

CRIMSON FROST



BY JIM C. HINES

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The first to know anything was wrong was a sentry elf named Kane. How differently the war might have turned out had she sounded the alarm a little sooner. But she recognized the lumbering shape of the living snowman as a friend to Santa and the North Pole, and thought nothing of his presence that winter morning.

By the time she saw the rage burning in his coal eyes and the armor of enchanted ice that covered his snowy body, it was too late.

But Kane was a veteran of the war with the Snow Queen, and had served at the Pole for close to two centuries. She darted forward, avoiding the first swing of the snowman's broom. He was powerful, but slow and clumsy by elf standards. She rolled past, and by the time he recovered, she had drawn her own weapon, a blade of ice with a candy cane handle. But what use was a frozen blade against a living snowman?

She parried once, twice—by the Star, he was strong—and then the broom dropped low. Kane took advantage of the opening, driving her sword into the crack where the bottom and middle spheres of the snowman's body joined.

Booming laughter chilled her elfin blood as the snowman bent forward, trapping the blade in place. The broom swept her feet from beneath her.

Kane looked up at the snowman who used to dance and play with the children of the world. "Why?"

He didn't answer. The last thing Kane heard was the *thumpity, thump, thump* of Frosty's broomstick.

"It's that old silk hat they found." The glass orbs hooked to Mrs. Claus' belt clinked softly as she paced the perimeter of the map room. Each colored orb held a different mixture of magic and modern explosives. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to jam them into Frosty's snowballs and blow him to flurries. She knew each elf at the Pole by name. They were family, every one. But there would be time to mourn Kane and the others once this crisis was over. "We knew the hat was magic. We never asked where that magic came from."

"He's made of Christmas snow." Hermie the elf looked at the snow-dusted map of the North Pole, a living sculpture of frosted crystal. Frosty had struck three times over the course of the day, testing the outer defenses. "Doesn't that mean he can never be destroyed? Santa said so himself."

“Christmas snow is magical, yes,” said Mrs. Claus. She knew that deep down, despite everything he had been through, Hermie the elf still thought of himself as a misfit. But he was tougher than most people gave him credit for. Any dentist who could pull the teeth from an Abominable Snowman was a dentist to be reckoned with. He wore a dagger made of an Abominable Snowman fang through his sash. “But something—someone—used the power of that hat to shape the snow into what we always believed to be a jolly, happy soul.”

The map room was traditionally used for planning out Santa’s Christmas route each year. It could foretell the weather five days in advance, and used a form of supernatural radar based on tiny particles of ice in the atmosphere to track even the most sophisticated stealth aircraft. No one wanted to risk another Roswell incident.

“What about Jack Frost?” Emma was a relatively young elf who had transferred from Cookie Dept. into R&D a mere ten years earlier. She and Hermie had been smitten with each other for months, but they were taking things slowly, which was the elfin way.

“Jack is strong enough, but what does he gain by attacking the Pole?” Mrs. Claus shook her head. “Despite that awful Tim Allen movie, Jack and Santa have always been allies. Santa was best man at his wedding.”

“Krampus?” suggested Hermie.

The demonic anti-Santa who kidnapped naughty children certainly had reason to attack the North Pole, but he lacked subtlety. The Awgwas, perhaps? But they had been dormant for decades. Mrs. Claus pulled the radio from her pocket and called Galleta in the Vault. “What’s the last known location of Professor Hinkle?”

The would-be magician had once tried to steal Frosty’s hat, and had temporarily succeeded in melting the snowman, until Santa arrived to restore Frosty. Santa had shown mercy to the nasally professor, but mortals had been known to mistake mercy for weakness. If Hinkle’s defeat had festered all these years—

“He’s working a Disney cruise,” said Galleta. “I show him on the nice list, though he’s borderline. Looks like he cheated on his boyfriend earlier this year.”

“What about his rabbit?” asked Hermie. “Hocus Pocus was a friend of Frosty. He might know—”

“Hocus Pocus died two years ago,” Mrs. Claus said gently. Elves understood the ephemeral nature of childhood, but tended to forget how short the lives of mortals were. “He was fourteen years old, which is elderly for a rabbit.” She stared at the map, trying to uncover any hint of a pattern, any clue to suggest where Frosty would strike next.

Galleta’s voice cracked over the radio, half an octave higher than usual. “Vixen has eyes on the snowman! He’s in the woods to the east!”

