

The Remedy to Winter's Curse

—and the Lord Hibernus has arrived to his just verdict: he hereby dispatches Arden son of Darius to the Bitterfrosts, to be lodged in the Healer's Sanctuary until his Lordship should find need of him once again.

An elegant form of declaring exile. If Lord Hibernus, the baron, could see him now.

For the hundredth time that day, Arden came to the conclusion that possessing healing abilities were useless if one could not even heal oneself.

His solemn gaze shifted from the last biting words of the letter to his withered fingers, a stark prune-blue in the firelight. Winter's curse, the artisans called it, because it nearly always started with their most cherished possession: the fingers. Fingers that made their craft, made their very life itself. That could only underline the depths of his misery.

Well...at least Matthias's letters were flakes of optimism. Arden recalled the eve of his departure when he had requested his fellow scribe to send him letters regarding Lord Hibernus's position. "Well, everyone knows the baron is petulant," Matthias had told him after he read the letter that night. He shrugged as if Arden would be back in two days. "He will remember that he needs you, anyway. You're his best scribe, the only one who possesses magic."

Arden scowled. "Healing magic. And it's the *Bitterfrosts*, Matthias. Those blasted mountains are not mistakenly named, I recall."

Matthias grinned at his sour reply. "Ah, Arden. The good thing is that you are returning to the Sanctuary, the place you learned all that magic in the first place. Think of it. You have *magic*, my friend. That should further account for your worth here at the baron's household. *I* recall that healing magic can cure most anything."

"Most anything, mind you."

"Yes, well, the healers *did* learn from the snow nymphs in the mountains. Have you ever seen one of them?"

"A snow nymph?" Arden asked. "Of course. We were required to study with them for a time. But Matthias, promise me you will keep me informed of...Lord Hibernus's status while I am gone?"

Even now he did not dare to hope the baron would be changing his mind, nor did it seem in the least likely. Matthias had sent him several letters already in the short time he had been gone, but Arden had not received them until he arrived to the Sanctuary, which had been an arduous week's journey. The letters were so full of detail that he had very nearly forgotten he was in exile: Lord Hibernus dismissing a manservant, flattering and losing favor with the prince at the capital, continuing to court Lady Vinelle. Matthias reported that the baron was currently hunting in the lower mountains with fellow noblemen, residing in his cozy lodge. Arden would have been humored at that fact had they been sharing the same weather, but the other side of the lower Bitterfrosts was fairly mild, and the baron was nicely settled, whereas he...

"Arden?" An older man entered the room, breaking Arden from his thoughts. His gray hair and robes were peppered with snow. "I apologize for keeping you."

Arden waved this off. "You were, and are, my master. I am used to waiting with you, Master Ulrich," he said dismissively.

The Master of Arithmetic regarded him for a moment, the corner of his lips twitching upward. He said, "I apologize because I know the matter is urgent. The other

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healers told me you contracted frostbite on your journey here.” His eyes spoke his sympathy.

“And you are going to say what the other healers told me: there is nothing you can do.”

“You know we can do nothing, my boy. You studied here for years and should know we regenerate and mend the flesh, not revive it. We cannot bring life into something dead,” the master told him.

A glum sigh escaped Arden, remembering those words he repeated to Matthias about how much healing magic could do. Even if he could heal himself, it really would not have made a difference.

“All this—writing, healing—it is my living,” Arden said.

“I know, my boy. I know,” Master Ulrich answered softly. “But you knew it was the Bitterfrosts. Did you not protect yourself?”

Anger flashed in his eyes. “Do you not think I was careful? The gusts grew worse! Before I knew it, I had lost my salves, even my gloves. I am surprised I did not arrive here naked. A smile from fortune, indeed,” he grumbled. His eyes alighted on the letter set on the desk again. Those words had long seared into his skull.

“Arden...what did you *do*?” He knew the master was not referring to the journey anymore.

“You saw the letter, master,” Arden replied shortly.

“Yes, but noblemen enjoy being flamboyant in their writing. The baron himself could not even concisely state that he exiled you because you sullied his honorable prestige,” Master Ulrich said, looking vexed. His teacher always did prefer methodical approaches, and for him to be irritated by that...

