

TEMPERED IN ICE

A Phoenix of Hope Novel



by Zora Marie



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*To Mrs. Perrott for helping me learn to read.
(though still cannot spell)*

1

Chaos had broken across the wall walk where Darkans spilled over the ramparts. Zelia plowed into one of the deformed and twisted descendants of the Dark Elves that ran towards her brother Alrindel. Even with a stab of pain in her side as she slammed into the Darkan, she did not falter. As she knocked the Darkan's blow away from her brother, she heard a faint snap but paid it no mind as the thunderous roar of her heart pounded in her ears and she slid her blade through an opening in the Darkan's armor. Then time seemed to shift, and she shook as she sat just inside the inner gate, watching as the cracks in her hands and arms receded, leaving trails of blood in their wake. A spike of pain emanated from her gut as the rush of adrenaline ebbed and her hand came away from her side, coated in her own sticky blood.

Suddenly she was riding out of the inner gates with the remainder of her kin and King Gregory's men to give those inside a chance to escape in the tunnels that led through the mountain. Her side burned from her hasty cauterization, but still she rode. Their horses made it past the remains of the outer gate before falling to the spears of the Darkans. Her brothers stood with their backs to her, each protecting the others. Time dragged on as she fought, then she turned towards where Eragon and Saria fought side by side. "No," she muttered, watching helplessly as the tip of a sword pierced Eragon's chest. Her sword slipped from her fingers, and she screamed. The warmth of tears and blood mingled on her cheeks, and the embrace of someone else enveloped her.

"It's just a dream," the voice was soft and familiar, yet did not belong to the person who held her.

She shot into a sitting position, cold sweat dripping from her brow as she struggled to remember where she was. Then pain ripped through her side from the gaping hole left after the healers removed the poisoned arrowhead and with a gasp she fell over, clutching her side as she rocked on the soft bed.

“It’s alright, you’re alright,” Alrindel soothed, a slight strain in his tone.

When the throbbing spikes of pain eased and her vision cleared, she glanced over her shoulder at Alrindel, her elvish brother. There was a bit of sleep caught in the corner of his eye, and a knot of guilt tightened into a sick feeling in the pit of her gut for having woken him. He must have fallen asleep watching over her, just as he had when she was little. It was for him Eragon had died.

She couldn’t bear that Eragon had died for her and her brother, but her brother’s death would have broken her. It was for the broken part of her that he had given his life for the girl he had soothed as she sobbed for the first time in centuries. He must have known just how much she needed Alrindel to live.

Zelia craned her neck to glimpse the starlight through the door to the balcony. The stars in the sky called her name. She knew she needed to piece herself back together for him and all the others who had died at the will of the wizards. If only she knew how.

She eased to the edge of the bed, putting her bare feet on the wood floor for the first time in centuries. The floor felt bumpy, and the moss tickled her feet. Had it been so long? How had she forgotten the floors of her childhood home? What had once been so familiar was alien to her now. She had grown so used to the cold, rough stone of the cave, and after that, the smooth stone in Hyperia.

“Where are you going?” Alrindel asked.

She flinched at the concern in his tone and shook her head. “Please, just give me a few. I just...” she trailed off and cringed as she edged onto the open balcony and collapsed to her knees, the cold wrapping around her. *Should have listened to Eadon.* She rocked as the pain eased back, the side of her nightgown clutched in her fist. *Nightgown,* she mused, that was something else she wasn’t used to anymore. She had only ever had one set of clothes in the cave.

Speckles of stars and a thin crescent moon lit the sky. Now that she was past the enchanted doorway, the cold air brushed frigid fingers across her skin with the first signs of deep winter. Elves sang and danced along

the edges of the lake, their sweet songs as bright as the stars. She sat back against the outer bark of the tree, leaning against the thick vine railing where it met the tree. All the parts of her home worked together in perfect harmony, the opposite of everything within her.

She stared up at the stars, her thoughts turned to her fallen friends.

