



Guardians of Winter

(Daughter of Winter #6)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: They have waited for her for centuries

When she wakes up in a cave with two invisible men in the remote Scottish Highlands, mountain rescue volunteer Claire thinks she has suffered a head injury. But the two Guardians need her help to lift a curse and time is running out...

A spicy m/f/m fantasy romance set in the same world as the Daughter of Winter series.

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The pager went off just when I was about to drift off to sleep. Typical. I jumped out of bed, adrenaline racing through my body, erasing all traces of tiredness. I was changed into my hiking clothes and on the way to the station in what felt like seconds.

Snow had started falling sometime after I'd come home from work; thick, fluffy flakes that had already covered the ground an inch or two deep. They looked like they were here to stay. Down here, everyone would be excited to have a White Christmas. But it wasn't the weather to climb mountains in. Visibility would be crap. I hoped this would be an easy rescue, if there was such a thing. I had an early start tomorrow, and besides, it was freezing, dark and snowing. About the worst conditions to be outside in, let alone climb hills.

Half the team was already assembled at the wee church that had been converted to Cairngorms Mountain Rescue HQ, some looking like they'd already been asleep, others brimming with energy, eager to go.

Karl, a bearded giant of a man who had become team leader last year when my gramps had retired from active duty, banged his fist on a table, instantly quieting the room.

"I know it's three days to Christmas, so I appreciate you all coming out during this busy time. We have a missing person on or near Ben Macdui," he announced. "Hamish Harris is his name. His wife called the police half an hour ago, reporting that he hasn't come home. He sent a picture from the summit in the early afternoon, but

they've been unsuccessful in establishing contact with him, so we've been tasked to go out and search. Three teams. Claire, Simon, George, Jack, you're team one..."

Ten minutes later, I was being shaken like a daiquiri in the MRT jeep. If I hadn't already been fully awake by now, the bumpy ride along a forest track would have done it. While Jack next to me was looking at maps, planning the best route for our ascent, I was fiddling with our radios, making sure they were all fully charged and set to the right frequency. Everyone in the team had a task, which meant we drove in silence while everyone prepared themselves both mentally and physically. This was the first missing person of the winter season and the tension was palpable.

The silence continued even as we unloaded the jeep, helping each other put on our heavy packs filled with survival equipment for both us and the casualty. All of us had been part of the MRT for years, and it showed. We were ready to set off in record time, just as the snowfall thinned a little. As much as I loved snow, I wished for it to stop entirely.

"Ben Macdui," Jack muttered, peering into the darkness. "Do you know the stories?"

I grabbed my poles and poked the snow in front of me. It had become deeper already. "Doesn't everyone?"

"What stories?" Simon piped from behind me. He was a banker from London who'd moved to Scotland a few years ago. He still stuck out like a sore thumb, no matter how much he tried to be part of the community. Despite his perfectly manicured fingernails and designer specs, he was an excellent mountaineer. Never judge a man by his fingernails.

"We'll tell you on the way," Jack said with glee. I knew already that he was about to embellish the old legends with gory details to scare the ex-banker.

I lifted my radio to my lips. “Team one to base, we’re setting off now.”

“Roger, team one. Good luck.”

I wiped the snowflakes off my glasses. We’d need all the luck we could get.

The higher we climbed, the worse the conditions got. The wind was howling ominously, lending a soundtrack to the flurry of snowflakes. The track was invisible beneath the snow, so we only made slow progress, using our poles to test the ground in front of us for sudden drops and slippery stones. We walked in a line, shoulders hunched, hoods drawn deep, taking turns shouting the missing man’s name. The storm’s noise made it impossible to talk, so Jack didn’t even try to tell his stories.

I peered into the darkness, hope blossoming every time my torchlight fell across a vaguely human shape, only to be disappointed when it turned out to be rocks. We’d not heard anything from the other teams. Because nobody knew what route the man had taken, our three teams were covering different ascents, hoping he had already made his way down from the summit. In these conditions, there was little chance of us reaching the top of Ben Macdui. Even on good days, it took almost a full day for ascent and descent. At night and with snow hiding treacherous crevasses...it seemed impossible.

