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Frost Stars

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One year before the ice

The day I lost Erik was the day of the snow storm. A snow storm like I'd never seen before – and I'm certain no one else in the world had, either. Well... no one in *our* world. And it had all started so normally. I was sitting on the bed, snuggled up in my favourite oversized jumper, my scratched-up laptop on my knees with a hundred tabs open about New York, Sydney, Barcelona, and a chilled playlist in my headphones. The perfect setting in which to imagine my dream trip. And hey, next year when I was finally done with school – and had invented a money-printing machine! – I'd go and look at all this stuff for real. Just take off, explore the world's coolest cities... and until that time, my good buddy Internet was keeping my spirits up. I sank deeper and deeper into the photos and travel blogs – until, between two songs, I heard something pattering against the window. This time it wasn't the rain that had been keeping the Stockholmers off the streets for the past week and turning me into an actual hermit crab. No, this time it was Erik, I'd have bet my life on it.

Yup: I'd scarcely managed the three paces to the window before I spotted him, standing down in the street – thick parka, no hat, of course. Something in my chest performed a sudden leap, as it always did since that stupid business last summer. But as usual I did my very best to ignore it. Erik spotted me too, grinned, and lowered the arm that must have just thrown a handful of gravel up at me on the second floor. So typical! It's a miracle he hadn't thrown his phone. Using it to actually call me was always the last thing that occurred to him.

I opened the window – just a crack, but even so, cold, wet air still whistled into my face. "Come down, Elvy!" Erik called out. "Come on, no excuses! Adventure is waiting, the sun is smiling!"

I pulled a face. That was rubbish and he knew it! Even when it wasn't raining, the sun didn't smile anywhere in Sweden at four o'clock on a December afternoon. It was dark outside, dark

and wet und unwelcoming. Sorry, he'd have to manage without me. I stuck my hand out of the window and gave him a thumbs-down.

"Eelvy!"

My problem: the couch potato in me was no real match for Erik's infectious energy. And she didn't *want* to fight it, either, if I was really, really honest with myself. At the end of the day, we had known each other since we were six, and had seen, squabbled with and teased each other almost every day since then. These days, Erik no longer threw Lego bricks at me, but nothing else had really changed between us in the last ten years. Not even last summer had changed anything, I tried to reassure myself.

Erik still knew his combination of hangdog expression and cheeky grin would lure me all the way to Mordor if necessary. And so five minutes later I closed the front door behind me and regretted it at once: the temperature had dropped even further, and a wind was blowing a lot of damp air through the streets. The sudden cold felt so biting that I thought I could feel my nose-piercing freezing – but of course that was rubbish, the thin silver ring had never given me any trouble in winter. I hurriedly stuffed my mousy brown hair under my hat and pulled my hood up over the top.

"Wow! All bundled up like you're going on a trip to Kiruna!" Erik greeted me. "Why do you look so frozen?"

I answered his stupid question by sticking my tongue out and snorting, "Ten horses couldn't drag me to Kiruna. Are you nuts? That's almost the North Pole!"

"Whoa, easy now!" He took a step back in mock fear and raised his hands. "Have you activated hedgehog mode again?"

"All 8126 prickles and bloody proud of it!" I shot back.

"Hedgehogs are very sweet despite the prickles – you know that, right?"

"I'll give you sweet!"

"No, I'm serious, and you really do have a lot in common." His grin almost burned a hole in my heart. "Goggly brown eyes, a pointy little snub nose... you both like apples..."

"You are so dead if you don't stop there," I threatened, but inside I was rejoicing: *He thinks I'm sweet!* Only to stop myself at once: *Sweet is like nice. And nice is crap.*

Erik just let out a laugh, a sound that brought the sun back. Then he put an arm around my shoulders and dragged me down the street with him. The sun got a little bit brighter... but I pummelled him away just to be on the safe side. "No grappling, Forsberg, is that clear? Save it for your rugby changing room."

"Whatever you say, coach Andersson!" He grinned again, adjusting the metal frame of his round glasses as we walked. They were the only thing about him that didn't quite fit with his Northman appearance, but I couldn't imagine him any other way. With his thick blond mop of hair, his broad-shouldered, sporty physique and his nonchalant 1 metre 90 height, you would definitely have put him at the head of an army in earlier times – or on the benches of a Viking ship. But his longsightedness meant he needed to wear glasses all the time, and if he didn't have them on he blinked like a dug-up mole when he had to read anything. *My Viking nerd*, I thought, with a secret smile. But then I snatched up that thought and stuffed it back into the depths of my mental broom cupboard. Come *on!* What were these constant lapses all about? Erik and I were *friends*, okay? That was safe, it was the way things should stay, I'd decided – especially given that he'd been with that idiot Tessa since June.

"Hey, hedgehog girl."

Behind the damp lenses of his glasses, there was a teasing glint in his eyes and he leaned over to me. He didn't have to bend down, because I was almost as tall as him. Though only half as broad. In an emergency he could have folded me up like a carpenter's rule, but as rough as he could be on the sports field, off it he could never hurt a fly. Especially one whose name was Elvy. Plus, he

knew that my long legs could dispense a vicious kick. Erik's mind was still on rugby. "You know, I think you could admire me just a little bit for saving the championship for us recently!"