You never should have followed me to The Hold, Eragon. I can never repay you for what you've done. You were there when there was no one else and you've given me my family back.

Her chest tightened against the plate that held her ribcage together as tears welled in her eyes. That plate was just one reminder among many of the price of her freedom.

I hope you rest easy in the afterlife.

The caw of a raven at her feet shook her from her thoughts. It echoed across the lake, causing the Elves to pause their song.

“Who are you?” she asked in disbelief, ravens never came here.

“A messenger of Yargo.”

“What? What are you doing here? How do you even know of Elyluma? Eleanor keeps it hidden.”

“Lumid perceives this place, even if he cannot see it. I think you forget they are gods.”

Zelia rolled her eyes at the messenger's words. “They are not gods, they live, and they die. Only the humans consider them gods, and if the Elves didn't fight alongside them, they might also consider them gods. They are originally from Hyperia, as are the Dwarves and Fairies.”

He preened his wing as he replied, “Yargo sent me with a message.

“While Rogath may still be mad at you, we understand that the ice flare that froze us and killed one of our guards was out of your control. We know you never wanted to hurt us or our guards.

“Zivu has left you something in a pocket dimension. She is convinced you can figure out how to open it with your ice powers. Take care of yourself, Zelia.”

He fluttered his wings and hopped closer. “I think that was all.”

“He sent you all this way for that?”

“He knows of your nightmares and that you still have a role to play.”

“What role?” Zelia asked.

“He does not yet know, but he knows you still have a role to play in what is coming. Take care of yourself, Zelia.” The raven gave a slight bow of his head and flew off, leaving her with more unanswered questions.

Alrindel crossed the balcony to sit beside her. A mix of concerned and exhausted energy vibrated off of him. She cringed and shifted her weight to lean against him, shivering as she did so. “Sorry, Alrindel,” she said his name more as a reassurance to herself that he was truly there than anything.

His stern expression melted away, and he wrapped his arms around her, scooping her up. “Come on, we should get you back inside. The last thing you need is to catch a cold on top of the infection.”

Eadon stood in the doorway, arms crossed, when Alrindel stepped off the balcony. He shook his head and followed them to the bed. “I didn’t realize we would have to watch you day and night to ensure you stay in bed. One would think the infection from that arrowhead and the gaping hole in your side would be sufficient.”

She fought back a smile, but Eadon caught it.

“What are you smiling about?”

“It’s just nice to be back here, with—” her breath caught in her throat as Alrindel sat her on the bed.

He kept her from falling over as she forced a gasp for air. Her feet arched as she fought back the pain. The strain of trying to breathe past the agony caused the wound to tear again.

She watched Eadon’s arms drop as blood seeped through her bandage and onto her gown, making it damp and sticky against her skin. He grabbed a fresh roll of gauze and flask of sterilized water from the corner of the room and sat on the edge of the bed across from Alrindel.

“You already broke your side open so we might as well wash it out again.”

She forced herself to swallow as she nodded.

She could feel his tension from seeing her this way as he slid her down, one arm across her back and the other under her knees. They had thought her dead for so long. She could only imagine how they felt now that she was back and in such a state.

Well, at least they hadn’t seen her after Yargo rescued her from Asenten, like Rogath had. The image of her mangled chest and his shaking hand as he wiped a trail of blood from her cheek burned in her memory, as did his emptiness, his loss, his fear, and his anger.

She curled her toes in anticipation, biting her lip as Eadon washed the poison and infection from her wound.

“Shh, lie still,” Alrindel cooed, keeping her from arching her back.

She shivered as the initial shock of the cool water passed. At least after Yalif's healing she hadn't been so weak. She had never experienced an infection like this, not even during all those long years when Asenten held her captive.

Eadon cleaned the blood off her and wrapped a fresh bandage around her waist, tight but not so tight as to make it too difficult for her to breathe. Still, she struggled for air as she shivered.

