across the mountain and find shelter soon. Winters in Arendelle-Ciera come early and without warning.

I pluck a handful of ligonberries and pop them into my mouth. They're delicious but so tiny that I eat the whole handful before I realize it. I take another handful.

'Don't eat so fast,' says a voice. 'You'll make yourself sick.'

I look around. There is nothing nearby but trees and ligonberries whose languages I don't speak. It didn't sound like a plant's voice either. I look up.

A raven sits on a branch above me. He fluffs his wings and looks down at me.

'Did you say something?' I say.

'Don't eat those berries so fast,' he says. He says a few other words that I don't understand. I only look confused.

'Do you speak Raven?' the raven asks.

'No. My Grandmother speaks Raven, so I know a little from her. Mostly I just speak Swallow and Dove.'

'Then I'll speak to you in your language,' he says in Dove. 'I am called Onyx. What is your name, girl?'

'Gerda.' I pick up one berry at a time and put them slowly to my mouth. It is torture, I am so hungry, but he was right that I'd get sick. One time Kai and I found a patch of raspberry bushes and ate nothing but raspberries all day. That night my stomach ached something terrible.

'You're a very brave girl, Gerda.'

I shake my head. 'No, I'm not.'

'Yes. I saw you running from the valley where no birds go.'

'Why don't birds go there?'

'There is strange magic there.' Onyx cocks his head to the side. 'Could you not feel it?'

'I think it affects us all differently. It wouldn't let me leave.'

'And yet you left not knowing what the magic would do to you,' he said. 'That makes you very brave in my book.'

I wish I had as much faith in myself as this raven does.

'Onyx,' I say, 'have you see my friend Kai? He ...' It takes me a minute to remember details, but when I do it all comes spilling back. 'He is about my age with brown hair and brown eyes. He's been gone since last winter, but he's not dead and he's not in the river and none of the flowers have seen him. I think ... I think the Snow Queen has taken him.' I swallow. This is the first time I've admitted it out loud. I don't want it to be true. I am so afraid of the Snow Queen. Yet the moment I admit my suspicions, I'm glad I did. At least someone else knows in case I can't save him.

Onyx cocks his head to the side. He stares at me with beady black eyes. 'Maybe,' he says. 'Maybe not.'

'What do you mean by maybe not?'

He flutters down from his branch and perches on a rock next to me. I offer him a berry, and he pecks it out of my hand.

'My mate lives among Arendelle's Palace birds,' says Onyx. 'Just beyond these mountain. She tells me that young princess Ida has chosen a mate. He is a little older than you with brown hair and brown eyes. He arrived last winter from Ciera, carrying only a knapsack.'

'Kai was carrying a sled.'

'Perhaps it was a sled,' muses Onyx. 'My mate may have been wrong. I'll ask when I see her next.' He pecked a few more berries out of my extended hand. 'She said Princess Ida has had many suitors, but she was waiting for someone cleverer than herself.'

'That must be Kai,' I say, excited. 'He is dreadfully clever. How far is the Palace?'

'Not far by wing,' says Onyx. 'On foot? Several days.'

'Can you take me there? I need to see for myself that Kai is alright.'

Onyx nods his little black head in a quick, bird-like motion. 'I will take you as far as Arendelle,' he says. 'Because you're brave, and because you were kind enough to share your berries with me even though you're hungry.' Then he spreads his wings and flutters up into the waiting sky.

Johanna

I take a step back.

"What is this thing doing here?" I point at the troll. Its squashed nose and bright eyes gaze up at me as if mocking me.

"Relax, Your Majesty," says the troll in a squeaky voice. It lifts its stubby arms and spins in a circle. The air around it grows hazy. When it stops turning, it is no longer a troll but a goblin like all of the others.

"That was an illusion," I say. A very good one, to fool me. The troll-goblin nods. "What's it used for?"

"To fool the trolls, Your Majesty," says the troll-goblin. His real voice creaks like a door that hasn't been oiled in ages. "Instead of trying to recreate the troll spell from scratch, we decided to infiltrate the trolls and convince them that I am one of them. Get them to trust me enough to spill their secrets."

I scoff. I knew it was too good to be true. "That's such a pretty plan, but it means nothing. You wish to infiltrate the trolls and gain their trust? Such efforts could take years."

The troll-goblin grins, showing pointed teeth. "Yes, it did. It took five."

He's done it already. Clever, clever goblins. I never doubted them for a second. "So you got the spell from them? You know it?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"It's too complex for me to simply relay it to you. It would be like you trying to give me the ability to raise winds just by telling me how. Suffice it to say that I can cast it." He rubs his ear. "It will, ah, require a sacrifice on your part."

No one mentioned any sort of sacrifice. "What kind of a sacrifice?"

"You'd have to give of your life force."

I am quiet. The wind outside picks up ever so slightly.

"Isn't there another spell you can use?" I say.

The troll-goblin laughs, a sound like a cough. "Resurrection spells are not exactly a dime a dozen. It may be another five years before we learn of another. If there is indeed another."

"This isn't good enough," I say. I'm irritated at them. I wouldn't say I was hopeful, but it was the closest thing to hope I've felt in years. How quickly the goblins can disappoint. "What's the point of sacrificing my life?"

"Only a portion of your life," says the troll-goblin.

"A portion?" Snow is starting to fall from the ceiling. "What's that? Five years? Ten?"

Kai returns from lighting the fire. "The room is ready for your guests," he says.

"Go away, Kai!" I shout. "Just—go—somewhere." The snow is falling thicker. Kai knows danger when he sees it. He runs up the stairs and disappears into the upper floor of the palace.

"What did I just say?" I ask the goblins. "I warned you not to disappoint me, but you could not even handle that." I swirl my hands together, one over top of the other, creating a ball of magic. Five of the goblins back away.

The Head Goblin marches straight up to me. "Stop this. All magic comes with a price, and you knew that when you sent us to find the spell. You're really going to kill the only creatures who can possibly give you what you want?"

In response, I raise the wind. It whips my hair across my face. His ears flap back and forth. My hands are still swirling together. The power between them is growing.

"Magic has rules!" he shouts over the storm. "Those rules can't be broken, but they can be twisted! You'll find a way to twist these ones!" I am too caught up by the thrill of the storm to hear him. The wind screams like a banshee. Five of the goblins cower against the wall in front of me.

"Do you want to see Julian again or not?" the Head Goblin shrieks.

I look down at him. The wind is blowing him backwards, but his black beady eyes are steady as they meet mine. I release my hands. Daggers of ice fly from them, crashing through the walls on either side of me. The goblins flinch, even the Head Goblin, but the daggers do not touch them. I've decided to let them live.

The storm ceases. The wind is gone. One of the goblins shakes snow from his hair.

"You're right," I tell the Head Goblin. "Magic can be twisted."

The Head Goblin sighs with relief. He has tumbled backwards onto the floor. I conjure a wind to blow upwards and push him onto his feet.

"Let's talk," I say. "Tell me the rules."

Gerda

Up. Down. Up. Down. The carriage bounces to the rhythm of the horse's feet, which make a clop clop sound as they pound against the dirt path. The movement makes me slightly sick, but I hold it in. We are almost to Arendelle Castle.

It was Onyx who has gotten us here so quickly. The clever raven flew up and up until the mountains spread out like a map on all sides of him and he found the nearest road. We moved in that direction for several hours. When we hit the road, I walked along it until a horse-drawn carriage came up beside me. Luckily, the driver took pity on me, a little girl with muddy feet and no shoes. I told him I was trying to get to Arendelle to find my brother, and he promised to take me there. He let me sit next to him in the front seat while Onyx flew overhead.

'Alright down there, Gerda?' calls Onyx.

'Fine,' I say without much enthusiasm. I wish I were a bird. Then I could fly instead of riding in this bumpy carriage.

We turn a sharp corner, and the city comes into view. Forest-green turrets rise over walls the color of sugar cookies. The fjord sparkles a deep blue, and ships with white sails glide majestically across the water. The mountainside is covered in evergreen trees. I inhale deeply. The air smells of pine.

In the center of the city, Arendelle Castle rises towards the sky.

Before the Goblins Wars, or so I've been told, the castle gates were never closed. Queen Elsa and King Frederick would host balls decorated with ice sculptures and attended by royalty and commoners alike. Sometimes, during the summer, Queen Elsa would turn the marketplace into a skating rink for a day, and everyone would glide across the ice in their sun bonnets and summer dresses.

Those are the stories I've heard. Such things don't happen anymore. When King Frederick and Queen Elsa vanished, Queen Johanna fled into the North Mountain. Then the Goblin Wars began, and Princess Sonja locked the gates and placed guards at all entrances.

I wish that, if Kai were going to be a prince at this palace, he could have been here during those happier days.

The carriage comes to a stop in the center of Arendelle. I thank the driver profusely and hop out of the seat. It is good to stand on land again. He wishes me luck in finding my brother, and we part ways. I approach one of the guards at the gates.

"Excuse me, sir?" I say. "I need to go inside."

"Do you now?" he raises a furry eyebrow.

"My brother's in there," I say. "Well, he's my best friend, not my brother, but he might as well be."

The guard sighs. "I don't have time for this. Scram, kid."

"But—"

"I said go bother someone else!"

I run back into the marketplace. Onyx flutters down and lands on my shoulder.

'Now what?' I ask him.

'You'll just have to sneak past the guards.'

'How?'

'It will be difficult, but my mate will know how. She knows the ways of the Palace. Wait here.'

Onyx flies off in the direction of the Palace. I wait in the marketplace next to a fountain that no longer flows. Children play in the streets, and mothers bustle back and forth to do their shopping. A pair of burly men unload cubes of ice from a sled. I try to imagine this whole marketplace turned to a cheerful ice rink, but I can't. Easier to imagine an eternal winter.

If Kai is in the palace, that means he's not with the Snow Queen. It's strange, but I just assumed Kai had been taken. By river, or by death, or by snow. But no one took him to the palace to marry Princess Ida. He went there on his own.

Was I wrong about Kai being illused? Perhaps he was simply growing up and moving on, just as they said. Perhaps Kai left me for something better. Maybe I should leave him to his new life.

A pair of ravens land on the bare fountain next to me. One of them is Onyx.

'This is my mate, Swiftwing,' he says of the second raven. Swiftwing spreads her black wings and dips her beak into a curtsy. She says something in Raven that I don't understand. Onyx corrects her.

'My mistake,' says Swiftwing. 'Lucky for you I speak fluent Dove. Now, dear girl, Onyx tells me you are trying to sneak into the castle.'

'Yes,' I say. 'I'm trying to find my friend Kai. Onyx says he is married to Princess Ida. I only want to know for myself that he is happy, and then I'll go.'

Swiftwing nods. 'What you are asking is difficult but not impossible. Listen carefully. On the eastern corner of the palace wall, the first guard of the night watch always falls asleep.'

'Every night?' I say. 'What if goblins attack? Have you told Princess Sonja?'

Swiftwing shakes her feathered head. 'My trainer is off fighting in the wars. No one else at the Palace speaks Raven or Dove. I can tell no one.'

'If I can get into the Palace,' I promise, 'I'll warn them. What else must I do?'

'Wait until the moon rises over the mountain,' says Swiftwing. 'Then climb over that wall. There is a tree on the other side of the wall whose top branches touch a narrow ledge. You must climb up the tree and onto the ledge. The ledge will lead you alongside the top floor of the palace. You will pass five windows, but stop at the sixth. In the summer, the window is usually open

enough for a small girl to squeeze through. On the other side of that window sleeps Princess Ida and her prince.'

'That doesn't sound too bad.'

'It's not,' says Swiftwing. 'Except ... oh. I wasn't thinking. You don't have wings.'

'No,' I say. I hold up my arms, devoid of feathers. 'Will that be a problem?'

'It will be ok,' says Swiftwing. 'But getting to the wall might be a little more tricky for you than for me. You'll just have to swim across the fjord.'

Johanna

"The first rule of the resurrection spell," recites the troll-goblin. We have moved into the guest room, where a fire is crackling. The eight of us, including Kai, sit around the table where we spoke last summer. Kai is looking longingly at the fire, but I make him stay in his seat. "The body must be present, and it must be well-preserved."

"Both of those preconditions have been met," I say.

"Is it here?" the Head Goblin wants to know.

"Do you think I'd live in a mausoleum?" I snap. "I have some respect for the dead. He is preserved in ice in another location. I will bring him here if and when you are ready to perform the spell."

Two of the goblins look uncomfortable. I think they are still processing the idea that I might have some respect for someone.

"Rule two," says the troll-goblin. "The cause of death cannot have been a pierced head or a pierced heart."

"It wasn't," I say. "It wasn't either of those things." My own heart strains within my chest, but I can't let the goblins see me tremble. "What's the next rule?"

"That brings us to the sacrifice," the troll-goblin says evenly.

"Go on."

"The spell works by moving the life force from one person to another. This is done at the very end of the spell by transferring a drop of blood from the living person to the resurrected one."

"A drop of blood?" I say, skeptical. "That's all?"

"No. The blood just establishes a connection. Then years of your life are transferred to the resurrected person."

"Which does me no good," I say, "if I am dead and he is not."

The troll-goblin shakes his head. "It doesn't work like that. The spell splits the years evenly. So say you were fated to die twenty years from today. You would live for ten years. Julian would also live for ten years. Then you would both die, at the same time, ten years from now."

"You said the years can come from any living person. It doesn't have to be me."

"No," says the Head Goblin. "But they have to be given willingly. Magic depends on intent."

"So I've been told." I wonder how much life I have left in me. I look over at Kai. He is so little. I wonder how old he is. I've never asked.

"Kai, how old are you?"

"Twelve."

Twelve. He probably has, what, fifty years left? Sixty? "You are going to give your life to Julian," I say. It has to be willing. "Is that ok?"

"Ok," says Kai.

"Good boy. Go sit by the fire." He jumps up and runs to the fire. He rubs his hands together and blows on them, trying to warm himself. I will have to let him sit by the fire more often. I want him in good health.

"Now what?" I ask the goblins.

"Now we need time to prepare the spell," says the troll-goblin. "It must be done outside, under the light of a new moon. The next new moon is two weeks away. I can be prepared by then."

"Only two weeks?" I say.

"Yes. That is, if you think you can prepare an eternal winter within two weeks."

I had almost forgotten about my side of the bargain. "I can give you your winter whenever I please. Only do your job first."

"Then in ten days we'll need a place to begin setting up for the spell. Two weeks from today we'll need clear skies."

"Done. I will make sure the skies are clear."

"Very good," says the troll-goblin. "I can perform the spell, as I said. Clear the skies, bring the person you want me to resurrect, and bring the sacrifice. I will do the rest."

And it will be that easy.

Gerda

Remembering the plan is the easy part. During the day, I walk along the shoreline, trying to find the narrowest section of the fjord to cross. Kai and I used to swim all the time in the river, so I'm not worried about that. I know I'm a good swimmer.

Getting caught is what worries me. What if the guards see me and drag me to prison before I can even talk to Kai?

But I can't think about that now. I find a good spot, and then I hide in the trees nearby, waiting for dark. The scent of roasted meat wafts towards me from a kitchen somewhere, and my stomach rumbles. I haven't eaten since I left the cottage except for lignonberries and some bread that the carriage driver gave me. I didn't eat too much of it because I suspected it was all he had brought for himself. Maybe Kai will give me some palace food.

When the moon finally climbs over the north mountain, I'm ready. I tiptoe down the rocks and stand ankle-deep in the water.

Oh!

The fjord is so much colder than the river was.

I force myself to keep moving deeper into the fjord. By the time the water is up to my waist, my feet have grown numb. I pause to tie up my hair, vowing to keep my head above water. Then I start to swim, paddling slowly across the fjord. Even though it's not a terribly long swim, it seems to take ages. All the time my heart is pounding. I'm certain that a guard is going to spy me and cry out.

Nothing happens. I reach the rocks by the castle walls and scramble out. Frigid water drips from my hands and feet. I wring out my clothes as best I can. Then I let my hair down. I'm glad I tied it up. At least my head isn't too cold.

The wall is rough in places where stones have fallen out. The gaps are just wide enough for me to grip with my hands and feet. My foot slips only once, but I catch myself and keep going. I heave myself up onto the top of the wall and lie flat against it, peering onto the other side.

A small courtyard spreads out beneath me. I inch along the wall. I'm not sure how I'm going to get down. Swiftwing, who can fly up and down at her leisure, probably was not thinking about the drop.

Luckily, I spy a heavy wooden barrel propped up against the courtyard wall. If I lower myself onto it, the drop will not be far. I lower myself down slowly. First my feet, then my knees, then my torso, until my arms are stretched out above my head, fingers clinging to the top of the wall, feet dangling below me. My stomach is pressed against the rough surface. There is still a meter between my toes and the barrel. I will have to drop and hope the barrel is heavy enough to hold my weight.

I count to three and let go.

The barrel catches me. I land with a dull thud and freeze, thinking I might be caught, but no one heard my fall. There are several trees in the courtyard, but only one is touching the ledge on the second floor of the palace. It's a gnarled oak, reaching up to the sky with limbs coated in ochre and gold. I move quickly across the open courtyard and lift myself into the tree. At the top, I reach out and hoist myself onto the castle ledge.

I'm almost there, and still I haven't been seen. This might actually work.

From the ledge, I can look past the wall and see Arendelle spread out before me. Houses speckle the distant darkness with their glowing windows. Chimneys release warm grey smoke into the sky. To my left, the North Mountain rises up, dark and alone. I'm glad I don't have to go there after all.

The ledge is narrow, even for a small girl like me. I press my back and my palms against the cold stone wall behind me and slide across it, counting the windows I pass. The sixth window is open, just as Swiftwing said it would be. I duck inside.

It takes a minute for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. Two figures are asleep in a bed. I creep closer. The boy in the bed has his back to me, but the back of his head looks so familiar.

"Kai," I whisper. He doesn't hear me. "Kai!"

"Hm?" The boy rolls over and sits up. He blinks sleepily. "Who are you?"

"Oh, oh," I whisper. "I'm so sorry."

This is the right room. But that isn't Kai.

Johanna

The goblins are gone. I can feel their shapes moving down the mountainside, but I leave them be. The snow around them falls softly, and I have no desire to kill them. In fact, I've decorated the mountain with gentle flurries and beads of ice that cascade softly from trees, bending the branches towards the ground like crystalline weeping willows.

The goblins won't notice, of course. They have no eye for such things. But I will know that my mountain is beautiful. My heart is so light that it hurts and I have to press it down.

I've never liked memories. They are too strongly tied with emotions. Still, the ones that I let myself have are most often of Julian.

Julian's eyes were bright green, the color of the grass on the hillside. He loved summer days and sword fights and ice skating, but he loved me most of all.

Julian was the youngest son of the Palace Cook, two years older than me. We grew up together, running through the palace halls, getting in the way of servants, exploring those secret corridors that only children know. Sometimes my insufferable cousins, Sonja, Ivan, and Ida, would tag along, but mostly we outran or out-hid them. Those were our times, Julian's and mine.

I'm not sure when exactly our feeling for each other grew up. It seemed to happen overnight. The first time Julian kissed me, we were sitting on the branch of a pear tree at the edge of the palace orchard. I was so startled I froze the whole tree. Ice swept over the branches and crept into the leaves, weaving through their veins like a white lace. Julian laughed and plucked a frozen pear blossom from its stem. He tucked it behind my ear.

"It suits you," he said. "You'll be a snow princess."

"I'll be a snow queen," I corrected him.

"My mistake." He laughed and kissed me again. Those were happy times, when I believed in love.

Everyone said Julian would make a fine king consort someday. The fact that he was a cook's son didn't bother them. Arendelle-Ciera was fond of its royalty marrying for love. It was well-known that my Aunt Anna had married an ice salesman from Lapland. Queen Elsa and King Frederick married for political reasons, but Queen Elsa confided in me that she would never have married him if she hadn't known she would come to love him.

"And I do love him," she said. "Very much."

These are the idiotic ideas I grew up with. Love was touted as if it were the be-all end-all of existence. The goblins tell me this is still the case today. My stupid sixteen-year-old cousin, Ida, has just married a blacksmith's son from Ciera because she loved that he was so much cleverer than her. Honestly, it does not take much to be cleverer than Ida.

Julian and I were more practical. We decided to wait until we were eighteen to marry. We wanted to spend some time living our lives before settling down into being happily ever after.

As if living happily ever after had anything to do with real life.

Gerda

I suck in my breath, trying not to be afraid. This boy looked like Kai from the back. They could pass as brothers. But he is older than Kai, with a longer face and lighter eyes. A stranger.

I've broken into Arendelle Castle to talk to a stranger.

The boy who isn't Kai taps the girl on the shoulder. "Ida, wake up. I think I've been illused."

Princess Ida sits up with a yelp. She has messy red hair and freckles. She shakes her head as if clearing it, then looks at me. "No, Al, I see her too. Unless we're both illused."

"I'm not an illusion," I say. "Please don't call the guards. I'm looking for my brother. The royal raven told me he came here. It's just you look so much like him, and she must have gotten confused. I came all the way from Ciera, and I haven't eaten in days, and I just wanted to talk to you—him—you when I thought you were him. I'm sorry."

I wring my hands. I'm prepared to beg for my life, but Princess Ida switches on the lamp. "Did you say the raven spoke to you?" she asks. "Are you a bird mage?"

"Not exactly. I only speak Dove and Swallow," I say. "Usually I only speak to flowers."

"Amazing," she says. "The castle has never had a flower mage."

Al scratches his head. "How did you get in here again?"

"Did you do that by magic too?" Ida asks.

"No," I shake my head. "I swam across the fjord and climbed over the wall."

"The guards didn't stop you?"

"The ravens told me the guard would be asleep. He always falls asleep, they said, but no one here speaks Raven, so they've never been able to warn anyone."

"How perfectly dreadful!" Ida's hand flies to her face. She leaps out of bed and picks up a lantern. "We have to tell Sonja."

"Now?" says Al.

"Yes, now!" says Ida. She sticks a pair of slippers onto her bare feet. "What if goblins attack tonight?"

Al climbs out of bed but wraps a blanket around himself to ward off the chilly night air. Ida takes my hand. "Come on," she says, pulling me into the hall. I blink in the light. The halls are made of marble, decorated with gold and ivory. Candles line the walls, shining bright as day, and a plush red carpet spans the floor. My bare feet sink into it as we walk. It's soft and warm, especially after I've spent days walking across treacherous woods and cold stone paths.

Ida stops in front of a bedchamber door. She knocks. "Sonja!"

The door opens a crack, and then Princess Sonja appears. The older princess is several inches taller than her cousin. There is a red scar across her cheek, and her hair is dark brown, the color of soil after it rains. I drop to my knees before her.

Kai's grandmother told me that Sonja is the only daughter of King Frederick's oldest brother. He died in a hunting accident when Sonja was very small, and so the princess has lived with her cousins in Arendelle Castle for most of her life. Sonja is not officially the queen—blizzards seem to spring up every time a coronation ceremony is scheduled—but she was next in line after Queen Johanna turned against us. She has ruled Arendelle-Ciera for five years now.

"Who's this?" says Princess Sonja.

"She's a bird mage and a flower mage," says Ida. "She climbed in through the window."

"When?"

"Just now."

"Are you insane?" Sonja steps away from me. "You brought her straight to me? What if she's a goblin spy? What if she's illused?" She looks down the hallway. "Guards!"

I hear shouts and footsteps moving down the hall towards us.

"Please," I say quickly, "I'm not illused. I'm only looking for a friend who is. Let me prove that I'm loyal by helping you."

"How?" Sonja eyes me suspiciously.

"The ravens told me how to get in. They said there's a guard on the eastern corner who falls asleep every night. Nobody here speaks raven, so they couldn't warn anyone. I told them I would warn you."

"You might have approached us during the daytime."

"I tried, honest, but the guard wouldn't let me in."

The guards arrive, ten or so in all, holding weapons as tall as I am. Princess Sonja holds up a hand and they stop. I notice that her left hand—only her left hand—is covered in a thick black glove down to her elbow. She leans in and whispers something to the nearest guard. Half of them turn and leave, marching in formation down the hall. The other half stay.

"They're going to see if your story checks out," she tells me. "In the meantime, stand up and tell me about your illused friend."

"His name is Kai," I say. I rise to my feet. "He looks like Al, only he's my age and has a rounder face and darker eyes. We grew up together. He was like my brother. One day he started being cruel for no reason. Everyone else said he was just growing up, but I knew he had to be illused to change so quickly. Then one day last winter he disappeared. They said he was dead, but they were wrong again. He's not dead. The Snow Queen has him."

Ida gasps, "Poor thing!" and grabs Al's hand.

Sonja frowns. "Johanna prefers isolation. Why do you think she has him?"

"Kai told me about a moment two winters ago. Before he was illused. He said the Snow Queen stopped outside his window and saw him looking at her. She stared right at him and beckoned to him. He was so scared, telling me this. He said, 'If anything happens to me, take care of my gran.' I asked him what he thought was going to happen, but he didn't know." My lower lip trembles. "Now he's gone. Everyone else has given up on him."

Sonja's expression does not change, but she nods slowly.

"Johanna's started appearing in town with another figure in her sledge," she says. "I assumed it was a snow golem. It could be a child."

"We have to help," says Ida. "We have to send someone—"

"The moment we or one of our soldiers approaches Johanna, we're dead," says Sonja. "If she is going to be of any use to her friend, she must appear alone. That doesn't mean we can't help

you," she adds to me, "if you are who you say you are. It only means that the final leg of your journey must be undertaken alone."

As if on cue, the guards return. They disappear with Princess Sonja into her room. After a few minutes, Sonja returns.

"Your story checks out," she says. "The sleeping guard will be reassigned, and the raven will be rewarded. We will help you get to your friend. But," she adds, "you must promise not to climb into the castle through anymore windows."

I assure her that I won't.

"Then," she says. She yawns. "... let's get you some food and dry clothes. You can have the guest room over the West Wing. When you're ready, we'll send you up the mountain."

Johanna

Sometimes I think I must be crazy.

Frankly, I'm not sure. I don't think it would bother me if I were. I have long given up on caring what common people think of me. As far as I'm concerned, they're the crazy ones. Going through their days full of hot emotions that simmer under the surface of their lives, just waiting to boil over. Who can live like that? It sounds terribly distracting.

I prefer to be rational, unencumbered by common woes. Seated on my ice-encrusted throne, I can sit and think about fear and pain and death, and it doesn't frighten me at all. Even with my own memories, I can look back detachedly. No fear. No agony. No longing. None whatsoever. I have moved beyond that.

On winter days, Julian and I used to sit in the Western Corridor. It was the coldest room, and I could always feel the snow swirling on the other side of the broad windows. I would throw back the red velvet curtains, curl up on a window seat, and watch it fall. Sometimes I'd reach out with my mind and give the snow a push, but just as often I'd be content to let the flakes flutter down on their own.

It was easier, back then, to trust fate and let the snow fall where it may.

One afternoon in particular comes back to me often. Julian was next to me, practicing his fencing with a rapier I'd fashioned for him out of ice. In a few years, he would be given a real sword, a gift from King Frederick to celebrate our engagement. But on that day we were still too young, so Julian practiced with a sword I made of ice. He would lunge forward, slashing in a circular motion at an imaginary opponent. Then he jumped back, landing lightly on his feet.

I pressed my forefinger to the window pane. Lines of ice crystallized at its tip, spreading and intersecting, forming shapes like the diamonds and squares on a stain glass window. I shifted the ice from one pattern to another until it formed a picture.

Julian lowered his rapier and stared at the image that was slowly taking shape beneath my hand.

"Is that supposed to be me?" he said.

"Not everything is about you," I said. "But yes."

"Why is my chin the size of the rest of my head?"

I blushed. "I'm working with a limited number of ice shards. Just be glad I didn't make that one your nose." I made the shard melt, though, so that it would shrink.

Julian sat on the cushioned window seat next to me. "I'm only kidding, Jo. I love it." He took my hand in his and kissed it. "I'll frame it and keep it in my room."

I laughed. "No you won't. It would break the second you tried to move it."

"Then I'll frame it and keep it right here."

"It will only melt in the summer."

That's the downside to my power. Even the most exquisite, carefully crafted designs will dissolve in the heat. All ice melts eventually.

I trace my finger around the top edge of the picture. A thick line of white frost appears in its wake. "What would you do if something happened to me, Julian?"

Julian has picked up the rapier and is practicing again. He pauses mid-parry. "What?"

I trace a line of white frost along the bottom edge. "What if I suddenly melted away? Like the snow does. What would you do?"

"I don't know. Are you worried about melting?"

I laugh, carefree, and trace a line of frost along the right side of the picture. "Not that I know of. I was just wondering."

Julian twirls the rapier slowly in his hand. "I'd leave Arendelle. I couldn't stay here knowing I'd lost you." He switches hands, repeats the same parry on his left side. "What would you do?"

"The same, I guess. But I'd never let anything happen to you." I lift a hand to the sky. Snowflakes soft as feathers descend from the ceiling. "Wherever you go, I'll order the ice to bring you home safe."

I finish tracing the frame along either side of the two figures in the ice picture. They stand together, their hands interlocked. I point a finger at the ice and carve our names in the top of the frame. Julian puts his arms around me.