Hermie zoomed the map in on that location. “That’s close to the flight school.”

The reindeer calves would be in the midst of their training. “All available forces to the flight school.”

“What if that’s what he wants?” asked Hermie. “Frosty could be trying to draw us away from the Pole.”

He was right, dammit. “Belay that. Send teams three and four. Tell the reindeer to hold back. I want them circling the whole perimeter.” To Galleta, she said, “Track down everyone Frosty’s been close to, and put them under guard. Especially Karen.” The girl had been Frosty’s closest friend when he first came to life. When people erupted into this kind violence, they often targeted those closest to them.

More than anything, Mrs. Claus wanted to arm herself with shield and flamethrower, and to ride Blitzen into battle to protect her home. But with Santa in post-Christmas hibernation, it was up to her to remain here to coordinate the defense.

Had Frosty and his master timed this assault deliberately, knowing Santa would be vulnerable in the weeks following Christmas? That the North Pole would be protected not by Saint Nicholas himself, but his wife?

If so, they were about to find out how serious a mistake they had made.

Yukon Cornelius and Bumble surveyed the carnage. Icicles of blood littered the field. Blackened pine trees still smoldered, turned to brittle black skeletons by elfin flamethrowers.

The calves had all survived, but two adult reindeer and an elf lay dead. Bumble let out a howl of dismay. Cornelius patted the abominable snowman’s fur-matted, thick-muscled arm. Bumble had grown fond of Santa’s herd over the years, and they had adopted him like a big, not-too-bright brother.

“It’s ugly all right,” said Cornelius. “Doesn’t look like the snowman had any strategy beyond smashing whatever he could find.”

Mrs. Claus’ stern voice buzzed from the speakers in Cornelius’ yellow earmuffs. “Can you track him?”

A microphone braided into his moustache carried his answer back to the Pole. “Of course I can track him. I’m Yukon Cornelius! You just make sure Jack Frost holds his breath a little longer so he doesn’t bury the trail. The last thing we want is a blizzard covering Frosty’s tracks.”

Frosty hadn’t gotten away unscathed this time. According to the reports, the flames had thinned his armor and set fire to his broom. The snowman had been forced to flee, belly-sledding away at speeds neither elf nor reindeer could match.

As Cornelius walked, he checked to make sure his silver and gold-inlaid revolver was fully loaded. He had grown up in the northern wilderness,

and had faced everything from angry yeti to rabid reindeer. These days, his beard and moustache were more gray than red, and he wasn't quite as quick to pick a fight, but he was still twice the hunter and tracker of any man within five hundred miles.

Bumble sniffed the air. His lips peeled back in what would have been a fearsome snarl, if Hermie the elf hadn't pulled his teeth all those years ago. The flat, too-white dentures just weren't the same.

Cornelius dropped to one knee and jabbed a finger into the ice-crusted snow. It tasted of pine, blood, and soot. Relatively fresh. They couldn't be more than an hour behind. "Don't you worry. We'll find this snowman and be home in time for dinner!"

"Just find him," Mrs. C said sternly. "Do *not* engage."

"Understood." He pulled his pick axe and shifted his belt, making sure the revolver was in easy reach. The point of that axe could punch through stone. It would crack Frosty's frozen armor like a nutcracker through a chestnut. He might not be planning on a fight, but he'd be a fool not to prepare for one.

A second set of tracks intercepted Frosty's trail. Cornelius jabbed his axe into a human-sized footprint, then licked the tip. The tracks were fresh, and from the residue, they weren't local. Elf-made boots had their own sugar-sweet aftertaste. These tracks tasted like old rubber.

He touched his moustache. "Frosty's not the only one wandering our woods."

A less alert man would have missed the sharpening of Mrs. Claus' words. "His master?"

"Won't know that until I find them. Yukon Cornelius doesn't make assumptions."

The tracks did follow the same path as Frosty. In several places, the human prints indented the smooth slide of Frosty's path, meaning the human had followed behind the snowman.

Bumble grabbed the top of Cornelius' head, and turned him gently to the right. Unfortunately, the beast's oversized fingers also prevented Cornelius from seeing what Bumble was trying to show him.

"I can't see through your hairy mittens, you big oaf!" He pried the hand free and looked around.