They helped her slip a clean gown on and Alrindel pulled her close to ease the shivering. Warmth radiated from him, and she snuggled closer like a small child. Part of her screamed that she was no longer a child, but she ignored it. Here, among them, her appearance didn't matter, not when part of her was still trapped as that little girl who had woken in a dark cave.

"If your side looks better in the morning, I'll stitch it up." Eadon cleaned his hands with stiff movements.

She could see the pain etched on his face, and her gaze fell. "Eadon, I'm sorry for putting you through all of this."

The bed shifted, and he swept a long brown curl out of her face. "Zelia, I would gladly go through this a thousand times over rather than lose you again. No matter how much it breaks my heart to see you like this."

She could tell there was something more he wanted to say, but he stopped himself.

Then he seemed to continue with a different line of thought. "I have a question. What were you doing out of bed? I thought you were asleep."

Eadon studied her face as she shivered without reply. She couldn't bring herself to open up. All the wounds were still too raw, and she feared hurting them with the truth.

"You were having nightmares, weren't you?" Eadon asked.

She nodded and pressed her head against Alrindel's chest.

"That raven wouldn't have anything to do with that, would it?" Eadon asked.

"No, he was bringing me a message from Hyperia. He's one of Yargo's messengers."

"And why did Yargo send you a messenger?"

For a moment Zelia studied Eadon. She was certain Skylar had told him and Eleanor about her time living with Yargo and Zivu as an adopted daughter of sorts, but maybe he hadn't. *That's not what Eadon is asking*, she told herself. "Zivu left me something in a pocket dimension, which

she's sure I can open. Even though I've never opened a pocket dimension before. Even now she tries to teach me."

"Come on, what else did he tell you?" Eadon pressed.

She let out a soft sigh. "Yargo knows about my nightmares and that I still have a role to play, he just doesn't know what."

Eadon nodded. "You should both get some rest."

"Wait, what do you know?" Zelia asked.

"Nothing for sure. Rest, I'll see you in the morning." Eadon stopped just before leaving the room. "And Zelia, no getting out of bed."

Alrindel teased her as he laid back, being careful not to move her side too much. "Promise not to get up this time?"

She gave a defeated shrug then snuggled against him. He had always been her protector, and it seemed he was determined to never let her be taken again.

He tucked the blanket around her and hummed until she drifted off to sleep.



The room was dim and the constant drip of water echoed through the cave. *Where am I? This isn't The Cave.* She turned around and something gleamed in a shaft of light.

"Back foul beast or feel the wrath of a son of Fregnar!"

Her heart caught in her throat at the mention of Fregnar. *No, it can't be. That's not his voice.* She focused on the creature that loomed over him. Several heads bobbed back and forth, hissing at the man through yellowed, fanged teeth that gleamed as they passed through the shaft of light.

"Just a little farther," the man's whisper was barely audible. "Yes!"

He slashed at a damaged column with a thread of dark magic, and a chunk of the cavern ceiling crashed down on the creature.

"NO!" the voice of a dragon boomed through her mind as a snarl echoed through the cave. A dragon charged at the man, and he fled into a narrow passage. Fire followed him and she woke with a start, her heart thundering in her chest.

It was just a dream, she assured herself and eased back against Alrindel, his heartbeat steady beneath her ear. *A dream,* she thought, and wondered what it meant.

She stared into the dim void of the far wall until the first signs of daylight lightened the room.

“How long have you been awake?” Alrindel rubbed her back.

“A while.”

“What’s wrong?”

“It... it’s nothing.” She pushed the dream from her thoughts.

“Alright. If you promise to stay put, I’ll go get you something to eat.”

She nodded and gritted her teeth as he sat her up in the bed with pillows behind her.

He came back with a bowl of fruit and bread for both of them to choose from. When she picked up an apple, he scrunched his nose at her.

“What?” she asked.

“You can’t live off of apples alone, you know that, right?” he teased.

“What? They’re my favorite and—” she cut herself off as her mind wandered down a path she didn’t wish to go.