Arden couldn't help but grin. “I have as little love for nobles as you. In fact, the *honorable* Lord Hibernus has set his sights on Lady Vinelle for quite some time. He wanted the most swaying, riveting love letter sent to her. He chose me.”

The master's brow furrowed. “Why you? That is not in your profession.”

Arden shrugged. “He claimed he wanted it to be without fault, and that perhaps my magical ability might...dazzle it a bit, if you will. So I spent the whole night writing it for him, slightly addling myself with wine to get into the mood. It was perfect, magnificent. I was feeling quite vainglorious despite myself. Lord Hibernus, damn him, wanted me to only address her as *my dear lady*. I gave the letter to the courier with the baron's seal—”

“And it was sent to the wrong lady.”

He laughed grimly. “Lady Telairna. I haven't the faintest idea what possessed those idiot couriers to send it to her. She is hardly fair for a noblewoman.”

“An even more foolish thing for the baron to blame you,” the master said.

Arden shrugged, feigning indifference. “Foolish or not, the nobles hold the power and authority. Now I am here until Lord Hibernus ‘finds need of me once again’. I shall be here indefinitely.”

Master Ulrich let out a breath, apparently coming to the intended topic. “Arden, I summoned you to my offices to inform you that we cannot help you. But there is a chance the snow nymphs may,” he said slowly.

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Arden's gaze was fixed on him then. The master continued, "You know our knowledge of healing derives from them. If a cure exists for the incurable, it would lie with the snow nymphs."

"They are high in the mountains. You want me to travel like *this*?" He gestured to his hand.

"If you wish, we could send someone to accompany you. But the nymphs have a hard time approaching more than one person. As you may remember, they prefer if you are alone, for it proves you have undergone a trial. It seems that trials are favorable to their systematic approaches. You also might recall their strange ways."

Arden glanced down at the letter again. "Should I take it with me?" he asked.

At the master's look, he elaborated, "For the luck I do not possess. Or perhaps the nymphs may take pity on me."

Master Ulrich laughed.

Still, Arden took the letter just the same. For the luck he did not possess.

The next day, he set out for the snow nymphs' dwelling. He was covered in various protective charms from the cold, courtesy of the other healers. It turned out simply finding the nymphs required a mathematical mentality. Arden had done it before, but it was years ago. So the Master of Arithmetic had to refresh his memory.

"At thirty-one paces, angle yourself ninety-three degrees. At seventy-four paces, swerve at a thirty-seven degree angle and proceed twenty-six paces to the perpendicular mountain wall—the wall by then *must* be perpendicular..." After rambling out more numbers too specific to Arden's liking, Master Ulrich said, "By that point you should encounter their cave. Remember: your steps should not be more than three inches apart."

Arden did as he was instructed. Truth be told, the whole process was meticulous to the point of driving him mad. Writing had proved to be his forte, not...*angles* and *numbers*.

Why eighty-three and three sevenths of a pace? Snow nymphs are mad maiden-creatures, he thought bitterly as he finally made it to the last step. Arden was ten steps away from a cave, recognizing it from years ago. *Perhaps they loathe me for some unknown reason, or are secretly employed by Lord Hibernus himself. Some tantrums he must have...*

He almost missed catching sight of them. It was hard to discern them, the snow assailing his eyes; the weather had only worsened on his way up. There was no hoping otherwise. With the Bitterfrosts, such chances for fair weather—or even the hopes for it—were barely more than prayers. Prayers that were brutally silenced.

The snow nymphs materialized in front of the cave, frosty apparitions garbed fully in white so that they looked like they were conjured up by the snow itself. Their glassy azure pupils completely covered their entire eyes, giving them an insect-like impression. But they were nonetheless stunningly beautiful. Their hair was long and silvery but not whitened with age. They did not make a move to approach him.

"I am Arden, son of Darius!" he shouted, feeling that his words were snatched away by the wind. "Do you remember me?"

Only the wind howled an answer. *I hope they realize we don't have skin as impermeable as they do*, he thought, shivering. They only gazed at him with those timeless eyes.

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Then came, "Yes...we remember you, Arden." He thought he saw one of them smile. "And patience is not among your virtues." One of them raised a hand in a subtle beckon to him. "Come and be received."

