

# Frozen Hazard

by Yangi

A hot wind grazed my cheek and I felt the sand crawl under my clothes.

“What happened here?”, Halinor said with wide eyes. Miles of sand, rock and veld expanded under two burning suns. We had only just arrived, yet the sudden heat already drove sweat down my forehead. “It’s almost as if...” “...the worlds had changed their weather.”, Kadma finished my sentence. We exchanged glances. That could be the answer. But how to reverse it? How was it done in the first place, by whom and why?

I watched a dust cloud moving over the horizon. “Let’s go talk to the royal family. Maybe they know what happened. And if not, we might be able to figure out a way how the two worlds can help each other.”

That seemed like the best plan so we moved towards the shimmering shapes of a town. After a 10-minute walk, we started feeling the weight of the heat. Everywhere the dark cloth touched my skin, it felt like burning cinder. Huffing, we came to a stop. If this continued, we would barely make it to the town. Yan Lin sank down onto the dried out desert. “It’s too hot! We can’t move on with these winter clothes. It’s insane!” “I know. Maybe we could...” I hadn’t even finished my sentence, when the heart of Kandrakar appeared in a white glow, flashed once and the heat we had felt had gone.

Surprised we looked at each other. Our uniforms had changed once more, this time to beautiful summer wear. Cassidy and Halinor squealed in excitement and pointed at each other. “That’s so cool!” “Oh my god, you look so amazing!” Shortly after, they dragged Kadma with them to dance around happily in their new desert-proof attire. I couldn’t join in. I wasn’t happy or excited. I was suspicious. Wondering, I held up the light fabric and let it fly in the warm breeze. Yan Lin came to me, mirroring my thoughts. “You didn’t do that... did you?”

Slowly I shook my head. Our eyes turned at the heart, floating over my hand. “You don’t suppose...” One finger pointed toward the glowing pendant. A line formed on my forehead: “I *know* it. Before I had finished the mere thought of what to do, the heart came on its own. I don’t like it.”

Yan Lin observed the heart with a mixture of curiosity and distrust. “Maybe it felt your troubles and wanted to help?” I closed my hand and the heart merged with my body. To my surprise, a sudden chill ran up my hand and Goosebumps appeared. Yan Lin eyed me questioning. “I-I’m okay.”, I stammered and tried to calm my racing heart. Within seconds, the sensation faded and the warmth of the two suns was more than welcome to me. Comforting one another, we watched how Cassidy, Halinor and Kadma enjoyed themselves. “Should I tell them?”, I asked without looking away. “No. It would only worry them.”, I heard Yan Lin say. “Let’s keep it between us for now. We can consult the oracle once this is over.” My muscles relaxed and I turned to meet her eyes. “Okay. Thanks Yan Lin.” She smiled: “Anytime. And you tell me whenever there’s something I can help you with, deal?” I laughed and took her hand: “Deal.”

Our new uniform had brought us a new set of strong and big wings. Under Yan Lin’s supervision, we tested them out and it felt like flying lessons all over again. Luckily I didn’t get sick this time. Still it took me longest, to control the mighty pinions. With just one flap of my wings, the ground burst open in a dust cloud and I leaped high up into the air. “Alright, I think I’ve got it now.”, I informed the others and they nodded in approval. “Then let’s go! I can’t wait to get some fresh water under my fingers!”, Cassidy shouted high-spirited and we others joined in her cheers.

Flying was incredible! Nothing like the noisy flapping of our usual wings. With our new ones, we could soar through the air, ride on the wind and fly higher than ever before. The orange ground raced past us like a roaring stream. I remember the scent of those skies, the soft touch of the wind, the freedom I felt. But we had reached our destination in no time and the fun was over.

Carefully we came to our feet and I was astounded how strange it felt to walk again. I threw a glimpse at Yan Lin and her smirk clearly said: “Now you know how I feel all the time.” I grinned. Our arrival hadn’t been undiscovered. How could it with those glittering wings! Several locals came out of their houses to see who had come. But it was different then back in Tarzea. Their eyes had started gleaming with hope, while these showed nothing than hunger and a deep unsatisfied anger. It didn’t take long to read their intentions.

“Who are you? What do you want here?”, a voice demanded and others shouted: “Yeah! Get lost!” “Leave us alone!”

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Halinor tried to calm them down: "Please stay calm, we just want to help."

"Help? Help?! How can *you* help?" An old woman came forth. "This is what *your* magic has done to our land!" She threw her walking stick against a tree and it cracked instantly, falling to tiny pieces. I stared at the powder of wood. Halinor tried again. I noticed, she became impatient already: "It's not our doing but we can try to fix it, if you just—"

"No!", the old woman replied. Without warning, arms started grabbing at us, angry faces all around. Panicking, Kadma bend the earth and a rock shot out of the ground and struck a few locals away. I took hold of her shoulder before she could repeat the attack. "Don't! It will only make things worse! Let's retreat for now." I looked around, until the girls' heads nodded slowly. Yan Lin shot us into the air and we made our escape.