"It's perfect," he says.

"You like the chin?"

"I like all of it. The frame is missing something though." He picks up his rapier, swivels it until the point is hovering over the bottommost line of frost. "What should I write?"

"I don't know."

"How about 'True love thaws the frozen heart?'"

"Too cheesy."

"They will never melt our love."

I mime gagging.

"Wait, I've got it," says Julian. He carves a series of symbols carefully into the frame. Eight letters. One word.

'Eternity.'

"It's perfect," I say.

He entwined his fingers with mine, holding me close like the figures in the ice picture. We sit like that for the rest of the afternoon, Julian and I. Watching the snow, not caring where it falls.

Gerda

It's colder when I wake up. Ice has coated the windows in pretty frost patterns, squares and diamonds that criss-cross and overlap. I wonder if this is the Snow Queen's doing, or if the frost fell that way naturally.

Ida is standing at the foot of the guest bed, looking excited.

"Come on, sleepy head!" she says. "It's almost noon, and Sonja is calling for you."

I throw off the covers and jump out of bed. I don't want to keep the ruler of Arendelle-Ciera waiting. Al meets us in the hallway, and we walk downstairs until we reach the royal menagerie. The air in here is warm and moist. Birds of every size and color flit and flap from perch to perch. I duck as a large black bird takes off next to me, his wings beating loudly against the air over my head. This bird has a yellow throat and a beak of red, orange, and blue. I have never seen one like him before. I call out to him in the only languages I know, but he doesn't respond.

Sonja waits underneath the window with a man who Ida tells me is the keeper of the menagerie. Next to them on the windowsill, Swiftwing sits, preening herself.

"Thank you for coming, Gerda," Sonja says. "I need a translator." She gestures towards Swiftwing. "Is this the raven who warned you?"

"That's her." I nod affirmatively. "Her name is Swiftwing. And there was another—her mate, Onyx."

"Please tell Swiftwing that she and her mate will be rewarded for making Arendelle Castle a little safer. They will be made the official ravens of Arendelle Castle and afforded a prime spot in the menagerie."

I pass the news onto Swiftwing. She dips her head into a bow. Sonja is watching our conversation intently, and I wonder whether she believes that I really am a bird mage. Swiftwing, meanwhile, is positively delighted.

'Tell the Princess that I am honored,' says Swiftwing. She flutters her feathers happily. I do, and Sonja nods like she is satisfied. The menagerie keeper promises to get right to work preparing a place for them.

After that, we all sit down to lunch together, Sonja, Ida, Al, and I. I am both terrified and thrilled. I never thought I'd be sitting down to eat with the royal family. We eat in the dining room, where the servants have spread a white cloth across the red oak table. More servants bring out platters of smoked salmon, herring, and cod. We are surrounded by dishes piled high with steaming potatoes, corn dripping with butter, nuts in little brown shells, and fruits of all sizes, ripe and round and full of flavor. I bite into the lignonberries but leave the cherries untouched. I've had enough of those.

Ida is still impressed by the fact that I'm a flower mage.

"We should give you a job at the castle," she says. "We don't have enough mages anymore, what with the war." She bites into an ear of corn. "Can you say something in flower?"

I shake my head. "There has to be a flower in front of me."

"What about birds?"

"Same thing."

"What if it was a stuffed bird? Or a porcelain flower?"

"I don't know. I've never tried."

"Can you—"

"Ida, for goodness' sake, let her eat," says Sonja. Ida falls silent.

"When I've rescued Kai, I'll come back," I promise, "and you can show me some fake flowers, and I'll see if I can talk to them. Maybe I'll even teach you some of the language."

I've only known Ida for a day, but I've never seen her look more pleased.

Johanna

In those days, no one knew about the Mirror of Opposites. They didn't know about the illusions. People around the kingdom started acting strangely, but we didn't know why.

At first we thought it was a disease. We sent them to doctors, who found an irregular heartbeat but nothing more. The Palace Mages determined it was some sort of magic, but it wasn't a kind familiar to them.

No one thought to look at goblin magics. They had no reason to suspect goblins yet.

It was Queen Elsa who discovered that the mirror was the source of discontent. I was there when she did. The guards had brought Ruben, Julian's older brother, in front of the King and Queen for stealing a set of golden candlesticks. Ruben was a Bird Mage, smart and kind and careful. He wouldn't even fence with Julian for fear that someone would get hurt.

"Ruben, you're no thief," said King Frederick. "Why did you do this?"

"If your family needs the money," Queen Elsa added, "we'd be happy to—"

Ruben sneered. "Stupid woman! I didn't take them because I need money. I took them because I don't care what you think." He spat in her face. I leapt to my feet, hands already forming a snow ball, but the guards grabbed him first and started to pull him backwards.

"Stop!" Queen Elsa held up a hand, and the guards paused. She calmly wiped the spittle from her cheek. "Ruben, there's some kind of ice in your heart."

"You don't know what you're talking about," said Ruben.

Elsa narrowed her eyes. "Hold him still," she ordered the guards. She lifted her hand and let it hover over Ruben's heart, her face screwed up in concentration. For a moment, nothing happened. Then Ruben shouted, and a little speck of something flew from his heart. Elsa reached out and caught it between her thumb and forefinger.

Ruben dropped his eyes to the ground. "Forgive me for saying those things, Your Majesties. I don't know what I was thinking."

"It's alright," said Elsa. "I don't think you were yourself. Just don't do it again."

King Frederick nodded to the first guard. "Let him go."

"And bring me a box," Queen Elsa added, addressing the second guard. "One with a tight lid that won't let dust in or out." She held the speck of tightly in her hand.

"What is it, Mama?" I said, leaning in to look at the speck.

"It's glass, I think." She held it up to the light, examined it from different angles. "Glass with icelike qualities."

"I don't understand." Glass may shine like ice, but they are two different substances. It won't respond to an Ice Mage's touch.

She handed it to me. "Feel this, but be extremely careful."

I took the speck and rolled it around in my hand. It wasn't quite like ice. It was heavier, harder to control, but I could still control it if I concentrated. I'd never felt anything like it.

"We should examine the others who have been acting strangely," said Queen Elsa to King Frederick. "If they have glass ice in their hearts too, we may have found the problem."

King Frederick nodded. "Bring them here," he ordered the remaining guards.

She was right, of course. Every one of them did. Some also had glass in their eyes, which Mama removed too. Over time we started to understand that this glass followed rudimentary rules. Like ice, it could only embed itself in the head or the heart. If it stabbed a person somewhere else, the wound would sting for a while but eventually heal.

Unlike ice, it wasn't fatal. Instead it changed one's perception of the world. "Everything wretched seemed good while everything good seemed diminished," was how the formerly illused described it. Which is foolish, when one thinks about it. How could they know? Perhaps the illused are the ones who see the world as it truly is while the rest see only lies.

Either way, word spread that Queen Elsa and I were capable of curing the illused. The task of finding and removing glass shards fell to us, and it proved to be an impossible one. Not every illusion affected people as strongly as it did Ruben. Many were subtler, craftier, the changes harder to detect. We couldn't simply sit down and sift through every heart in the kingdom. Two Ice Mages didn't have that kind of strength.

One evening I found Queen Elsa out on the balcony, her face tilted to the sky. The clouds above her were swirling into a thick black storm, but no snow was falling.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"I wondered where the glass-ice was coming from," she said, not taking her attention from the clouds. "I think I know. Feel that." She waved her hand in the general direction of the storm. "It comes down from the sky during storms. There are tens of thousands of pieces up there."

I couldn't feel that many—my powers weren't that strong—but there were at least hundreds. I prodded at one with my mind, but instead of flying out of the sky it just flopped over, dead weight. Moving glass-ice is like trying to roll a boulder up a hill.

"Why is it there?" I asked. "Did one of us make it by accident?"

"That occurred to me, but I don't think so. It's more like..." She called a piece of glass-ice down from the sky. It sunk slowly until it reached her outstretched hand. "... it's like something big was made and then it shattered. See this piece? The edges aren't smooth."

I felt it with my mind. She was right. The edges were sharp, like it had been broken off of something.

"A lot of them were like that," Queen Elsa continued. "One of us would remember making something that big. I want to try to put them together. Maybe we can figure out how to fix it if we know what it is."

"We're going to need a lot more pieces," I said.

"Yes, we are," said Queen Elsa. She beckoned another piece down from the sky, plucking it out of the air when it got close enough. "We might as well get started."

"What, gathering all those pieces? That's impossible."

She smiled and beckoned down another piece. "Impossible things are always more possible than they seem."

I didn't know what she meant by that, but, being an obedient daughter, I agreed to help.

It became a daily ritual for her to call shards of glass down from the sky and lock them into an air-tight box with the other pieces. Maybe we would have succeeded if I'd tried as hard as she did, but I didn't. I hated calling the glass. It was slow, tedious work, and I almost always tried to get out of it. We were only halfway done when she left and never returned.

To this day I am never sure whether or not that's something I should regret.

Gerda

At the end of the meal, when I am happily stuffed to the point of bursting, Sonja asks Ida and Al to leave the room.

"I need to speak to Gerda alone," she says. Ida sighs dramatically, but she and Al leave. Sonja moves from her spot at the head of the table. She sits down in the cushioned chair next to me and folds her hands in her lap.

"That was nice of you, offering to talk to the flowers," says Sonja. "I think Ida wishes she were a mage." She sighs, like her thoughts are elsewhere. "She and Johanna were always fascinated by mages. They used to watch them work together. Sometimes I wish Ida had been the Ice Mage instead of Johanna, but ... " She dismisses the thought with a wave. " ... who's to say it would have turned out any better?"

"Ida knew the Snow Queen?" I say.

"We all did. We were friends once, though she was a different person back then. I'm never sure whether she doesn't remember or just doesn't care. You really plan to face her?"

"I have to. Kai is trapped on the mountain. Who is going to save him if I don't?"

Sonja looks down at the black glove on her hand. "You're right. Of course you're right. But you need to see something." With her free hand, she pulls off the black glove. I try not to gasp. Her left hand is blue and translucent. It's solid ice.

"What happened?"

"Johanna."

"She did that to you?"

"She did. The hand was an accident as far as I can tell. She didn't hit me in the head or the heart, and that's why I'm still alive." She traces the scar on her cheek. "This one wasn't an accident. I angered her, and she nearly killed me." She slips the black glove back on. "I showed

you that so you would see how powerful she can be without trying. You can't attempt to fight her. She'd kill you in a heartbeat."

I shiver. "I don't want to fight her. I just want to save Kai. If I die trying, well ..." I swallow nervously. I hadn't really thought that far ahead.

"I don't think you'll die though," she says. "I think you'll succeed."

I fidget in my chair. I'm not sure I'll succeed.

"Johanna's power depends on magic, but magic depends on intent. And your intent is far purer than hers is. For that reason, I think you'll have more luck than anyone. You and Kai have a good chance of returning alive."

She stands up. I take that as my cue to stand up too.

"I want to help you," she says.

"You do?" I say. "Why?" I didn't think Sonja trusted me. Permission to leave the palace was as much as I hoped for. I didn't expect help.

"Because I'd save my best friend too if I could." Sonja looks over at the window, at the tendrils of frost that creep across the panes. Then she looks back at me. "What do you need?"

"Boots would be nice," I admit. Sonja looks down at my bare feet and laughs for the first time since I've met her. She is pretty when she laughs.

"You'll have the finest boots in all of Arendelle," she promises. "Let me also give you a carriage to take you up the mountain to Lapland. Ask for Ida's parents, Prince Kristoff and Princess Anna, who live near the top of the mountain. They go up there to fetch ice this time of year and will gladly let you stay with them."

"That's more than I can accept—"

"Accept it," says Sonja. "That's an order."

That afternoon I am gifted with a beautiful gilded gold carriage, complete with a driver and a footman to travel with me. It makes me feel better to have someone to travel with. Sonja hands me a pair of golden boots lined with warm fur, and Ida gives me a soft muff to wrap my hands in. Sonja, Ida, and Al (accompanied by several guards) walk me to the courtyard to see me off, where Swiftwing and Onyx are waiting to say goodbye. Ida impulsively throws her arms around me in a hug.

"Come back and visit any time," she says.

I say I will. Assuming I make it back alive.

The carriage rolls out through the city streets. When I arrived, I had nothing but a muddy sundress and an empty belly. What luck I've had, to be leaving the city in such a grand fashion!

Onyx flies behind the carriage for several miles before the wind gets to be too strong and he stops, settling in the branches of an evergreen. He lifts a black feathery wing in a wave goodbye. I wave back. The carriage climbs on until Onyx's tree disappears from site, blending into the background. I turn my face forward, to where the tip of the North Mountain draws ever closer.

Hold on, Kai, I promise silently. I'm almost there!

I'm halfway up the mountain when the carriage abruptly stops.

Johanna

One month before my eighteenth birthday, King Frederick disappeared.

He was travelling east to the goblin's kingdom to negotiate a truce. The tension between our kingdom and theirs was not yet so bad. War was one of many possibilities, but everyone was confident that it would be averted. For that reason he didn't take many guards with him. This proved to be a mistake.

The king and his company set off down the road to Ciera, but they never arrived. What happened to them was anyone's guess. Some people blamed the goblins, but there were no signs of goblin activity in that area. Others blamed highwaymen. Arendelle likes to accuse me of letting the road fall into ruin, but even in those days it had its robbers and thieves. We waited months for news of Papa—a letter, a ransom note, anything. Nothing came. Mama and I sent out snow storms, thinking we might feel his shape in the swirling snow, but we found nothing, and it was too dangerous to keep trying.

Julian and I postponed our wedding. It wasn't something we talked about. We just felt this was a time for mourning, not celebration.

Then Queen Elsa announced she was going to look for him. She selected a team of guards and arranged for the servants to pack her things. I didn't like this. I was worried for her, of course, but I also knew that, while she was gone, I'd effectively be queen.

"Don't go," I said.

"I have to."

"No, you don't. I'm scared for you."

"If it was Julian out there, would you go?"

She had me on that one. "That's different. If I left, Arendelle-Ciera would still have a queen. I couldn't rule it alone."

"You'll be fine, sweetheart. I wouldn't leave if I didn't think you were ready, and your advisers can help if you get stuck. It's only for ... " She bites her lip and doesn't finish the sentence. Her eyes are far away. Then she smiles and smooths my hair. "I'll come back. I promise."

She left the next day. She never came back.

I waited. Arendelle-Ciera waited. She never should have gone. The kingdom was crumbling without her, and it had nothing to do with me. The people missed her. They missed the kingdom-wide balls, the ice skating, the hope she inspired. I did my best, I listened to my advisers, but I couldn't replace her.

After nearly a year with no word from either of my parents, the advisers said it was time to make me queen. Things with the goblins were growing tense, they said. Arendelle-Ciera needed a solid ruler to rally behind. They needed someone to unite under if things got bad.

"If we go to war, you mean," I said.

"Let's hope it never comes to that," they said.

It was almost certainly going to come to that. Anti-goblin sentiment was running rampant, and for good reason. The goblins knew my storms weren't nearly as strong as Queen Elsa's could be. Without the constant threat of a deadly winter hanging over their heads, they became bolder. They refused to negotiate. They taunted us. They owned up to creating the Mirror of Opposites but refused to help us retrieve the pieces.

I knew I wasn't helping when it came to the mirror. My storms kept stirring up the shards, sending them flying into unsuspecting heads and hearts. I pretended that the storms weren't mine, that we were just having a bad winter. The truth is I was losing control. Snow kept slipping out from between my fingers. Winds flew up around me, unbidden.

Julian and I spent a lot of time together in the weeks leading up to my coronation. He was the only thing that kept me calm. We would talk about how much the future had changed, or we would talk as if nothing had changed at all. We would tell stories, like the time we were visited by the King of Corona and Queen Elsa accidentally froze his favorite hat. Or we would sit in silence, saying nothing.

If I'd known these were the last of such moments with Julian, I'd have treasured them more.

The night before my coronation, Julian's grandmother fell ill. She'd always been sickly, but within a fortnight she grew worse. He found out the next morning.

"I have to go to her," he said.

"The coronation is hours away," I said. I didn't know how I would make it through without him. "Please stay."

"I'll stay for you," he promised. "I'll won't leave until the ceremony is over."

The coronation ceremony was beautiful, or so I was told afterwards. I just remember how surreal it was, how I expected Mama and Papa to burst through the door at any moment and berate me for taking their crown. It didn't feel like it belonged to me, none of it. Not the crown, not the ceremony, not the applause at the end when the chaplain introduced me as Queen Johanna of Arendelle-Ciera. I kept my eyes on Julian in the front row of the chapel. He smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

Julian, his parents, and his four brothers came up to me afterwards at the coronation ball to offer congratulations. And to express their apologies for leaving so soon. I waved away the offense and offered good wishes for the grandmother's health. Before Julian left, I caught his hand.

"Come back safely," I said.

"As soon as I can," he said.

The ball was all smiles and dancing. Sonja, Ivan, and Ida congratulated me twenty times as if this were some sort of personal accomplishment. Aunt Anna and Uncle Kristoff waxed on about how beautiful I was, "just like your mother at your age." A couple of the village children approached me, begging me to make an ice rink, and were disappointed when I said no. Truthfully, if I tried to make ice at that moment, I wasn't sure what would come out. Spikes or spines sharp as knives. Nothing suitable for children to play with.

From what I'm told, Queen Elsa's coronation ball ended abruptly when she caused the Great Snow. Mine went off without an apparent hitch. It ended happily, with everyone saying goodnight and departing for their respective homes and rooms. I think they were relieved that nothing had happened.

They should have known they weren't safe yet. It was too early for relief.

Gerda

"What's going on?" I call from inside the coach. There is no answer.

Rough hands wrench open the door and pull me outside. I stumble to my knees in the snow. A chorus of laughter surrounds me. A band of robbers stand in the snow, sneering down at me.

"What have you done with the others?" I demand, but before I've uttered the question I see what they've done with my driver and footman. They lie facedown in the snow, unmoving. I choke back sobs. Have I come all this way to be killed by robbers?

Above me, stars glitter like ice crystals in an unfeeling sky. A big, burly robber binds my hands and ties the rope to a tree. The rest of them start to divvy up my things one by one. One of the robbers takes my coat. Another takes my muff. A third takes my beautiful golden shoes. I wiggle my toes sadly. I'm barefoot again.

At least they'll probably kill me before my feet become frost bitten.

"What do we do with the girl?" says a small, skinny robber. He prods me in the ribs. He's hardly taller than me, but he has a mean look in his eyes.

"I guess we kill her," says the big, burly one.

"Her things are royal though," says the skinny one. He rubs his chin with his hand. "Suppose we keep her and hold her for ransom."

"Absolutely not," says a woman robber. She is bundled up in a thick hooded coat. I didn't know she was a woman until she spoke. "It's hard enough feeding everyone as it is. We don't need another mouth."

"I can work if you keep me alive," I say. "I can sew, and I can cook."

The woman snorts. "Fat lot of good that does us when there's no food."

"And I can—" I hesitate. I'm not sure I want them to know this. On the other hand, the knowledge won't do me any good if I'm dead. "I can speak to birds. And flowers. I can ask them where there's food nearby."

"You're a Mage?" The burly one looks impressed.

"Mm hm," I nod. The robbers murmur amongst themselves. Hope swells in my chest. They might actually let me live.

"A Palace Mage could be worth a lot," he says.

"She could be lying," says the skinny one. He pats the tree that my rope is still bound to. "Prove it. Ask this tree where to find food."

"I don't speak Tree," I say. "Only to most flowers."

The woman scoffs loudly. "And how convenient that no flowers grow on this mountain, so she can't prove anything. I knew it. She's lying."

"But you can't kill her!" A child's voice, high pitched and shrill, comes bursting out of the crowd. Seconds later, a little girl with dark skin and dark brown curls elbows her way through the arguing robbers.

"You!" she says to me. She plants her hands on her hips. "How old are you?"

"Twelve," I say.

"I'm also twelve. You will be my friend." She turns to the tallest robber of all. He steps forward. The way the other robbers part around him makes me think he is their king. "Papa, I want her to be my friend."

The robber king laughs heartily. "Of course, princess." He clears his throat. "The Mage will stay with us. Does anyone object?"

A few robbers scowl, but no one says anything. The robber king unties me from the tree and hands my rope to the little robber girl.

"Hold tight, Princess," he says.

"I will," she nods. She turns to me. "Don't run away, now, or I'll kill you myself."

"I won't," I say. Where would I go with no food, no coat, and no shoes?

The robbers climb back in to their caravan. The little robber girl climbs into the front seat, then pulls me up so that I'm sitting beside her. It is somewhat warmer in here where the wind isn't so harsh. The girl hands me a blanket, and I wrap myself in it.

"My name is Merla," says the little robber girl. "What's yours?"

"I'm Gerda."

"Gerda," she says happily. "I just knew we'd be friends. It's in our names."

I don't know what she means.

"Because they are spelled almost the same," she explains. "Gerda and Merla. We both have five letters, and the *er* and the *a*."

"Uh," I say.

Merla frowns. "You can spell, can't you?"

"Yes," I say quickly. I've studied it in school.

"Everyone thinks I can't spell," she tells me, "because they say I'm savage. But I can. I love to read. I have so many books. Do you like books?"

"I like books about flowers," I say.

"I don't have any of those," says Merla. She turns to her father. "Papa, I want a book about flowers."

"We'll find you one, Princess," he promises.

Merla turns back to me, her hands on her hips. "Tell me some things you've read about flowers."

I'm not sure what to tell her. Merla taps her foot impatiently. I've never met a girl this bossy. I start to list all of the flower facts I can think of—how high the daffodil usually grows, the best places to find bluebells, what time of year the roses bloom. All the while the caravan is slowly crawling up the North Mountain. I wonder what it would take to escape from this place. We are getting closer and closer to Kai.

And closer and closer to the Snow Queen.

Johanna

I am recalling why I am not particularly fond of memories. Once they start to sweep over you, it is almost impossible to get them to stop. They all come pouring out at once, like a waterfall, or a river that is rushing too fast for me to freeze.

The coronation ceremony over, I closed the door to my room. My eyes fell over the canopy bed with its lacy blue curtain, the tapestry on the wall that Sonja knitted for me two winter's prior, the snow globe on my nightstand. It looked exactly the same as always. Nothing had changed since that morning, nothing altered since this time last year when Arendelle-Ciera still had a King and a Queen. It struck me with horrifying certainty that I was queen now, that this was permanent, that Mama and Papa were never coming back.

Snow started to fall, spiraling down from the ceiling.

I picked up the snow globe and tipped it over. Real flakes of snow drifted up from the tiny ice castle inside, fluttering against the side of the globe like little white butterflies. I was angry, suddenly, at the snow globe, at the perfect little world inside of it, pristine and shining and so unlike my own.

I pushed a wind into it, sent the snow fluttering faster and faster. The air twisted within the icy orb, pounding against the ice castle until pieces of it broke off, one by one. I caught the sharp ice shards and sent them flying, spinning, crashing into the side of the snow globe.

The globe cracked and shattered. The wind broke free from its tiny prison and began to swirl around my room. I raised my hands and let it fly. It caught the snow, ripped down the tapestry, tore the fragile canopy in two. The window cracked, little fissures snaking across the panes like lines of frost. I send a jet of ice flying at it, and the glass exploded outward, the wind and snow flying outside and rocketing into the sky.

Dark grey clouds rolled in, blotting out the stars like ink. The storm grew and spread like a frost-ridden plague. The wind screamed, snow churning through the air, balls of ice sailing down from the sky and ricocheting off of windows and roofs.

I sat in my room, eyes closed, feeling my storm around me. I have never let a storm take me over like this. It feels so powerful, so free. Ideas swirl into my head and immediately burst into fruition. Snowdrifts as high as roofs. Done. Hale that falls up from the ground to the sky. Done. White horses made of snow and ice, icy hooves clattering from roof to roof. Done. Wind that lifts the water from the fjord into the air, where it freezes into a crystal whirlwind. Done.

Fate has pushed me to and fro, and I have watched helplessly, powerless to stop it. Tonight I am not powerless. Tonight I am the queen of the ice and snow. I go to the window, watch the world come alive as light flashes across the screaming sky. I can manipulate it as I please. My thoughts shape it, my words command it.

The storm is beautiful, and its mine.

Gerda

The robbers live in the ruins of what was once a castle. The stone walls are crumbling, the ceiling caved in. A whole band of them must live here, because the great hall is crowded with boiling fires, whining bulldogs, and men with stringy hair who leer at us when we walk by. I try not to look afraid, but I am very afraid.

Merla takes my hand and leads me through the hall and into a corner where a pair of straw mats lay squashed against the wall. Over a hundred pigeons perch in a cage nearby, their beaks tucked under their wings as they sleep. A little further on, a reindeer strains against the rope around his neck.

"These are mine," Merla says proudly, pointing to the pigeons. "I keep them in a cage, or they will fly away. And this is also mine," she adds, pointing to the reindeer. "If I don't keep him chained up, he will run."

She sits down on one of the mats and pats the one next to it. I sit down next to her.

"You're a Bird Mage, aren't you?" she whispers conspiratorially. "Tell me what the doves are saying."

"Right now they're sleeping," I say. "They're not saying anything."

Merla frowns. "Wake one up and make him talk."

I stand up and approach the nearest dove, perched at the end of the line.

'Excuse me,' I say.

The dove blinks awake.

'Sorry to disturb you,' I say. 'Merla wants me to talk to you, and I'm afraid she might kill me if I don't.'

'Are you a pet of hers?' says the dove.

'I guess I am,' I say. 'What is she like?'

'She treats us well enough,' says the dove. 'She's not so kind to the reindeer though.'

Merla jumps to her feet and flies to my side. "You're really doing it! What are you talking about? What is he saying?"

"He says you're kind to the doves, but not to the reindeer."

She laughs. "That's because the reindeer misbehaves. He likes to talk back." She pulls a little knife out of her pocket. The blade flashes in the firelight, and I take a step back.

"Don't worry," she says to me. "The knife isn't for you." She holds it up to the reindeer's throat. The poor animal trembles. "He makes the funniest faces when I threaten him."

It isn't funny at all. Merla giggles and puts the knife away. "Come on. Let me show you another thing that's mine."

She lifts the straw mat and pulls a wooden box out from underneath. From her pocket she withdraws a little key and sticks it into the lock. It pops open with a click.

The box is filled with books.

"I've read them all," Merla tells me. She holds up a thick red book. "This is a good one. It's all about adventures. Someday I'm going to go travelling too. I'll be an adventurer."

"Don't you travel up and down the mountain?" I ask. Merla scoffs.

"The mountain is all the same," she says. "I want to see something other than ice and snow." She hands the book to me. "Have you read it?"

I shake my head.

"Then sit here. I will tell you the story."

I stay for several days with Merla. We become something like friends. She is bossy and a little bit frightening, but she protects me whenever the other robbers leer at me or complain that I am a waste of food and should be killed. No one wants to cross her. She is fierce, but I come to realize she is also lonely. Merla has never known another child her age. For that, I'm sorry.

Always, though, I am looking for a chance to escape.

The dove that I spoke to on that first day still talks to me sometimes. He sees that I am distracted. One night, when all the others are asleep, he asks me why.

'I came to the mountain to rescue my friend Kai,' I tell him. 'Now I'm a prisoner. I can't help him at all.'

'Kai?' says the dove. 'You mean the Snow Queen's Kai?'

'You've seen him!'

'I was a free dove only months ago,' the dove says sadly. 'I saw Kai with her often. I never knew where he came from, but he is her pet, just as we are Merla's.'

My heart leaps and sinks at the same time. I start to cry. Kai is really with the Snow Queen, and now he's trapped as long as I am trapped.

Merla wakes up and rolls over. "Stop crying and go to sleep, or I will kill you."

I silence my tears, but I cannot sleep.

Johanna

The storm that followed my coronation lasted for three days.

On the third day, I woke up feeling better. I still missed Queen Elsa and King Frederick, but the loss had become bearable. I'd ranted myself out in the storm.

I had two thoughts going downstairs for the first time in three days. One, this was the second time in a row that a coronation ceremony had ended with a snow storm. Arendelle-Ciera was never going to want to crown another queen again. Two, my advisers were definitely going to kill me.

At the bottom of the grand staircase, a cluster of about ten people stood talking to a common woman I didn't know. Aunt Anna and Uncle Kristoff were among them. The woman was holding a little girl, and both of them were crying. Ida was the first to hear me come down the stairs. She nudged the others. They looked up at me, then quickly looked away.

That was my first hint that something was wrong.

"What's going on?" I said.

Sonja met me at the bottom of the stairs. She took my hand and pulled me away from the group.

"It was a bad storm," she said. She opened her mouth again, as if she were going to say something more, but she couldn't think of the words. That was unusual for Sonja. Finally, she covered her mouth with her hand. "It was really bad, Johanna."

I had never seen a bad storm. Mama and I had always been cautious. If one of us planned a storm, we warned the population days in advance. This was the first time I'd seen the kingdom caught off guard. "How bad was it?"

"People died."