"Forget it." Now it was my turn to grin. "Dim-witted hero-worship is what the cheerleaders are for." And Tessa, I added spitefully, though luckily only in my head. "But I'm going to ban you from the touchline if you don't hurry up and tell me what I'm doing out here in the cold!"

"Cold? It's six degrees, there isn't even a frost! Crybaby!"

"Better a crybaby than a dumbass."

He laughed again, and again I was puzzled to find how much I liked the sound. That it made something vibrate in my head, my stomach. Ooookay, enough now.

The wind blew cold, damp air against the stucco-ed fronts of the apartment buildings, as I accepted my fate and trudged along the almost deserted streets at Erik's side, buried as deep inside my hood as possible. *Six degrees? Minus six, maybe!*

I looked longingly up at the lighted windows. In some of them, there was even the warm flicker of candlelight, seeming to whisper enticingly to me: *Come on in, we've got hot tea, gingerbread and free WiFi...*

Erik clearly wasn't hearing anything of the sort. Instead, he finally explained why he had dragged me out of my cave: "Do you remember that abandoned apartment block from the local news recently? The one you found the address for? Which was extremely clever of you, by the way."

"Don't thank me, thank my IT," I said dismissively. "The building was really recognisable, so the rest was just doing a better image search."

Of course, I knew at once that he was talking about our latest Lost Places plan: poking about in abandoned buildings was our thing right now; we were always on the lookout for traces of the past. Not an easy matter, finding these places in a sought-after city with a population of millions – but they did exist, if sometimes only for a short while.

Erik was marching cheerfully along beside me. "Anyway, I had a bit of a sniff around there already, and bingo! You can get in through the basement window!"

"Does it have to be today?" I moaned. Normally, I was instantly fired up about these secret excursions... but not in this weather!

He looked at me in surprise. "Of course it does! Don't you know what day it is?"

"Tuesday?"

He gave an amused snort, stopped walking and pulled a cloth out of his pocket to wipe his drizzled glasses.

The last turn-off had taken us out of the narrow streets and into the Humlegården. The lawns of the large city park lay silently around us in the wintry dark. The bare bushes and trees seemed to be ducking beneath the heavy clouds, and there's wasn't another soul in sight. And – just a minute, what Erik was wiping off his glasses wasn't rain, but snow! I'd been right to doubt his weather report after all. Crybaby, huh? Shivering, I exhaled all the air in my lungs and watched it form a cloud in front of my face. In the light of a lonely street lamp, I could see the flakes drifting down from the dark sky. A little further on, a weeping birch drooped over the path. Its thick, bare branches, already with a sugar-dusting of white, formed a protective tent. I knew it well: the tree used to be an important part of our games in the park, standing in for a treasure cave, a secret lab or – as now in winter – an ice palace.

I couldn't help but raise my arm. A few snowflakes were clinging to it, their glitter standing out from the blue fabric. The snow was so fine that it was falling in individual crystals, each unique and incredibly beautiful...

"Hey! Earth to Andersson! So, it really isn't on your radar?"

I looked up and straight into Erik's brown eyes, where a twinkle of mischief danced as it so often did. Something in my stomach was dancing, too – until I firmly turned the music off.

"It's the day before your birthday," he said, winking at me. "And I know you don't want a party or a huge fuss, so we're bringing the celebration forward, very informally." He seemed to think

for a moment, then shrugged and pulled me under the weeping birch. "I was going to do this in the apartment block, but maybe we should put off going. Our footprints will be really obvious in the snow, we'll end up getting into trouble... But this is good too, right? Our old polar research station?" He nodded toward the curtain of branches around us. "So. Close your eyes and hold out your hand."

For a moment I struggled with the surprise and my gloves, then I obeyed, curious to see what would happen next. I felt Erik's warm fingers on mine, felt him place something on my palm. Opened my eyes and at first saw only him, looking at me expectantly and... and somehow... But he had already let go of me; he was wearing an embarrassed smile and hurriedly said, "Well then... happy birthday, hedgehog girl."

I hid my own embarrassment and looked at what he'd put in my hand.

It was a ring. Quit a large ring made of matt white material, maybe wood, clearly hand-carved and decorated with rune-like symbols.

It looked ancient and valuable lying there in my hand. My eyes widened. At the same time, I was thinking: *A ring! He's giving me a ring?! What... what is this supposed to mean?* A wave of joy washed through me, closely followed by panic. A ring wasn't a normal present, was it? *Does this change something between us? Does HE want to change something? And... do I want that? But what if it doesn't work, and what about Tessa, and...*

"Isn't it cool? I've got the other one!" Erik had taken a step back, no trace left of that strange expression that had been on his face seconds before. He held out his right hand to me, and his forefinger really was wearing the twin of my present. He hastily added, "Guess where I got them! No, don't, you'll never guess. From my grandmother's treasure chest, you know, the one in the attic where we were never allowed."

"And you're allowed now?" I asked sceptically.