We switched positions a few times, taking turns in leading our small group through the darkness. Our headlamps reflected off the snow, creating eerie streaks of light that seemed to be torn apart by falling snow.

I was at the back of the group when I heard it. A man’s voice, shouting, barely indistinguishable from the howl of the wind as it cut across rocks. I stopped in my tracks, pointing my torch at the direction of the sound.

“Guys, stop!” I called, but didn’t dare turn back to the others. If the casualty was out

there, he needed to see my light to guide him to us. If he could walk.

“Hello? Hamish? Can you see us?” I shouted as loud as I could, then pushed back my hood to listen.

Nothing. Had I imagined it? Had it been just the storm? I slowly counted to ten in my head, giving him the chance to call out once more.

There, the crunching sound of footsteps on snow. Someone was walking towards me. I squinted, trying to see through the thick curtain of snowflakes. It was impossible to see further than a few feet.

“Hello? Mountain Rescue! We’re here to help!”

I took a few steps in the direction of the sound. The footsteps seemed to get closer.

“Guys, can you see anything?” I asked, turning to my teammates – who weren’t there. It took a moment for the truth to sink in. They hadn’t heard me when I’d told them to stop. They’d continued on and because I’d been at the back, they hadn’t noticed that I’d not followed. Fuck. I should have double-checked that they had indeed heard me.

At least I still had my radio. As soon as I found the guy, I could let them know that way.

Crunch. Crunch. It was strange how close the footsteps sounded, yet I still couldn’t see anyone. Maybe the towering rocks created an echo effect. But I was sure the man was out there. This wasn’t the sound of snow falling or an animal running from my torch’s light. The crunching was unmistakably someone walking through deep snow. But where was he?

With one last look in the direction of where my teammates had disappeared, I continued walking towards the sound. My glasses could have done with little windscreen wipers. Snow was everywhere; on my face, on my backpack, on the locks of hair that had freed themselves from my quickly tied bun. For now, I barely felt the cold. Adrenaline was keeping it at bay, but I knew that as soon as we found the casualty, I would be freezing and in need of not just a hot shower, but preferably a large hot chocolate.

“Hellooooooooo? Where are you?!”

My foot hit something slippery. Time slowed down. It was as if I was watching myself from a distance, yet I couldn't do anything about it. I fell backwards, the weight of the rucksack pulling me down, and then I was tumbling, rolling down a slope I hadn't even known was there. Bone hit stone. Snow exploded into the air around me. And then a rock hit the back of my head and everything dissolved into darkness darker than the night.

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Waking up was like dredging through a sea of sludge, swimming my way to consciousness.

The first thing I noticed was that I didn't feel cold. I remembered slipping, then falling, then hurting. Nothing after that. My back ached a little, but somehow, I felt like there should be more pain. Had the others found me and taken me back down the mountain? Was I in hospital? Had they located the missing man?

"She is waking up." A deep, unfamiliar voice.

"Get away from her. You shouldn't be here."

Another man I didn't recognise. Nurses? Doctors?

I reached deep to find the energy to open my eyes. Everything was blurry. Where were my glasses?

"Gently, take your time. You might have a concussion."

I ignored the voice and pushed myself up into a vaguely sitting position to look around.

I wasn't in a hospital. I wasn't even in a building. Even with my blurry, shortsighted vision, I could see that I was in a cave. A fire burned to my left, which explained why I wasn't cold anymore. The flickering flames made the ceiling glitter strangely.

Quartz, maybe, or stalactites, but without my glasses, I couldn't tell. I should have taken the time to put in my contacts before heading to HQ. Without my specs, I was lost.

The cave was surprisingly large. I hadn't even known there were caves on Ben Macdui. The side opposite the happily crackling fire was decked in shadows, too dark to tell if there was an exit or a further extension of the cave.