"No." My hand flew to my mouth. That was back when I cared about people dying. In a few minutes, it wouldn't bother me anymore. "How many?"

"About a dozen. Jo..." Her face stayed calm, but she folded her hands in front of her like she was pleading with me, or with someone I couldn't see. "Julian was one of them."

"You're lying."

She would never lie about this.

Sonja goes on, her voice shaking. "That woman Aunt Anna is talking to, her daughter fell in the fjord. Julian went in after her. He saved her life, but he's gone, Jo."

I look over at Aunt Anna. She's crying. The woman is crying. The stupid little girl who fell in the fjord sucks her thumb. She won't meet my eye.

"Where is he?" I say.

"I—"

"Did they get him out of the fjord? Because if he's still down there, I'll freeze the whole thing just to find him. I swear I will, Sonja." I can feel my voice rising, growing hysterical. But it can't be me talking, talking about Julian's death, because Julian can't be dead.

"No, he's out."

"Bring him here."

"But his family wanted—"

"Bring him here. That's an order."

I sat down and waited.

His four brothers carried him in, covered in a shroud. Aunt Anna directed them to rest him on the settee in the sitting room. I hoped against reason that there had been a mistake, that I would peel away the shroud and find myself face to face with a stranger. But I folded back the white cloth and found Julian. He was wearing a brown tunic, his rapier at his side as always. I wondered whether he'd dived into the fjord carrying it or whether one of his brothers placed it there. His face was pale, green eyes closed. I touched his forehead. It was ice cold. Death is cold even to me.

I fell to my knees, pressed my cold cheek against Julian's, too numb for tears. How did this happened? I should have felt his shape in the storm. I should have felt him in the ice and thawed the fjord so that he could climb out. I could have, if I'd been paying attention. I had promised Julian that my snow would always keep him safe. Instead it killed him.

This was my fault. This, like the storm, was mine.

Ice seized in my bones and began to seep outward. This ice wasn't alive like my storm had been—this ice was still and dead. No movement, no light, nothing but dead, dead, dead, dead—

"JOHANNA!" Sonja grabs my arm. "Stop!"

"Don't touch me!" Ice shoots out of my hand and hits her square in the palm. She winces and clutches her hand in pain, but it didn't hit her in the head or the heart. She'll be fine.

"The walls—" she gasps. I look up. I hadn't noticed that the ice wasn't just inside me. It has seeped out everywhere, leaking through the walls, squeezing the beams, crushing the foundations under the floor. The room is less than a minute away from collapsing. Everyone else has backed out of it into the hallway. They're watching the exchange with terrified expressions, looking at me as if I'm some sort of monster.

Because I am.

I turn back to Julian, or what's left of him, thanks to me. Still covered in a thin white shroud. The man who was going to be king deserves to be buried in better. I lift my hands and cover him in a coffin made of pure ice. Then I carve designs on every side, interweaving patterns of diamonds and pear blossoms and swordsmen slaying monsters made of ice. Everything he was to me. Everything he was going to be. At the foot of the coffin, I carve a series of symbols. Eight letters. One word.

'Eternity.'

Sonja watches me work, still nursing her hand. Maybe I hit her harder than I thought, but I tell myself I don't care. I sweep out of the room without a word. There is nothing in the world that words can fix.

Then I run.

Gerda

The next morning Merla is in a better mood. She takes me over to where a woman is boiling a big pot of rabbit soup. The woman gives each of us a cup to take back to our mats.

"You were crying last night," says Merla. She doesn't use a spoon but tilts the cup to her mouth and slurps it. "Why?"

"It's a long story," I say.

"Tell me," says Merla.

I tell her all about Kai. About sailing down the river and getting lost on the mountain. I tell her about Onyx and Swiftwing, about Sonja and Ida and Al. I tell her about the Snow Queen, and how I have been sent up the mountain to find Prince Kristoff and Princess Anna. By the time I'm done, Merla's soup has grown cold. It's sitting forgotten at her side.

"You selfish girl, Gerda," she says. "You've been on an adventure all along, and you never told me."

"It's not much of an adventure," I say. "Now I'm here, and Kai is still trapped."

"Do you think I'd keep you here now that I know what you've been through?" Merla waves me closer. "I'll tell you a secret. This afternoon, the others are going out. Mama and I will stay behind to watch the fire. You can escape then."

"Will you distract your Mama while I sneak out?"

Merla laughs as if I've said something very funny. "I don't need to do that. Whenever Mama and I stay behind, she gets good and drunk and passes out. And look," she takes my hand and leads me over to where the reindeer is chained. He takes a few steps away from us. "This reindeer is from Lapland. He can take you there."

"How do you know?"

Merla says a few words to the reindeer in a language I don't know. He brays back at her.

"There," says Merla. "Because he says he will. I've offered him his freedom in exchange for a safe trip for you."

"You're a Mage too?" I say.

"I'm a lot of things. Today I am your friend who is helping you escape."

She pats me on the shoulder and smiles.

"You're a real friend, Merla," I say.

She waves away the sentiment. "Of course I am." We both sit down on our mats and watch the robbers as they wake and eat their soup for breakfast. Freedom is so close, and there's nothing to do now but wait.

Johanna

I run. Past Sonja, past the people in the hall, out the front door and onto the ice-covered fjord. Out here too there is ice over everything. The land, the fjord, the ships. The castle. The houses in the village. All coated in a sheet of dead grey ice. I can feel it thicken and twist, barricading doors and keeping everything inside. I raise a wind, and with it comes sharp chunks of ice, shooting out of the sky like falling knives.

"Jo!" Sonja has followed me outside. Why won't she leave me alone? "I know it hurts, but you have to stop. Arendelle can't weather another storm like this."

"I don't care," I say. But I do. I care so much that I don't know what to do. The feelings are blazing hot coals inside of me. Emotions burst into flames, each explosion raging hotter than the last. King Frederick, Queen Elsa, Julian, Arendelle-Ciera. I can't take everything that I'm feeling. I am going to burn to death in the middle of this ice storm.

At that moment, like an answer to a prayer from a forgotten god, something that isn't ice flutters down from the sky. I reach out my hand and catch it between my fingers, holding it delicately like the wings of a butterfly.

A piece of glass.

I know instantly what I'm going to do. I press the glass between my palms, letting my power form around it.

"Jo?" Sonja is watching me cautiously. She can't feel that the glass is something other than ice, but she's seen me pluck shards from the sky before. She suspects that it is what it is. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." Sonja moves towards me, but I shoot a jet of ice out of my little finger. A thin wall of shimmering ice forms between Sonja and me. On the other side, Sonja pounds at it with her good hand, but it's too late. My hands begin to glow from the force of the magic. I separate them just enough for an icy wind to form between them.

Then I slam the glass into myself. There is a sharp stabbing in my chest as the goblin glass wrenches into my heart.

Pain comes, white and hot. I cry out and double over, clutching my chest. My heart is still sputtering, struggling to beat, but the goblin spell will soon overcome it. In the distance I hear my cousin scream my name.

Then there is nothing. Silence. My heart is still. The inside of my head goes quiet. I look around at the icy fjord, suddenly so peaceful in its irrelevance. No burning, no screaming, no guilt, no fear. Just the ice, the beautiful ice, and the glass, and the exquisite freedom of never having to feel again.

I lift my hands to the sky, laugh, and let the hale stream down around me. Those clever, clever goblins. A thousand Julians could die now, and I wouldn't feel a thing.

Behind me, a crash. Sonja has broken through the wall of ice. She runs to me across the frozen fjord, her expression one of horror.

"You didn't," she says. "Please tell me you didn't."

It's irritating, Sonja's concern. As if she can't see how much better off I am now. As if she wants me to go back to holding all of that boiling, blazing pain inside. Behind her, Arendelle Castle stands, so quiet and majestic under its icy lock and key. I suppose I could go back inside, rule my kingdom as if nothing has happened. But feel no obligation towards Arendelle-Ciera. It's not my kingdom anymore.

I lift a finger to the sky and beckon. Two white horse made of snow lower themselves down from the clouds and land obediently at my feet. With a swish of my hands, I fashion a pair of harnesses and a white sledge. Rudimentary, but they will do.

The horses know what's expected of them. They ease into the harnesses. I stroke their jagged manes and climb on board.

"Johanna," Sonja whispers. She clutches the side of the sledge. "Please. There's so much ice. Don't let the kingdom die." Her left hand is turning blue, but she's ignoring it. I could laugh. I did that without trying. My power is stronger than I thought it was, after all. And now there's nothing to hold me back.

What else can I do?

"Silly little cousin." I reach down and stroke Sonja's cheek. "You have always worried too much. Would you like me to lift the ice before I go?"

Sonja nods. Relief is visible on her face. "Thaw it as much as you can."

"Of course I can." I laugh. "But thaw it? That wasn't what I said."

Sonja looks suspicious again. "What do you—"

I snap my fingers. The ice beneath us explodes. Millions of gleaming shards fly into the air over Arendelle as if a giant window into the earth has just shattered. The shards are sharp, uncontrolled. They fly into walls, into trees, into animals and people. A shard flies up and hits Sonja in the face, and blood appears. Sonja screams. The ice that covered the fjord bursts up from beneath her feet, and she plunges into the deathly cold water. Later I would learn that she survived.

I whip the snow horses, and the sledge lurches as they leap into the sky. Then I am flying alongside the shards of ice, catching the wind, spiraling higher and higher until the kingdom that's no longer mine disappears beneath the clouds. The ice is singing, but I hold up a hand to stop it. It grows still and silent, numb as the unbeating heart inside my chest. Far below, Arendelle is screaming in fear.

My horses sail on, unhearing.

Gerda

I dig my fingers into the reindeer's thick fur. The mountain is high, and the wind is cold. Snow flies at my face like spittle from the mouth of an angry giant. I was worried that as soon as we were out of Merla's sight, the reindeer would throw me and run, but so far he has borne me carefully up the slope.

The robber woman drunk herself into a stupor halfway through the afternoon, just as Merla said she would. I hardly needed to sneak out. The reindeer and I simply walked out into the snow, and Merla came with us to bid me goodbye.

"You must save your friend, and then you must write to me about your adventure," she said. I hugged her and promised her I would.

Now it's early evening, and the sun is beginning to set in the west. I can tell because the clouds in that direction are a lighter shade of grey than the others. I shiver and pull my blanket tight around my shoulders. My coat and shoes are gone, exchanged for food, and I let Merla keep the muff, but she gave me the warmest blanket she could find. It's not warm enough. My teeth chatter. I reach down and rub my feet with numb fingers, hoping to warm them up. The reindeer senses that I am freezing and begins to move faster.

At long last, a house appears in the distance, smoke rising from the chimney. I urge the reindeer to go faster, and he does. I can no longer feel my toes. I slide off of his back and stumble to the door, pounding on it with one hand and holding my blanket tight with the other.

"I hope it's not another sled salesman," says a voice on the other side. Then the door opens, and a woman looks down at me. She has a soft face and hair that's a sandy red color, streaked with white. She looks a little bit familiar.

"You have no shoes," she says.

I'm not sure what to say to that statement. My teeth are chattering too much to say anything. A man with grey hair and broad shoulders appears at the door next to her.

"I think she knows she's not wearing shoes," he says.

"Right, yes, of course," says the woman. She ushers me inside. "Come on, let's get you warmed up."

The man and the woman are very doting. They ask no questions but sit me right down next to the fireplace and bring me a bowl of what turns out to be carrot stew. The man throws an extra few logs on the fire, while the woman hands me something wrapped in a little round foil.

"What's this?" I say.

"Chocolate," she says. "Guaranteed to cure all ills." She holds up a hand as if reciting a pledge. "I swear by it."

I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, but I'm cold and hungry, and the chocolate is creamy and melts in my mouth. I wonder whether I should be accepting desserts from strangers after that time in the cottage, but I can still remember Kai. These people must be alright.

Once I've stopped shivering and can feel my toes again, the woman pulls up a chair and sits by the fire next to me.

"So..." She tucks a lock of strawberry hair behind her ear. "What's your name, sweetheart? And what brings you all the way up here?"

"I'm Gerda, and I'm on an adventure, I guess."

"What kind of adventure?"

I tell her my story just as I told Merla. Kai and the Snow Queen and the river and the ravens and Arendelle Castle. Halfway through my story, the man sits down and listens too. When I mention that Princess Sonja sent me to look find Princess Anna and Prince Kristoff, the two of them exchange a look, but otherwise they listen in rapt attention. Then I add the part about the robbers, about Merla saving my life and helping me escape. By the time I'm done telling it, the silence is palpable. I am not sure what else to say.

"Well," says the broad-shouldered man. "Of course we'll help you."

The woman takes my hands and squeezes affectionately. "Yes! You're welcome to stay with us for as long as you need."

"And Sven can take you to the North Mountain," says the man. "He knows the way as far as the queen's ice garden." He rubs the back of his neck. "Aside from that, I'm not sure what Sonja expected of us. We're no match for Johanna."

"Wait," I say. I shake my head. Maybe the cold has made me delusional. "Are you ... ?"

"Princess Anna of Arendelle-Ciera."

"Prince Kristoff of Arendelle-Ciera."

"Oh goodness!" That's why the woman looked familiar. She looks like an older Princess Ida.
"Forgive me, I had no idea who you were!" I throw off the blanket and fall to my knees.

"Whoa, whoa," says Prince Kristoff. He catches me under my shoulders and pulls me to my feet.

"We're not-" Princess Anna starts. "I mean, we *are* royalty, but we're not, like, *that* kind of royalty. You don't have to bow."

"What kind of royalty are you?"

She and Prince Kristoff exchange another look. I can tell they are one of those couples who have been together long enough that they can communicate entirely through meaningful looks. My parents used to be like that, before the wars took them.

"We're the ordinary kind, I guess," Prince Kristoff says finally.

"Ok," I say. I'm not sure what kind of royalty that is. "But you'll still help me?"

"We'll do the best we can," says Princess Anna. "Though I'm not sure how. I wish we could offer you protection, but Kristoff's right. We can't fight Johanna. Elsa was the only one who could stop her. She could have stopped all of this." She looks away, sad. I know that sadness. It's how I've felt about Kai. I want to make her feel better.

"Queen Elsa was your sister," I say. "You must miss her a lot."

Princess Anna nods. I pat her weathered hand.

"It's ok," I say. "Don't be sad. Conceal it, don't feel it." I don't know why I say that, exactly. It seems like the thing to say at the time, but Anna recoils as if I've prodded her with a hot iron.

"What did you say?" she whispers.

"Nothing." I look at my feet. "I stayed with this woman by the river between Arendelle and Ciera, and it was something she used to say. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

"No, no, it's ok." She is still looking at me with an expression I can't read.

"We'll get packed up and ready to take you and Kai down the mountain as soon as you return," says Kristoff. "Just in case." In case I anger the Snow Queen. I wonder if she will freeze me the way she froze Princess Sonja's hand.

"Wait," I say. "The robber girl who saved my life is still on the mountain. Can someone warn her too?"

"We'll send Olaf," says Anna. "He loves meeting new people, and robbers can't hurt him."

"Olaf's alive?" I ask. Olaf was Queen Elsa's little snow golem. I used to hear a lot about him when I was very young. He would tag along at the royal balls and was a favorite among the children of Arendelle. I haven't heard much about him since the Goblin Wars began.

"He's alive, but he has to stay in the snow now that Elsa's not around to keep him from melting. He lives near here."

"I'd love to meet him when I come back." If I come back.

"You will," says Anna. "Rest here tonight. You can go to the mountain tomorrow morning."

It is tempting to leave in the morning, to spend the night wrapped in thick fur blankets, basking in the glow of the fire and the scent of warm carrot stew. But Kai is out there in the cold weather that I'm avoiding.

"I should go," I say. "Kai needs me now."

I half-expect her to stop me, but Anna only nods. "If that's what you want to do."

"It's what I need to do."

Suddenly, I am afraid. I have come all this way fearing that I would have to meet the Snow Queen, but it was always an abstract fear in the back of my mind. Now it has become real. This is it. The Snow Queen lies ahead, and there's no turning back.

Johanna

The goblins are pounding at the door again. I don't even bother to call Kai. I raise a wind and slam it open myself.

"What?" I say. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

The six goblins hunch into themselves, frightened. They're all wearing little brown knapsacks on their backs. The troll-goblin, the one who can cast the spell, apologizes profusely.

"It's just that, ah, we're ready to begin setting up for the spell," he says, looking up at me cautiously, as if I were full of gun powder and might any minute explode. "You were going to show us to the space you'd picked out."

There is a shallow vale behind the Palace where he can work his magic undisturbed. I did indeed promise to show him to it next time he visited. Still, I feign disinterest.

"Some of us have other things to do," I say. "You cannot just show up unannounced at any old hour and assume that I won't be busy."

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," squeaks the goblin. "We'll wait."

"Yes," I say, "you will." I slam the door in his face. I can feel little cracks forming in the ice from all the door slamming I have been doing since the goblins started appearing more often. I reach into the fractures and smooth them out.

I'm not really busy at all, but the goblins are impetuous creatures and must learn that I will not be at their beck and call. They will be taught to wait. Maybe I will circle the first floor of the palace a few times before going outside. I pace and emit puffs of snow from my palms, letting it burst upward and then catching it in my open hand as it descends.

I wonder what the goblins are doing outside. They're probably eager to finish this spell and be done dealing with me. I will be glad to be rid of them too. Though there is still the matter of food for Kai and me. Perhaps I can arrange for them to leave it on the front stairs so that we never have to interact.

The puffs of snow soon grow boring, but I don't feel like dealing with goblins yet. I will have to find another way to divert myself.

The idea of crafting a snow globe comes to mind.

I have not attempted such a thing in a long time. It has always seemed irrelevant. It's still irrelevant, but perhaps I have been feeling sentimental lately. I swirl my hands together and mold a rough ball of ice between them. It's grey and unshapely, coated in fine white snow dust. Then I blow against it. The rough surface of the ice grows smooth and shiny. The snow dust drifts like dandelion wisps into the air and then dissipates.

I take a moment to admire the orb, gleaming and perfectly round, but I know that forming the sphere is the easy part. The inside is the hard part. To craft a shape that will fit inside the globe, to create little snowflakes that will fall gently without raising a wind, those things are difficult. I am far more comfortable with large, chaotic storms than small, precise ones.

Still, I begin. I shift the ice crystals around, jostling them into a rough formation at the bottom of the globe. A tiny mountain, I decide. I'll make a miniature mountain inside of this snow globe. I close my eyes, blotting out the rest of my senses so I can better feel the ice. It's tricky, sending little peaks jutting up inside the globe. If they jut up too far, they'll hit the top of the sphere and shatter it. I slowly push the ice crystals into shape, fashioning crevices and crags, intricate angles and towering summits, labyrinthine paths that curve and coil and twist up towards the sky-

"Your Majesty?"

Kai startles me, and I jump. A peak shoots up through the top of the orb. The whole snow globe splinters into pieces and smashes onto the ground.

"What? What is so important?" I almost feel embarrassed, like I've been caught doing something I shouldn't.

Kai looks at his feet. "Can I go? I need to find Gerda."

"Now?" I have no patience for this today. "Really? You really need to find Gerda right now?"

"It's important."

"Fine. But first ... " I search the room for something that can distract him. My eyes fall on the pieces of shattered ice on the floor. The little mountain I'd worked so hard on is basically dust, but there are about a dozen large curved pieces of the globe itself still glittering on the ground.

"You must use this ice to spell a word," I say. "Without breaking any of the shards. Spell ... " I count the pieces. There are hardly enough to form a short word, let alone a long one. " ... spell 'eternity.'"

A lump rises in my throat, but the word means nothing to Kai. He dutifully sits down and begins to play with the pieces.

I leave the room. The goblins have waited long enough.

Gerda

Outside, the snow falls thicker than ever. Sven turns out to be a tall reindeer with soft brown and white fur. Kristoff lifts me up and sets me on Sven's back. The reindeer snorts, but the sound is encouraging somehow. Anna stands on her toes, kisses my forehead, and tells me I am very brave. I don't feel brave. I just feel cold and nervous. My stomach flutters like flower petals being blown by a harsh wind. There will be no flowers where I'm going. How am I to face the Snow Queen in her own court?

"Should I take a weapon?" I ask, even though Sonja told me not to. "What if I need to fight?"

"There's no weapon stronger than what you already have," says Anna. "I know you'll be ok."

What do I have? I don't even have a pair of shoes. I want to ask, but Sven hurtles forward, and suddenly it's all I can do to hold on as we plow through the frigid air. We fly up the mountain, the snow biting my face, and I bury my hands deep into his thick, scruffy mane so that I don't fall off. Or lose feeling in my fingers.

The Ice Palace rises out of the ground at the peak of the North Mountain. I catch my breath as it comes into view. Spires made of crystal spiral up to the sky, glinting and glittering like starlight in the dark evening air. Sven slows his pace, then stops completely. In front of us sprawls a pure white garden. I lean in close to look at a silvery berry bush. It's made of snow! The snow bush is so perfectly carved that I can peer into it and see leaves and branches inside. I reach out and pluck a berry from its stem. It hold its shape.

At the far end of the ice garden, a steep ice stairway leads to the front door. No wonder Sven could only take me this far. Those clunky hooves of his could never make it up the stairs. I climb off of his back and thank him for bringing me this far. Sven nuzzles me with his nose.

"Will you wait for me and Kai?" I ask. I don't expect him to understand me, but Sven plants his feet and stands still. I feel safer knowing that Sven will be waiting for me. Someone expects me to make it out alive.

Halfway through the snow garden, I spy a snow rose bush. It looks so real, I stop to admire the beautiful white petals.

'Hello,' I say before remembering that it's only a sculpture. I turn to go.

'Hello,' the rose bush says back. I nearly fall over in shock.

'You're not a real rose bush,' I say.

'Well, excuse me,' it huffs. 'If that's what I get for being polite.'

'I'm sorry!' I apologize quickly. 'I just wasn't expecting you to respond. You're very beautiful.'

The snow rose bush rustles happily.

'Have you seen my friend Kai?' I say. 'I've been looking for him for so many months.'

'I see him around. Last I saw, he was in the third room on the right. If you go straight there, you shouldn't encounter any trouble, but be careful not to wake the snow guards.'

'Thank you!' I say. I start to run.

'Stop!' Say the roses. 'Don't you want the password?'

I stop short. 'What password?'

The roses *tsk tsk* at me. 'Do you think Queen Johanna leaves her castle unguarded so that anyone can just walk in? The door is password protected. She changes it every time she leaves.' The snowy leaves ruffle. 'I don't know if I should be telling you this.'

'Please,' I beg.

'Today you must whisper 'eternity' to the ice statue by the entrance,' the roses say. 'The door will swing open.'

'Thank you, beautiful roses,' I say. The rose bush rustles happily once more. It's a vain little rose bush, but it's helped me tremendously. I wave and set off once more for the castle.

The icy staircase is even steeper than it seemed from a distance. I clutch tightly to the slick railing as I climb, but my hands are numb with cold. I slip near the top and cry out as my shin slams against the sharp stair. Then I hush. Did I wake the snow guards? I glance around nervously. Nothing moves but the snowflakes that swirl down from the sky. Maybe no one heard me.

At the top of the stairs crouches a goblin made of ice. He has a gleam in his eye and a wicked sneer on his face. I don't want to go anywhere near him, but I see no other ice sculptures. This must be the one. I tiptoe towards him and lean right into his leering face.

"Eternity," I whisper.

For a moment nothing happens. Then the door behind him swings silently open. I slip inside.

Johanna

"Well?" I tap my foot impatiently. Little ice crystals spurt across the ground each time I tap. We're standing in a shallow vale just on the other side of the mountain from my Palace. Shallow enough that no shadows will block the light of the new moon, but deep enough that the wind won't reach us.

"This is perfect," says the Head Goblin. "We'll set up here."

The other goblins begin to unload their knapsacks. They set up little tents around the perimeter. The troll-goblin unloads a set of strange little objects: stones of varying sizes, a holly branch, dried lignonberries, thyme, and a little container holding a mysterious brown liquid.

"What idiocy is this?" I ask him.

"Troll magic. For the spell."

"It had better work."

"It will." He pulls a string of mushrooms out of his bag. Mushrooms, of all things! "Where is the sacrifice?"

"Back in the Palace," I say. "Safe."

"And the one we're resurrecting?"

"Same place as always. Also safe."

He raises a prickly white eyebrow. I wasn't aware that goblins could do that. It looks ridiculous.

"I'd recommend bringing him here as soon as possible," says the troll-goblin. "The more we can prepare now, the less we have to worry about last-minute difficulties."

"What kind of difficulties? I thought you knew what you were doing."

"Magic of any kind can be finicky. It can develop a will of its own if you're not careful. Even a mage of your caliber must have experienced a spell that's grown beyond your control."

In my mind's eye, I see Aunt Anna and the woman whose daughter fell in the fjord, crying together in the front hall. The little girl sucks her thumb. Her still-wet hair drips thawed ice onto the floor, forming a puddle at her feet.

"Never," I say.

"My apologies then." The goblin goes back to his work.

I hate it when the goblins are right, but he's right. I don't want any unforeseen circumstances interfering with the spell. Tonight is as good a time as ever. I might as well go.

I think about checking in on Kai but decide against it. When I left, he was still engrossed in moving the ice shards around. That should keep him entertained for a few more hours. Plus, he's not expecting me back anytime soon. I told him I was going to Iceland to freeze some volcanoes.

I have no idea why I lied. It's not like he cares any more than I do.

I lift my hands to the sky and beckon. My snow horses descend from above, pulling the white sledge behind them. It's much improved since the first time I used it. I've smoothed the rough edges and drawn patterns on the side that catch the light from each street lamp and window and reflect it back. I don't go down into Arendelle-Ciera very often, but I make the trip a few times each year. It's good to remind the people that I'm still there, that I still have power over them.

I climb into the sledge. "I trust you will have no more need of me tonight?"

The troll-goblin shakes his head.

"Then I expect things to run smoothly until I get back. No difficulties."

"You have my word," the troll-goblin says.

I crack my whip and raise a wind. The horses leap up, pulling me into the heart of the storm, until the goblins and everything else vanish beneath the clouds.

Gerda

The main hall is breath-taking. I lift my eyes to the ceiling and twirl slowly, taking it all in. The walls are decorated in silver shapes. A chandelier sparkles above me. Crystal hallways branch out in every direction, crisscrossed by glimmering stairways that lead up and into the unknown. If the visit were less serious, I could spend hours running from room to room, exploring, but that's not why I'm here.

The rose bush said Kai was in the third room to the right, so that's where I'll go.

I am silent as I move across the room. I keep my eyes open for snow guards—I'm still not sure what they look like—but I see nothing of the sort. The third door is slightly ajar. I take a deep breath and push it open.

Kai's face is white as death. He's sitting still as a sculpture in the center of the floor surrounded by shards of ice. For a second I think he must be dead. Then he reaches forward and slides two pieces of ice across the floor.

"Kai," I whisper. He doesn't look up. I run to him. Halfway across the room, I slip on a shard of ice. I bite down hard on my lip to keep from crying out as my hands and knees slam against the hard ground. I crawl across it until I'm kneeling in front of him.

"Kai," I say. "Kai, I'm here." He stares right through me. His eyes are blank. He reaches past me and picks up another shard of ice. I grab his shoulders.

"Kai!" I shout. I don't care who hears. "Kai, please see me!" He doesn't. He shifts another piece of ice across the floor. What if he's too far gone for me to save?

Warm tears trickle down my cheeks. I throw my arms around him and press my face against his icy chest. His sweater is frozen solid. "I wanted to save you," I say. My tears leak into the fabric and thaw the ice, creating a dark stain against the deadly white frost. "I've come so far. Please, please, just look at me!"

"Gerda?"

I sit up. Kai is staring at me. There's color in his cheeks, and his eyes have cleared. "Gerda, it's really you! What are you doing here?"

"Kai!" I throw my arms around him once more. He's not as cold as he was a moment ago, but now he's shivering. I take off my coat and wrap it around him. It wasn't doing me any good anyway. "The Snow Queen took you. Everyone thought you were dead, but the swallows said you were alive. I came to find you."

He hugs me tightly. "You shouldn't have come."

"You would have saved me too."

Outside, the wind howls.

"We need to get out of here," Kai says, "before the guards hear us."

"There's a reindeer waiting to carry us if we can get to the garden," I say. "Can you walk?"

He nods. I take his hand, and we rise shakily to our feet, leaning on each other for support.

"The queen's going to be angry if she finds us," Kai says. "She said I couldn't leave unless I made the ice shards spell out a word." He looks down at the ice at our feet and trails off. I look down too. The word 'eternity' winks up at us, spelled out by the shards of ice.

"I didn't do that," said Kai. "I couldn't. It was supposed to be impossible."

"Then who did it?"

"Sometimes I think the ice has a mind of its own," says Kai. He shivers and takes my hand. "Come on."

There is a rumbling sound behind us. A window bursts open, and the gust of wind nearly blows us off our feet. Snowflakes the size of my head pour into the room and writhe around us. The wind shrieks.

"The guards are here!" Kai shouts over the snow. "Run!"