"Come on, try it on!" He poked me in the side, which was undoubtedly meant to be casual, but came across as kind of nervous.

Beyond our roof of birch branches, the fine snow was still falling, sparkling in the light of the park's lamps and settling on the dark paths and grass like a gossamer veil. I quickly pushed the ring onto my finger. And realised the problem at once.

"It doesn't fit." Erik sounded crestfallen.

"Slightly too big," I admitted, trying hard to hide my own disappointment. In reality, it was much too big. Made for Viking hands. Did Erik honestly think I had the same huge paws as him? *What a Smurf.*

"That's really crap," he muttered contritely. "I thought it could be our secret sign. The two of us, attic buddies, remember?"

Oh. THAT'S what he meant. I swallowed down all the confusion and inner dance numbers I'd allowed myself. How stupid of me. "Attic buddies" was our version of the classic playground friends. People who throw Lego bricks at each other. Everything was normal. Safe. That was good, wasn't it?

Almost automatically, my feet started moving, carrying me out of the shelter of the weeping birch, away from the moment. Erik trudged along behind me, his boots crunching on the snowy path.

My head lowered, I asked, "Can I still keep the ring? Thank you, anyway, it's really –"

"Hey, Elvy, look!"

The tone of Erik's voice made me look up again. I quickly tucked the ring away in my coat pocket and followed his gaze. Was so astonished I almost choked. "What *is* that?" I stammered, my breath white and thick in front of my face. All at once, the air had grown icy. But the drop in temperature was nothing in comparison with the incredible show we were now seeing.

Through the darkness of the park, something was snaking along the ground – a trail of cold, sparkling light, maybe a finger's width across. No, *snaking* was the wrong word: it was leaping

forward, and kept scattering into delicate little branches as it went, like a time-lapse video of ice flowers spreading across a window pane...

The trail was coming straight towards us.

We both took a few steps backwards as the cold sparks reached the circle of light cast by the street light and slowed down, barely two metres from our feet.

"Let's get out of here!" I blurted out.

"No, wait," Erik whispered, the familiar desire for adventure in his voice. "I think I read something about this, it's one of those light installations..."

"Are you kidding?" I hissed – but I couldn't tear myself away, either. What was happening before our eyes was too unique. The trail of ice flowers had slowed, and was now just creeping forward. At its edges the air steamed with the cold, and its crystalline glitter was almost hypnotically attractive. Around us, everything was completely silent – or maybe I just couldn't hear anything except the fine, frosty crunch as the trail edged forwards. Erik took off his misted-up glasses. His face was glowing with excitement as he knelt down and stretched one hand out towards the cold sparks.

"I wouldn't if I were you," I murmured, though all I could do was watch in fascination.

He wasn't listening to me anyway; he touched the line, and – "Dammit!" He snatched his arm back and leapt to his feet. Shook his hand, blew on it, but it did no good.

An ice spark was sitting on his fingertip, dancing and glittering. I could see its reflection in Erik's face, in his wide-open eyes, which were suddenly no longer brown but milky, as if frosted over...

"Erik? Hey, what's wrong?"

No reply. His whole body suddenly looked tense and stiff. A choking fear shot up through me, pinning me to the spot. The ice flowers had reached Erik's feet. Were creeping up his body at lightning speed, gliding with a cold crackle across his jeans, up his parka, enveloping him in a web of sparkling hoar frost.

I have to help him! The thought took hold of me, tearing away the fear, releasing my muscles.

My hands shot forwards, grabbed Erik's coat. An icy cold, bone deep, made me cry out. I stumbled back, sank to my knees as my hands burned, black stars before my eyes. For a moment everything was unreal, at once clouded and clear as glass. I saw Erik's shape as though through a fog, now completely covered in ice crystals. They sparkled, they shone brighter and brighter, and became a whirlwind – a whirl of snowflakes. I blinked, trying desperately to see clearly again. But the snowflakes got thicker and thicker, enveloping Erik, tearing him apart bit by bit...

He... he's dissolving... Erik is dissolving!!!

My cry of horror stuck in my throat and my limbs refused to obey me. In a second, a snowstorm was raging around us, howling, whistling. Needle-sharp ice crystals hit my face, and I squeezed my eyes shut reflexively. When I opened them again, not even a second later... Erik was gone. Vanished with the storm. Nothing but a few shattered flakes drifting down, shining briefly in the light of the street lamp behind me and then melting as soon as they touched the dark ground. The trail of ice flowers was gone, too. Where Erik had just been standing, large, living – there was only his glasses, which must have fallen out of his hand. Trembling, I reached for them. Groaned with pain when I touched them, because my palms were sore and reddened. Freezer burn.

Whatever had just happened – I hadn't dreamed it. I gulped, sobbed, struggled to breathe. My throat felt raw, icy. I hauled myself back onto my feet. Grasped Erik's glasses tightly in my throbbing fingers and tried to scream.

For him. For help.

It did no good.

I was alone in the shadows of the park.

Of course no one believed what had happened. And the more time passed, the less I believed it myself.
Until the dreams came.
And everything began.

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