The pine trees here were thin and undecorated, unlike the woods closer to the Pole. A short distance ahead was an icy crater, lightly dusted with snow. It looked like an enormous ice cream scoop had gouged the ground. In the fading sunlight, Cornelius could make out something sparkling in the center.

He readied gun and axe and moved closer, checking the trees to either side for movement. "Looks like a bomb went off here."

The tracks continued on, passing the crater a ways to the side. It didn't look like they had stopped. On a hunch, Cornelius approached the edge of the crater and jabbed his axe into the snow. He circled slowly, squinting and

tasting. He had gone halfway around when his tongue confirmed what the snow had hidden – the human *had* been here. Three, maybe four days back.

“It’s some kind of ornament,” he said. “Crystal, maybe. Busted all to pieces now.”

“*Don’t touch it.* I’m sending Rudolph and a pair of elf researchers your way. Can you tell what the ornament used to look like?”

Something in Mrs. Claus’ tone made Cornelius’ moustache itch. Bumble’s hackles raised, and his eyes spun to and fro, searching the shadows.

“I’d say a star. Or maybe a snowflake.”

“Get back to the North Pole *now.*”

He spun, gun raised. “There’s nobody here, Mrs. C. Just me and Bumble. And we still don’t know where Frosty—”

The snow exploded as if the snowman’s name had summoned him up from an icy hell. He was larger than Cornelius remembered. Without missing a beat, Cornelius put two bullets through the center of Frosty’s head. “Found him!”

Frosty roared and leaped, broomstick raised like Death’s scythe, but Bumble tackled him from the side. They fell into the snow, rolling like cats. Bumble was all claws and fury and angry growls, a regular Bumble rumble.

Cornelius charged in. “Get out of the way, you overgrown hairball!”

Snow swirled to his left. So focused on trying to line up a shot that wouldn’t hurt his friend, Cornelius ignored the movement a second too long. By the time he spotted the figure stepping out of the snow as if through a curtain, it was too late.

“Clever girl,” he whispered.

“Cornelius, what is it?” shouted Mrs. Claus.

He spun, throwing his axe and raising his pistol, but his limbs had already begun to slow. Cold seeped into his bones.

He saw Bumble jump to his feet and start toward him. Frosty clubbed Bumble’s knee with his broomstick. With an angry howl, Bumble seized Frosty by the head and hurled him through the air at one of the pine trees. The pine tree broke with a crack like bone, and Frosty went down.

Bumble charged to Cornelius’ aid. Blood matted his fur, and one of his ridiculously huge eyes spun in circles, a sure sign of concussion in bumbles.

“I’m not afraid of you, beast.” The woman’s words grated like death itself. Ice flew toward Bumble’s face, sharp as shards of broken glass.

Bumble howled again, but he kept coming. However painful his physical injuries, his grief and determination were stronger. Bumbles were loyal to the end, though it was unusual for a Bumble to show such loyalty to humans and reindeer and elves. As long as Cornelius was alive, Bumble would fight to the last breath to save him.

What had an old prospector ever done to deserve that kind of friendship?

As his strength ebbed and his hands stiffened, Cornelius forced his wrist to bend, until he was peering down the barrel of his own pistol. “Get out of here, you dumb Bumble!”

With Bumble’s anguished cries echoing through the woods, Yukon Cornelius forced his frozen finger down on the trigger.

The isolation sphere in the center of the room looked like an oversized snowglobe. The room’s outer walls were two feet thick, built of steel and concrete to protect the rest of R&D from potential accidents. A good thing, too. Mrs. Claus brushed her fingers over the gashes by the door. Emma had been so excited by the potential for robotic reindeer...

Reluctantly, she turned her full attention to the fragments in the center of the transparent sphere. Every last splinter had been carefully retrieved and returned, laid out on the sterile white floor.

The team had also brought back the body of Yukon Cornelius.

Bumble hadn’t returned to the Pole, and the retrieval team hadn’t spotted him. At his age, and without teeth, he would have a hard time living in the wild, but she couldn’t risk sending her people out to try to bring him home. Not yet.

She was stalling. Forcing herself to project an air of calm, she turned toward Rudolph. “We’re ready. If you wouldn’t mind?”

Rudolph’s hooves clopped on the tile floor as he positioned his head in a specially designed metal hood secured to the outside of the sphere. When he spoke, his voice was muffled and tinny. “Ready.”

