

Frozen Hazard

by Yangi

Where was I?

Ah, yes, our happy reunion:

To be honest I don't even remember all of it. My limbs felt strained and heavy from the past days and I remember pushing myself beyond my limit once I had spotted their tiny figures on the ground. With my flying skills I probably crash landed but I also remember the great relief and joy I felt. Safety. Friends. Almost home.

I think the old couple patched me up as best as they could, before we went home. There was a bright light – probably the Heart of Kandrakar and then a sudden change of temperature. After all the heat of the desert, the sort spring breeze felt incredibly cold to me. Then... nothing.

The next thing I remember is all five of us being together in my room. I was lying on my bed and the girls were sitting around, Halinor toying around with a shawl she's always liked, putting it over her head, wrapping it around her neck or use it as a stole. She pranced around and made the others laugh. Cassidy seemed a little off, now that I think about it. Nothing too noticeable. It was more like she was lost in thought or... maybe she was just tired. Anyway, we talked and had fun and did all sorts of things girls of that age can come up with when left alone. Happy times. The next day was the same. Apparently they had stood up to the Oracle demanding to give me more time to recover before continuing the mission. I must say I needed it and the girls helped me however they could. They spoiled me to no end, making me laugh until my stomach ached and with each happy moment, the darkness I had felt and the chill faded further from my memory. But eventually they left and I was alone again. My parents weren't home like so often. I decided to take a nice hot bath and as the steam curled from the water I became me again. I remembered the time in the desert and it felt distant, long ago. Just like my home had when I had tried to remember it in Aressy. I was comfortable, warm, ... I was home. I was actually home! I sighed in relief. Maybe I even cried a little. I don't know anymore.

The second I was out of the bath something happened. The lights went out and suddenly all that darkness, that inner cold came crushing down on me again. I was terrified! I needed light! NOW! My fingers tried to find a candle, a match, something to chase the blackness away but there was nothing. I stumbled out of the bath, pathetically running into the next wall until I found my room and hid under the blanket. Like a little girl I hid from the monsters out there. My inner self cried for light, begged for it... and then the Heart of Kandrakar came. It felt warm and welcoming, soothing. That moment I dropped all my suspicions. It saved me that night and I was ever grateful.

My next mistake.

The next day when I woke, I had a melody stuck in my head. Just a few notes. It sounded pretty. "In a good mood today?" Yan Lin nudged my arm cheerily. "You look a lot better, too. Healthier. Happier." Her eyes narrowed inquisitively while we strolled along the street. "Did something happen? Give me all the details!"

I laughed and shoved her away. "Not what you think!"

"How do you know? You can't read thoughts, can you, because that-would-be... amazing!"

"Not that I know ha ha! Let's just say the Heart and I stopped fighting."

I turned a few words in my mind, and then added: "For now."

Yan Lin's brow shot up. "Ho? Well, that's good news." After a pause she stared at me intently.

"What?", I asked in confusion. A gust of wind threw my hair to one side.

"What do you think, Nerissa? Details!"

So I told her about the incident of the former night but instead of sharing my relief, Yan Lin seemed...

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thoughtful. "I see. Well that's good."

"Oh, yes I can see you bubbling of excitement."

She didn't miss the sarcasm and grinned apologetically. "Sorry. It's just... the Heart being... alive. Having a sort of... mind. That's a lot to digest!"

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." We walked the rest of the way in silence. Each girl lost in thought.

The plan had been to meet up after school and continue our mission but Halinor had been assigned to cleaning duty and apparently hadn't been able to talk her way out of it. We were determined to end the mission over the weekend and had formed a perfect story for our parents that would allow us to stay away several days. At least as long as none of them started asking questions. By the time Halinor reached the park, dawn had painted the world blue. When I called the Heart back then, it felt light, as light as it had never felt. I was convinced we were finally getting along.

Dressed in our warm winter uniforms we landed in Tarzea. Night was at its peak and a giant moon threw long shadows across the land.

"Wow! So many stars..." We followed Kadma's gaze and saw a beauty I will never forget.

"Almost like the night we first flew. Remember, Nerissa?"

The girls giggled and I rolled my eyes with a smile. "Yes, I remember. Thanks for reminding me, Cass."