Miles away in the shadow of a red rock, our feet touched ground again. Halinor was angry: "How can we help them if they don't let us? Seriously! How could they say we did this?" She shot a flame into the air. "They don't know better.", Cassidy said and Halinor grumped. "Cassidy's right. These people are desperate. They don't have food or water. Their home is falling apart.", Yan Lin explained but Halinor didn't want to hear it. "So was the situation in Tarzea but there we were greeted with open arms!" Everyone turned to me. "What?", I demanded to know. Kadma waved her hand between the different parties. "Well, what do you say?" I sighed and got up. "She's right. You all are, in a way. But that doesn't solve our problem." It wasn't what they wanted to hear but for the time being, they seemed to agree. Cassidy shrugged her shoulders: "So? What do we do? Return to Kandarakar?" "No. These people need our help. We can't abandon them just because they are furious. I would be furious in their stead and so would you, Halinor. Kadma, you, too. We have to make it to the royal family. That's our mission."

We flew from town to town, but no one would help us. No one would let us help either. With every angry mob, with each encounter, the girls got edgier and controlling their emotions became more and more exhausting. Yan Lin tried to support me as best as she could but even her good nature was vulnerable to frustration. Once more we had to flee like refugees, hide from the rioting locals who came after us with horses or vehicles of strange sorts. They were fast and had weapons. The time for a decision was due. Should we stay and risk our lives? Or return to Kandarakar and leave these people to themselves? It was a terrible decision. The girls were weary and stressed. They jumped at every sound and when an old woman came to meet us, it took incredible effort to convince them of her good intentions.

I went to greet her and took care to stay within the line of fire of the others. Just in case.

"I'm sorry if we scared you. It's just... the people haven't been very nice to us."

She nodded with sorrow written all over her face and motioned us to follow her. The girls hesitated. I turned to face them. "What now? She's our only hope to find the royal family. We all had a hard day but let's try to do our job here one last time. I promise, if this is a dead end, we'll go back to Kandarakar."

"If we still can...", Kadma hissed. I could sense their thoughts, the darkness in them. They rose up like a giant black cloud, pushing down on my shoulders. I felt the cold within me and automatically looked at Yan Lin. But she couldn't help me now. None of them could. I was on my own. I tried to focus on my heart, on the heat around me, the sound of the wind, rolling sand across the landscape. Breathe... feel... trust... You can do this. The cold faded, but so did my strength. Worn out, I followed the old lady. I didn't care about the others. That's what I tried to tell myself. I heard their footsteps behind me and had to fight the urge to turn my head, fight the feeling of discomfort.

After a short while, we reached a small house in the middle of nowhere. On closer inspection I could make out the sad remainders of a garden, a fence and some trees. The woman told us to come in and we met her husband. They were kind and shared their humble meal with us. With every bite, every drink, the girls grew back to their old, positive selves. I was relieved but also worried. Our mission had just begun and we already suffered from so many troubles.

When everyone was finished eating, we patiently introduced ourselves and I explained our intentions. The old couple didn't know much about the magic that had brought the heat. Like on Tarzea, they

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woke up one morning and snow had turned to sand and a terrible heat started making the locals sick and raging. We bent over a map on the table.

"The royal city is here", he pointed to a big area at the top of the map. "We are down here. It takes about 2 days on foot." I twitched at that. I heard the rustling of clothes behind me. "2 days? We can't stay that long!" Halinors voice grew loud. Cassidy and Kadma went through all the obstacles on the way, the many villages of rioters that would try to kill us, the dry waterless vast lands. Yan Lin talked to me more quietly: "Nerissa, we can't stay that long. Our families would go crazy and what about school? We all need some rest..."

"SHUT UP! ALL OF YOU!" My fist hit the table. "I have to think."

It was quiet then. And I thought. I collected all facts together, turned and twisted them, calculated and finally closed my eyes. There was only one way out of this: "I will go."

"What?", the girls exclaimed. Suddenly all anger, all frustration had left them. Halinor looked at the map again, then to me and back at the map. "Nerissa... think this through, you can't-", I cut her off: "I just have. It's the only solution." "It will take you forever to get there.", Kadma reminded me. I nodded: "Not if I fly." I waited for any more objections but there was only silence. With my finger I drew an uneven line, avoiding all villages on the way towards the royal city on the map. "If I avoid the towns I should be able to make it there and back in 2 days."

Kadma sighed: "That's still two days gone from Earth. What about your family?"

"You will take care of that. It would have been too risky with all of us anyways. I'm faster on my own and if I stay close to the ground the locals won't even notice I'm there." I tried a smile. The girls' faces stayed still as stone.