The hood was another of Emma’s designs. A sequence of lenses inside captured and amplified the light of his nose, sending a beam of piercing red light into the heart of the sphere. Hermie and Emma worked the knobs on the control panel. Inside the hood, a small mirror brought the beam directly onto the largest of the fragments.

The broken crystal acted as a prism, shattering Rudolph’s magical light into a rainbow ... if you stripped that rainbow of every color save blue and violet.

Mrs. Claus waited for Emma’s spectrographic analysis of the crystal’s magic, though she already knew what Cornelius had found. “This was a weapon of the Snow Queen.”

They were similar to Mrs. Claus’ enchanted glass orbs, only far more potent. During the war, the Snow Queen had seeded the North Pole with her crystal snowflakes, hiding them beneath the drifts where they were all but undetectable, even to Santa’s magic. Feckless and Pacer, two of Santa’s original reindeer, had died after stepping on her buried traps.

They had been the lucky ones. While some of the Snow Queen’s crystals simply exploded, others cursed all within range. Illusion turned friend to foe, releasing its victims only after they had slain their closest allies, and

forcing them to carry that guilt forever. Another variety froze the heart, leaving you with the memory of love, but stealing the emotion.

“I thought you killed the Snow Queen,” said Hermie.

“I did.” Years later, and she still relived that battle in her dreams. She pushed the images aside, forced the remembered screams back into the darkness of her mind. “She is gone. Whoever this is, they’re *not* the Snow Queen. But they may be looking for her arsenal.”

Time after time they had swept the Pole, searching for slumbering traps from that war. Each time she hoped they had found the last. Each time she was proven wrong.

“Could the Snow Queen’s magic control Frosty?” asked Emma.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Claus said softly. “Frosty, and so much more.” She turned and strode from the isolation room.

Rudolph pulled free of the hood and trotted after her. “Where are you going?”

“To the Snow Queen’s grave.” Frosty’s master would have to go there eventually. Even dead, much of the Snow Queen’s power remained trapped in her eternally frozen flesh.

“Excuse me,” Hermie said awkwardly. “We’ve all read about the war with the Snow Queen, but nobody knows who she really was. The elves who lived through it, they get this faraway expression and say they never saw her up close, or they can’t recall what she looked like.”

“They chose to forget,” Mrs. Claus said wearily. “We all did. Even Santa. You probably will too, when this is over.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence, through the paper mill and the wood-finishing factory, the greenhouse where elves harvested corn and grain for the reindeer, and finally to the guarded marble stairs spiraling deep into the heart of the North Pole.

The sounds of the Pole faded as they entered the mausoleum.

Gold plaques were mounted to walls of white ice. Many were older than Mrs. Claus. Most of Santa’s original reindeer were memorialized here, as were those elves who had died throughout the centuries. In the center of the far wall, holly and mistletoe bordered four large plaques. She tried not to think about the empty space below those plaques.

“I don’t understand,” whispered Emma.

Mrs. Claus touched the lower right plaque.

Rudolph’s nose painted the ice red. Hermie’s breath caught. Emma made no sound, but tears began to drip down her cheeks as she realized why they were here. She squeezed Hermie’s hand.

Santa Claus had been given the Mantle of Immortality, allowing him to serve for all eternity. His wife—his first wife—had been long-lived, but not even the magic of the Pole could preserve her life forever. Santa had grieved for each of his four prior wives, as he would one day grieve for her. But he

was a being of infinite love, one ill-suited for living alone. And passion could blind even the greatest of men.

“The Snow Queen...” Mrs. Claus traced the icy words engraved in gold.

Rest in Peace
MARTHA CLAUS

*“The heart of the jewel burns lustrous and fair
And its soul full of music breaks the air
When the song of angels is sung.”
– Phillips Brooks*

“...is here.”

Mrs. Claus pressed her hand to the security scanner. The frost on the glass melted at her touch. Not for the first time, she noticed the way her brown skin had loosened and wrinkled with age, like an old glove one size too large. She had been so young the last time she rode into battle. “Code: In hora mortis nostrae.”

The vault door swung inward. She stepped into a cold room no bigger than a closet, what some of the elves jokingly referred to as the Santa Sanctum. Inside were some of Santa’s most powerful artifacts: an ice sphere created by the Winter Warlock. A green and gold robe from the 18th century. And the crystal crown of the Snow Queen.