“Mmmhm, I remember when you used to have to cut them up because you couldn’t get a good bite on them. I think that was the only blade you were good with in those days.”

“Nice to see you smiling this morning.” Eadon stood in the doorway. “Alrindel, Koin needs your help with something. I’ll have someone else keep an eye on her.”

As soon as they left, a guard stepped in and stood near the door. She sighed and fiddled with the water they had left for her. Then she remembered the portal and the message from Zivu.

Zelia thought back to her time watching Zivu. She would hold a clear orb of ice and its surface would ripple as her hand disappeared into the sphere. Zelia poured the water into her hand, freezing it before it could run off the sides of her palm. She shaped it, running her hand’s back and forth over its surface as her powers pushed and pulled at it.

When she was satisfied that it was as close to a perfect sphere as she could get it, she held it up to the light. There was a white haze in the center, as if a cloud of mist was trapped in its core. Zelia focused on the little pockets of air, forcing the trapped air to the surface.

It was midday when she first managed to open a portal, the power needed to open it cracking through her head like the pulse of a migraine.

“Fregnar,” she cursed as she recognized the familiar sting of flames against her skin. Only these weren’t her own. She removed her flaming arm from the reflective swirl of ice and patted the flames out.

“Um, Alrindel...” the elvish guard called down the hall.

I bet Rogath would roll in laughter if he saw this. She let out a sad sigh and scooped the sphere back off the bed. How she missed his presence. Tiny superficial cracks had spread across her hand where the fire had touched and she watched them recede, a few drops of blood remaining on the surface of her skin. At least this part of her was still healing quickly, she mused.

When the cracks had gone, she tried again.

Alrindel came into the room as she pulled her arm from a new portal.

“Oh, you figured it out.”

“She was just on fire.” The guard stepped closer to the door.

“Yeah, she just does that sometimes.” Though his tone was dismissive, his knitted brow said otherwise.

“I didn’t mean to be on fire this time. I stuck my hand into a pocket dimension filled with flames. I’m fine and I found the one Zivu intended, though more instructions would have been nice.” She held out a plate of pastries covered in a white powder. “Beignet? They’re fantastic and the pocket dimension kept them fresh, they’re even still warm.”

Alrindel picked up a piece of the sugar covered fried dough, inspecting it with squinted eyes as he took a cautious bite. His eyes sprang wide as he chewed. “Um, this is great.”

“Told you so.” She took one for herself and put the rest back for later. Her hand brushed against something else and she pulled it out.

She read the note scrawled across the top of the little wooden box. It was from Yalif, the Hyperian healer who had pieced her back together not all that long ago. It read:

A gift to help you heal, just spread it across the wound twice a day and you will be healed in no time. Take care and stop getting yourself blown-up, cut open, and shot, it is getting quite obsessive!

-Yalif

P.S. In case you missed it, there is a dress in that pocket dimension from Dain. The fool is still determined to make you the perfect outfit.

“What’s that?” Alrindel asked.

“Healing cream from Yalif. It’s the same thing he used on me when Yargo brought me to him the first time. Asenten used a spell I couldn’t

heal from, yet I couldn't die." Zelia shook her head, as if trying to dispel the tainted thoughts. "I might heal fast, but this helps a lot." She closed the pocket dimension and set the box and ball of ice beside her.

"You say you're not used to anyone caring about you, but it seems that lots of people do."

"I guess," she paused, "it's just different with you and Eadon."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just, I have all these memories from when we were younger and I know we can never have that back. And I can hide my pain from everyone else but around the two of you, I can't."

"Maybe it's because you're finally letting your guard down. You're safe here with us."

She shook her head. "No, I'll never be safe again as long as the other wizards live. The Darkans, all the death, it's all because of them. They wanted to draw me back from Dragon Island and they succeeded." She paused, not sure how much to tell of her time there. "I hadn't planned to go to Dragon Island when I left Hyperia, that's just where Lumid happened to have been looking. I got lucky with where I ended up and I didn't plan on coming back. I knew I would endanger all of you if I did. Now they'll be after me again or maybe they're just testing me, lining me up to use in their game."