But strangest of all – there were no men. I rubbed my eyes. I'd clearly heard their voices. They'd sounded like they'd been right next to me. But there hadn't been footsteps moving away from me since. They should be here. Yet I seemed to be alone.

"Is this some kind of joke?" I muttered, more to myself than anyone else. I knew nobody in the mountain rescue team would play such a dangerous practical joke on me. We all respected the mountains and didn't fool around while on a job.

"She can't see us," the first voice said sadly. "She's not the one."

Again, I could have sworn he was right next to me, so close that I should have been able to touch him.

"Maybe we got it wrong." The second voice sounded like he was grieving someone. So much sadness and despair. It was dripping off every word.

Instinctively, I reached out towards the voice – and my hand touched something warm and hard. I blinked. Impossible. I looked at my hand, extended into nothing but air. Even with my blurry vision, I could see that there was nothing between me and the craggy cave wall a few yards away.

Cool fingers wrapped around my hand and I shrieked, trying to pull back, but the grip

only tightened. Another invisible hand slid beneath mine, this one warm to the touch.

Okay, I was most definitely concussed. I was hallucinating. I should lie down again and wait to be rescued. Surely, my teammates were looking for me already. Hopefully, they'd found the missing man by now. I didn't want my foolishness to interfere with his rescue.

"She can touch us. How?"

"I don't know. This has never happened before."

"Maybe it's too early. What time is it?"

"The sun is still rising. Do you think touch comes first, then sight?" He sounded hopeful.

Even though the voices were clearly just in my head, I didn't like that they were ignoring me. If they were my imagination, shouldn't they be a little more self-centred?

Warm fingers caressed my wrist, gently exploring my skin. There was a certain hesitancy to the touch, whereas the cooler hands were wrapped firmly around my hand, keeping me in place. A thumb pressed against my palm, stroking in circling motions. A warm shiver ran down my back. This felt way too good. I fought against the craving of wanting more of these invisible touches.

"It's all in my head," I whispered. "I am concussed. I'm hallucinating."

"Sorry to disappoint, but you're not," the deeper voice said close to my right ear. For a second, I imagined feeling hot breath against my cheek, but it must have been just the warmth of the fire. Even though that was on the other side of me.

“We are as real as you are, lovely human.” The other voice chuckled. “Maybe even more real. It depends on your definition of reality.”

“This is not the time for philosophy, Ben. She is clearly confused. We should enlighten her before she convinces herself that she’s unwell. Human minds are powerful. Imagined illness can become real if they believe in it too much.”

“You’re right.”

“As always.”

They laughed in unison, a rumbling sound that echoed through the cave, reminding me of rocks rolling down a hill.

The warmer hands finally released their grip, only for one to retake my hand, shaking it enthusiastically.

“My name is... well, you may call me Mac. And this is my brother-“

Cold fingers pushed away the warmer ones until my hand was shaken again. I didn’t even try to pull away this time. I was too stunned to do anything much.

“Ben. I’m Ben. And you are?”

“Claire,” I said automatically. “Claire MacDuff. But you already know that because you’re in my mind. Why am I even talking to you?”

“Because you know that you’re making excuses,” Mac chuckled, none of the earlier sadness remaining. “You can feel us. You can hear us. And soon, you will hopefully be able to see us.”

I wasn't sure how to reply to that. Or if I should reply at all. Maybe I should just lie down and wait to be rescued. I wasn't usually one to take a passive role in life, but there was a first time for everything.

"Just to double check," Ben said close to my right ear, "You're a MacDuff by birth, not marriage, right?"

"I'm not married."

"Good. We got it right. This time."

"This time?" I repeated weakly.

"About fifty years ago, another MacDuff came to us on Winter Solstice. We were so hopeful..."

His voice trailed off.

"What happened?" I asked, even though I still didn't quite believe this conversation was real.

"She couldn't see us. Couldn't even hear us. Not like you."

A cool hand touched my cheek. I flinched for just a moment, then forced myself to look at the air where Ben would likely stand. If he was standing.