“How did you beat her, ma’am?” asked Emma. She and Hermie waited outside the vault. Neither had clearance to enter, and the vault’s defenses were unforgiving.

For more than seventy years, Mrs. Claus had tried to put that day behind her, to forget like the rest of the Pole had done. Sometimes she thought even Santa had erased Martha’s betrayal from his memories, along with what his new wife had done to destroy her.

“I taunted her. I stoked her rage. I flaunted my youth. I planned the most public wedding the Pole had seen, showing her that Santa was now mine. That she was old and replaceable.”

The Snow Queen had been cold and cruel, finding strength in the unforgiving, unfeeling ice. With her fury inflamed, she had acted without thought, attacking the wedding with all of her might. The ice storm that preceded her arrival had cut down all in her way. Elves, animals, and more had fallen, their blood staining the snow red.

Mrs. Claus touched her side, feeling the hard lump of scar tissue and the sliver of eternally frozen ice lodged below. She had no sensation in the area around the old wound.

“I requested a favor from Mother Nature.” She reached for a flat, insulated box approximately two feet long. “A blade formed from the essence of summer. The blistering sun parching your skin, heat so intense the earth cracks and the air itself begins to melt.”

Her radio crackled. The vault’s walls distorted the signal, but she was able to make out most of the words. “Frosty is here. He’s ... southern border. Elves ... huge. Heading for the—”

She retrieved the box and the crown, exited the vault, and made her way to the nearest video intercom. “Do we have eyes on the snowman?”

The image jumped about, making it hard to focus. The caption in the lower right corner noted that the feed was from reindeer cam #14. That would be Rudolph’s wife, Clarice. The picture stabilized briefly, and Hermie whispered the strongest profanity an elf could utter:

“I don’t believe it.”

“He’s made of Christmas snow,” Mrs. Claus said. The same snow covered much of the North Pole. Frosty had recovered from his battle with Bumble, rebuilding himself into a monster three stories high. His silk hat was a ridiculously undersized bump atop his head. His arms were pine trees stripped of their branches, and he carried another such tree as a club.

“What do we do?” asked Emma.

The old scar on her side throbbed as she placed the crown atop her own brow. “We protect the Pole.”

Rudolph and Fireball flew at Frosty’s neck, a silver cable strung between their harnesses. These were animals who were fast enough to circle the globe in a single night, but even their speed and power were no match for the magic of Christmas snow. The cable dug into the snow, then lodged there, whipping the two reindeer at one another. The impact would have crushed them both, but Rudolph ducked low and triggered an emergency release.

Fireball wasn’t fast enough. The cable wound him tighter and tighter until he slammed into Frosty’s neck. The giant snowman tilted his head, casually crushing the second reindeer.

Rudolph cried out, his nose bright with grief, but there was nothing anyone could do.

Streaks of flame played over the lower portion of Frosty’s body, slicing into his frozen flesh like knives, but the wounds refroze as quickly as they melted, leaving scars of clear ice in their wake. One ground-shaking thump at a time, Frosty moved inexorably closer to the heart of Santa’s home.

Other elves aimed their weapons at the ground, using their flamethrowers to melt a moat ahead of Frosty. Steam roiled forth from the water. Frosty crushed two elves who were too slow to get out of the way, then slid into the shallow water.

For the first time, the giant snowman let out a howl of pain. The boiling water ate his frozen flesh like acid. But he soon waded back onto solid snow, and his club lashed out with greater violence than before.

Elfin snipers tried to shoot the hat from Frosty's head. Bullets chipped away at the ice encasing the hat, but none could penetrate. Not even grenades or RPGs could dislodge that tiny silk hat.

Toy planes carried out kamikaze-style attacks, smashing into Frosty's eyes. The coal began to burn, eliciting a second shout from the snowman.

Mrs. Claus looked away. She couldn't afford the distraction.

"I can feel the warmth of your breath and blood. You can't sneak up on me."

"War was never a part of Frosty's nature." Snow crunched beneath Mrs. Claus' boots. "I can't imagine how much strength it took to turn him to this."

"Less than you might think. He's my friend. Once he learned what you had done, it was simple enough." Karen Foray turned from the carnage. The little blonde girl who had named Frosty all those years ago was gone, replaced by a middle-aged woman with sunken eyes. Where once she had worn earmuffs and a heavy red coat, she dressed now in layers of silver and pale blue that draped her body to the ankles, leaving her arms bare. A crystal snowflake hung from a silver chain around her neck. Smaller crystals circled her wrists. "How did you find me?"