"Shh, you worry too much." He eased onto the bed and pulled her into a soft hug. "You're safe here. We won't let them take you again."

"I have to worry. You don't know what they did, what they made me do." She pressed closer to him, as if his presence could stave off the horrible memories of her past.

"And we won't know, unless you let us in."

Her breath caught at the thought and he rested his cheek on top of her head. "Just know that I'm here whenever you're ready."

I don't think I'll ever be ready.

2

“Are you sure?” Alrindel asked.

“Of course, I’m sure. Go, have a little fun. No need for us both to be cooped up here.”

“Alright, I’ll be back here soon.” Alrindel left the room, and a guard stepped in.

Really? Another guard. With a sigh, she twirled a flame around her fingers and let it fly across the room like a phoenix. The guard edged closer to the door and she could only imagine what he thought. She knew she shouldn’t scare the guards, but she was so bored and it wasn’t like there was anything else she could do.

“Zelia, no fire in bed, you’ll burn the tree down,” Eadon said as he came into the room.

“You know I would never burn our home down. Besides, the tree is my friend, and she’s better company than him.” Zelia nodded towards the guard.

“It doesn’t take much to be better company than him, he’s the least entertaining of the Elves,” the tree creaked and Zelia grinned.

“Let me guess, the tree is talking to you again?”

“Again? Who told you about that?”

“Skylar told Eleanor and me.”

“And that doesn’t surprise you?”

He shook his head. “It seems you’re more Elf than we are anymore. Since you seem to be feeling better, I need you to tell me more about what happened with your heart.”

“I thought Skylar told you.”

“He told me what he could, but I need to know as much as you can tell me. I can’t help you if I don’t know.”

Zelia chewed the inside of her lip as she struggled to decide where to begin. “I... the spell Asenten used bound some shrapnel to my heart and lungs. Yalif said they can’t be removed, even if they are what cause my death they will still be there when I come back. I could explode, and the shrapnel would come back with me. But even if it wasn’t a part of me, I don’t want to be trapped like that, especially since I’m not stuck in The Cave anymore and...” she trailed off, not wanting to open herself up to questions about her nightmares.

“Then we will do what we can to prevent that. Come on, let me have a look at your side.” He unwrapped the bandage and inspected her wound.

She glanced down at her side. It already showed improvement. The inflammation was down, and she hadn’t even used the cream Yalif had sent yet.

Eadon heaved a sigh. “I wish elvish healing worked on you, why do you have to be so difficult?” He tapped her nose, and she smiled. “See? There’s a piece of the old you still in there somewhere.”

Pieces, but I’ll never be her again. Her smile fell away and she could no longer meet his gaze.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as he stitched her up.

“It’s just... she’s gone. The old me, who I used to be, she died the second time I... should have died. Through the years, bits and pieces of her have been chipped off and there’s hardly any of her left now. There’s more darkness than there is light left in me and part of it was my doing.”

“What happened to you is not your fault.”

“I understand that, well, the logical part of me does, but the emotional part of me doesn’t follow suit. There are many things I could have done differently. As for my own doing, I wanted to forget. I wanted to forget you and Alrindel, and everyone else here. Memories made my reality seem all that much worse. Even when I had lost hope, I knew what I was doing was wrong.”

“Alrindel said he thought something was on your mind, but I never thought it would be this.” He tied off her stitches and went to fetch a fresh wrap.

“Oh,” she said and wiped the tears from her eyes, “I almost forgot to tell you, Yalif sent some healing salve in the pocket dimension.” She pulled the little wood box out from under the mound of pillows behind her.

“Changing the topic now, are we?”

“Kind of, but I thought it would be nice to put it on before you wrap me up.”

He took the box and skimmed the top. “I’d have to agree with Yalif. You know what it says, don’t you?”