The snow blows into the doorway and materializes into two giant snow creatures shaped like men with angry white eyes. One holds a scythe made of ice; the other holds a sword. They raise their weapons above their heads.

I cover my face.

"Stop!" Kai shouts up at the guards. They pause, blink, and lower their weapons. "We've done nothing against Queen Johanna's orders. She's permitted me to leave if I can make the ice shards spell the word 'eternity.' As you can see, I've done so."

The guards peer into the center of the room where the word 'eternity' glistens.

"I'm free to go, according to the queen," says Kai. "This girl is my escort. If you don't let us go, you're defying her."

The guards look at each other. One of them grunts. Then they splinter into pieces and fly out the window.

"You've saved us," I say.

"Not yet," says Kai. "Let's go."

He takes my hand, and we flee the palace as fast as we can safely run.

Johanna

I hate mausoleums. It's like the dead are watching you. Death is perhaps the only force stronger than ice.

I shudder. Nothing to do but get it over with.

The royal mausoleum sits on the shore to the east of Arendelle Castle. It's a grey, nondescript stone building. I land in front of it and send the horses back up to the clouds to wait for me there. This is not a trip to which I particularly wish to draw attention.

There's a lock on the door, but I freeze it with a jet of ice and it shatters. Then I go inside.

It's quiet in here, but not the kind of quiet I like. This quiet is full of echoes. Say one word and the space becomes full of it, calling it out in every direction. It's impossible not to feel everything that has happened here. In the center of the room are two white stones, one for Queen Elsa and one for King Frederick. Their names are engraved in an elegant script. No death date, because nobody's sure when they died. A vase in between them holds a wilting bouquet.

These two stones are memorials, not graves. These I don't mind so much. I pause before them for a moment, but they aren't why I'm here, and I move on.

Julian's tomb is not marked, but he is still encased in the ice coffin I made. I can always feel where my own ice is, and I find him that way. The tomb is locked, but, again, this lock is easy to break. I open the door and slide the coffin into the open room.

Julian looks peaceful, which is all wrong. He was always moving, bouncing from one thing to another, climbing trees or practicing fencing with his rapier. Looking at his still face, it's like someone took a split second in time and encased it in ice. I imagine that he'll open his eyes and jump into action as soon as the ice melts.

I trace the surface above his face. The ice ripples under my hand. How can I be so close to having him back? It doesn't seem real. I didn't expect any of this to happen so quickly.

Behind me, a door creaks open. Footsteps. Who on earth is here at this time of night? I don't bother to hide. Let them see me. A mausoleum is as good a place as any for them to die.

The person behind me gasps, and I turn around.

"Jo?" Sonja is standing in the doorway, holding a long-stemmed white flower.

I frown. "Sonja."

She glances cautiously into the room. Her left hand hovers like a shield in front of her heart.

"Will you relax?" I sigh. "If I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already."

She nods, lowers her hand, and walks into the room. Her gait is soft and dignified. Sonja was never fun, always too hard to rattle. Ida would have run away the moment she saw me.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

"I come here every Sunday night."

Figures I'd come here the same night as my stupid cousin. "No guards?"

"They wait outside."

"I never took you for the sentimental type."

"I don't hide from my feelings, if that's what you're saying."

"Is that an insult?" I raise a finger. "I could change my mind about killing you."

"And leave Ivan to rule the kingdom? Oh god. Can you imagine?"

I laugh. Sonja has made me laugh. I decide not to kill her. She walks over to the memorial for Mama and Papa, removes the withered bouquet from its vase, and replaces it with the white flower. She doesn't take her eyes from the pearly white stone, but her words are for me.

"I miss you, Jo," she says. "Not the illused you, the real you."

"This is the real me."

"If you say so." She peels off the black glove, thoughtfully runs her good hand along her icy hand. "You never come back. Why are you here?"

I gesture to the casket in front of me. "Stupid question, cousin. What do you think I'm doing here?"

Sonja turns around, looks down at the coffin in front of me. She frowns. "You're stealing his body? That's morbid, even for you."

"Says the girl who spends every Sunday in a mausoleum."

"I'm serious, Jo. I don't know what you're up to, but you shouldn't mess with death."

"You want to stop me?"

She steps away from me, slips the black glove back on. "I'm not stupid. I want to keep myself and the rest of Arendelle-Ciera alive. You'll do what you want, whether I accept it or not. Just as you always do. I'm not going to fight you over someone who's already dead."

I laugh. "Smart choice, cousin."

Sonja heads back towards the door. I raise my hands, prepare to call up a wind. Not a big one, just enough to move Julian's casket into the sledge. From there I can fly through the storm back up the North Mountain to where the goblins are waiting.

"Jo?" says Sonja quietly.

"What?"

She looks over at the memorial where Queen Elsa's and King Frederick's names are inscribed in script. She looks at Julian, encased in ice. "They were my family too, you know. I miss them every day."

"Touching. Remind me to care."

She smiles slightly. "What good would that do?"

And she is gone.

Gerda

Sven is waiting for us at the edge of the snow garden. He lowers his front hooves so that Kai and I can climb easily onto his back. Kai is much weaker than I. I sit behind him to make sure he doesn't tumble off.

Sven moves more slowly going down the mountain than he did coming up. Maybe that's because the two of us are heavier, or maybe it's because he knows Kai can't hold on very tightly, but it makes me nervous. I'm afraid the Snow Queen will chase us. Several times I turn my head expecting to see her flying down the mountain in her terrible white sledge, but behind us there are only snowflakes, fluttering soft as silk.

I'm burning with questions for Kai, but he looks exhausted. He's barely hanging onto Sven's fur. I say only encouraging things, telling him we're almost there when it feels like it's taking forever.

Finally, the cabin comes into view. Warm smoke rises out of the chimney like a beacon for cold travelers. I hope Kai and I are the only travelers out tonight. I can't imagine who else would be. Kristoff and Anna are already outside, packing up a big sleigh with blankets and food. Sven stops in front of them, and Kristoff helps me off.

Anna reaches up and takes Kai's hand to help him off of the reindeer's back. "I'm Anna—Princess Anna—just Anna. You must be Kai."

"That's me," says Kai. He tries to bow, but he's so weak that he slips off the reindeer and falls into the snow.

"I'm so sorry," Anna says, aghast. She helps him to his feet and dusts the snow out of his hair. "Kristoff, he's like ice. Let's take them both inside for a minute."

"No," Kai shakes his head. "We need to get off the mountain right away. If Queen Johanna raises a worse storm, we'll all freeze." He shivers. "I'll warm up at the castle."

"We'll need more blankets for the trip then," Anna says. "Hold on." She settles Kai and I into the sledge and drapes several thick blankets over us. Then she disappears inside while Kristoff helps Sven into the harness. When Anna comes back out, she's carrying a pile of blankets and two bowls full of carrot stew.

"This will warm you from the inside," says Anna. She hands the bowls to Kai and me. I press my fingers against the warm clay sides, moving them back and forth until they regain feeling. Anna and Kristoff move about making last minute adjustments. Then they hop into the sledge on either side of us, and the reindeer start to pull. The dark cabin fades behind us as we move down the mountain.

I brush a few snowflakes from the tip of my nose. "This snow," I say, "is this because the Snow Queen is angry?"

Kristoff laughs. "This is just a normal storm. The North Mountain is like this all the time."

"I'm really sorry we had to send you through this with no coat," adds Anna. "Magic is kind of weird. The more you're willing to sacrifice, the more it's going to work in your favor."

"Thanks," I say. I sip my bowl of soup. "The Snow Queen wasn't there, though, so it didn't work."

"She wasn't there?" says Anna. "Like at all?"

"She was off freezing volcanoes or something," says Kai. He is shoveling soup into his mouth as if he's never tasted food before.

"Johanna almost never leaves," says Kristoff. He and Anna exchange another look. "Sure sounds like it worked."

Kai finishes his bowl of soup and wipes his mouth on his sleeve. I offer him my soup, but he waves it away.

"So what happens now?" says Kai.

"We're going back to Arendelle Castle," says Kristoff. "If I know Johanna, she'll probably send out a real storm, but we can wait it out indoors. And then we'll send you two home."

"What about the Snow Queen?" I say.

Anna pats my knee. "You two don't have to worry about her anymore."

Kai pulls the blanket up to his chin and rests against Princess Anna's shoulder. I nibble on a steaming carrot. The snow is cold and getting colder, but, sitting under fur blankets and sipping stew next to Kai, I'd swear I've never been so warm.

Johanna

Back in the vale, the goblins unload the ice coffin from my sledge. All except for the troll-goblin. He is hidden in his tent. The Head Goblin tells me he is purifying the rocks in preparation for the spell and has asked not to be disturbed.

I suppose it's risky to allow the goblins to perform strange magic so close to me. We are allies, but that doesn't mean allies can't betray each other. The risk has occurred to me before, and

it's one I've decided to accept. I am fairly well-versed in magic. I learned from the best mages at Arendelle Castle; Queen Elsa thought it would help me master my own power if I studied the different kinds of magics that exist. Although I can't practice any spells that aren't specific to ice, I can recognize them. I would know if the goblins were preparing a death spell or an illusion. So far this spell is completely unknown to me, which lends credence to the claim that it is, in fact, a resurrection spell.

Truthfully, I am more concerned about incompetence than sabotage. I stay with the goblins for a time to make sure they don't drop Julian's coffin. The little men scramble erect a tent overtop of it, looping heavy ropes through the canvas covering, and hammering pegs into the icy ground. When they've finished, and I've nothing more to supervise, I go back to the Ice Palace.

It's morning by the time I arrive home. The sun is peeking over the mountains to the east. The white sledge drops me off on the balcony near my bed chamber and disappears into the sky. At the foot of my bed, the little blanket where Kai usually sleeps is empty.

"Kai!" I call. Maybe he's up already. Or maybe he's still downstairs trying to form a word out of those ice shards. I think about letting him go on for a few more hours before remembering I need to watch his health.

"Kai, you stupid boy!" I sweep down the stairs and into the third room on the right. "You can stop now."

The room is empty. Only blank white walls and smooth white floors.

Empty except for one impossible thing.

Eight letters. One word. Spelled entirely in unbroken shards of ice.

I step backwards.

"Impossible," I say. The pronouncement does nothing to change the truth in front of me. Eight fragments of ice have warped and curled themselves into a series of symbols. The word 'eternity' blinks up at me, sharp as a dagger, clear as day. On the ground next to it, two pieces of goblin glass twinkle like stars.

I run to the door. The wind blows it open before I even get there.

"Kai!" I shout, though why I'm shouting I don't know. I know there won't be an answer. I run down the stairs. Two sets of footprints run through the garden and head south. Two? I bend down and examine the second set. It's definitely a child's, but beyond that I have no idea who it would be. Who would dare come up here?

I send a small snowstorm rolling down the mountain. Not fast enough to hurt anyone, just so I can feel what's going on down there. I can feel figures moving through the snow, but none of them seem to be Kai. He could be bundled up or indoors. Or he could be completely gone from the mountain by now. Any hope I had of seeing Julian in four days has gone with him.

I stomp my foot. The snow beneath my feet rumbles, shattering the ice garden. The vibrations ripple down the mountain, sending powdery snow flying in every direction. Maybe it will cause an avalanche. I don't stay outside long enough to find out.

Back in the Ice Castle, I melt the shards of ice until they blend into the smooth floor. Then I pick up the two pieces of goblin glass and tuck them into my pocket.

Gerda

Arendelle Castle comes into view. The reindeer's hooves clatter across the stone bridge and stop at the gate, but the guards see Anna and Kristoff and let us right in. No swimming through frigid waters this time. Ida runs right up to the sleigh and throws her arms around her parents.

"I've missed you so very much!" she says. "Ivan wrote us from the war. He says he and Ruben are doing alright. They both send their love."

Kristoff hops out of the sleigh and unhooks the reindeer from their harnesses. Anna helps me and Kai onto the stone ground.

"Let's get everyone inside," she says to Ida. "We're expecting a storm from the mountain. Hopefully Olaf warned Ivan, but write to him just in case."

Sonja is waiting in the main hall. She runs to Anna and clasps her hands.

"Thank goodness you're back safe. You wouldn't believe what happened to me last night." She looks down and spies Kai and I behind them, wrapped in our fur blankets. "Maybe you would. Gerda, did you see Johanna?"

I shake my head. "She wasn't home. The snow guards tried to stop us, but Kai tricked them, and we ran away. We never saw her."

Sonja nods like that's the answer she expected. When she whispers it's to Anna, but the words are loud enough so that I can hear. "That's because she was here."

"Here?" says Anna. "She never comes here. Why?"

Sonja looks over at Kai and me. "I'll tell you later. Let's get these two warmed up."

We're rushed into the drawing room and a fire is lit. The room is cozy, the chairs covered in velvet cushions. A clock rests on top of the marble fireplace. I'm pretty sure it's made of real gold. Servants bring in platters of fruits, soups, and meats for us to eat. Kai and I sit on the carpet in front of the fireplace, drinking cups of mulled apple cider. Anna and Kristoff, who also need to warm up from the trip, sit on the couch behind us. Anna is drinking from a mug of hot cocoa. She giggles when Kristoff takes a sip and ends up with a brown mustache all over his upper lip. Everything here is calm and safe, like home.

Ida walks in with a pen and ink and sits down on the carpet next to me. She begins to write, slowly and thoughtfully, in elaborate cursive letters. She's wearing beautiful gloves embroidered with blue roses.

"Is it fashionable in Arendelle to wear gloves all the time?" I ask.

"Not particularly," says Ida. "I only wore these because they have flowers on them." I almost forgot about that promise. "Why do you ask?"

I blush at my ignorance of royal fashion. "Well you're wearing yours inside, and Sonja sleeps in hers. And the woman I stayed with at the border of Arendelle never took her gloves off in all the time I was there. I thought perhaps it was a fashion."

There is a crash behind us. Anna has dropped her mug. It lies in pieces on the floor. She ignores them.

"Is that the same woman who told you 'conceal it, don't feel it?'" says Anna.

I nod. "That's her."

"And she never took off her gloves." She looks at Kristoff. At her feet, the hot cocoa spreads and begins seeping into the carpet, but she doesn't seem to notice. "That's too weird."

Ida looks puzzled. "What is it, Mama?"

"Maybe nothing," says Anna. She looks at me. "Did she tell you her name?"

"No." That's weird now that I think about it. How did I never learn her name?

"What about her face? What did she look like?"

I shift uncomfortably as I struggle to remember. Everyone's looking at me, but I don't know what to say. It's only been a few days, but the memory feels distant, like something from when I was very young. "I'm sorry, I don't ... I'm not sure. I think she had silver hair." Yes, that was right. "She always wore it in a braid. And she was tall and thin, and she was old—not terribly old—maybe a few years older than you."

Kristoff looks amused. Anna elbows him.

"Was there snow?" she asks me. "Was there a lot of snow?"

"Anna," says Kristoff. "I know you want Elsa to be alive, but you can't assume—"

"I'm not assuming," she says, "but this has got to be more than a coincidence."

"There was no snow," I say. Anna's shoulders sag. I wish I could remember more to tell her, but the whole trip is so hazy.

"It was warm," I say. I remember it being warm all the time. "She said it never snowed. She didn't seem to know what snow was. She didn't know a lot of things. It was odd. Like she said she had a sister who'd saved her life, but she couldn't remember her name. Who forgets something like that?"

Anna and Kristoff exchange glances. Anna's face is shining with barely concealed hope, but Kristoff shakes his head.

"I'll admit that it's a weird coincidence—a really weird coincidence—but it could be anyone."

"Could it really? I've never heard that phrase from anyone but Elsa. Never in my life." Anna takes his hand in hers. "It's crazy, but it's the only lead we've had in years. Maybe it's Elsa, or maybe it's someone who met Elsa, or maybe it's nothing." Tears shine in her eyes. "Kristoff, you have to understand. She's my sister. And she's the only one who can possibly stop Johanna. If there's even a chance she might be alive..."

He sighs. "You're right. Of course, we'll go. We'll talk to her. But don't be disappointed when nothing more happens."

Anna turns to me. Through her tears, her eyes are bright and hopeful. "Can you take us there?"

"I can't," I say, "but I know who can."

We walk through the corridors to the menagerie. Swiftwing has been set up in her own little velvet perch with a wide door so that she can fly in and out. I peer inside. She is curled up in the corner, but something is wrong.

'Swiftwing, what it is?' I say.

She lifts her head. 'You didn't hear? Onyx was caught in a snowstorm. He's dead.'

'Not Onyx!' I gasp. I wouldn't have Kai without him. I don't know if I'd be alive without him. 'Swiftwing, I am so sorry.'

Swiftwing lowers her head again. I stroke her glossy black back and tell the others what happened. They pass on their condolences through me.

'Swiftwing,' I say after a few minutes have passed, 'we might need you. The kingdom might need your help.'

She looks at me tiredly. 'I'll do what I can.'

'Do you know the place over the mountain where no birds go?'

'Of course I know it.' She covers her face with her wing. 'Oh, don't ask me to take you there.'

'We might be able to find Queen Elsa. She'd stop Johanna from causing more storms.'

She shudders. 'No, no. Ask someone else. The magic there is so dark, and I'm frightened of it.'

'Then let me tell you a secret.' I hold out my hand. She hesitates and then hops into my open palm. 'When Onyx met me, he told me I was brave. I didn't believe him, because I thought he meant I wasn't afraid, and I was very afraid.' Swiftwing says nothing but makes a sad little cooing noise. 'But I know what he was saying now. He didn't call me brave because I was unafraid. He called me brave because he knew I was very frightened but I still kept going. Please, please be brave with me. For Arendelle.'

Swiftwing sighs. She hops up from my hand, flutters towards the door, and lands on the handle. Then she peers back at me impatiently.

'For Onyx,' she says. 'Let's go before I change my mind.'

Johanna

"What do you mean the sacrifice is gone?" says the Head Goblin. He tears at the wiry black hairs on his head in a panic.

I point a threatening finger at his heart. "Don't raise your voice at me. I mean exactly what I say. He left the Palace, and he's no longer illused. Your stupid magic mirror couldn't hold him."

"You can't blame us for that. The illusion on those mirrors is as strong as any spell out there, but magic depends on intent—"

"Yes, you keep saying that, but that does nothing to inure me to the concept."

"You'll just have to find another sacrifice."

"Obviously." I examine my nails. "We'll just have to use one of your goblins."

"No," says the troll-goblin. "You're resurrecting a human. It needs to be a human life."

"How convenient." I scowl. "So I have to find a human to willingly sacrifice themselves within four days? In the meantime, why don't I just fly to the center of the earth and back? Where am I supposed to find this person exactly?"

The Head Goblin shifts uncomfortably.

What?" I snap.

"I just thought, ah—" He hesitates. "You might sacrifice yourself. It would still give the both of you another twenty years or so, and that is more than enough time for our winter to be effective."

"Are you deaf or just stupid?" I say. "I've already made it clear I'm not doing that."

"Yes," says the troll-goblin, "but at this point we're running out of options."

It makes sense, I suppose, that I should give half of my years to Julian, so that we live out our lives together and die at the same time. Yet a pragmatic voice inside of me screams no. Why should I shorten my own life just to revive someone else's? Especially when that someone has already been gone for five years? Maybe I'll be fine living out the rest of my years without him. Or maybe the goblins will find another spell that can bring back Julian without harming me.

"I need time to think about it," I say.

"How much time?"

"Four days."

The troll-goblin clears his throat. "The spell must be performed in four days."

"Which means I've timed it perfectly, doesn't it?"

The goblins look at each other. I can tell they're trying not to upset me. I hope I have upset them.

"Four days," says the troll-goblin. "You'll let us know whether you've decided by then?"

"I will." I raise a wind, and it blows the door open. "Until then, we're done here."

"But if—"

"I said we're done."

The goblins slink out the door, glancing back at me as if unsure of whether I'm going to let them go unscathed. I don't care enough to put forth the effort to harm them. I simply slam the door behind them. Then I sigh, shake my head. Incompetent creatures. I can't wait until the spell is over when I no longer have to deal with them.

Now I have four days' time to find another sacrifice.

Gerda

Crossing the mountains takes far less time on horseback than it did on foot. Swiftwing was disappointed when a storm flared up, delaying us, but wasn't as bad as everyone expected it would be. By mid-afternoon, most of the snow has melted, and we are ready to set out. I had to go, seeing as I'm the only one who can speak to Swiftwing. It's a strange thing, to have princes and princesses depending on me, but it makes me proud at the same time. Anna and Kristoff both are going because they knew Elsa best. And then there's Kai.

I told him not to come, but he refused to stay put.

"I need to make sure you're ok," he said.

"You need to rest," I told him.

"But I won't. I'll worry that you're being eaten by a snow golem, and I won't be there to save you."

"Your chivalry is going to get you killed," I say.

Kai shrugs in that way of his. I hope that Anna and Kristoff will make him stay, but whatever he says to them convinces them to let him come along. That boy is too clever for his own good.

We tell Sonja and Al but no one else. Anna doesn't want to give people hope if nothing comes of the trip. We travel for a little over a day. This time we are prepared for the cold, bundled up in long, thick fur coats, boots, and mittens. I'm not too worried about robbers taking our things. They tend to stick near the roads, according to Merla, and Swiftwing took us away from the roads almost immediately. At night we sleep in a little tent that Kristoff packed. The night passes uneventfully, and the next morning we climb onto our horses and continue riding.

Around midafternoon, Swiftwing stops.

'Just on the other side of that peak,' she says. 'Don't make me go with you.'

'No, you can wait for us here,' I tell her. 'You've helped so much, thank you.'

The horses are getting spooked, so we dismount them and walk the rest of the way on foot. As soon as we cross over the top of the hill, the valley comes into view. The woods around us are grey and dreary, but the garden is still blooming brightly, glowing with the warmth of summer. The bright colors resonate like a beacon. Or a warning.

"Do you get the feeling we shouldn't be here?" says Kristoff.

"That's just the magic," says Anna, "I think."

I don't say anything. I look over at Kai. He shivers.

The sense that we shouldn't be here only grows stronger as we descend. I think about turning around—several times I almost do—but Anna plunges forward determinedly, and I follow her. When we reach the orchard, though, the feeling vanishes abruptly. It's a calm, bright summer day. Nothing more.

I take off my coat. It's far too hot for fur coats. The others do the same.

The woman steps out of the house, still wearing her hat and gardening gloves. She's holding a tin watering can. The sight is so familiar, it's almost like I never left. I wave and call out a greeting. She looks up and smiles when she sees it's me.

"Gerda? I almost forgot about you! And you brought visitors ... " Her voice trails off. She is looking past me. The watering can falls to the ground. "Anna?"

"Elsa!" Anna is already running to her. She throws her arms around her. "I knew it had to be you! I knew you couldn't be dead! Not after everything."

"Anna!" Elsa clasps Anna's hands. They are both laughing and crying. "I can't believe it's you. I can't believe you're here."

"Queen Elsa?" I say. "You're the queen of Arendelle-Ciera?"

She looks at Anna. "Am I?"

"Yeah."

"I guess I am." She nods like it's no big deal. Then she smiles, almost shyly at Anna and Kristoff. "I'm so glad you're all here. Please come in—" She pushes the door open.

"No!" says Kai. I gasp at his sharp tone. He's arguing with a queen! "Nobody go inside. We need to get out of here now. Including you, Queen Elsa." He bows a little when he says her name.

"Kai, what are you talking about?" I say.

"There's strong goblin magic here," he says. "This whole garden is one big goblin illusion."

"How do you know?" says Kristoff.

"I just spent a year inside of one, didn't I?" says Kai. "I know what they feel like. The longer we stay, the stronger it's going to get."

"Then let's go," Anna tugs at her sister's hand, but Queen Elsa stands still. Her face is ashen.

"I can't go," she says.

"Why not?" says Anna.

"I ... I don't remember. I just know I can't." She backs away into the house and slams the door.

"Elsa, no!" Anna pounds on the door, shaking the solid wooden frame. "Please don't do this again. You have to let me in." The pounding goes on for several fruitless minutes, but the door remains closed. Finally, Anna turns away from the door in a huff. "There's got to be another way inside."

"There is," I say. I look to Kristoff. "Boost me onto the porch roof. I can climb in through the window."

"Gerda," Kai says, alarm in his voice.

I reach out and squeeze his hand.

"I'll be careful," I say.

Kristoff lifts me onto his broad shoulders. I gain my balance, then climb onto the porch roof and scramble over the rough tiles to the window of my old bedroom. It's still open from my escape.

I squeeze through. The wooden sides press against my waist as I slide into the room. It's harder to get in than it was to get out.

"Queen Elsa?" I call out. There's no answer. I check her bedroom and the sewing room, but there's no one up here. I go downstairs.

She is standing in the kitchen, facing away from me, looking out the window. She holds her hat, the one with the roses on it. Light glints off of the long braid that hangs down her back. I can't believe she's the queen of Arendelle-Ciera. I can't believe I didn't recognize her.

"You should go while you can, Gerda," she says. "Tell Anna to go too."

"We can't leave without you," I say. "What's wrong?"

She looks at me. Her eyes are shining with tears. "I can't go, sweetheart." She brushes my hair aside with a gloved hand. "I don't remember anything from the outside. I don't even remember being a queen."

"You remember Anna," I say. "And you remembered your father. The memories will come back. They came back for me when I left."

She squeezes her eyes shut. The tears leak out. "I'm so frightened."

It's funny, but when I was afraid, there was always a grown up to tell me it was going to be ok. I thought grown-ups always knew how to make it ok. But Queen Elsa is a grown-up, and she's just as scared as I was. Who is there to tell her that it's going to be ok?

No one. Just me.

I take her hand.

"That's ok," I say, "because I was scared too when you met me. Everyone gets scared. I know your father told you to conceal your feelings, but I think he was wrong. If you're afraid, then ... then you just need to be afraid. It's ok. You just admit to yourself that you're afraid, and you keep going anyway."

She shakes her head and takes her hand away from mine. I sit her down at the kitchen table, set down the hat, stroke her hair like she did for me when I was upset.

"Try, Queen Elsa," I say. "Try just being scared. It's ok."

Nothing happens. Then there is a loud noise, like something breaking. It takes me a minute to realize that the gardening gloves have frozen and shattered. Cold air rushes past my face as a jagged line of ice shoots across the kitchen and blasts a hole clean through the wall. Elsa stares down at her bare hands, breathing hard, like she's just run all the way from Arendelle to Ciera. She looks up at me.

"I remember snow," she says. "Well." She curls and uncurls her fingers. A puff of snowflakes rises into the air. "Let's get out of here."

I jump to my feet and grab her hand. She recoils at first, like she doesn't want to be touched, but I hold on tight. It's like holding onto a snowball. I think my hand is going to freeze off. She relaxes and smiles at me, and I'm glad I held on. Hopefully it's worth losing my fingers to frostbite.

Queen Elsa unlocks the door. Anna, Kristoff, and Kai are standing on the porch, waiting. Anna is breathless, her eyes bright.

"I don't know what you did," she says, "but it's snowing."

Johanna

An unending winter.

I never thought too hard about the prospect, but that's what I've promised the goblins if this spell manages to work. It's daunting but not undoable. I can keep a limited amount of power flowing out of me at all times, even when I sleep. As long as I am well-fed and rested I'll have enough energy to keep the winter going without draining myself. It will be a little bit easier during the season of winter, too, when the snow falls on its own and I can rest a bit.

It's funny because I think the trolls told Arendelle the prophecy about eternal winter in order to keep it from happening. Yet the goblins wouldn't have gotten the idea if the prophecy didn't exist. Strange how those things happen.

I was eleven years old when I first heard of it. I think the troll prophecy was common knowledge among the village children—I've since heard them singing it like a nursery rhyme—but that was one of the downsides of living in the castle. It was easy to be sheltered. Instead, a mage introduced it to me as part of one of my lessons. Sonja and Ivan were hanging around, annoying me, the way they always did.

"A ruler with a frozen heart?" said Ivan. He poked my shoulder. "That's you, cous'."

"Is not," I said. "My heart's not frozen."

"Yes, it is," said Sonja. "I can't even hold your hand without freezing my butt off."

"Don't be dumb," I said, but a horrible sinking feeling washed over me. What if they were right? What if I was the prophecy? As soon as the lesson was over, I ran to Queen Elsa. It was the week before a ball, and she was in the Great Hall, standing on a stepstool made of snow and decorating all the windows with icy curtains.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said.

She traced a curtain with her finger, coating it in a shimmering wave. "Tell you what?"

"About the troll prophecy? 'A ruler with a frozen heart?' Is that me?"

She pauses, caught off guard. The snow melts beneath her feet until she's standing on the ground in front of me. "Don't worry. It's not you."

I pull away. "Then why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you were ready." She looks out the window at the perfect summer sky. Her eyes are very big and very pale. "That's a lot of responsibility for a child to handle."

"So you thought it could be me."

"That's not what I said." She balls her hands up tight, like she's holding something in.

I stomp my foot. Jagged ice spreads across the floor. "I'm not a child. What if I didn't know, and I accidentally caused an unending winter?"

"That wouldn't happen, Jo."