"You're welcome!" She smirked. We bantered for a bit while starting to walk, when suddenly Kadma stopped in front of us. Yan Lin seemed to notice something, too and then realization washed over me. Nothing looked like we remembered it! The raging winds had overthrown rocks, pulverized icy waves and created dunes of snow. Few meters away, a big crack split open the ground.

"What now? Does any of you know which way we went?", Kadma asked, turning her head in search for some kind of land mark. But there was nothing to base our directions on. The stars were different than those we knew from Earth. Several times we walked apart from each other, covering a 15 Meter radius. We were lost!

I felt how desperation gripped my heart. Maybe the Heart of Kandrakar knew the way? I tried calling it in my mind but nothing happened. I tried again. This time successful. The white pendant appeared in my hand accompanied by a terrible sting in my chest! Was it mad at me? Could it even feel mad? Slowly it wobbled in the air until it floated away from me. I held it by the golden chain like a dog on a leash and mile after mile we made our way through the frost.

At some point Kadma fell in step with me and we walked together for a while.

"Has it always been gold?"

"What?"

"The Heart."

"No. It used to be silver."

"Hm." She glimpsed at the pendant from the corner of her eye but said no more.

Yan Lin and Halinor were walking several meters behind us, in the middle was Cassidy, not going fast enough to catch up with Kadma and me, not slow enough to fool around with the other two at the back. I first noticed something was up, when we reached a slim passage leading right through the ice. In there the moonlight was nothing more than a dim blue-ish glow. Kadma and I waited for the others at the entrance.

Cassidy came up first. Her eyes had been fixed in front of her shoe tips but when she reached us she looked up. Her gaze went from my face to Kadmas and then between us. Her eyes grew wide.

"You want to go in there?", she exclaimed with a trembling voice. We exchanged a glance. The last two arrived and their laughter came to an abrupt halt.

"I don't think anyone wants to go.", Kadma said slowly but firm. "But the Heart points directly at it."

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With grim faces the five of us stared at the snowy ground. Nobody wanted to go first. Nobody wanted to go at all. After several minutes of quiet Yan Lin finally spoke: "Then we have to go. The Heart is the only sense of direction we have out here... so..." She looked at Halinor. The blond took a deep breath and pulled the hat firmly over her ears. "Then let's go." That was all she said. That was all that needed to be said. Halinor was the first to go in. Then Kadma and me followed. Cassidy went in after me but she seemed hesitant, struggling. I couldn't blame her. The winter landscape outside was alien enough. This passage was simply surreal! If you looked long enough at the ice, you started seeing things. Figures, shadows, a queer reflection of yourself. Yan Lin was last. Slowly we walked onward. Cassidy bumped into me and when I turned my head she looked panicky. I considered if she had claustrophobia. After all the passage was barely 2 meters wide, sometimes we had to squeeze our way through. Back then I had no other explanation. She was clearly on edge and I signaled Yan Lin behind her to stay alert. After that, the three of us stuck close together, pushing and dragging Cassidy with us as we went deeper and deeper into the ice. The further we went in, the darker it grew. But we kept on walking, until the sounds came.

"KRACK!"

"kriiiii-kri-krrr"

Silence.

Halinor's voice reached our ears. She was whispering. "Okay, I'm making fire, now."

Nobody objected. With a floating fireball above our heads it felt more comfortable... at first. We made good speed but the light also meant dancing flickers, more strange reflections and sudden flashes on the frozen walls. The sounds, too repeated themselves, like a dark rhythm.

When we finally reached the exit we our nerves were wracked!

"Those sounds...", Kadma whispered but I cut her off: "Let's not even think about it! Come on. We're not there yet." Cassidy didn't look well. She was pale and shivering, despite her winter clothes. I told Halinor to walk with her, keep the fire close. Yan Lin would support her while Kadma and me lead the way. I we didn't find shelter soon, we would have to retreat.

"Greetings, envoys of Kandrakar." The woman was somewhere around the age of 20. She was tiny with short black hair hidden under the hood of her green cloak. We had met her not far from the passageway. She called herself... Mara, I believe. She bowed and said she had been sent to lead us to the Collective, a building of huge proportions, where the group of helpers was waiting to be brought to Aressy. It was a 15 Minutes walk but it felt like an eternity! Mara was an overly polite and respectful woman with a soft and quiet voice and everybody loved her. And that's why I hated her.