“I can read it. I’m not Alrindel, I actually paid attention to your teachings.”

“When you were not running off to go riding,” Eadon teased and wiped some of the salve on her bandage. For a moment he paused, his tell that Eleanor interrupted his thoughts. “Well, I hate to change the topic, but Eleanor has asked me to. What’s this I hear about Skylar’s wolfblood friend, Nikolas?”

“He’s not just a wolfblood, look close at his eyes, you’ll see it. Nicolas is a god-child, like Skylar’s great grandfather was. But this time Yargo was not the father.”

“Then who?”

“The so-called god of the dead. They’re the only ones with so much black in their eyes.”

“Well, I would not worry too much about Nikolas. I’ve known him for years. He may be an outsider, even among his own people, but he is a kind person.” He tied off her bandage and pulled her gown back down.

“You say that, yet you worry about what it means.”

“Perhaps you know too much for your own good.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my Eadon?” Pain interrupted her little chuckle and she cringed.

“Settle down before you rip out your stitches. I will go find someone else to look after you before you scare the guards off. Oh, and stop using fire and ice so soon after one another, you are slowing down your healing.”



Some time passed, and her uncle Koin came to visit. “So, ready for some fun?”

“Don’t lie, Eadon enlisted you to watch me as if I were a baby. Even when I was a baby, they didn’t watch me every hour of the day.”

“Yes, but when you were a baby you didn’t go around doing things that got you hurt all the time and I was not lying.” He pulled a board from behind his back and propped it up against the far wall. “We’re going to practice knife throwing.”

“Okay, I’ll bite, even though I think you’re all just trying to distract me from something else.”

“Alrindel is right, you have changed for the better since we got home. Either that, or you’re putting on a front.” He handed her a green handled knife and pulled the one from his boot for himself. “But for the moment, let’s practice.” He held the knife up by his head and with a flick of his wrist it stuck into the board.

“You know, you make that look so easy, but I know better.”

Koin let out a soft laugh. “It just takes practice. Go on, your turn.”

“You know, I missed your laugh.” She threw the knife, and it bounced off the board. “Yep, this will take some time.”

“Hm, maybe we should wait until your side heals more so you can put a little more force into it.”

“Koin, coming up with excuses to get out of practice? What has gotten into all of you? First Eadon says I might know too much and now this?”

“Really Koin? Knife throwing?” Lighnif asked from the doorway.

“What? I was just showing her,” Koin replied, a delicate hand to his chest in feigned offense.

“And judging by the knife on the floor, she gave it a shot too. You know she’s supposed to be resting.”

“He just pointed that out. No need to scold him. So, what brings you by?” Zelia asked.

“Eadon asked me about keeping an eye on you and after hearing that Koin was here I figured I should check in.”

“Says the Elf I had to order to sit when she broke the cut on her leg open,” Koin protested.

Lighnif gave him a quick glare and nodded towards the door. “Go on, Koin. I’ll watch her until Alrindel, or Skylar come around.”

“Fine, but only because I have a couple young Elves to round up for training.” He sauntered past her and grinned just before passing out of sight.

“He’s full of it today, isn’t he?” Lighnif laughed and sat down on the side of the bed.

“With the way he was when Leena died, I never thought I’d see him so happy,” Zelia said.

“You remember that?”

“Yes, it’s the small things I forgot. Well, I didn’t recognize you, but you’ve changed a lot. Most things I forgot are little, like I didn’t remember

what it was like to ride a horse. I remembered everything about it, I just didn't remember the feeling riding gave me, the freedom." She shook her head. "That's enough about that, let's talk about your feelings."

"What do you mean?" Lighnif questioned.

"For Alrindel, you already admitted it so no sense in hiding it now."

"You didn't tell Alrindel, did you?" There was a slight sense of panic in her voice.

"Of course not, that's between the two of you and he's still clueless."

They talked about Alrindel and things that had happened over the years she was gone. They did this for the rest of the evening, and the next few days weren't that much different.

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