"Are you ghosts?" I blurted. "Do you float?"

Both of them laughed in unison.

"No on both accounts," Ben said, his hand still on my cheek. I should have pushed

him away, but I strangely enjoyed his touch. Guilty pleasures like this were allowed in dreams.

Mac cleared his throat. “It’s a long story. But I suppose we have time until the sun reaches its zenith. Have you ever heard the story of the Grey Man of Ben Macdui?”

I would have stared at him in surprise and disbelief if I’d been able to see him. “Of course. Everyone here does. Am Fear Liath Mór , the Big Grey Man. A creature that haunts the mountain. Crunching footsteps behind you. Shadows that move. Strange noises. And tales of a man, ten foot tall, broad shoulders, dark hair, skin the colour of the rocks that line the summit.”

“Men. It should be men.” Mac sounded annoyed. “Nobody ever mentions that there are two of us.”

“At least most of the other details were right. Not sure I agree with skin the colour of rocks. Depends on the rock.”

“You’re the Grey Man...Men?” I interrupted. “Alright, now my mind is scaring me. Changing a myth into... what are you? Brothers?”

“Twins,” Mac said happily. “Two sides of a coin. Ben here is doing the haunting. I do the opposite, leading lost hikers to safety. Or into caves to get warm.”

I could hear his smile in his voice. He was talking about me.

“Let’s pretend I believe you, believe all this. How did you get me here? Where is this cave? And what are you planning to do with me?”

“I carried you,” Ben whispered close to my ear. “I’m sorry for leading you astray. I can’t help it. But when you fell, I wanted to help. I was about to lead one of the other

humans to you when I saw your name badge... You're a MacDuff. That changed everything."

"We're halfway down from the summit," Mac continued the story. "While Ben carried you here, I led the humans to the one who was lost so that we would be undisturbed. Sadly, they realised you were missing fairly quickly and have been scouring the mountain ever since."

"Like ants crawling up a leg. Itchy." Ben growled softly.

I sat up straighter. "I need to go to them. Show them that I'm alright. Where is my radio?"

"I didn't see one where you'd fallen," Mac said. "It also wasn't in your pockets."

I looked down at me and realised for the first time that I was only in my underwear. Bloody hell. I searched the cave for a trace of my clothes, but without my glasses, everything was too blurry.

"You undressed me."

"You were cold. Your clothes were wet. We didn't want you to become even more hypothermic."

Mac's words made sense, but I suddenly felt very vulnerable.

"Do you have a blanket?" I asked, my gaze firmly focused on the fire. I could feel a hot blush rise to my cheeks and I didn't dare look at where the invisible men-in-my-mind likely stood. I suppose it was a small mercy they'd left me my underwear. Not that it was my prettiest set. If I'd known someone would see me half-naked today, I would have put on... wait. I didn't have to impress anyone. Besides, they weren't real.

It didn't matter what they thought of my lingerie because they didn't think at all. Their supposed thoughts were just a mirror image of my own mind.

"We don't," Ben said, pulling me from my confused thoughts. "But I have your pack. Do you keep one in there?"

A strange sound, something being dragged across stone, made me twist around. The most curious sight offered itself to my blurry vision. My red-and-black backpack, the same bag everyone in Mountain Rescue was issued with, moved towards me, seemingly on its own accord. The bottom dragged across the cave floor, leaving track marks in the dust. The handle was erect as if an invisible hand was holding it up. Fuck me. This was impossible.

When I reached for the pack, I almost expected my hand to only meet thin air - but no, solid cloth met my shaking fingers. Slowly, taking in every sensation to reassure me that this was really happening, I unzipped the backpack and pulled out an emergency blanket.

"Let me help you with that." Mac took the blanket out of my hand and unwrapped it. The fire's shine reflected off the silver-gold material, throwing tiny flecks of light all across the cave. For a moment, it seemed as if we were beneath the night sky.