"You don't know that. Ivan and Sonja say it's me. Why aren't there any other Ice Mages? It's because we're dangerous, isn't it? We're freaks! Everyone knows we're freaks, but you let me think I was a normal Mage when I'm really a monster!"

Queen Elsa slapped me across the face.

"Don't say that about yourself," she said, her eyes flashing. "Don't you —EVER—say that."

I stared at her, touched the cold spot on my cheek where her hand had been. That was the only time in my life she has ever slapped me.

Her hands flew to her face, horrified. "Oh, Jo. I'm so sorry. I—you're right, you're not a child." She pats the window sill. "Sit down. Please. There are some things I need to tell you, and you're old enough to know."

It was then she told me about the Great Snow. About the coronation and the storm and how she almost killed Aunt Anna. How a boy from Ciera died in the storm. It was snowing in the room by the time she was done. I wasn't sure whose snow it was.

"So the prophecy was you," I said.

She nodded. "It looks that way." Later I would find out that not everyone agreed, that prophecies sometimes reassert themselves, but for the time being I was soothed. I gave her a hug. She tried to examine the spot on my face where she'd hit me, but there was nothing to examine. She hadn't hit hard. I told her she'd startled me more than anything.

That afternoon, Sonja and Ivan came over and apologized for scaring me, but it was Julian who really set me at ease about the prophecy. I found him in our usual spot, hanging upside-down from the pear tree, and started telling him what I'd learned. When I got to the part about Mama, he pulled himself upright on the branch and looked at me, serious.

"You thought you were the troll prophecy?" he said. "Geez. I could have told you you weren't."

I climbed up next to him. "How would you know?"

He shrugged. "Because I know you. Duh."

And that was enough. I didn't worry about it after that. Julian knew me better than anyone.

Gerda

The five of us run through the garden, flakes of snow cascading down around us. Kai hands me my coat, and I button it up. The garden has changed. The flowers now look withered and unkempt, like they've never seen the sun. The soil is rocky and dry. Even the pretty house looks different. It's pale and flimsy, as if the snow could blow it over.

I stop by one of the daisies.

'What's happened to you?' I say.

'Daisies love the summer sun,' the daisy says. 'But the cold ... the cold ... the cold.' Its voice is a sad echo of itself.

"The flowers are dying!" I tell Kai.

Kai puts a hand on my shoulder. "I think they've always been dying, Gerda. There's nothing we can do."

"Was this place one big illusion?" I ask. "The summer, the warmth, the sun?"

"If it was," says Kristoff, "it's the biggest illusion I've ever seen."

"The goblins are getting really good," says Anna. "We'll have to tell the palace mages about this."

Elsa says nothing. She covers her eyes, not looking at the wilting garden. The snow begins to fall thicker.

"Let's go," says Kai. He pulls my hand, and we start to run. The others follow. We run past the cherry orchard with its seductively shining red fruits. Anna pauses to look at one, but I tug her hand away.

"Don't eat the cherries," I say. "They have something in them. It makes the illusion stronger."

We keep running. By the time we reach the horses, we are out of breath. The snow is falling fast and thick.

"Is this Johanna's storm?" asks Kristoff.

"It feels like Elsa's," says Anna. Elsa folds her arms and presses her hands into her sides as if she's trying to cover them up.

"I'm sorry," she says, a note of panic in her voice. "I don't remember how to stop it."

The wind picks up, reeling in panicked circles. I reach up and put a hand on Elsa's ice-cold arm.

"It's ok," I say. "You don't have to remember right away."

Elsa takes a deep breath. The wind dies down. The snow is still falling fiercely. Swiftwing flutters down from the sky and lands on my shoulder.

'I've found shelter from the storm,' says Swiftwing. 'There's an abandoned cabin several miles northwest of here.'

I repeat to the others what Swiftwing said.

"Let's go, then," said Kristoff. He offers a hand to Queen Elsa and hoists her up onto a horse. Kai climbs onto the horse behind hers. Anna pulls me aside.

"What did you say to Elsa?" she asks me. "In the cottage?"

"She was scared," I said, "because she couldn't remember anything. I told her that being afraid was ok. She should just let herself feel scared and keep going anyway."

Anna nods. "That was good. That was probably the best thing you could have said, actually." She sighs. "Elsa might just save Arendelle-Ciera if she doesn't kill us all first."

I am shocked. "Queen Elsa would never hurt anyone."

Anna laughs as if I've said something funny. Then she clears her throat and looks away. "No, right. Of course not."

I am unconvinced. I never thought Queen Elsa could hurt anyone, but now I don't know what I think. Grandma told me a boy died in the Great Snow years ago. I guess that never really hit me until now.

"Ready, you two?" calls Kristoff.

"Ready," says Anna cheerily.

Kristoff hoists me up onto a horse. Anna climbs up on the horse behind Elsa. She takes Elsa's hand and gives it an encouraging squeeze. Elsa smiles sheepishly.

I look over at Kai through the snow. He smiles and gives me a thumbs up.

'Follow me,' says Swiftwing. She takes off from my shoulder and flies into the storm. I urge my horse to follow. The others fall in line behind me. We fly forward into the biting wind. I can hear the pounding of the horses' hooves against the icy ground. I squint and shield my eyes to keep the snow out, peering through the white wall ahead of me for the black speck that is Swiftwing. I can't twist around to look back at the others, but I have to trust that they're there. It's all I can do to keep my eyes on her, to keep my numb hand on the reins, to hold myself up straight so I don't fall off the horse.

Finally, the cabin comes into sight. The snow is so thick by now that I'm only a few meters away when I see it, a looming grey shape between the trees. I slide off of my horse and run to it, stumbling in snowdrifts up to my knees. It's moss covered and falling apart, with a door that swings off of its hinges and boards falling off of the wall. It clearly hasn't been used in my lifetime. Still, it's shelter. Right now it's more beautiful to me than Arendelle Castle.

Swiftwing lands on my shoulder.

'I hope this is enough,' she says.

'It's lovely, Swiftwing. Thank you,' I say through chattering teeth.

Three figures appear in the snow behind me. Anna and Kai are shivering. Elsa presses her hands into her skirt, trying to stem the snowfall. The skirt only turns to ice, folds of crystals glittering and rippling in the wind. She stomps in frustration, and a sheet of pure ice spreads out from under her foot.

"Where's Kristoff!" I call over the wind.

"He's bringing in the horses," says Anna. "Let's get inside."

"I think I should stay outside alone," says Elsa.

Anna pauses. "You can stay outside, but you won't be alone. I'll be right here on the other side of the door."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Don't," says Anna. "You already killed me once, remember? It wasn't so bad." She hugs Elsa. The queen looks shocked, again like she doesn't want to be touched. Then she relaxes. The wind slows down ever so slightly, its bitter howl fading into a gentle whoosh. We can see Kristoff coming towards us through the snow, leading the horses.

"See?" says Anna. She reaches out and smooths Elsa's braid like it's the most natural thing ever. "You're getting better already. I'll be right through this door, ok? Let me know if you need *anything*."

She hugs Elsa again, then ushers Kai and I through the door. I look behind me one last time. Elsa is watching us, her face contorted with worry. She presses her hands against the folds of her skirt again. Spikes shoot out, their spiny points glaring in every direction. She looks up and sees me. Her eyes grow sad. Elsa presses her hands against her sides and turns away.

Anna pulls me inside.

Johanna

The goblins keep their distance over the next few days. I suspect it's because they're afraid of finding me in a foul mood, but it's annoying me further. The plan is unraveling, and my allies have all but disappeared.

I never would have asked the goblins for help with the resurrection, and their incompetence was only half of the reason. I knew goblin magic, and it wasn't what I needed. Goblins do deceptions, hallucinations, mysterious music that comes from nowhere, figures that vanish in a puff of smoke. All imaginary. I didn't want to see Julian as a vision, a moving picture, or a talking statue. I didn't want an illusion. If I was going to have Julian back, I wanted it to be real.

And if a resurrection spell existed, I knew it wouldn't be a goblin spell. It would be a troll spell.

After I fled the kingdom, I went to the trolls. Uncle Kristoff showed me once how to find them, but, even so, they were well-hidden. I searched for days before I reached their glen. When I landed my sledge among them, the trolls rolled over and bounced around me, giggling like infants. Their demeanor did not fill me with much confidence.

Finally, one of them had the sense to summon the eldest. He was a squat creature with a lumpy face the color of earth. He denied me almost immediately.

"We do not return the dead to life," he told me.

"Do not or cannot?" I said.

"Such magic has dark consequences. We have foresworn it."

"You helped Aunt Anna."

"She didn't die. She was infected by magic and was able to save herself. Magic is a force that depends on intent and so can be changed. Death is a different force, and a more powerful one. We do not mess with it."

I draw myself up to my full height. "Not even for the Queen of Arendelle-Ciera?"

"Not for anyone. It's too dangerous. The only thing we'll do is remove the shard of goblin magic from your heart." He holds out a rumpled hand.

I take a step back. "That is no help."

"If you leave it there, an eternal winter will almost certainly come to pass."

"I thought that prophecy was fulfilled by my mother."

"It was, but prophecies have a way of reasserting themselves. If you don't let us remove the glass, Arendelle-Ciera will likely fall."

"So be it. I care nothing for Arendelle-Ciera."

"Johanna—"

"I don't see why I should help them. They've done nothing to help me, and neither have you."

I whirled away, vanished in a flash of white. I never returned. Instead, I went to the North Mountain. I expected to just keep moving north, perhaps settle on the North Pole, that barren ice land which brave explorers so eagerly kill themselves in an attempt to touch. It might be fun to sit there and send storms at them whenever they get close.

Then I found the Ice Palace, rising out of the ground, waiting just for me. How could I abandon such a work of art? I decided to stay, and so I did.

I would never have gone to the goblins about bringing back Julian. The goblins found me.

Gerda

Inside the cabin, the horses stomp and whinny in the corner. Kristoff gets a fire going in the old fireplace. He and Anna do their best to fix the gaps in the walls, moving fallen beams back into place and barring the door. Kai, still weak from his stay in the Snow Queen's palace, curls up next to the fire and goes right to sleep. I sit next to him in case he's ill, but he doesn't seem feverish. He's just tired.

So am I.

I lay down next to Kai. I fall asleep to the sounds of his steady breathing, the fire crackling, and the wind howling behind the walls.

When I wake up, the fire has faded into glowing embers. The wind has changed. It hasn't gone away, but it sounds different. Muffled.

Kai and Kristoff are asleep. Anna is sitting up, listening.

"I hear it too," she says to me. She stands up and goes to the door, opens it a crack and peers out. Her expression is puzzled, then delighted. "Gerda, come see."

I tip toe to the door and look out. There's a wall of snow as thick as my arm. At first, I think the cabin has been buried. Then Anna pushes the door open a little further, and I see that the snow wall has a built-in doorway so we can still get out.

"It's an igloo," she says. "Elsa built an igloo around us to keep us warm. She must be learning control again." She slips outside of the cabin so that she is standing in the doorway of the igloo. I follow.

Anna is being optimistic, I think. Outside of the igloo, the storm is raging stronger than ever. Queen Elsa stands with her back to us, her hands open to the angry sky. Ice shoots from her outstretched palms, coating the trees in thick, shimmering blankets.

Anna frowns. "Gerda, wait here." She steps out into the storm. I duck into the shadows behind the igloo wall where the storm won't find me.

"Elsa?" Anna calls.

Elsa snaps her hands down from the sky and whirls around. "Anna, what are you doing out here?"

"Are you ok?" says Anna. "You're killing the trees."

In answer, Elsa shoots another jet of ice towards the sky. "I remembered my life. Or most of it."

Anna doesn't say anything.

"Fifteen years trapped in my room," says Elsa. She shoots a ball of ice at a frozen pine tree. The tree shatters in the collision. Anna covers her face, but Elsa brings up a wind and blows the shattered fragments in another direction.

"Five years trapped in an illusion," Elsa shoots a ball of ice at another tree. It too explodes. "This is my life, Anna. Hiding and forgetting."

"That's not your life," says Anna. "We had good times too. The bad times happened, yeah, but they're over now."

"Are they?" Elsa swirls her hands together until they glow, then releases two balls of ice. The explosion shatters the two trees on either side of her.

"Yes," Anna says firmly. "Elsa, things have been bad for all of us. You can't change that, but you don't have to let that change who you are."

Elsa laughs. "I'm the queen. I can change whatever I want to change." She swirls her hands together, forming another ball of ice between them. "Go inside, Anna."

"You'll have to make me."

"Go inside before I make you, Anna."

"No."

Elsa lifts her hands. The wind picks Anna up and drops her thirty feet away into the snowdrift next to the igloo door. I run to her and help her to her feet. She's startled but unharmed. Behind Elsa, the frigid air spirals into a giant whirlwind full of ice, glittering and deadly. Frozen trees splinter, fragments flying into the sky and twinkling like stars.

The queen smirks back at us. Then she walks straight into the whirlwind and vanishes in the storm.

"Elsa!" screams Anna.

I grab Anna's hand and pull her back. "We have to get inside," I shout. The storm around us is only growing worse. We stumble back into the igloo. Kai and Kristoff are awake and watching from the cabin door. They pull us both inside and sit us down by the fire. Anna is shivering worse than me. She got the worst of the storm.

"Great," says Kristoff. "Now we've got two Snow Queens, and they're both crazy."

"Don't say that about my sister," says Anna. "Don't say that about either of them." She rips off her snow-covered cloak. "Elsa will get over this, and she'll help us stop Johanna."

"What if she doesn't? You saw her out there. We need a Plan B."

"There is no Plan B! She's going to come back, and she'll be fine! We'll all be fine! End of discussion." Anna pulls her knees into her chest and covers her face with her hands. Kristoff sits down next to her and puts his arm around her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he says.

Anna wipes her eyes with her sleeve. "What are we going to do?"

It's a rhetorical question. Nobody knows what to do.

Kai sits down next to me.

"Are you ok?" he says.

"Just cold."

He gives me a hug. I've missed Kai's hugs.

"I'm sorry I saved you," I say, "and then brought you here to freeze to death anyway."

"Don't be, sorry," says Kai. "We'll get through this, and then we'll go home. I don't know about you, but I could go for some hot chocolate right now."

"Or an apple pie."

"Or a turkey dinner."

"I can't even think about turkey right now."

We fall silent. Kai hands me a blanket, and I wrap it around both of us. Huddled together, it's almost possible to ignore the cold. I look over at Anna. She's staring into the dying fire, twisting a strand of hair around her finger and then untwisting it again. It's strange, again, watching grownups not know what to do.

"So when Elsa comes back," I say, "do we go back to the North Mountain?"

Anna blinks. She nudges the embers with a rusty poker, and the flame flickers to life. "I think we'll go back to Arendelle Castle," she says. "Let Elsa get her strength back and calm down. Eventually she'll have to confront Johanna. Kristoff and I will go with her, of course."

"And me," I say.

"Absolutely not."

"You need me. The Ice Palace only opens when you whisper a password to the goblin statue by the door."

"So?"

"The flowers in the Ice Garden told me the password, but they said it changes."

"We'll get another Flower Mage to go with us."

I shake my head. "There are none in Arendelle. Princess Ida told me."

"Maybe we can find one by the time Elsa confronts Johanna," says Anna.

Kai coughs. "I probably should have mentioned this," he said, "but we have less than a day until the eternal winter starts."

"What?" Anna's aghast, but she's not the only one. We all sit up and look at him.

"The Snow Queen made a deal with the goblins," he says. "They're going to cast some sort of spell for her tonight. She's going to give them an eternal winter in exchange."

"That's not enough time," says Anna. "I don't even know if Elsa will come back to us by then. This is horrible. This whole thing is unraveling. We don't even have a Plan A let alone a Plan B."

"Anna—" says Kristoff.

"We're going to die. Arendelle's going to die. Ciera's going to die."

"Anna—" says Kristoff.

"Have you ever died? It's really cold, and it's uncomfortable, and I don't want to do it again before I have to!"

"ANNA!" says Kristoff.

"What?"

"Does it seem quiet to you?"

Anna pauses. It is quiet. The only sounds are the crackling of logs on the fire, the whinnying of horses, and the drip drip of melting snow outside.

All four of us leap to our feet and run out the door. Sun shines down through what's left of the trees. The igloo has all but melted. There is some snow on the ground, but mostly it's mud with plants and bits of grass shooting up through the soaked earth. Pieces of shattered trees stick up at odd angles. The air is crisp but not cold.

Elsa kneels in the mud, looking down at her hands. Anna runs and falls to her knees in the wet earth next to her sister. "Elsa?"

Elsa looks up. Tears stream down her face. "The rest of my memories came back," she says. "I was married, wasn't I?"

Anna nods.

"I went to look for him. Did he ever come back?"

"I'm sorry, Elsa," says Anna.

Elsa looks down at her hands again. "I really loved Fred," she whispers. "I really did."

"I know," says Anna. "He knew it too." Elsa hugs her tightly and starts to sob. Tears like rain drops roll down her cheeks and splash into the mud.

Kristoff puts a hand on Elsa's shoulder. I put a hand on her other shoulder. We sit like that, holding the Queen of Arendelle-Ciera as she sobs, while the sun beams down from above and the snow around us slowly melts.

Love may thaw the frozen heart. That doesn't mean it won't hurt.

Johanna

The very first time the goblins made their trek up the mountain to my Palace, I could feel them coming towards me through the snow. Even then I wanted nothing to do with them. I almost killed them for the hell of it, but then I remembered that I was pleased with the effects their mirror had on my heart. I decided to give them a chance.

"What do you want?" I demanded when the little green creatures appeared at my door, hats in their hands, looking up at me like a cluster of penitent children.

"We would like to be of assistance," the Head Goblin said. "We are big fans of your work."

"Are you mocking me, little man?"

"No, no," said the Head Goblin. "Quite the opposite. Your storms are very impressive. Our king has noticed. He sent us to ask you a question."

"Then ask and get off of my front steps."

"What is your allegiance to Arendelle-Ciera?"

"I do not care either way about it," I said. "I'm never going back. The past is in the past, and the kingdom can rot for all I care."

He nods. "Then, Johanna—"

"Queen Johanna," I correct.

The goblins look at one another, confused.

"Wherever the snow falls, that's my kingdom."

"*Queen Johanna*," says the Head Goblin. "Your snowstorms have helped us tremendously in the war against Arendelle-Ciera. We would like to help you back."

I examine my nails. "Go on."

"We can't help but notice that the storms have been diminishing. How could we encourage you to keep them going?"

It was true that I'd begun to let the kingdom thaw for the first time since my coronation. Contrary to what most commoners would say, the thaw had nothing to do with love. I enjoy making ice and snow, but I like to rest just as anyone likes to rest.

"There is nothing for you to do," I say. "I create the storms at my leisure. I shall continue to do so when and if I choose."

"Then you're not attempting to create an eternal winter?"

I scoff. "Eternal winter? Sounds tedious. I have no need of one. Good day."

"Queen Johanna!" He is in my way before I can close the door. "Can you actually create an eternal winter?"

"I could create a very, very long one."

"How long?"

"Decades. A century perhaps."

"That's all we need. Our king is prepared to offer you anything."

I scoff. "I don't need anything from you."

"Surely there must be something you want."

I pause in the doorway. I am intrigued, it's true. An idea formulates in my mind. Small at first, but, like a snowball rolling down a mountainside, it quickly grows. I don't feel the loss of Julian anymore. But the rational part of my mind remembers that I enjoyed his company. Why shouldn't I have things I enjoy?

"I want Julian alive. Not an imitation of him. Not an illusion. I want the real flesh and blood person. Bring him back to life, and an eternal winter is yours."

The goblin blinks. "That's impossible."

"For goblin magic. Not for troll magic."

"The trolls will never share their secrets."

"Then that's your problem. Good day." I move to shut the door.

"Queen Johanna!" He catches the door. "If we are able to restore your friend to life, you will cast a perpetual winter over Arendelle-Ciera?"

"If you bring him back to life and keep him alive." It would be just like goblins to bring him back only to kill him again. "For as long as Julian lives, there will be snow over Arendelle-Ciera."

I didn't expect it to happen. I didn't even expect the goblin to agree to my terms, but he nodded his little green head. "It will be done."

And it was supposed to be that easy.

Gerda

"We need to get back to Arendelle Castle," says Elsa calmly. Her eyes are red from crying, but she dries them with a kerchief Anna hands her.

Elsa spreads her hands and then gently pulls them back together. The muddy earth freezes, the ground covered in patterns of tiny ice crystals. A droplet of water rolls to the end of a leaf and freezes mid-drip. She opens her palms to the sky, and this time when the ice thaws it doesn't melt into mud. Instead it drifts upward, little droplets of water vapor vanishing into the air. In a moment, the ground beneath us is dry.

Elsa pushes herself to her feet. She gestures to her current dress, which is worn thin and caked in dark brown earth.

"You'll forgive me a moment of vanity, I hope," she says. Ice cascades down from her wrists, flows over her arms, and criss-crosses into a pale blue dress that falls down to her ankles. The bottom of the dress fans outward beneath her knees, shimmering like ripples in a frozen pond.

"That's so much more comfortable," Elsa says. She twirls her hand and a lacy shawl—silver like her hair—materializes around her shoulders. "Do you think it looks alright? I haven't done this in ages."

"Oh, Queen Elsa," I burst out, "you look so beautiful!"

Elsa smiles. "Thank you, Gerda. That's very kind of you to say."

"You look amazing," says Anna, "but the back of your skirt is uneven. Unless that's the look you were going for."

"Always the skirt." Elsa sighs. "Tell me when." She twirls her hand a few times, pulling the hemline up until it falls evenly and Anna nods. There's a sense of familiarity in the exchange, as if it's something they've done together many times before. I can picture the two of them in Arendelle Castle before the goblin wars, happily preparing for a ball together, trying on ice dresses and changing the designs as they go. It seems strange to think of a time before the wars. I was so little when they started that it seems like they've been going on forever.

"Come on," says Elsa. "We need to warn everyone."

"Warn them about what?" says Anna.

"The goblins," says Elsa. "They're far more hostile than we expected."

"Oh," says Anna. "Actually, we've been at war with the goblins for five years now."

"What?"

"I think they were afraid of your powers. They got really aggressive after you left. What happened to you?"

Elsa looks away. "We stopped by the orchard on our way to Ciera. I think the goblins put something in the cherries, because after we ate them nobody felt well. I could hardly raise a wind. The goblins sprung out and attacked, and we couldn't fight back. It was a slaughter. They killed everyone but me." She squeezes her eyes shut. "When I woke up, I was in the cottage. No memories, no friends. I thought, well, I must live there. So I kept going as if I did. There was no snow or ice or even wind, nothing to remind me of who I was. Until Gerda showed up." She

looks down at me. "Gerda, I froze your rosebush. I'm sorry. I was so lonely, and I thought if you saw the bush and remembered Kai, you would leave. I didn't do it on purpose, but it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't willed for you to stay. It was selfish of me, and I'm sorry."

"It's alright," I assure her. "Everything turned out ok."

"Why didn't the goblins kill you though?" says Anna. Her face pales. "I mean—crap—not that they should have killed you. I'm really, really glad you're not dead. But it doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does," says Elsa. "After I survived that assassination attempt by your fiancé—"

Anna makes a face. "He was my ex-fiance."

"—your ex-fiance then. As soon as I learned how, I made a pair of snow golems that would shield me from harm. They were a failed experiment, honestly." Elsa blushes. "I was trying to make them for you. I couldn't get them to respond to anyone but me, though, so I kept them as guards. Even if I'm distracted or unconscious, they'll defend me. The goblins must have seen that they couldn't harm me so they imprisoned me in an illusion instead. And then they declared war ... oh." She trails off. Her wide eyes grow even wider. "I left Jo to rule the kingdom during a war. How could I do that?"

Anna clears her throat.

"If it makes you feel any better," says Anna, "you actually left *Sonja* to rule the kingdom during a war."

"What happened to Jo?"

I look at Kai and Kristoff. They look at me. No one wants to look at Elsa.

Anna tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. She takes a deep breath and begins speaking very quickly. "Ok, so you know how after your coronation you ran away to the North Mountain and caused a big snowstorm and I had to hike up the mountain and beg you to come home? Well, Jo did the same thing, only she never came back. And she got really mean. And now she's allied with the goblins and is planning on ushering in an eternal winter. Starting, um, tomorrow."

"Jo did that?" Elsa looks down at her hands. Her eyes are big and watery, like she's going to cry. Snow starts to fall. Then she blinks and waves her hands and the snow stops. "No, no, no. That doesn't make any sense. Jo hates goblins."

Kai speaks up. "She hates them, but they stole a resurrection spell from the trolls. They've promised to bring back Julian in exchange for an eternal winter."

"What happened to Julian?"

This time Kristoff clears his throat. "The storm she caused? It was a *really* bad snowstorm."

"Oh." Elsa looks at her hands again. "That makes a lot more sense."

I don't know who Julian is, but it seems like the wrong moment to ask. I'll get Kai to tell me later.

"Sonja thinks Jo's illused herself," says Anna. "There was never any way for us to tell. But now that you're back ... " She looks up at Elsa hopefully.

"You thought I could save her," says Elsa.

Anna nods. "Can you?"

"I can try." Elsa takes a deep breath. "Ok. This will require a change of plans." She shoots a beam of ice out of her hands. It crystallizes into a white sleigh. "I don't have time to make it pretty, so this will have to do." She beckons up to the sky. A pair of pure white reindeer spiral down and land in front of the sleigh. Elsa begins to hook them to it, fashioning silver harnesses out of ice. "If I leave now and fly straight to the North Mountain, I can make it by tonight. The rest of you can take your horses back to the castle."

"You need me with you," I say. I explain about the password.

"And I'm not sending you up there without me," says Anna.

"Basically," says Kristoff, "we're all going. You should have learned by now that you don't have to do this alone."

"But it's not safe," says Elsa.

"If we all go, it will be safer for everyone," says Kai. "You know how magic can be influenced by intent? All five of us are travelling with someone we love. That could cause the magic to work in your favor, Queen Elsa."

Elsa looks down at her hands. "I still don't like it, but you're right. All of you." She sighs. "Gerda, go see if Swiftwing can guide the horses back to the castle without us."

I run back to the cabin where Swiftwing waits, perched on the mantel. I tell her the plan, and she agrees to lead the horses back to the castle. When I get back outside, the others are sitting in the sleigh already, waiting for me.

"If she's really illused," Elsa says, "all I have to do is remove the shard from her heart. Then hopefully she'll go back to normal."

"What if she's not illused?" I ask.

"I have no idea." Elsa shrugs. "Maybe I'll send her to her room." She flicks her wrist, and the reindeer take off, pulling the sleigh into the morning sky and leaving the clearing with its splintered trees far behind us.

Johanna

It's the morning of the first new moon, and I still have not decided what to do.

The goblins are getting restless about my indecision. They refuse to vent their frustration at me, but I can tell it's there. They restrain it only because they're more afraid of dying at my hands than they are of failing to cast the spell.

Truthfully, I am not thinking about them. I have other things distracting me. It's not that I miss Kai, but he has been a presence in my life for nearly a year. His disappearance has thrown me for a loop. Three times today I have called out an order only to remember that he is not here to obey. I suppose I could always create a snow golem, but, for all the effort that it takes to create a golem, I might as well perform the task myself.

A knock sounds at the door.

"Kai—" I start.

Never mind. I storm down the front stairs, a long lace train of ice sweeping behind me. I flick my wrist, and the icy door opens.

The Head Goblin bursts in, shivering and shaking snow off of his hat.

"For goodness sakes', there's not that much snow," I say, irritated. "Where's your little mage?"

"In the valley, setting up. You said you were going to clear the skies."

"They'll be clear tonight."

"So you've decided?"

I don't know why I haven't decided. I travelled down to Arendelle last night, thinking I'd search for a replacement sacrifice. I thought perhaps one of Julian's brothers would go willingly if I explained the situation. They weren't as young as Kai, but they would do.

I pulled up in my sledge outside of Julian's old home, but none of his brothers were anywhere near. I realized I had no idea where they live anymore, what they do, if they're even still in the

kingdom. Through the window, I could see his parents sitting at the kitchen table talking quietly, a fire crackling in the fireplace behind them. They were of no use to me, sitting there old and grey-haired with so few years left to them. It was infuriating how calm they looked, eating across from one another, smiling as if unaware of their encroaching mortality. I frosted up the window and went back to the Ice Palace. No sacrifice came with me.

"Your Majesty," says the Head Goblin, "you have decided, haven't you?"

"One cannot make such a decision in such a short time period," I say. "Give me until tonight."

"But we—"

I throw a spike of ice. It pierces the black misshapen hat he's wearing not an inch above his head. The fabric freezes into solid ice.

"Next time that will be your head," I warn. "I said tonight. I mean tonight."

"Of course, Your Majesty. No rush." The Head Goblin bows his head and backs out the door. I raise a hand, and the wind slams it in his face.

It's going to be me, of course. It's going to have to be me. I couldn't find anyone else to take Kai's place.

But I'm going to wait to admit it. It's irrational, I know, but I keep thinking that if I just delay my decision, fate will bring me what I want.

Fate has not always been my friend, but it owes me this much.