Mrs. Claus touched her crown. "You're using the Snow Queen's weapons to enhance your magic." Standing before Karen now, Mrs. Claus saw what she should have seen years ago. The resemblance was undeniable. The truth sapped her anger and determination, leaving only weariness. "When did you know?"

"Earlier this winter. Frosty and I were walking these woods together when I set off one of the Snow Queen's old mines. It should have killed me, but as the magic reached into my blood, I turned it aside without thinking. The power in that crystal awakened the same magic inside of me."

"You enchanted Frosty's hat," said Mrs. Claus. "You're the reason he came to life that day."

"I didn't mean to. I didn't know what I had done, what I could do." Karen circled Mrs. Claus, her hands twitching as she spoke. "Frosty and I used the fragments of the Snow Queen's trap to find others. Each piece awakened more of my inheritance. Eventually, they led me to the site of her death." She shivered. "The echoes of the battle are still frozen in the air. I relived it all. I heard your taunts, the cruelty with which you goaded her. I watched you murder my grandmother."

"She betrayed the North Pole. She betrayed Santa." Santa couldn't have children. How had Martha hidden her affair and her child? Had it been before or after she fled the Pole? Not that it mattered anymore. "Karen, you don't have to do this."

“Did Santa know about me? Did you?” Tears froze to Karen’s pale cheeks.

“Neither of us—” *Had* Santa known? Was this another truth the he and the Pole had forgotten? “I had no idea, Karen. I’m sorry.”

“I belong *here*! The North Pole is my birthright. Mine!”

“You’re right.” Mrs. Claus held out a hand. “Call off Frosty. Come home.”

For a moment, she thought Karen might agree, that this war could end without further death. Karen looked longingly toward Santa’s workshop, and in that instance Mrs. Claus saw the girl Karen had once been, full of joy and wonder at Christmas magic. And then her expression turned cold.

Mrs. Claus didn’t wait. She ripped one of the glass orbs from her belt and threw. The red globe shattered in the snow, and candy cane spikes shot up, piercing Karen’s feet. Karen screamed, and seconds later, her magic turned the spikes to ice that melted away in rivulets of water and blood.

Karen’s counterattack was swift and brutal. Cold wind knocked Mrs. Claus back, the snow abrading her exposed skin like sand. Magic reached for her heart, and it was all she could do to use the crown to deflect the power away. To either side, spruce trees cracked and toppled, frozen from within.

In the distance, Frosty’s progress slowed. Mrs. Claus forced herself to laugh, though her heart was numb. “You’re new to this power. Your attacks are clumsy. Your grandmother would be disappointed.”

“I saw how you killed her.” Karen stepped back, panting for breath. “I won’t let you taunt me into the same mistakes.”

Mrs. Claus drew the Summer Blade. The air rippled around the blackened steel blade, and the heat hurt her raw skin.

Before she could attack, Karen raised a hand. Pain stabbed through Mrs. Claus’ side, originating from the icy splinter the Snow Queen had left behind. She could feel the ice piercing muscle, digging deeper. She hurled another globe. This one wrapped loops of razor-thin red ribbon around Karen’s limbs.

Mrs. Claus glanced toward the battle below. Frosty’s left arm was on fire. In addition to flamethrowers, the elves had brought out fire hoses that sprayed scalding water. It took twenty elves to control each hose, but they had managed to freeze the snowman in place. Mrs. Claus stepped forward, but the movement drove the sliver deeper, making her cry out.

Karen’s cold smile promised a slow death. The ribbon turned brittle and shattered. “Christmas snow can never be destroyed, remember? You can’t stop him. You can’t stop me.”

Mrs. Claus wasn’t close enough to use the knife, but there was one other weapon she could try. With her free hand, she pulled out a silver-and-gold inlaid revolver. Her limb stiffened before she could bring it to bear on Karen. When she pulled the trigger, the bullet vanished harmlessly into the snow. The sound thundered through the trees.

“You’re too old,” said Karen. “You don’t have it in you to kill me.”

Mrs. Claus felt the surge of Karen’s magic, and Frosty renewed his assault, ripping his own burning arm from his body and hurling it at his tormenters. She tried to dispel Karen’s magic, to use the crown’s power to thaw her elderly bones, but Karen was right. She had grown old, and she lacked the will. Her body stiffened.