"So you are the guardian of fire! How fascinating!", Mara squealed in excitement watching the floating flames while we made our way towards Cérat, former capital of Tarzea.

"Does it burn? Is it very hard to create a flame? It truly is amazing!"

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. Halinor, however seemed stricken with our guide. She was boasting endlessly, showed some tricks until I gave her a stern look that said 'stop this nonsense right now or I'll tell her your darkest secrets!'. But we hadn't walked another 5 steps until Mara's question round started anew: "So, Halinor is fire. What about you others? One of you can build ice walls, right?" Yan Lin smiled and slightly nudged Cassidy who still seemed absent, staring in front of her feet without blinking. She worried me.

"That's Cassidy. She's the guardian of water. I'm air and Kadma is earth."

"The four elements! You must be very powerful! We are lucky to have you!"

Her gaze fell on me, then and I was relieved I had been clever enough to make the Heart disappear before we had met her. On the other hand... now her full attention was on me.

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“But what are you?”

I didn't respond at first. My eyes were busy taking in the reminders of a city that had superseded the dull landscape. Several hundred meters away the five domes of the Collective rose into the sky.

I nodded in its direction. “Is that it?” Mara didn't say anything, her stare constantly on my back.

“Do you have an element, too?”, she asked again. I sighed. “In a way. I am energy or... quintessence.”

“She's our leader.” I spun around! Cassidy had finally spoken again! I tried a smile and she mirrored mine. Two broken smiles. It was a strange moment of comfort.

“And she's-“ I quickly shook my head and pointed at my chest. I didn't want Mara to know about the Heart. I couldn't say why... but Cassidy respected that. “...important.”, she finished awkwardly but it made us snicker and helped lift the mood. Mara kept quiet after that but I still felt her stare on me for the rest of our walk.

The Collective truly was a sight! A giant building of several levels with many stairways zig zagging along its outer walls. Pillars as thick as a house held the five majestic domes of shimmering gold. It was so immense it could have been the city, if we hadn't passed several buildings outside. A city in one building... even looking back I am still amazed by this wonder of architecture.

Inside I was almost sure to see pictures along the walls, similar to Kandrakar but instead the walls were empty, made of some golden stone that caught the light of Halinor's flame and threw it back into the room multiplied to illuminate a hall hundreds of meters long and wide. We heard a noise, like a humming or rushing of water and realized it was the sound of clothing. Like a flood, people came rushing towards us. Kadma, Cassidy and Yan Lin immediately stepped closer to me. Halinor didn't. She walked over to Mara, her flame growing ever so slightly. She was proud and just a bit overconfident.

Everything after that moved on quickly. The people came, made way for a group of people with green robes, similar to Maras, only theirs had white embroidering. They were the helpers who would accompany us back to Aressy. Kadma and I spend a lot of time sorting out the plan, trying to get a feeling for our future company. Yan Lin and Cassidy were few meters away on a bench where some young men and women treated them with food and drink. I glanced over a few times and each time I did, Cassidy seemed to feel better. One thing less to worry about. Halinor, though, was gaining new friends by the second. She spend the time amidst the masses, showing tricks, while Mara spread the word even further. Before we left, they had stacked up a huge pile of furniture that Halinor set ablaze in a great show.

“Excuse me a moment” I said to the green robes and stomped off in direction of our fire guardian. It wasn't until I had reached Mara and Halinor, that I saw Kadma, equally angry falling in step with me. “What do you think you're doing?”, I hissed at Halinor. The sight of us seemed to impress her enough to be ashamed of her unnecessary power display.

“I was just... Mara said-“

“I don't care what Mara sais! This is *your* doing. If I told you to jump over a cliff, would you do it?” She got it. I saw it in her eyes. Mara pushed her way through the people over to us and opened her mouth to say something but Kadma stared her down cold. Without another word she grabbed Halinor's arm and pulled her away. With one last look on Mara I, too turned on my heel and walked back to the others. This mission was getting far too exciting for my taste.

In my fury I didn't care about anything, except leaving this place. I called the Heart, called out to the green robes and my friends to get ready and we were off with a beam.