Gerda

The silver sleigh starts to descend.

"Listen to me, Gerda," says Queen Elsa as we drop below the clouds. "Once you get the password, I want you to jump back into the sled and get out of here. That goes for you too, Kai. Understand?"

Kai and I nod.

"Anna, Kristoff, you should go with them."

"I'm not leaving you," says Anna.

"Then just stay back until we know what Johanna will do."

The sleigh lands and coasts to a stop in front of the ice garden. Or what was the ice garden. The flowers are gone. Sharp fragments of ice lay in broken piles on the ground.

"What's happened?" I leap out of the sleigh and run to the spot where the rose bush used to sit. Anna calls after me, but I ignore her. I kneel before the glittering pile and pick up a piece of ice. It's still curved like a rose petal. "She's killed the garden. The roses are dead."

Someone puts a hand on my shoulder. It's Elsa.

"Can you mend them?" I say.

She shakes her head. "I'm sorry, Gerda. I could build a new one, but it wouldn't be the same rose bush."

"How do we get in now?" says Anna. She helps me to my feet. "We don't have the password.""

"We can knock," says Elsa, "or I can force the door open. Either way, we lose the element of surprise. Gerda and Kai, you need to get back in the sled-"

A powerful gust of wind knocks me sideways into the snow. I sit up, shivering and spitting snow out of my mouth. Johanna stands at the top of the stairs, her hands raised, calling a winter wind down on us. Her eyes are pale and cold. Her hair flies out behind her, long white-blond tresses entwined with beads of ice. She wears a dress made of sharp ice, blindingly bright, and a white cape that flutters in the wind. She is even more frightening than I expected.

The clouds above us part. Elsa stands with one hand to the sky. She's caught the rest of the wind and thrown it straight upwards. I'm not sure, but I think that's the only reason we're still alive.

Johanna lowers her hands and looks at Elsa. Really looks at her. She frowns.

"Elsa?"

"Johanna."

"It's Queen Johanna now. Funny story, the previous queen left and never came back. So they crowned me." She smirks down at us. "Well, I didn't succeed in killing you, so you might as well come in."

"I'll come in," says Elsa. "The others will stay out here."

"No." Johanna's eyes flash dangerously. "They're coming too. Especially you." She points at Kai. "You have a promise to keep."

The ground falls out from under me as the wind lifts me up and carries me towards the palace door. I reach for Kai, flying next to me, and catch his hand as the wind drops us in the Main Hall of the Ice Palace. I fall on my back and gasp for air. Beside me, Kai winces as he lands on his arm. Anna and Kristoff land a few meters away and tumble across the floor. Only Elsa lands on her feet, stepping down from the air as if she's gliding down a staircase.

"That was uncalled for," she says. "Is that how you treat all of your guests?"

"No." Johanna laughs and sashays past her. "Mostly I just kill them."

"Except the goblins."

"They were willing to negotiate. They can give me what I want."

"I'm willing to negotiate too," says Elsa. "What is it that you want?"

"Nothing you can help with, old woman. The children can, though. They will, if they're smart." Johanna laughs and turns her attention to me and Kai, huddled on the cold floor. "Kai, darling, you know what I'm talking about."

"Like hell I'd help you with your precious sacrifice," says Kai. "I won't help you with anything."

"You ignorant little—" Johanna chokes, covering her heart with both hands. Then she whirls around, glaring at Elsa. "Stop it, Mama, I know what you're doing. Stay away from my heart."

Elsa slowly lowers her hands. "You can't just leave the glass in there."

"I think I will. I like it there."

"Do you really? Or is that the glass speaking?"

Johanna narrows her eyes. "You're talking about things you know nothing about. It's tedious." Almost casually, she lifts a finger. "You don't want me to find you tedious."

"Please, Jo." Elsa holds her hands open, offering peace. "Can you hear yourself? Can you hear what you've become? You're going to cast an eternal winter over Arendelle-Ciera, and you can't even care. Let me remove the glass. It won't hurt."

"Is this your idea of negotiation then? Coming in here and trying to take what's mine?" Johanna flicks her hand in Elsa's direction. Spikes of ice fly out, but Elsa twists her wrist and redirects them. The spikes embed themselves in the wall behind her. One of them catches itself in Elsa's braid, and she stumbles backwards.

Kai and I crawl over to where Anna and Kristoff are huddled near the door. Anna tells us both to stay behind her. I peer over her shoulder to see what's happening.

Johanna laughs. "You're slipping, Queen Elsa. You used to be faster than me."

Elsa yanks the spike of ice from her hair. "We can still negotiate. Let's talk about this. You know the glass isn't really yours. It's not you. It just feels like it is."

"It doesn't feel like anything." Johanna throws a wall of ice at Elsa. Elsa stomps her foot, turning the floor to ice and skidding out of the way. The ice wall shoots past her and crashes into the next room.

Elsa turns on her toes and spins to a stop. "Stop this. You don't have to kill me."

"You know, I wish I didn't." Johanna swirls her hands around in a circle. A ball of magic starts to glow between them. "I never intended to. But you've returned at precisely the wrong time. I have extremely time-sensitive business to attend to, and you are getting in the way. My power over the goblins comes from the fact that I am the only one of us. I can't have them deciding not to cooperate because they think you're stronger than me."

Ice crystals fly from Johanna's hands, but Elsa summons a whirlwind that catches them and sends them flying back at Johanna. Johanna in turn throws up a shimmering shield, and the crystals embed themselves in it. She tosses the shield at Elsa's head. It spins through the air like a discus, sharp edges glinting. I scream, but Elsa throws a hand up, and a white ice reindeer dives down from the sky and collides with the spinning shield. Both of them explode into shards of ice.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Jo," Elsa says, "but I'm not going to let you hurt my kingdom either."

"It's not yours anymore. Neither am I."

"If this is about me leaving—"

"I don't care that you left. I got over it. I care that you've come back just in time to complicate my plans."

Johanna shoots a jet of ice at the chandelier over Elsa's head. It drops directly at her, but Elsa catches it. In her hands, the ice twists into a silver rope. Elsa tosses the rope like a lasso at Johanna, trying to bind her, but the rope never makes it that far. Instead, the icy wall beneath the stairs bursts into pieces as a snow guard crashes through and catches the rope around his arm.

"Get down!" Anna shoves my head down out of the way as the pieces of ice from the wall fly at us. A sharp piece slices open the back of my coat.

Another ice guard leaps out of the wall behind Elsa, brandishing a sword, ready to strike. One of Elsa's ice reindeer leaps down from the sky and blocks the guard with his antlers. Elsa stumbles to the side but is unharmed. The snow golems struggle. I'm engrossed in watching the fight when Kai nudges me and points to Johanna.

A vine of ice slowly creeps out of the wall behind her. Without warning, it catches Johanna's wrists and throat, tugs her backwards, and pins her against the wall. The vines twist themselves around her hands, holding her still. Johanna's mouth falls open in shock. The ice guards dissolve. She struggles, but the ice that holds her only grows thicker.

"Gerda," says Elsa, straightening up. "Kai, get out of here." She lifts a hand and the door behind us swings open.

"Mama, wait," says Johanna. She hangs her head, ashamed. "I—I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I never could have hurt you or the kingdom." She peers up at her mother, her eyes wide and innocent. "You can remove the shard from my heart if you want."

"Oh, Jo," Elsa takes a step towards her daughter. She reaches out a hand to stroke her platinum blond hair. "It's ok. You'll be better in—"

Johanna kicks her mother smack in the chest. It isn't a hard kick, but magic must have shot out through her feet because Elsa flies across the room and slams into the wall. She falls to the floor, unmoving.

Johanna tugs herself free from the icy binds. They shatter and fall around her.

"Idiot," she says. "See where love gets you?"

She kicks a shard of ice aside and closes the door with a wave of her hand. I'm trapped. Kai's trapped. We should have run, but I was so sure Queen Elsa was going to win, that Arendelle-Ciera would be saved. I couldn't imagine it would turn out like this. Johanna smiles over at Kai and me.

"Now," she says, "where were we?"

Johanna

"You can't do this, Jo," says Aunt Anna. She starts to run towards me, but Kristoff holds her back.

"She'll only kill you too," he says.

He's wrong, actually. I don't want her dead just yet.

Kai is holding onto the little girl, who's crying quietly. I assume that's Gerda.

"You're a wicked, wicked woman," Gerda glares at me through her tears. "You're not frightening at all. You're pathetic. I hope you're ashamed of yourself."

"Shut up, or I'll give you something to be frightened over," I say. I walk over to where Queen Elsa lies. She's still breathing. I didn't expect to have killed her. Honestly, I'm not sure how to kill another Ice Mage. All of my usual methods involve ice, and she'd just absorb that. I'll have to get the goblins to come in with a mundane method. Knives, arrows, or poison. Until then, I run my hands back and forth through the air and coat her in layer after layer of thick ice until there's nothing to see but a white block of ice in the middle of the floor. Once she wakes up, she'll have a time breaking through all of that. If I'm lucky, she'll suffocate.

My heart flutters and I silence it. It's been doing a strange little fluttering since she walked in. I suppose it doesn't like the idea of me killing my own mother. I wasn't lying; I *don't* relish the idea of killing her, but she is spoiling my plans. I'm extremely irritated with her for coming back tonight of all nights. Any other time we might have been able to come to a compromise. But not tonight. Tonight is too important.

"Now Kai," I say, "there's the small matter of a willing sacrifice."

"Forget it," Kai says. "I'm not willing."

"But I think you are."

I twirl my hands. Four winds blow in from four different directions, carrying Kristoff, Anna, Gerda, and Kai onto four different sides of the room. Four cages shoot up out of the ground, bars reaching upwards and curling together at the top, entrapping each person in their own individual prison. The others pounds on the bars, but Kai only stands and waits. He knows there's no escape.

"As you can see," I tell him, "I've left your friends alive. For now. If you refuse to cooperate, I will kill them. Slowly, and one by one. Starting with Gerda. Then I'll send an eternal winter, whether you cooperate or not, so don't get any noble ideas about saving the kingdom. Now," I hold out my hand, "how willing do you feel?"

Kai looks at me. His eyes are full of anger. Not cold hate, but a living, burning anger. It's weird to see Kai's eyes so alive.

"If I cooperate," he says. "I want you to swear that you'll let us go alive."

"Of course."

"Swear on Julian's life."

"I swear it." Clever boy. I suppose the storm will just kill them on the way down anyway.

"Kai, don't do it!" Gerda shrieks. "It's not worth it!" She pounds against the bars of her cage.

"I told you to shut up!" I send a spike of ice flying at her. It stops inches in front of her throat. She grows silent, watching it hover there, afraid.

"I'll do it," Kai says. "Willingly."

"Good boy." I let the spike of ice fall. Gerda touches her unharmed throat. She looks at Kai and shakes her head, but he looks away.

Kai's cage dissolves into the ground. I conjure up a silver rope and wrap it around his wrist so he can't run away. Then I open the front doors and call my horses down from the sky. It's not a long walk to the valley, but I don't want him getting sick from the cold.

Kai says nothing during the ride in the sledge, but he's clearly thinking. It's strange, Kai thinking. He used to be so pliable. Every so often, he turns his head to glare at me, then goes back to his thoughts.

"I liked you better when you were illused," I tell him.

"I don't think I ever liked you," says Kai.

"Shut your impertinent mouth."

Kai snorts. "Yes, *Your Majesty*."

What an awful child. I'm going to have to illuse him again. I reach onto my pocket for the shards of goblin glass, but they're gone. Damn. Queen Elsa must have summoned them while I wasn't paying attention.

I'll figure out how to kill her first. Then I'll take the shards of goblin glass that she stole and put them back in Kai's heart.

Gerda

I blow warm air on the bars of the ice cage, then rub them with my bare fingers. My mittens sit next to me on the ground. I'm hoping my body heat will melt this ice like it did Kai's. It doesn't look promising, but I keep trying.

Across the room from me, Anna shoves against the bars in her cage, trying to find a weak one. Kristoff chips away at his with a metal ice pick. Even the ice pick is hardly making a dent.

"This ice is denser than anything I've ever seen," he says.

"We have to keep trying." Anna slams herself against the side of her cage. "This is all my fault. I never should have pushed Elsa to come here so soon."

"It's not your fault," says Kristoff. "Elsa knew Johanna. She knew what she was getting into."

"Did she? I don't think anyone knew Johanna would do this." Anna pushes against the nearest bar, digging her heels into the ground as if she thinks the cage will slide right over the slick surface. It stays put.

"We need a plan," says Kristoff. "What happens when we get out?"

"Should we try to stop the Snow Queen?" I ask. My hands are starting to hurt from the cold. I rest them inside my coat and examine the icy bar in front of me. It might be my imagination, but I think I'm actually starting to make a dent.

"It's too late for that," says Anna. "We'll have to warn the kingdom."

"Ok," I say. I rub the bars with my hands again. On second thought, it is my imagination. They're as solid as they were when I started. "But how do we get back there? Do you think Queen Elsa's snow reindeer will still come back for us if she's ... "

Nobody wants to finish that thought. A tall white block of ice covers the spot where Queen Elsa fell. It sits silent and impenetrable in the center of the hall. Anna's lower lip trembles, and I'm sorry I said anything.

"What we could do," says Kristoff slowly, "is interrupt the spell itself. No resurrection spell, no eternal winter."

"Yes," Anna nods. "Yes, that's it! We'll keep the goblins from bringing back Julian, and she'll have no reason to curse Arendelle."

"All we'd have to do tonight is get in the way. And then tomorrow we could, I don't know, bribe the goblins—"

"—enough so that they don't try to cast it again! This could work!"

"Where do we find them?" I say.

Anna and Kristoff pause. They don't know. Kai knew, but he's gone.

"Even if we knew, we'd have to get there before the spell is over," says Kristoff. He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. "It's a pretty time-sensitive plan, now that I think about it."

"Maybe Olaf will help us," says Anna.

"Olaf isn't going to be anywhere near us."

"What about magic?" I say. "Everyone tells me magic depends on intent. So if our intent is purer than the Snow Queen's, maybe the magic will be on our side."

"Maybe," says Anna. "I mean, it's possible. Magic depends on more than just intent though. And right now it's leaning pretty heavily towards the troll prophecy."

There's a cracking sound beside me. I think maybe one of them has broken out of their cage, but I'm wrong. Kristoff's ice pick has chipped in two.

"This is unbelievable," he says. "There is absolutely no way to break through this ice! It's like iron!" Frustrated, he slams the good half of the ice pick into the floor.

It slices a crack in the ice and sticks.

Kristoff stares at his ice pick, confused. He pries it out of the ground and slams it back in. Another chunk of ice becomes dislodged.

"Kristoff, you're a genius!" says Anna. "We've been going about this all wrong. We were fighting to break Johanna's cages, but Elsa made the floor. We can break through her ice." She clasps her hands together happily. "I'd knew we'd find a way. Everyone chip at the ground! We're going to save the kingdom after all!"

Johanna

The goblins see us coming and are there to greet the sledge when it lands. The Head Goblin welcomes me with a deep bow. "Your Majesty. Good to see you." He notices Kai sitting in the corner of the sledge. "And good to see that your sacrifice has returned."

"I'm going to need a weapon after this," I tell him. "An ordinary one. Nothing made of ice."

The Head Goblin frowns at Kai. "The sacrifice won't work if he's dead."

"It's not for him. I have enemies that you don't need to know about."

The goblins exchange nervous looks. "We can provide you with a weapon tonight," says the Head Goblin finally.

"Good. That is all I require." I stand up and brush past him. The silver rope bites at Kai's wrist, and he has no choice but to follow me out of the sledge and into the center of the valley. The

troll-goblin has already set up an area in which to perform the spell—at least I assume that's the meaning of the little clusters of rocks and mushrooms that circle the ice coffin. Julian's form is blurred by the patterns that have been traced on either side of him. Someone has built an archway of sticks overtop of the circle, with the holly branch hanging down over his heart.

"How long will this take?" I ask the troll-goblin.

"However long the magic requires."

"That's no answer."

"Most of the spell is done already," he says. "All we need is a clear sky, and the final part should take no more than an hour."

"Fine," I say. I throw a wind straight up. The clouds above us scatter. The sky spills open, and stars blink down at us, their twinkling eyes unseeing. "Do it now."

"Very well. I can see why you would want this over with." He clears his creaky throat. "The spell will go best if you thaw the ice coffin. So he can breathe."

So he can breathe. I never thought I'd hear that said of Julian again. I can't feel anything—it is inconceivable that I could feel anything. And yet, knowing that this impossibility is coming true, knowing that minutes from now Julian is going to be standing next to me, the sheer impossible knowledge of it hits me so hard that it's almost like a feeling.

I step into the circle and press my hand against the ice coffin. It melts away, dripping onto the snow. I leave a block of ice directly beneath Julian so that he can rest on something other than the ground. Then I step away.

I've done my part.

The other goblins gather round as the troll-goblin begins to chant. The words are deep and earthy-sounding, rolling and rumbling like boulders down a hillside. The spell is clearly troll in origin and sounds funny coming from the mouth of a goblin. Still, he says it well.

While he chants, I reach out with my mind and feel for the ice within my Palace. I want to know if any of the cages have been disturbed.

"Your Majesty," says the troll-goblin suddenly, "your magic will interfere with the spell."

I stop reaching out. He begins to chant again, picking up where he left off. I shift slightly from one foot to the next. I can still feel the ice crystals in my immediately vicinity, but that does me no good. I don't like not being able to contact my ice from far away.

The goblin's chant continues for what seems like eternities. I don't know if I've ever gone this long without using my power. The stars above us have moved. Finally, the troll-goblin holds up the vial of ugly brown liquid.

"Who will sacrifice his life for his brother's?" he calls out. He looks at Kai.

"I will," says Kai.

"Is this life given willingly?"

"Yes."

"Then drink." He hold the vial out to Kai. Kai uncaps the vial and wrinkles his nose at the smell. He hesitates.

"I can easily kill Gerda from here," I remind him. Kai tilts the vial into his mouth. He makes a face and swallows it quickly.

"Who will give his blood to his brother?" recites the goblin. This is Kai again. He steps into the circle and holds out his hand. The goblin tugs Kai's hand out over Julian's chest. He pulls out a knife and jabs it into Kai's fingertip. A bead of blood appears. Then the goblin squeezes Kai's hand, causing the blood to drip onto Julian. He releases Kai, says a few more words in troll. He bows his head and steps out of the circle.

Nothing happens. The goblins stand in silence. Julian lies still. Not even the wind blows.

"Is that it?" I say.

"That's the spell," the troll-goblin says. "Exactly as the trolls taught me."

"It didn't work."

"Perhaps," says the Head Goblin, "your sacrifice was not as willing as he seemed."

"Don't blame your mistakes on me," says Kai evenly.

"Shut up, all of you!" I say. I can't believe I was stupid enough to think the goblins could pull this off. I swirl my hands together. Power grows between them. "I warned you of the price of failure."

Someone gasps. It's a human gasp, so it must be Kai.

"Shut up, Kai."

"I didn't say anything."

Julian gasps again. I recognize his voice this time. My hands fall to my sides. Half-formed ice crystals shoot from my palms into the snow, where they vanish. I run into the stone circle and fall down at his side, pressing my cheek against his. Julian is breathing. Air is moving in and out of his mouth. His chest is rising and falling. Every few seconds, he gasps unevenly, but otherwise his breathing is smooth. I reach up and brush a wet strand of hair from his forehead. My heart flutters, and it takes me a minute to force it back down. There's color in his cheeks, but his eyes are still closed.

"Is he going to wake up?" I demand. "Why won't he wake up?"

"The spell takes a few minutes to warm up," says the troll-goblin.

"You might have told me that."

"But you were having so much fun threatening to kill us all."

I point a finger at him. "Don't mock me." But I can't really get behind my threat when Julian is lying in front of me, his cheeks gaining color every minute. Already his breath is growing steadier. He starts to shiver.

"It's too cold out here," I say. I glare at the goblins as if the snow were their fault. "I'm taking him back to my Palace to warm up."

"What about the eternal winter—"

"Are you goblins always so impatient?" I reach up and give the air above us a nudge. "There. It's done."

The Head Goblin looks suspicious. "Just like that?"

"Not all mages need chants and potions."

He shrugs. "I'll accept your word." He turns to the other goblins and waves them forward. "Load the man onto the sledge. We're going back to the Ice Palace."

Gerda

I fall to my knees and start pounding on the ground. Anna starts to do the same. We're not making much progress, but Kristoff already has a good-sized hole in the ground. For a few minutes, it seems like he's really going to escape. Then Kristoff stops digging. He wipes his brow and shakes his head.

"The bars go underground," he says. "I can dig into the ice around them, but they're too close together for me to fit through."

"It's ok," says Anna. "We'll find another way out." She sounds exhausted. "We will."

I press my hand against the icy ground. It's smooth, flat, and impenetrable, like a wall. Maybe we'll never break through. Maybe this is it. I think back to the long summer days I spent with Kai when things were easy, sitting in the window boxes and watching the roses grow. The cozy winter nights we spent drinking hot cocoa and listening to his grandmother's stories. We could be back there now if it weren't for the Snow Queen and the goblins. I could be there now if I hadn't gone after Kai. But I'm glad I went. I'd rather die now at the hands of the Snow Queen than grow old knowing I'd failed my best friend when he most needed me.

The ground beneath my hand begins to rumble.

The white box in the center of the room, the one that's covering Queen Elsa, explodes into pieces. I instinctively cover my face with my hands. When I lower them, Queen Elsa stands in its place. She takes a deep breath.

"Someone was attacking my ice," she says. Her voice is faint, almost a breath. Then she collapses, crumbling onto her hands and knees and clutching her chest with one hand.

"Elsa!" Anna rattles the bars of her cage.

"Hold on, Anna." Elsa waves one hand. She's still using the other one to hold herself up. The cages melt into the ground. Like that, we're free.

I run to the center of the room, skidding across the slick ice floor to help Elsa up. She doesn't seem to be able to stand, so I support her shoulders and help her sit down.

"Are you ok?" Anna asks, kneeling beside her.

"No." Elsa shakes her head slowly. She grimaces, like even that is too much effort.

"Was it me?" Kristoff looks horrified. "I didn't mean to attack your ice."

"No, no, you can't hurt the ice. That was good. It woke me up." She presses her palm against her chest. "It was Johanna. She's pierced my heart. I don't know what's going to happen to me. I've never heard of an Ice Mage being pierced by ice."

"You'll be ok," says Anna. "We'll find an act of true love for you to do."

"You can try. Any bad boyfriends I can save you from?"

"Sorry, I'm fresh out."

"Too bad." Elsa tries to laugh but winces instead.

"Maybe if you save the kingdom," says Anna. "Saving everyone is pretty loving, right? We were thinking, if we interrupt the resurrection spell before it works, Johanna won't have an excuse to start an eternal winter."

Elsa shakes her head. "I'm not going to save the kingdom, Anna."

"Why not?"

She looks up to the ceiling, open to the sky. "The eternal winter's already started."

"What?" I say. I didn't mean to interrupt, but I can't believe what I'm hearing. "When?"

"Just now."

I picture my grandmother, at home in Ciera, probably baking a pie or knitting a shawl. She's resourceful and always well-prepared. She'll have enough food set aside to survive a normal winter. Not an eternal winter though. No one can survive that.

"I'm sorry, everyone," Elsa says. "Especially you, Gerda. This isn't the kind of kingdom I meant for you to grow up in. I wanted so much better for Arendelle." She looks down at her hands, her eyes sad. "This whole thing is my fault. I should never have gone to look for Fred. None of this would have happened if I'd just stayed home."

Anna squeezes her hand. "It's not your fault."

"How can you say that?" Elsa squeezes her eyes shut. "When Jo was born, I was so worried for her. I didn't want her growing up like me, isolated and afraid. I tried to show her love. I tried to teach her control. I thought she wouldn't be a threat to the kingdom if I taught her how to use her powers. It never occurred to me that she'd use them to bring about the troll prophecy on purpose." She hugs herself, presses her palms against her sides like she's trying to hide them from us. "How could I be so stupid? To think we could live here without hurting people? We're monsters. Both of us."

A quiet snow starts to fall from the ceiling. The flakes are big and wet like tear drops.

"Stop that," says Anna. "Neither of you are monsters. People make bad choices when they're mad or scared, but that doesn't make them bad people." She pauses. "Ok, Johanna's acting pretty bad, but that's because she's illused. If we can get the goblin glass out of her heart, she'll go back to normal."

"I tried," says Elsa. "She's too quick for me." A wind curls up around her. It's a sad, soft little wind. It sounds more like it's crying than howling.

I throw my arms around Elsa's neck in a warm hug.

"You didn't have to apologize to me," I say, "because I don't think you did anything wrong. I think you're the kindest, bravest queen Arendelle-Ciera's ever seen. And you didn't just leave. You had to go find King Frederick for the same reason I had to go after Kai and the same reason Anna had to go after you. Because you do everything you can to save the people you love."

Elsa hugs me and pats my hair. "Thank you, Sweetheart. I don't know how much this means when we probably won't live to see the dawn, but you're one of the bravest people I've known."

Suddenly, she tenses.

"Johanna's coming," Elsa says. "I can feel her sledge getting nearer." Out of her skirt pocket, she pulls a little glittering drawstring bag and hands it to me. "Take this, Gerda. Don't let Johanna have it, and don't touch what's inside."

I take the little glittering bag and tuck it deep into my coat pocket.

Johanna

The snow horses pull up to the balcony on the second floor of the ice palace. I climb out, order the goblins to carry Julian into the bedchamber and rest him on my bed. I cover him with an eiderdown blanket. It's one of the few things in the palace not made of ice and will keep him warm.

Julian stirs but does not wake. Kai stumbles in behind me, still chained to my wrist by a silver string.

"How long until he wakes up?" I say.

"Could be minutes," says the troll-goblin. "Could be hours."

"You are no help to me, as usual." Frustrated, I reach out with my mind to see how my ice cages are holding up.

"Your Majesty, we-"

"Shut up." Something's wrong. I've reached out to my cages, but I can't find them. It's like they've melted, disappeared into the ground.

Only one other person could have done that.

"Downstairs," I say. "Now."

Kai scurries to keep up with me as I approach the stairs. The goblins creep after us. I reach the landing, and my fears are confirmed. In the front hall below, I can see Queen Elsa sitting on the floor, free from her prison. The others cluster around her. Elsa looks up at me with pale blue eyes. I hate that her eyes are the same as mine, when in all other ways we are entirely different.

"I thought I got you out of the way," I say.

"You seem to think a lot of things that I don't agree with." Elsa struggles to her feet. "So the spell went as planned? Where's Julian?"

"Resting upstairs. Alive." I fold my arms across my chest. "Which no one will be able to say for you in a minute." I'm extremely irritated at her for breaking out so quickly. She's really going to make me do this.

"You have to let her go," says Kai. "You promised—"

"She wasn't included in your request," I say. "You thought she was dead."

Kai scowls and bites his lip, thinking.

The goblins whisper among themselves. "Is that Queen Elsa?" "Can't be." "Must be." I ignore them.

"The pieces of goblin glass," I tell Queen Elsa. "You took them. I want them."

"I don't know what you're talking about," says Elsa. I reach out with my mind and search her, briefly, but she's right. She doesn't have them.

"Why do you insist on making this complicated?" I sigh, exasperated. Today wasn't supposed to be difficult. "I'll just kill you and then find them."

I reach into the pocket of my fur coat and pull out a knife. A real, metal knife, sharp and slick. The handle is made of gold and decorated with strange goblin designs.

"Let's save ourselves some time, Queen Elsa," I say. I run my hand along the flat side of the blade. "I think we both know what will happen. I'm stronger than ever, while you can hardly stand. We'll fight for a while, you'll run out of strength, and I'll kill you. Let's skip all that. Let me make it quick. You know you've lost."

Elsa looks up at me. "You're right. I've lost. I've lost so, so many things. I've lost a daughter. I've lost a husband. I've lost time with my best friend and sister. I've lost the future we all could have had together, the one in which my kingdom doesn't perish in an eternal winter. I've lost the chance to see the children of Arendelle-Ciera grow up happy and safe. I know I've lost those things, and I mourn them.

"But you—you've lost everything. You don't even know what you've lost, and you're so afraid of thawing your heart that you'll never know. You'll grow old and frail and die never knowing what you're missing out on."

"Good!" I snap. A wind rises, lifting my hair, filling the room, even though I didn't purposely call it. "I don't want to know. I never want to know. You're such a fool, holding on to all these things when they mean nothing. It was stupid of you to come here. To even think you could—"

"Johanna?" says a voice behind me. The wind falls abruptly. The knife falls from my hand. The voice that calls my name is hoarse from lack of use, but I would know it anywhere.

Julian staggers onto the landing. He leans against a pillar, his legs shaking as if he has not yet gained full control of them. The rest of the room—the goblins, the children, Queen Elsa—it all ceases to matter. I run to him.

"What's going on?" he says. His legs nearly buckle underneath him. I catch him, and he steadies himself. "What are they saying about an eternal winter?"

"Nothing. It doesn't matter." I touch his face. He's real. This—this is real. "You're alive."