"I don't think we should split up.", Kadma finally admitted. I sighed. How could I explain myself without harming their feelings? None of us wanted to go. But someone had to. So far each of the girls had used their powers against the locals at least once, filled with the same rage and aggression. It had befallen them like an illness and I couldn't risk a war. It was easier to do it myself.

Yan Lin's eyes surprisingly filled with tears. Quickly she wiped them away and focused on the map. "There must be another way. There has to be!" I smiled warmly and lay a hand onto her head, like patting a dog. "There is none. Don't worry." I turned towards the others: "In 2 days, we'll meet back here. If I'm not back by sundown, leave for Kandrakar and get help. Don't look for me on your own!" "But Nerissa, the rioters are everywhere. How do you expect to even get into the city?", Cassidy asked quietly. I frowned. I hadn't thought about that. A finger tapped onto the map. Surprised we all looked up at the old man. He grinned. "It's just a legend but... supposedly there is a secret passage somewhere around the western gates. If you find it, you can make it to the palace without being seen."

One hour later, I was equipped with a bit of food, water and some herbs in case I would run into trouble. I was ready to go. The suns were nearing the horizon. It would be easier to travel at night. The old woman helped me store away everything into a belt with small bags, when the girls came out. They looked down. We said our goodbyes, exchanged good luck wishes and each of them got a hug. Finally I turned to look at them one last time. "See you in two days."

And with the last bit of day light, I rose into the sky and darted away over the sand.

I didn't look back. If I had caught just one glimpse of their figures against the dawning sky, I might have changed my mind and left with them. But this was more important than any of us. I had to focus on the mission.

Strange what we think of when alone. How our mind turns to unspoken fears and darkness rises. How we go over situations, wondering how they would have played out if we had done something different. How we are driven from nostalgic to anger, to sadness and start doubting our self. It's these moments that shape our future. Not the battles, the opportunities taken or the friends we make. It's ourselves. How can I become great, when every time a door closes and the sound echoes to silence, my darker self takes over? How can my future be bright, if I can't face and accept myself in these moments? I knew doubting was necessary, like fear and anger and sadness. Without

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them we wouldn't know what life is, what living means, what's worth cherishing or even changing in this world. And so I took a deep breath, let the darkness in and accepted my flaws, wrong doings and weaknesses. I let it pass through me like a river, cleansing my soul on its way until I became restless again and sinister thoughts crept up from the back of my mind. I decided to call it a day, pushed the darkness away, cleared my mind and looked at the soft shimmer of light rising over the desert. I didn't think about the locals, or the girls, the old couple or my parents at home. I just sat and watched, breathed, listened and at some point, I drifted into a deep slumber.

Something stirred, I could feel it in the air around me. It was so intense, my dream started changing until it tuned into a great black thing, daring me to stay long enough for it to take me. With a gasp, I shot up and shook my head! It was day still and the two suns shone onto the stone around me until it felt like an oven. While usually, the heat was almost unbearable, I was more than happy about it, now that a cold chill crept up my back and arms once more. I lay back down and focused on the warmth under me, how it filled me up. I felt better after a few minutes and apparently, my resting time was over. A heavy dust cloud rose on the horizon. It came closer very fast. A caravan.

Carefully I gathered my few things and moved close to the ground. Finally, I rolled over the edge of the rock I had been sleeping on, fell, until my wings opened silently and I drifted the last meters to the ground. Quickly I continued my journey. It wasn't the first caravan of locals I had encountered since I had left the girls. In fact, it was the third. So far none had seen me but they travelled fast and made me take alternative routes which made my way even longer. Sleep was rare to get. The nights were cool so I used them to travel the greatest distance, while at day it got so hot sleeping was hard to achieve. The tiredness slowed my footsteps, while the lack of sleep and water tricked my mind constantly. At times it got so bad I felt sick and had to find a place to rest. And after two days alone, hunger and thirst weren't my only problems. At first the loneliness had been a sweet companion. It made me think clearer, digest the latest developments of our adventures. But it quickly turned into a cruel stalker. Watching me constantly. The more I progressed on the path to the royal city, the more I felt like I was going backwards. Sand and stone everywhere. If there was a town, I had to avoid it. If I heard someone talk, I had to hurry on without being seen.

It was only as I approached a strange dark spot in the distance that I thought of home, of my parents, the girls, Heatherfield, school, the scent of rain. Everything suddenly came back to me like a long lost memory. Family- vacations, how I met the girls, the old grumpy neighbor in his scary house... common things like electricity, cars, the sound of a door or a familiar voice that suddenly seemed so precious. But while I clearly remembered, the pictures seemed surreal as if they had no connection to me at all. My finger rose to my face where it met a single tear. That girl I saw in those memories looked just like me.

But it wasn't me.

Not anymore.

I knew it then for the first time.