The quirk of the snow nymphs was that their way of life circled around precision. The cave was not natural; it had been carved into the mountains. An architect would have marveled endlessly at the painstaking perfection of how it had been done. Arden never cared for geometry, but the cave was undeniably its embodiment. Octahedral pieces conformed to each other to shape the ceiling, making the ceiling sparkle with their multitude of facets. The iridescent walls were completely symmetrical to each other, myriads of shapes carved out of the crystal.

Arden remembered these walls, remembered how the nymphs dieted. They ate these crystals. It provided some sort of vital mineral for them. True to their culture, the snow nymphs only ate a certain amount daily. Their culture also resulted in the painstaking precision of their spells, which he hoped would serve to his benefit.

The nymphs asked to see his withered right hand. He held his hand out to them and they wordlessly examined it. He was somewhat unnerved at the experience, for he was still not accustomed to the numbness he felt when they lightly touched his fingers. When the nymphs finished, they exchanged looks, and he had to check his edginess. He bore in mind that the snow nymphs rarely ever divulged to strangers the mysteries of their thoughts.

The nymphs led him to a chamber in the cave. It looked familiar—it might have been one of the practice rooms they had taken him to years before. "Stay," one of the snow maidens told him, and they disappeared through the crystal before he could respond.

Minutes later they returned with a glass flask filled with a cerulean liquid. "Drink," the same nymph told him in a staccato-like cadence, holding it out to him. "Consume thirteen milliliters. No more."

Of course, he thought. Using Master Ulrich's practical mental calculations, he brought it to his lips and sipped carefully.

Arden handed it back to her when he finished. The nymph was frowning. She shook her head. "Another potion," she told the others.

By the end of it all, Arden knew the taste of every kind of potion and had refreshed his memory in all areas of mathematics. The snow maidens obviously thought him a curious case, looking at him strangely as if they were expecting each one they gave him to work at last.

"Not to distrust your expertise, fair maidens," Arden said to them when they were studying him for any change, "but is it not harmful to drink this much?"

Apparently the snow nymph who spoke to him in the entire duration spoke for all of them. She responded with an odd look, "Your human brews can eventually damage the body. Our brews will not, unless you consume two with counteracting purposes. Never mind the potions. We will attempt spells."

And so began another meticulous process of calculations. The magic they cast on him made his skin tingle. But all the spells proved to be as ineffective as the potions.

"Why will they not work?" Arden finally asked.

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"Our magic's purpose is to heal, both externally and internally. It responds to what you truly need," the snow nymph told him. She was quiet for a few moments. Then she said, "There is another spell, but only you can perform it..."

She explained the spell to him. He barely needed time to contemplate it. Arden asked, "Will it work?"

"You will need a possession."

"I can arrange that."

"Are you able to calculate the distance?" the nymph asked.

"Definitely."

"Very well. Here is the spell..."

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Days later, he returned to the Sanctuary. Master Ulrich was surprised to see him. "Your fingers! You're cured, Arden!" he exclaimed. The master inspected his fingers like they were artificial, clearly still in disbelief.

Arden smiled. "It appears I am."

"How did you manage it? What did the nymphs give you?"

"A spell. It proved to be helpful in various ways," Arden replied.

"A spell? You must show the Sanctuary. Think of the doors it would open!"

Master Ulrich grinned.

"Unfortunately, the spell can only be done by me. It was what the nymphs call my...*personal* spell. Mind you, I could do it again. But regardless, one can only learn it if they are afflicted with frostbite, and only the nymphs could teach it."

The master appeared slightly disappointed. "A pity. Speaking of which...the nymphs took pity, did they?" he asked.

Arden showed him his empty pocket. "Actually, they kept the letter. It must have fascinated them."

"Ah, yes...a letter came in for you..."

Later that night, Arden was eating an apple by the fireplace, relishing the feel of the fruit's firmness between his fingers. He read again Matthias's words:

—and I heard about your fingers, Arden. I am sorry. Do you know what's strange? Lord Hibernus's fiery nature has been snuffed. His hunting trip turned out badly. The noblemen caught no game whatsoever. When they returned from the hunt, the baron's household was aflame with news. The baron's fingers are a sickly hue of blue! Even now as I write to you, he is desperately searching for healers. No one knows the cure. And I must say, it is his fault. The mountains were hardly cold where he lodged. You would have thought he would have been more careful.