"Yeah," Julian smiles. I can count the hours since I last saw him smile. "I guess I am."

He kisses me. I want this kiss to last forever. My heart tries to leap, but it is pinned tightly in place by the shard of goblin glass, and I wince in pain.

Julian notices. "Are you hurt?"

"No, it's nothing."

For the first time, he looks beyond me down the stairs and frowns. His hand goes automatically to the rapier at his side. "What are goblins doing here?"

"Don't hurt them. They're keeping you alive."

"Keeping me alive?" He holds out a hand in front of his face, flexes his fingers like he's not sure how to use them. "This is a goblin spell? Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's worth the cost."

"What's the cost?"

"It doesn't matter."

"My life," pipes Kai. "She's draining my life. And she's killing Arendelle. She made a deal with the goblins. She says as long as they keep you alive, she will keep Arendelle in an unending winter—"

"Shut up, you worthless—" I raise a hand to silence him, but Julian grabs it before I can do anything more than whip up a few flakes of snow.

He stares at my hand. His fingers have traced the palm of that hand so many times.

"You were about to attack a child," Julian says.

"So what?" I say. "He deserves it."

"Why? Is he telling the truth?"

"It doesn't matter," I say again. Nothing else matters. Why can't he see that?

"Queen Elsa?" says Julian. "Is the boy telling the truth?" I turn my head in time to see Mama nod.

"Julian—" I start. I try to reach for him, but he pulls away. He looks at me, horrified. Like he's not even seeing me, like he's looking at me and seeing someone he doesn't know.

"What's happened to you?" says Julian. "Are you trying to fulfill the troll prophecy?"

"It's not about the prophecy." I'm pleading. I hate that I'm pleading. "I don't care about the prophecy."

"You should care about the prophecy. You can't just sacrifice your kingdom. That's your family down there. And draining a child's life? I'm not worth that. No one is worth that."

"But—" Suddenly I am crying, and I can't stop. I hate the way he's looking at me. I never wanted him to look at me like that.

"I don't understand," he says. He takes a few uncertain steps across the landing. His eyes scan the room, as if he'll find answers curled up forgotten in some snow-covered corner, before his gaze returns to me. "I shouldn't even be here right now. I defied every law of nature to come back when they called me, because I knew they were calling me for you. I come back and I find you like this? How? Why?"

"I don't know." My chest hurts. The tear drops turn into beads of ice that roll down my face and clatter against the floor like diamonds. "I don't know why I do anything I do. All I know is that I love you."

"You love me enough that you'd kill everyone in Arendelle just to bring me back?"

I manage to nod through my tears. My heart is straining against the glass. I'd forgotten it could hurt this much.

Julian puts a cold hand against my face and touches his forehead to mine. His eyes are green like the hillside on a summer day. When's the last time I saw a summer day? "If you love me enough to hold on like this," he says, "you need to love me enough to let me go."

Julian steps back and reaches for the rusted sword still in his holster. The world all returns at once. Aunt Anna gasps. Kai whispers, "A sword sacrifice!" and Gerda shrieks and clutches Elsa's hand. The goblins rush to my side, but I spread my arms and a gust of icy wind pushes them back.

"So this is what love gets me," I laugh sadly. "Are you going to kill me, Julian?"

"Jo," Julian says. He looks at me for a long time, the sword still balanced in his right hand. "What would I kill? You're already gone." He turns to Kai. "Unending winter as long as I'm alive? That's the agreement?"

Kai nods. Julian's green eyes meet mine. He looks frightened, but not of me this time. Then he sets his jaw determinedly, and I know suddenly what he's going to do.

"Julian, don't—"

"Let me go, Johanna."

Before I can raise a hand to stop him, he turns the sword on himself.

I think I scream his name. I think there's blood. I think a gust of wind shatters the palace walls, and I think I caused it. I think Mama rushes to my side and catches the shard of goblin mirror that flies from my heart as my entire life bursts apart. All I know is that I'm on my knees next to Julian, and his chest is covered in blood, and mine might as well be bleeding too, everything hurts so much. My hands are turning red because I'm holding onto him, and I'm shaking him, and I'm screaming, I'm screaming at him to come back.

One of the goblins approaches tentatively.

"Make him come back," I order. "Use the troll spell again. You can have my life."

"He's pierced his heart," said the goblin. "There's nothing anyone can do for a pierced heart."

"No," I say. "No."

I'm crying and I'm holding onto Julian. Mama is kneeling beside me and stroking my hair and whispering, "Let it go, Johanna. It's ok. Let it go."

The icy wind outside picks up. I close my eyes and send it swirling faster and faster, but there's nothing inside of it. It's nothing but empty air.

Gerda

Johanna sinks to the ground and buries her face in her hands. I keep waiting for her to get up and fight, but she doesn't get up. She doesn't move. I don't think she's faking this time. The way she screamed, I don't think anyone can fake that.

Elsa kneels next to her on the landing. She practically flew up the stairs when Johanna fell. I don't think I've ever seen anyone move so fast. Next to her, Kai stands, looking dazed. I run up the stairs and throw my arms around him.

"You almost died for me," I say.

He ruffles my hair. "That makes us even."

Elsa sees me looking and waves me towards her. I leave Kai and tip toe over. From this close, the Snow Queen doesn't look so frightening. She's small and frail, not very much taller than I am.

"Open the bag, Gerda," Elsa says in a whisper. I withdraw the silver drawstring bag from inside my pocket and tug it open. Elsa uncurls her hand. She's holding the piece of goblin glass that flew from Johanna's heart. Elsa tips the glass into the silver bag, and I pull it tightly shut.

The goblins try to slip past me down the stairs.

"Don't you dare." Elsa sends a blast of ice at their feet, coating their boots and fusing them to the ground. The goblins stop in place, freezing like a bizarre tableau. Elsa storms over to the one in charge.

"What's your name?" she says.

"Sallowtooth, Your Majesty."

"Sallowtooth, what do the goblins want with Arendelle-Ciera?"

"I don't know. I'm but the messenger. The king would know. He has—"

"The king has entrusted you with an incredibly sensitive mission and must have told you the plan." Almost delicately, she presses a hand to his temple. "I almost caused an eternal winter with this hand. Want to see what it can do to your head? Why are you attacking Arendelle-Ciera?"

"I—I don't know."

"Do you think I'm playing?" Elsa shoots a jet of ice into another goblin's head. He hits the floor with a gross thud. "I'll ask you one more time. What do you want with Arendelle-Ciera?"

"The fjorde," Sallowtooth says, panicked. "We just want the fjorde out of the way."

"Why?"

"The only other port nearby is in the Goblin Lands. With Arendelle out of the picture, we'd be the center of trade. Everything would come through us. All the riches, all the gold. You've heard stories of the Americas. They're supposed to be full of it. All that gold, coming to us? We'd have been fools to pass up such an opportunity."

"Is that so?" Elsa narrows her eyes. Her head tilts almost imperceptibly south. "And how would it affect your plans if it were your port frozen over instead of ours?"

"You wouldn't do that."

"I just did."

"Elsa," says Anna. Elsa looks down at Anna, standing timidly at the bottom of the stairs. She looks at Johanna, still unmoving. She looks at Kai and me. Her eyes grow large and sad. She takes a deep breath and lowers her hand from Sallowtooth's head.

"Five years," she says. "I give your country five years of winter. That seems fair. As soon as you withdraw your troops, we'll begin to send you aid. I don't want your people to suffer any more than mine. They have no control over your king's poor decisions. No one will be using your port, but no one will starve either."

She waves a hand, and the goblins' boots unfreeze. The ice cracks into pieces and falls to the floor, clattering like unlinked chains.

"You're free to go. Go back to your kingdom, tell your king what I've done and why." She gestures towards the goblin laying on the ground, the one whose head has been pierced with ice. "Leave him. I'll take him to the trolls to be healed. Once we know he's alright, he'll be free to join you as well."

She might as well not have said the second part. The goblins flee the moment she says they can go. Sallowtooth pauses at the door, looks up at Johanna's slumped figure like he has something to say. Instead, he slams the door behind him.

That is the last I see of those goblins.

Elsa leans down and whispers something into Johanna's ear. I don't know what she says. Johanna doesn't look up, but she lifts a hand. Slowly, as if bearing some incredible weight, she waves it in Julian's direction. Snow begins to fall from the ceiling. It covers him like a blanket, obscuring the blood, blotting out his form, finally solidifying into a simple white box around him.

Johanna's hand collapses, as if she's exhausted all of her effort.

"We have to go," Elsa says. "Kristoff, will you carry the goblin?"

"What about Jo?" says Anna.

Elsa crouches down in front of her daughter.

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry," she says. She touches Johanna's wrists, and the little ice vines wrap around them, twisting themselves up her arms and across her body until she's nearly covered. Johanna only shrugs.

"Let's go," says Elsa to the rest of us. She takes Johanna by the wrist and lifts her gently to her feet. Kristoff picks up the unconscious goblin. Anna takes my hand in one hand and Kai's in another.

Together, we walk outside and into the night. The sky is silent, dark and still. As if a storm had never been brewing at all.

Gerda

We take Elsa's sleigh to the trolls' glen. I wrap the unconscious goblin in my coat and let him lie next to me on the seat. I've never seen a goblin up close before. He looks like a little pale green man, but skinny and with wiry wisps of black hair on his head. Only one snow reindeer pulls us this time, but we still move quickly through the snow. Elsa steers while Kristoff occasionally calls out directions.

When we reach the glen, it's empty save for a bunch of rocks.

"What happened to the trolls?" I say. "What if the goblins attacked them too?" Anna laughs. Before I can ask what's so funny, she grabs my hand and pulls me out of the sleigh, leading me over to the nearest rock.

"Say hello," she tells me. The rock uncurls into a little brown troll. It blinks up at us with wide, excited eyes.

"So good to see you, Anna," the troll says. It nods at me. "Is she yours? She looks just like you and Kristoff."

I look back and forth from Anna to Kristoff, confused. They both have extremely fair Arendelle complexions. My complexion is not dark but is darker than theirs, highlighted by my dark brown eyes.

"This is Gerda," says Anna. "No relation whatsoever. She did just save the kingdom though."

"Ah," the troll pats my hand. "I knew there was something similar about you two."

Behind me, a throat clears. A wizened old troll with a wrinkled face stands on the rock in the center of the glen. He nods at Elsa and she approaches, head bowed. The old troll's face breaks into a smile.

"Elsa," he says, "it's been so many years since I first saw you here. You've grown into a fine queen. You've conquered your fears, led the kingdom well in wartime and in peace. History will remember you fondly, but, for now, it's good to have you back. What can I do for you?"

Elsa blushes at the praise. She gestures towards Kristoff, who holds the unconscious goblin in his arms. "I'm not sure I've done as well as you say. I've pierced this goblin in the head unprovoked. Can you heal him?"

The old troll beckons Kristoff forward. He looks down at the goblin in Kristoff's arms and begins to laugh. The sound is deep and rich like the fresh earth after a rain storm.

"This goblin has caused us a lot of trouble," the old troll says. "He posed as one of us and stole our resurrection spell. We learned much from his illusions, but not before he escaped with a dangerous knowledge." He places his hand on the goblin's forehead. "He'll live and be well. Memories of the past five years will be a little fuzzy, however. He may never get them back."

"What about Elsa?" says Anna. "Johanna pierced her heart with ice. Can an act of true love save her?"

The troll smiles again. He looks to Elsa. "I imagine it hurt terribly for a few minutes, but now the pain is almost gone."

Elsa nods. The troll chuckles.

"Elsa is an Ice Mage. Ice won't harm her. She's likely absorbed it by now."

"And Johanna?" Elsa says. "What will happen to her?"

The troll's smile fades. "Bring her here."

Elsa goes back to the sleigh and returns leading Johanna. The younger Snow Queen doesn't look at the troll. Her eyes are fixed on the ground.

"Johanna," the troll sighs. "I wish you had let me remove the shard when I asked. It would have saved you so much pain."

Beside me, I see Elsa touch the little glittering bag with the glass shards inside. We've stopped the Snow Queen, but the Mirror of Opposites with its horrible glass is still out there somewhere, illusing innocent people. I take a step closer to Kai, as if my presence can protect him from it happening again.

The troll places a hand on Johanna's forehead. She shivers almost imperceptibly. "Your days seem dark right now," he says, "but the light will come when it's time." He lowers his hand. "As for the rest of you, the worst is over. It's time for you to rejoin your people."

Gerda

We arrive at Arendelle Castle amid a gentle snowfall. The gates open, and guards pour out to welcome Anna and Kristoff home. They spy Elsa climbing from the sleigh, Johanna trailing behind her at the end of a silver rope. The courtyard hushes. The guards fall to their knees.

Behind them, the main door swings open. Ida starts to run, then sees Johanna and stops short, looking frightened. Sonja runs right past Ida and doesn't stop.

"You did it!" Sonja says. She hugs Elsa and Anna. She looks over at Johanna, hesitates. Then she embraces her too. The Snow Queen blinks in surprise but doesn't push her away.

"What happened?" Sonja says.

"It's a long story," says Elsa. "We'll tell you inside. Let's get Johanna indoors before the sight of her frightens people."

"Is she still illused?"

"No, but I think it's best if we keep her restrained for a little while."

Johanna shifts within her bonds but says nothing.

"You're right." Sonja waves us inside.

Kai and I are taken upstairs to rest, something both of us desperately need. I don't see what happens to Johanna. I assume she is given a cell in the prison.

News spreads quickly that Queen Elsa has returned and brought Johanna down from the mountain. Elsa wanted to wait a while before making an official statement about her return, but word travels so fast that she ends up making an appearance that night.

Kai and I sit in the front row with the royal family. There is a huge crowd waiting in the courtyard by the time she steps out onto the platform, a small wooden stage which was erected just for this occasion. Elsa looks down at all of us and smiles shyly. She looks so dignified, standing with her hands folded, a string of paper lanterns from Corona shining down from above and causing her ice gown to glow. I can't help but feel a little proud of her. Of all of us.

Her telling of what happened is brief but heartfelt. When she tells them how I helped her leave the garden, the crowd applauds me, and I blush. I didn't think I'd done anything all that special. A few minutes later, Elsa reaches the part where we visited the Ice Palace. The crowd hushes respectfully when she tells them that Julian sacrificed himself and saved Johanna from being illused, but the quiet doesn't last long. As she goes on to explain the goblins' plan to freeze the fjord, a collective gasp of anger rises up from them, followed by furious shouts of anti-goblin sentiments. Elsa motions for everyone to calm down.

"Remember that the attacks were ordered by the goblin king," she says, "not the goblin people. The individual goblins who did this will be held responsible, but not the innocent. Just because some of their kind can be cruel, that doesn't mean we should think they're all monsters. Let's not forget that." She clears her throat and looks down at her hands. "I will welcome input on this matter in the future, but now is not the time. We all have a lot to be thankful for today. I know I do. I've been given a second chance at life. Again." Some of the older members of the crowd chuckle. "But I'd be wrong to make today about me. We all have people we love, people we wouldn't be here without. Let's make today about celebrating them."

She walks to the end of the platform and ushers Anna onto the stage, pulling her into a tight hug. Anna laughs, embarrassed. Applause ripples through the crowd. Then everyone is laughing and hugging and cheering. It's a good day.

Kai nudges me.

"You did it!" he says.

"We did it," I say. "All of us." That's when it hits me. We really did it.

The worst is over.

I am looking forward to going home to my grandmother and my garden, but after the speech Elsa asks Kai and me to stay at Arendelle Castle for a few weeks.

"You saved the kingdom, both of you," she says. "You have my gratitude, and, now that everyone knows the story, you have their gratitude as well. I'd like it if you would stay for the celebrations and let us honor you in a formal ceremony. It's up to you, of course. You're welcome to return to Ciera whenever you please."

I am speechless.

"Can we invite our grandmothers?" says Kai.

Elsa smiles. "Of course."

The palace sends out carriages to Ciera to pick up our grandmothers and bring them to the castle in style. They take a sealed royal invitation as well as hand-written letters from Kai and me. I wonder how our grandmothers will take the news. Surely they thought we were both dead by now. The thought brings a lump to my throat, but I think it's going to be ok. They'll know soon enough that we've survived.

Gerda

The official date for the celebration is scheduled for two weeks after Elsa's return, but a few days later Ida runs into the dining room where the rest of us are having breakfast.

"The soldiers are home!" she says, breathless. "Ivan's home. The war's over!"

Two men appear in the doorway behind Ida. One must be Ivan; he has the same round face and red hair as she does. Anna squeals. She and Kristoff run to him. I don't know who the other man is at first, but Sonja leaps to her feet.

"Ruben!" She runs to him. He catches her, laughing, and kisses her. Sonja blushes.

Elsa, sitting beside me at the table, laughs into her hand. "Didn't see that one coming. Maybe the next ruler will be a Bird Mage. We've had too many Ice Mages for one kingdom."

"The next ruler? But you're Arendelle-Ciera's ruler," I say.

"Not forever, but for now." She looks over to where Sonja and Ruben are talking in hushed tones. He's holding Sonja's hand. "Maybe in ten years or so I'll let her take over again. Sonja's

done well, but it's hard to inherit a kingdom when you're only seventeen. She deserves a few years to be young."

"What's that mean?" I say.

Elsa smiles. "You'll understand when you're a little older."

After the soldiers return, a wave of unofficial celebrations begin. Spirits are high, and it's not unusual to see parties popping up around Arendelle. It's been a while since they've had a reason to party, I guess.

Even Elsa, as busy as she and Sonja have been since her return, takes an afternoon off to make an ice rink in the marketplace. I skate in circles with Kai. Ivan and Ida have been skating for most of their lives, and they like to show off, twirling and zig zagging backwards across the ice. Al watches from the sidelines, but Ida grabs his hand and pulls him out onto the ice, showing him how to place his feet. He's a little bit wobbly but quickly gets the hang of it.

So this is what it's like, I think. Skating in the market. I wish Onyx were here to see.

After the sky grows dark and our feet grow sore, we go into the sitting room where Anna and Elsa are waiting with hot chocolate. Elsa has made us mugs out of ice.

"So the chocolate doesn't burn your mouth," she explains, handing one to me. It's an unusual blend of hot and cold, but I like it.

It's strange, but I'm getting used to spending time with the royal family. Out of all the others in the palace, I'm not sure why me. I suppose in the months that Elsa and I spent together in the goblin illusion, we did become something like family. And it's nice to spend time with her without that sense of missingness intruding. At first I was intimidated, knowing that she was the queen, but that doesn't bother me anymore. Elsa is almost as dear to me as my own grandmother.

A servant knocks on the sitting room door.

"There's someone here to see you, Your Majesty," he says, bowing. "And you, Gerda."

"Me?" I say. It must be my grandmother. Who else do I know that would be in Arendelle?

"Thank you, Kasper," says Elsa. "Send them in."

A little white snowman with a lumpy carrot nose bobs into the room. "Elsa!"

"Olaf!" Elsa laughs. "I've missed you. How are you?"

"Oh, I am so happy! You are back, and I've made a friend." The snowman bounces up to me.
"You must be Gerda!"

I curtsy. "It's nice to meet you Olaf."

"Wow," says Olaf. His stick hands fly to his face. "You are just as wonderful as my friend said you would be!"

"What friend?" I ask. The door opens again, and Merla slinks inside.

"Merla!" I embrace her. "You're safe!"

" 'Course I'm safe. I can take care of myself." She looks insulted that I would even suggest otherwise. "Your snow golem was fun," she adds. "I could stab him and stab him, and he just kept getting back up."

"I got impaled so many times," Olaf says gleefully.

Elsa waves over a guard and whispers to him. Without warning, the guard grabs Merla's hands and pins them in place.

"Oi, get off me!" shouts Merla. She struggles against his grip. "I didn't do anything wrong!"

"It's ok, I promise," Elsa says. "It will only hurt for a second." She holds out a hand. Merla screams, and a little shard of glass flies out from her chest and lands in Elsa's outstretched hand.

"Feel better?" Elsa asks her.

Merla nods, dazed. "Yes, thank you."

I gasp. Merla was illused?

On second thought, that makes perfect sense.

Merla looks at me, blinks a couple of times. "Did I threaten to stab you?"

"Only a few times."

"Sorry about that."

"It's ok. You also saved my life, so thanks."

She smiles almost sheepishly. "I think that was an accident, but you're welcome."

"You were illused?" Olaf looks wounded. "Oh. I'm glad you're better, but does that mean we're done playing the game where you impale me?"

"Of course not," says Merla. "We have to teach Gerda how to defend herself against robbers who try to kill her. We'll practice on you."

Olaf cheers.

"I don't know—" I start.

"You're learning self-defense, Gerda. I want my best friend to stay safe. And that's final." She stomps her foot. I have to laugh. With the goblin glass gone, she's no longer threatening to stab me, but Merla is just as bossy as ever.

Gerda

Merla tells me she is travelling south in search of a new adventure.

"I think I'll visit Corona," she tells me. "I heard they have an amazing paper lantern display every year. And then who knows? Maybe I'll go even further south."

I ask her to stay for the ceremony, though, and she promises she will.

She's not my only guest. A few days later, Kasper informs Kai and me that a carriage has arrived at the palace for us. We run outside and reach the courtyard just as my grandmother climbs out of the carriage door. I run to her and hug her tightly. She smells of pie dough like always, although she's shorter than I remember.

"I've missed you so much," I say.

"I've missed you too, Gerda." There are tears in her eyes. "I could hardly believe it. I'm so proud of you. I know your parents would be proud too."

I want to introduce her to Queen Elsa, but she and Sonja are in a meeting with the advisors. Instead, Kai and I take our grandmothers on a tour of the Palace, or at least the few places we've come to know during our stay here. We take them through the Great Hall, the West Wing, the ball rooms. We visit the library, where Merla and I have since discovered a whole shelf full of books about flowers, and the menagerie, where Swiftwing sits in her little velvet perch. Grandma and Swiftwing have a conversation in Raven, and I'm glad. It seems to cheer Swiftwing up.

That evening, Kasper finds the two of us and summons us to the throne room. Grandma is nervous, so I take her hand as we walk through the door.

Elsa rises to greet us. She looks very queenlike, wearing a blue silk dress and a long silver train made of ice. Her crown isn't made of ice, but it shines as if it is. "Thank you so much for coming," she says. "It's good to finally meet you."

Grandma curtsies as deeply as she can. "It's an honor, Your Majesty."

"Oh no," says Elsa, "the honor is mine. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for Gerda. She's a very brave, very smart young woman. You must be proud of her."

"I am." Grandma smiles at me. I blush. I'm a little embarrassed to have them both talking about me.

"Sit down, please," says Elsa. She motions to a pair of chairs, and we sit. "I'm glad you're both here, because there's something I wanted to ask Gerda. And don't think you have to say yes just because I'm royalty. It's a sincere query. We've never had a flower mage before, and I'd be honored if you would stay at Arendelle Castle as our first official one. I could even enlist a flower mage from another kingdom to mentor you and help you develop your talents. As you get older, you may find you can do more with flowers than just talk to them." To illustrate, she uncurls her hand, and a little ice daisy grows out of her palm, stretching its silver petals upwards. "What do you think?"

"Oh," I say. "Queen Elsa, that sounds so wonderful, but I was rather looking forward to going home. And I'd like to finish elementary school. Kai and I both missed a year."

"Of course," says Elsa. "That's entirely understandable. You're free change your mind at any time. As long as I'm queen, the offer will stand. And you're always welcome to visit."

"Thank you," I say.

"There must be something we can do to repay your hospitality," Grandma says. "I know! Let me bake something for you. I'm famous for my cherry pie."

"Cherry pie?" says Elsa. She and I exchange a glance. "That would be, um... " She clears her throat, clearly not wanting to think about cherries any more than I do.

"She likes chocolate better," I tell my grandmother.

"Chocolate pie it is," says Grandma.

Elsa looks relieved. "That would be wonderful."

We are dismissed then, as one of the castle mages is waiting for an audience with the queen.

Gerda

I can't sleep the night before the official celebration, I'm so excited. And a little nervous, too, to be recognized in front of everyone. It seems odd that I should be scared when I've already faced the snow queen and won, but the whole kingdom wasn't watching me when I faced the snow queen.

I slide out of bed, put on a silk robe over my nightgown, and pad down the halls in my bare feet. The night is quiet, though I can hear thunder rumbling outside. I go to a window and open it, peering out. The clouds above the castle curl into a threatening spiral, but nothing is falling from them. It's like the storm is being kept in the sky.

On the wall opposite me, Queen Elsa is standing on a balcony, watching the sky. After a moment, she reaches up and catches something out of the air, curls her palm closed around it. Then she sees me, lifts her other hand in a hesitant wave. I wave back.

"Trouble sleeping?" calls Elsa. I nod.

She looks around, thinking, then appears to decide. With her free hand, she releases a wave of ice. It falls in an arc from her balcony to my window, unfolding into a staircase. I climb out the window and up the stairs.

Once I'm on the balcony, she waves her hand, and the staircase melts.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" I ask.

"I don't need to sleep as much during the winter," she says. "Ice gives me energy. Which is just as well. I have a lot to do. Step out of the way for a moment, Sweetheart."

I take a step back. A single snowflake drifts down from the sky. Elsa encloses her hand around it. She pulls out the little silver drawstring bag and tucks it inside. The bag is getting quite full.

"What are you doing?" I say.

"Collecting goblin glass," she says. "We're trying to put the mirror back together."

"What for?"

"It—" There's a knock at the door leading to the balcony. Elsa beckons, and the wind blows it open. It's Sonja. She's fully dressed in a spring green gown with a gold glove on her hand and gold boots, even though it's the middle of the night. Come to think of it, Queen Elsa is also fully dressed. Her outfits are usually made out of ice, so I've stopped being surprised by what she wears, but for Sonja this is unusual.

"The Mages are ready for us," Sonja says.

"You go ahead," says Elsa. "I'll follow in a minute."

Sonja nods and leaves the room.

"Queen Elsa," I say. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Well, I hope this isn't rude, because I like Sonja very much," I say. "But you're back now. Why is Sonja still ruling?"

"Sonja knows the kingdom better than I do right now," says Elsa. "Besides, think how you might feel if you were still in Ciera, and one day you woke up and heard that I was back from the dead and Johanna was cured and the war was over. What would you think?"

"Well, I'd be very happy. But ..." I try to imagine. "... I'd think it was too good to be true. It might be an illusion."

"Exactly. People need to see me and Sonja working together. They trust Sonja, and they need to know that she trusts me."

"What's going to happen with the goblin illusions now? Are you going to stop them?"

"I'll try." Elsa takes my hand. Hers is cool but not like ice anymore. I wonder if that's something she's learned to control. "Come with me. There's something you might like to see."

I follow her down the hall to a room I've never been inside. She opens the door. The room is very big, with a high domed ceiling, and cluttered with strange odds and ends, bottles of boiling liquid, books with titles in strange languages. We pause in the doorway.

"This is the Mage's workroom," Elsa says. "I don't know exactly what we're going to see, but, whatever it is, I must ask you to keep it a secret. You may tell Kai—I wouldn't expect you to hide things from your best friend—but no one aside from the two of you can know."

"I can do that," I promise. We go inside.

Sonja is already there, waiting with several people I think are advisors, as well as a pair of mages. One I recognize as the man who was waiting to speak with Queen Elsa when Grandma and I left. Behind them is a giant mirror, cracked and broken in many places. I peer into it. The shapes within are dark and distorted. I gasp and look away.

"Is it wise to have the girl here?" says the Mage.

"She was imprisoned in the goblin illusion with me," says Elsa. "I want her to see that good has come of it."

"Very well," says the Mage. "Then we'll begin." He waves everyone close so that they can hear. "The palace mages have only spent two weeks examining the cherry orchard, and the illusion that was cast on it appears to be a very complex spell. There's still a lot to be learned. However, even in two weeks' time, we've learned enough about recent goblin magics that we were able to crack the code on the Mirror of Opposites."

"That's wonderful," says Elsa.

"So you can reverse it?" says an advisor.

"Unfortunately, no," says the Mage. "The spell cannot be reversed, but it can be changed. We'd like to replace it with another spell. Now, there are several common mirror spells that we could use, and I'd like to have your input on which we select."

He looks to Elsa. She nods. "Go on."

"First, there's the Hearts Desire spell. We can create a mirror that will show the viewer their heart's desire. I don't recommend this one, as it tends to inspire unrequited longing. I only list it first because it would be the easiest spell to cast."

Everyone in the room is shaking their heads. The Mage moves on.

"We've considered a Communication Spell, or a slightly trickier Transportation Spell. However, those would require two mirrors, and we only have this one. We could attempt to split it into two."

I look over at Queen Elsa. She doesn't look terribly convinced.

"Personally," says the Mage, "I would suggest a Truth Spell. There are several kinds of magic mirrors that show the truth. My recommendation is the True Beauty Spell where the inner beauty of the viewer is revealed in their physical reflection. That's a fairly common spell and not too difficult to cast."

Several of the advisors nod their heads, but Sonja speaks up.