Karen yanked the gun from her hand, then reached up to take the Snow Queen’s crown.

“I’m sorry, Karen.”

Karen touched Mrs. Claus in the side. The sliver of cursed ice wiggled in response. “For murdering my grandmother, or for trying to do the same to me?”

“Neither.” She closed her eyes, listening to the distant sound of battle, and beyond that, the whuffing, snarling grunt of an approaching beast. “For this.”

Drawn by the sound of his friend’s gun, Bumble exploded through the trees and threw himself at Karen. His first blow broke her arm. They smashed into the snow together, his fists pounding and clawing her body. His dentures couldn’t pierce flesh, but the elf-made teeth crushed skin and bone. Karen managed to free one of her crystal snowflakes and drive it into Bumble’s fur. He roared, but didn’t let up.

Frosty turned away from the Pole and hurried toward them, but he was too far away to prevent what followed. Mrs. Claus threw off Karen’s enchantment and limped forward. She clutched her side with one hand and raised the Summer Blade with the other.

Bumble howled and rolled away, the Snow Queen’s curse spreading through his blood.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Claus repeated, and brought the blade down.

Karen was laid to rest in the mausoleum beside her grandmother. There were a total of thirty-six new markers for the elves and reindeer who had died in Karen’s quest for answers and revenge.

Mrs. Claus limped alone through the woods after the ceremony, leaning heavily on a candy cane-striped walking staff. How much of this could have been avoided had Karen known the truth? How much of her hatred had come from that sense of betrayal, and how much had grown from that cursed artifact Frosty had unwittingly delivered into her hands?

Rudolph and Clarice touched down in the snow in front of her.

“There’s no sign of any more unexploded magical ordinance,” said Clarice.

Rudolph wore a tight-fitting leather-and-metal muzzle, a miniaturized version of the hood Emma had built in the isolation room. They had turned Rudolph’s magical nose into a kind of spectrographic radar. Emma sat upon Rudolph’s back, while Hermie rode Clarice. Mrs. Claus didn’t understand the

technical details, but they had managed to find two more old, forgotten shards of the Snow Queen's magic.

"Good," she said quietly, looking out over the hills. "What about Frosty?"

"No sign of the snowman, ma'am," said Hermie.

A swath of crushed trees showed where Frosty had fled, shedding excess snow as he went. His cry of anguish when he realized what he had done would stay with Mrs. Claus for the rest of her days.

The snowman would never be the same, and God only knew what he might do in his grief. She had already ordered additional guards for the foreseeable future, as well as nightly aerial sweeps of the region.

"No Bumble, either," added Clarice.

With his injuries, there was a chance Bumble had simply crawled off to die, but she doubted it. Bumble had a stronger heart than most people realized. She was more worried about what he would do to Frosty. Bumble wouldn't forget what the snowman had done.

"Why would Karen turn against us?" asked Hermie.

Mrs. Claus closed her eyes and rested her weight on her staff. They had already begun to forget. They had little choice, really. The North Pole was a place of joy. Hate and vengeance, grief and pain, they had no place here. As before, she alone would carry the burden of memory. But without that burden, the Pole might have fallen.

She touched the scar on her side. Without the Snow Queen's magic numbing her blood, would she too have forgotten?

"What's wrong?" Rudolph's nose flashed, red light flickering over her body before she could protest. The reindeer's eyes thinned. The halo of cold blue light illuminated the ice in her soul.

Her shoulders sagged. She no longer belonged at the Pole. It was time to leave, to let Santa find a new wife, one untouched by war. One whose joy was pure, as hers had been once.

Rudolph stepped closer and ducked his head beneath her arm, so her hand rested on the coarse fur of his neck. "I know that look. You don't think you belong here anymore. You feel like a misfit. But you're wrong. You belong with us. With him."

She blinked back cold tears. "Thank you."

"You know," said Hermie. "With Rudolph and his nose so bright to guide my scalpel, I might be able to remove that sliver."

Hermie's hands were as steady as any elf's, and the thought of ridding herself of the scar she had carried for so long—of cutting away the death in her heart—it was a gift as wonderful as any Santa had ever delivered. And yet...

"I can't," she said softly, thinking of the Pole. Of everyone they had lost. Of Karen. "Someone has to remember."

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