"No," says Sonja with surprising vehemence. "I hate that spell." They look at her in confusion. She lowers her eyes. "I've seen those mirrors before. The kind people are always unblemished, while the cruel ones are marked up and covered in scars." She traces the long scar on her own cheek. "How kind I am has nothing to do with my face, and I don't think mirrors should get to make that judgment."

"She's right," says Elsa. "No beauty spells. Do we have any other options?"

"There's another truth mirror," says the Mage, "which will show the viewer the best possible outcome of a given situation. It is difficult but has few negative side effects."

"That may be worth the difficulty," Elsa muses. "But couldn't that be similar to the Hearts Desire spell? Showing you an outcome that you can't have."

"Occasionally that happens," says the Mage. "But the Outcome Spell has two benefits that set it apart from Hearts Desire. First, it only shows outcomes that the viewer has direct control over. Secondly, when performed correctly, it gives advice on what you can do at the moment to further that outcome. Rulers have used such mirrors for arbitration purposes.

"However, know that they can't always be relied on in times of crisis. They don't always give advice on the right situation. For example, Queen Elsa, you may approach the mirror wondering how to deal with the goblins, but the mirror will show you how to find a lost earring instead."

"Well, I could always use help finding earrings," says Elsa with a soft laugh.

"Mind you, this new spell will only effect the glass in the reassembled mirror. The glass pieces that are still out there will continue to have illusory powers. Once those shards are found and added to the new mirror, they too will change."

The advisors look to Elsa.

"I can take care of the other shards," she says.

There is a little more discussion, but it seems clear that the Outcome Spell is what everyone has settled on. I can tell this is important, but I am starting to yawn. When the Mage ends the meeting by promising that they will cast the new spell tonight, Sonja nudges me.

"You look like you're ready for bed," she says. "Come on. I'll walk you back to your room. You've got a big day tomorrow."

Elsa is too busy with the advisors to build another ice staircase, so Sonja shows me the normal way through the long hallways. There are no guards around, but she doesn't seem to care. I'm glad she doesn't think I'm an illusion anymore.

"Excited for tomorrow?" Sonja asks me.

I nod, yawning. "Are you and Ruben going to the ball together?"

"Oh." Sonja blushes. "Yes, we are." She smiles shyly. She's very pretty when she smiles. She doesn't need a mirror to tell her that.

Sonja takes me back to my room and bids me good night. The celebration is tomorrow, and the Mirror of Opposites is going to be fixed. It's been a very good night already.

My head hardly hits the pillow before I fall right to sleep.

Johanna

I wake up screaming.

It's the same dream as always. I'm seeing Julian, as he was in the Ice Palace, looking at me like I'm a stranger. Or a monster. And then he's gone, and I'm alone with myself and the ice, until the ice swallows me up and I can't breathe.

I'd have bad dreams before I was illused, but back then I'd wake up with Julian next to me, and it would be ok. I have no such consolation now.

That's not to say I'm always alone in my cell. Sometimes I'll wake up to find Mama sitting on the other side of the bars, fashioning something out of ice, a picture or a dress or a clock. She pretends that she comes down here to work on her hobbies, says that its quieter than anywhere else in the palace, but I know she's come down to sit with me. Sometimes Sonja comes down and sits with me too, talking of light everyday things or simply allowing the silence. I don't have the strength to pretend I'm not touched by that. I don't have the strength for much of anything though.

They can't always be here. They have a kingdom to repair, thanks to me. And everyone else is afraid of me. So I am often alone.

I sit up, roll off of the cot and walk to the window. Walking is difficult. My hands and feet are bound by heavy chained cuffs, made of two layers of iron with a layer of ice in between. The cuffs can slow me down but not keep me forever. I could break out of them given a few hours of time. But in order to do that I'd have to break the ice in between the layers of metal, and Mama would feel the ice break in time to respond.

It's a clever idea, if a useless one. I have no desire to escape. Where could I go that would change what I've done?

Outside, I can feel a storm in the sky. Mama has probably been gathering goblin glass again. She's been doing that every night since she returned. I wonder if she's slept. She's had so much to do because of me. So much to fix.

I hurt a lot of people when I was illused. I killed some of them. I try to blame my actions on the goblins, but I can't do that either. I was under their spell, but it was still me doing those things. I

don't know what to do with that. How do you know what was you and what wasn't? How do you live with yourself once you know?

I squeeze my eyes shut. I could call down another shard of goblin glass. Illuse myself again. I know I could, and these things wouldn't hurt nearly so much.

But I don't do it. I can't. The only thing that makes these nights bearable is knowing that whatever Julian saw when he looked at me, whatever it was that horrified him, I'm not that anymore. I don't want to be that anymore. Everything I thought I was is falling away from me like grains of ice, tumbling down and losing themselves in an avalanche. I don't know what I am. I don't think I'm anything. But at least I'm not *that*.

I watch the sky for a very long time as the storm gradually settles down on its own. There's an unfamiliar magic in the air. I'm not sure what it is or why I can feel it, but then it hits me—it's the goblin glass. A very big collection of goblin glass. It's changing.

The goblins told me the palace mages were trying to reassemble the mirror. I guess they have.

What happens next surprises me. I don't know why I decide to break out of my cell. I didn't think I cared enough about anything to put forth the effort, and I know Mama's just going to find me and put me back. I accept that. I decide to break out anyway.

I think it's because I'm curious about what they're doing to the mirror. Curiosity. It's the first feeling I've had in five years that hasn't hurt. So I cling to it.

There aren't many things I can do with my hands and feet bound, but my snow golems are out there somewhere. I press my forehead against the bars on the window, and they freeze until the metal shatters. A white snow horse comes down from the sky and lands next to the window. It takes me a minute for me to break the chains attached to my cuffs and climb out, but once I do the ride is fairly smooth. I order the horse to take me straight to the hallway where the mirror is kept, and he goes quickly. Which is good. If Mama has been paying attention at all, she'll feel that I've been making and breaking ice. I only have minutes until she catches me.

By the time I reach the window that has the mirror inside of it, the mirror's changing has stopped. It feels different somehow, but I can't put my finger on it. The substance has become less like ice, so it's harder for me to feel it.

I freeze this window until it too shatters. Then I climb inside.

The room is empty except for a big mirror with an ornate wooden frame. The mirror itself is cracked, full of missing pieces, but there must have been enough of it to cast a proper spell. The mages have blocked it off, left the mirror alone so that the magic could settle.

I approach. I'm not sure what I'm expecting. A True Beauty Spell maybe, one that will show me hideous and scarred, but, when I look at the mirror, that's not what I see.

That's not what I see at all.

Not at all.

I am weeping when Mama walks in and puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Jo," she says softly.

I wipe my eyes, look up at her. "The mages did this. Is this the Heart's Desire spell?"

She looks at the mirror. "No. This one's called Outcome. It shows the best possible one."

"It's beautiful."

She smiles. "It is, isn't it?"

"But it's impossible."

"Impossible things are always more possible than they seem." She sighs, tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. "Everything the mirror shows can happen. Just give it time. And you need to get back to your room before the sight of you causes a riot."

"I know. Give me one minute. Please." I look back at the mirror one last time. My heart swells. It's sort of nice, letting my heart beat as it pleases without the glass holding it down. I'd forgotten how good it could feel. I know I can't change the past. I know I can't undo all I've done. But just for a minute, it feels like the future's going to be alright.

There's a light somewhere out there in the encroaching darkness. Maybe, if I can learn what I'm looking for, I'll be able to find it again.

Gerda

The celebration is beautiful.

When I wake up, the whole palace is decorated with ice, ice sculptures in the halls, ice patterns on the window frames, lacy ice curtains on the windows. Beaded strings of ice drape like streamers from one rooftop to the next, twinkling like stars over our heads. It's better than anything I pictured from Kai's grandmother's stories.

Outside, I greet a cluster of ice flowers that are blooming in the garden bed, and they answer me cheerfully. When I show this to Ida, she's delighted. She asks me to speak to a paper flower, but it doesn't respond. Only the ice flowers are alive, it seems.

Elsa declares the gates open to everyone, both citizens of Arendelle-Ciera and foreign visitors. I'm a little intimidated by all the royalty that arrives. Queen Rapunzel and King Flynn of Corona are here, as are the Princess of Weselton and twelve princes from the Southern Isles. When I ask Anna where the thirteenth prince is, she sniffs and says he wasn't invited.

"Don't mention Hans around Mama," is all Ida will say.

The food is amazing. Cooks out-do themselves with dishes full of meats and cheeses, fruits and desserts. I thought my first meal at the palace was impressive, but this one puts it to shame. Kai and I stuff our faces with roasted turkey until we can't possibly eat anymore. Grandma, true to her words, makes her famous chocolate pies, and they disappear almost immediately.

"These are amazing," Anna says. She's halfway through her second helping of pie. "Can you just cook for us all the time?"

"I can send pies up with Gerda whenever she visits," Grandma says.

"That's the best thing I've heard all day. Gerda, you have to visit us often, whether or not you bring pie." She pauses, puts the last forkful into her mouth. "But do bring pie."

I laugh. "I will."

Its evening by the time the award ceremony begins, held in the chapel where I'm told the coronations are usually held. We rehearsed this a few days in advance so that I would know what to do, but my stomach is full of butterflies anyway. The crowd applauds as I walk up the aisle with Kai, Anna, and Kristoff. Sonja is waiting at the front of the chapel, where she places medals around all of our necks. I'm a little disappointed that they're made of gold, not of ice, but Anna explains that it's so they don't melt. I suppose that makes sense.

We stay standing while Elsa starts to speak. She thanks us first, one by one, for saving her and for saving Arendelle-Ciera. Then she looks down at her hands.

"There's one other person who couldn't be here today," she says. "Most of you remember Julian, I think. Until five years ago we all expected him to be the next king of Arendelle-Ciera."

I know who Julian was now. Kai told me. It makes me feel a little bit sorry for him and for the Snow Queen. I fought so hard to save my best friend, but what if my efforts had gotten him killed instead? I can't even imagine.

"Even though he never became king," continues Elsa, "he gave up more for our kingdom than anyone in this room. With your support, I'd like to honor him by opening up a school in his name."

The room applauds. Ruben is crying, as are the people in the row next to him. That must be his family. Elsa speaks for a few more minutes, but there isn't much else to say. When she wraps up and everyone starts to file out, I see her go down and embrace Julian's parents.

"I would have been so proud," she whispers, "to have him as a son."

Her voice, which has been calm and in control all morning, cracks suddenly. I avert my gaze to the floral designs on the chapel windows. I can't bear to see the tears in her eyes.

Kai and I are safe, and for that I'm thankful. But not everyone made it through this ordeal alive.

A ball is held in the palace that night, a celebration for those of us that have. Ida lends me one of her old dresses to wear. It's blue and gold with flowers on the sleeves. She gives Merla one too, a long, purple one. Merla looks so elegant with her ball gown and her hair braided up, it's hard to believe she's the same girl I met on the mountain.

"Don't be fooled," she tells me. "I could still beat up anyone in this room. I wouldn't, but I could."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say.

Kai, Merla, and I don't know how to dance, so Ida takes it upon herself to teach us the minuet. It's a French dance, she says, and her favorite. She ropes Ivan into teaching Kai the man's part, since she keeps getting it backwards. Then I'm paired with Ivan because Kai wants to dance with Merla, and Ida embarrasses the both of them by squealing loudly about how cute they are together. Sonja and Ruben stop by to tell us that there's ice skating outside in the courtyard, and we all decide take Merla skating because she hasn't gone before. I'm exhausted by the end of the night, but I'm glad. It's the most fun I've had in ages.

The next morning there's a knock at the door of my guest room.

It's Queen Elsa, accompanied by a pair of guards.

I quickly curtsy. "Good morning, Your Majesty."

"Good morning, Gerda. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad. Listen, I have a strange request. Johanna would like a word with you."

Johanna as in the Snow Queen? At first I think I've heard her wrong. "With me?"

"It's entirely up to you," says Elsa. "You're free to say no."

I should say no. I rub the sleep out of my eyes. "Is it safe?"

"Relatively so. She's bound up rather tightly, and I would stay nearby the whole time." She looks out the window at the clear sky. "I think she's making an effort to reform now that she's not illused. Truthfully I'm still a little wary after she faked me out and nearly froze my heart, but it's been two weeks, and she seems genuinely sorry."

"I'll go," I say.

"Are you sure?"

I nod again. Maybe it's morbid curiosity. Or maybe it's the fact that I can't forget how lost she looked after Julian died again. But I want to know what she has to say.

I take a few minutes to change my clothes, and then I follow the guards down to the dungeon underneath the palace. We go into a dark room with a locked door. I look nervously at Elsa, but when she asks if I want to turn around I shake my head. The room inside is split into two. There's a couple of chairs for visitors in the front of the room, and a little writing desk with a drawer. In back is a cell containing a cot and a small window that overlooks the fjord. Johanna lays on the cot, looking at the ceiling. Her platinum blond hair is splayed out over the pillow.

"Hi," she says when I walk in. For a few seconds, she doesn't even lift her head. "I didn't think you'd come."

"You wanted to talk to me," I say. I sit down in one of the guest chairs.

I wait a few more seconds. Finally, Johanna sighs and sits up on the cot. Her hair falls in front of her face. "I really hated you for a while, you know," she says.

"Sorry?" I say. I'm not really sure what I was supposed to say to that.

She climbs to her feet, hindered somewhat by the metal cuffs.

"I know. I shouldn't have. I'm the one who kidnapped your friend. If anything, you should hate me. You probably do."

"I don't," I say. "You were illused."

"I guess that's an excuse." She shrugs. "Well, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. About everything. I know that means absolutely nothing. It can't change the year I stole from you and Kai, but ... "

She brushes the hair from her face. Her eyes are big and blue like her mother's. "I'm trying to make things right. I want you to know that. I really am."

"I know," I say.

She sighs, and it's like she's exhaling all of her energy. She sits back down wearily, looking down at her bound hands.

"I made you something," she says. "I mean, I made something, and it just sort of turned into something for you. I thought about giving it to Kai, but that just seems cruel, doesn't it? Reminding him of that year. But you ... you might appreciate it."

"What is it?"

She nods to the writing desk. "Open the drawer."

I slide open the drawer and hold up what I find inside. It's a snow globe made of real ice, with a miniature ice rosebush nestled inside the tiny orb. Little crystal leaves fold one over top of the other in an intricate, glittering pattern. The rosebuds themselves are so realistic that I almost imagine they are bursting into bloom in front of me. I have never seen anything like it.

"It's beautiful," I say.

"Thanks," she says.

"You're welcome."

"No, I mean, really, thanks." Her eyes meet mine. The corners of her mouth flicker upward, almost imperceptibly, but she's definitely smiling. Not a frightening smile but a real one. Then she looks away. "You can go if you like."

I turn to look at Elsa, and she nods. I stand up to leave, carrying the gift Johanna has made for me. The ice sparkles in the dim light.

I tuck it carefully into my skirt so that the fragile thing won't get broken.

Johanna

"That was kind of you," says Mama.

I don't answer. My energy seems to ebb and flow without warning, and the strength I might have used to speak has flown out the door behind Gerda. Besides, what would I say? I've done nothing that could be called kindness. Not in a very long time.

Mama sits down and permits the silence the way she always does. I imagine she is used to it by now. I haven't been much of a conversationalist since I returned.

I lower my head, let my hair fall across my face. For the moment the world is obscured in a soft white haze, and I'm thankful for the respite. If I had any sort of luck, the recollection of what I did while I was illused would have vanished when the shard left my heart. Instead, if anything, the memories seem to have grown more poignant. I can still recall every harsh word I spoke, every blizzard I cast, every knife of ice I sent flying at a human heart. I can remember—vividly—what I put Gerda through. The fear on her face the first moment she saw me. The pure disgust when I froze Mama's heart. The look of horror when I threatened her life in order to steal Kai's.

I spoke to Kai this morning, seeking to right things. It was quickly evident that the best thing I could do for him was disappear from his life. I let him go empty handed, let him leave the past year behind. I had no idea whether Gerda would respond the same way. I didn't know her for more than a day. When I offered her a gift, I thought she might destroy it. She could have thrown it against the cold stone floor, watched it shatter just like all the others. She would have been justified. After all, I tried to take everything from her. I almost succeeded.

But no. She held the orb up to the light, watched it shine with a look of genuine delight. As if I had handed her a priceless treasure rather than the brittle creation of a withered, worn out soul. I kept expecting her to scowl, or glare, give some indication that I was wrong and this would never be enough.

Instead, I saw her wrap it in the folds of her skirt before she left. Gingerly, like it was an egg she didn't want to break. Like it was actually something beautiful.

That was a kindness I didn't deserve.

Mama is saying something. I brush my hair aside and look up. She's moved, standing next to the cell door, her hand resting against one of the bars. A few stray ice crystals form at her fingertips, pin pricks of white against the solid dark iron.

"Are you ok?" she repeats.

The question is so absurd I almost laugh, but I bite my tongue because I know she means it sincerely. I don't know if I will ever be what you would call ok. The future that I saw in the mirror, I know it's possible. There are moments when I glean a little bit of hope from that. Yet the mirror, for all its shining optimism, sings only of possibilities. There are just as many moments when it seems so far away, so unattainable. If I have a future apart from this—apart from the cell, apart from the pain—it is hard to imagine.

Still, I cling to the moments of hope. I have to cling to something.

"Are you?" I say.

Mama smiles sadly, not answering either. I wonder if she misses Papa the way I miss Julian.

I lift a hand, gesture towards the desk. The tiny movement seems to take tremendous effort.

"I made something for you too," I say.

"Something for me?" She's surprised, and a little cautious. I don't blame her for that. Last time I offered to cooperate, I nearly froze her heart. Apparently I was a very convincing liar when I was illused. I'll spend the rest of my life trying to repair that.

I'll spend the rest of my life trying to repair a lot of things.

"For you," I say again. "If you want it."

Mama crosses the room, a train of ice fluttering at her feet. Though I can't see it from where I'm sitting, I know what she'll find inside the desk. I've tucked away an airtight box made of white ice, frozen shut to protect bystanders from the goblin glass that glitters within. The glass is dangerous, for now. But not for long. It's waiting patiently, ready to be transformed with the rest of the mirror.

I give her a moment to reach into the box with her mind and feel what's there.

"How long have you been gathering these?" she says. She frowns slightly. I know it's a risk for her, letting me manipulate the goblin glass. It could be a dangerous weapon if I had any inclination to use it as one, but I don't. And she can't gather all of it herself. I've seen how tired she's been lately, though she tries to ignore it. This is too much for just one Ice Mage.

"Since two nights ago. The mirror suggested it." I lower my eyes to the silver cuffs on my hands. An explanation spills out from my mouth, more words than I've uttered in weeks. "I haven't touched them. I move them straight into the box and leave them there. I figured the sooner we gather all the shards, the sooner you can change them. Then no one can be illused anymore, and people won't have to worry about goblin spells or goblin spies. Or ..." I trail off. I can't quite bear to say it. *Or about me.*

Her blue eyes search mine. There is pain in them. Pain because of me. My heart wrenches within my chest, but there's nothing I can do to push it down. It's something I'll have to learn to live with. "You have to understand," Mama says, "letting you collect these is dangerous after what you did. You can't be expected to exercise perfect control all the time, but you also can't just lose it. You and I, we don't have that luxury. You can't illuse yourself again, Jo."

"I won't," I say. How could I? I remember Julian's eyes, reflecting the face of a stranger. Of a monster. "I could never do it again."

Mama bites her lip, mulling it over in her mind. I worry for an instant that she will forbid me from collecting them, and I will have to stop—I have rather lost the right to do anything but cooperate. But then she looks beyond the box. And smiles. It is a soft smile, warm, if a little bit sad.

"I know," she says. She takes the white box in her arms, cradles it like a child. "This helps a lot. It really does." She starts to go, then pauses, moves towards the cell. She reaches a hand through the iron bars and tenderly tucks a lock of white-blond hair behind my ear. "Just be careful, Sweetheart."

"I will." I look up to meet her eyes, and there is a little less pain in them than before. I have done something good, I think. At least, I feel a little less tired. Mama leaves, and I listen until her footsteps fade down the hallway.

Somewhere out there, high in the shifting clouds, shards of goblin glass still stir. I've been collecting them all morning. It's exhausting work, no more pleasant than it was six years ago, but it needs to be done. In a way I can't quite explain, I need to do it. So I begin again, reaching out with my mind, feeling through the swirling flakes of snow until I find a few that aren't like the others. The little shards move slowly, stubbornly, slogging through the air. When they finally reach my window, I wrap my thoughts around them, encase them in a new box of ice. Only then, once the shards are out of the way, unable to harm anyone any longer, do I breathe a sigh of something like relief.

I still don't know what I am. I don't know what I'm becoming. Truthfully, I spent so many years determined to smother my emotions that even now, even without the glass in my heart, I am not entirely sure what kindness should feel like. Whether this is right. Whether I can possibly make up for all the wrongs. Some things that I've done can never be repaired, and I know that. But I wasn't lying to Gerda when I said I'm trying.

I think Julian would want me to try.

My heart swells, quite unexpectedly, for the second time in as many days. Outside my window, clean, crisp flakes of white descend from the sky over Arendelle. It's the first natural snow of winter. The first natural snow in quite a long time. The snowfall is too light to carry down any shards from the clouds, so I lean my head back against the wall and allow myself a moment of rest.

The snowflakes outside hum a quiet song, whispery, like a lullaby. They brush against my mind as they drift downward like feathers falling from the wings of a dove. Once I would have silenced their song, snatched them and sent the whole sky spiraling into a bitter wind. But what would that accomplish? The undisrupted snow has a beauty all its own. It doesn't have to be mine.

A thousand uncertain tomorrows linger ahead of me. I'll face them as they come. For today, I only close my eyes and listen as the snow sings on.

Let it fall where it may.

Gerda

It snows the day after the celebration, but only lightly. Feathery little flakes land on the grass and melt almost immediately into the earth. Queen Elsa says it's a natural snow, so she doesn't stop it, but she does guarantee it won't grow bad enough to interfere with any travel plans.

Indoors, the morning is a flurry of activity as most of the palace guests start to pack up and leave. Kai and I came here with nothing, and our grandmothers have little, but Sonja wants to send us off properly in a royal carriage.

"With extra guards this time," she says. "Just in case."

Though I think we'll be alright. Merla will be riding as far as Ciera with us, and she's been teaching me self-defense. She gave up on using Olaf when I absolutely refused to stab the little snow man, but he still stands by and cheers me on as I practice.

It's mid-afternoon, and I've said all my farewells. I've hugged Queen Elsa goodbye, promised Anna and Kristoff and Ida that I'd visit, thanked Swiftwing for all of her help. My snow globe is packed up safe and tight in a cushioned box. I'm a little sad to be leaving, but I'm happy to be going home.

It's funny, but I until I spoke to Queen Elsa, I hadn't given much thought to the future beyond rescuing Kai. I am certain that I'd like to finish school. My spelling needs practice, I know; Merla and I have been reading books from the castle library, and I keep tripping over the big words. Beyond that, I'm not sure where I'll go. Maybe I will return to the castle someday as a flower mage. Or maybe I'll go travelling with Merla, or stay in Ciera with Kai and our grandmothers. Possibilities unfold before me like daylilies opening to the morning sun.

While we're waiting for the carriage to be ready, I tell Kai about my discussion with Johanna. He only nods. Apparently he had a similar conversation.

"What did you say?" I ask him.

"What could I say? I told her I didn't hold her responsible for anything she did while illused, but I hoped she'd understand if I never wanted to talk to her again." He shakes his head, his brown hair flopping side to side. "I try to hate her, but I can't. She was illused too. Then I try to hate the goblins, but it wasn't their fault either. Only the ones who made that mirror. I wish they could just fix it, get rid of the illusions once and for all."

"Oh!" I completely forgot that I was allowed to tell Kai what I saw. "Actually, they did."

"What?"

I look around, but our grandmothers are nowhere near, off on some last minute walk through the menagerie. So I fill him in on the night I couldn't sleep and how Queen Elsa let me sit in while the Mages cast an Outcome spell on the mirror.

"Can we see it?" he says.

"I haven't asked," I say, "but I think we could. Do you want to?"

Kai hesitates. Then he nods. I feel foolish that this didn't occur to me sooner. Kai has spent the past year trapped in the Snow Queen's palace, ensnared by a goblin illusion. Of course he wants to see that things will turn out alright.

We run to the throne room and nearly slip on the floor. The room has become an ice rink.

"Oops," says Elsa. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting anyone." She waves her hand and the ice on the ground disappears.

"Aw," says Anna, stopping short where she was gliding only seconds ago. "I was just getting the hang of it again."

"Is everything ok?" Elsa asks us. "I thought you were going home."

"The carriage was delayed," I say, "and we were wondering if ..." I suddenly feel nervous asking. "... if we could see the mirror?"

"Oh."

"Is that ok?"

Elsa nods. "I think I can give you that much. Kasper?"

The old servant comes running through the door, holding a pair of ice skates. "I knew I had these somewhere. I—ah." He spots Kai and me, sheepishly tucks the ice skates behind his back. "How can I be of assistance?"

"Gerda and Kai would like to see the mirror before they go," says Elsa. "Would you take them there? The ice rink will resume when you get back."

Kasper bows. "Certainly, Your Majesty."

"And hurry. I can't walk in these things," says Anna. She hobbles forward, trying to move in ice skates when there's no ice beneath her. Elsa laughs and links arms with her sister, steadying her. The last thing I see of the queen and her sister are the two of them laughing, arm in arm, waving goodbye as Kai and I leave the throne room. I wave back. It's good to know it won't be goodbye forever.

Kasper leads us up flights of stairs and down long hallways to a nondescript wooden door. He inserts a bronze key into the lock. The door creaks open, and it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. There, in the center of the room, sits the mirror that has caused us so much pain. I take a hesitant step through the doorway, and Kai follows. Kasper stands outside, waiting.

"What do you think we'll see?" Kai says, his voice hushed.

"I don't know," I say, but in a moment we are standing in front of the mirror, and we know the answer.

It's us. Kai and me. Standing in this room.

"We look the same as we are right now," I say. "Well, you look the same. I look older."

Kai shakes his head. "You look the same. It's me who looks older."

I take a step closer to the mirror. Despite the cracks, it's pretty clear. "We haven't seen our reflections in so long. We are older."

"I think you're right. We're not really children anymore, are we?" I thought Kai would be disappointed that this was all the mirror will show, but he looks relieved. I realize that this was all he needed to see. Both of us, standing together despite everything. Kai reaches out and touches the cracked glass of the mirror. His reflection does the same.

My reflection reaches out and touches the glass too, and I gasp. I haven't moved. My hands are still folded in front of me.

"Gerda!" Kai looks back and forth from me to my reflection. "Do you see—"

"I see it too."

Mirror Gerda winks at me. A tiny green vine springs from her hand and wraps itself around the frame of the mirror. Pale pink flowers blossom from it. I see her laugh in delight.

"I didn't know you could do that," says Kai.

"I can't," I say. "Or I couldn't. Queen Elsa said my powers might start changing as I get older, but I didn't expect it to happen like this." I start to reach my hand towards the mirror, then hesitate. I'm frightened of what's to come. I look to Kai, and he nods encouragingly. Slowly, I reach out and touch the frame. My fingertips grow warm, and from them a little vine shoots out, just as it did for Mirror Gerda.

"Oh!" I laugh. The pink flowers are clematises. I can see that from this side of the mirror. I touch one. It's soft and real.

"What does this mean?" says Kai. "Does the mirror want you to stay at the castle and become a flower mage?"

I don't know what the mirror wants. Maybe nothing. Maybe it's only a mirror. Magic mirrors are powerful, but they are, after all, only reflections of the people who make them.

I watch the little pink flowers bloom at my fingertips. Flowers that I made. I couldn't do that before, but I can do a lot of things I couldn't do before. I've grown up in the past year, I think. I've seen love and death, magic and mirrors, illusions and prophecies. It's big and exciting and a little bit frightening, and it's changed me. But that's ok. Everyone changes. It hasn't changed what's really important to me. If anything, it's only made me more certain.

"I don't know what the mirror wants," I say. "But I know there's a rose bush sitting in my window box that wishes it had a friend. And now I know exactly how to give it one."

I hold out my hand. Kai takes it. It's time to leave this adventure behind. The wars are over, my best friend is safe, and home is waiting for the both of us.

The End

A/N - Oh my god, you guys, I can't believe this is the end! Writing/sharing this story has been such a wonderful, terrifying, frustrating, amazing experience, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate every last one of you for sharing it with me! You have all been so positive and encouraging, and, even if you never commented, just the fact that you were here reading every week, bumping up the stats that I way-too-obsessively pored over, that meant a ton to me! Thank you, thank you!

This was the first novel-length story I've ever finished, so I'd love constructive feedback! (Though I'm an embarrassingly fragile flower when it comes to that sort of thing, so do be tactful with your critiques.) There won't be a sequel, sadly, although I may come back with one shots or borrow aspects of this world for an original story.

I enjoyed writing this story so much. If you enjoyed reading it, I hope you'll share it with anyone else who may like it too. That's the highest praise you can give me. :) Thanks again and wishing many warm hugs to all of you!

~WinterSky