He wrapped the blanket around me, or maybe it was both of them. Hard to tell when faced with invisible men.

"You're real," I whispered when I was fully covered. "How is this possible?"

"How much time do you have?" Ben laughed softly. "It's a long story. Are you hiding any snacks in your backpack? I haven't had human food in a while."

I ignored his request. "You keep saying human as if you aren't human yourself. What

are you? Why are you invisible? And what are you going to do with me?"

"I could think of a few things." Mac's breath was hot against my cheek. "And I promise you'd enjoy every single one of them."

His lips touched the lobe of my ear. A wave of pleasant shivers ran down my spine. I shouldn't enjoy it but deep inside, I knew I wanted more.

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" I found something!"

Thank goodness for the interruption. I pulled away from Mac's invisible touch and looked at where I assumed Ben to be. A small bottle of whisky hovered just above my backpack. I'd completely forgotten about that. We'd had our annual MRT Christmas party last weekend and we'd each been given a wee bottle of Glenlivet. I'd put mine in my bag and hadn't thought of it again.

"Not as good as snacks, but better than nothing," Mac said to the sound of footsteps moving away from me. "Are there any glasses?"

The other man tsked. "Don't pretend to be civilised. We drink from the bottle. Slàinte mhath ."

I didn't quite see the lid turn, thanks to my missing glasses, but I heard it fall to the ground. The bottle shifted in mid-air until the whisky should have flown freely on the cave floor, but instead, the air around it began to shimmer. The faintest outline of a man appeared, barely indistinguishable from his surroundings. If I hadn't been staring with all my might, I may have missed it.

"I think... I think I can see you."

The bottle froze, as did the giant man holding it. "You can?"

Ben turned to me. I couldn't see his face yet, or any detailed features, but the outline

was becoming stronger.

"What about me?" Mac asked from my left. "Can you see me?"

"Kind of. Do you have a beard?"

"She can see us!" Ben exclaimed. "She's the one!"

"She can hear you," I snapped. "And she would like an explanation."

He handed me the whisky bottle. "I'm sorry. Of course. We shall answer your questions. Brother, do you want to start?"

Mac sat down next to the fire. Even sitting, he looked enormous. "Once upon a time, there were two Guardians. Do you know what that is? Do humans still tell stories of us?"

I shook my head, and both of the men sighed.

"Typical. All the important things get forgotten. Guardians are the servants of Beira, the Goddess of Winter and Mother of Gods. We are made to look like humans so that we may visit your world and blend in, but we are not like you. For once, we are more or less immortal. Some of us have magic. Others are given special skills by the Goddess. And yet others are her messengers, letting her see through our eyes and speak with our lips." He sighed. "You should have seen the Winter Realm. Sparkling crystals everywhere. Snowflakes as large as your head. Mountains taller than any you've ever climbed before. Unicorns grazing on the first grass of spring. And-"

"Unicorns?!" I interrupted. "I was almost starting to believe you, but now you're pulling my leg."

"No leg pulling involved. I swear it's true."

"It is," Ben confirmed. "Unicorns are real. How did you think the legend came to be? A few Realm creatures escape every year. Most of them get caught by Guardians before they're spotted by humans, but sometimes, they are seen. Anyway, we don't have much time. The sun is rising fast. Mac, continue your story."

I had no idea what to think. This was all a little too much. I looked down at the bottle in my hand and took a large sip. The whisky burned down my throat. I welcomed this strong, tangible feeling. This was real. The rest of it... I couldn't be sure.

"I have told you who we are. Now I shall tell you how we came to be here, on this mountain. About five hundred years ago, we-"

"Shut your face," I blurted before realising that it may not be a good idea to be rude in the presence of immortal beings who spoke to unicorns. Maybe I should go back to my concussion theory. It made a whole lot more sense than what they were saying.

Mac smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. A deep sadness as old as the mountain lingered in their depth, pulling me in. "It has been a long time. Some days, I wonder how we survived. How we didn't go insane."

"Because we were together," Ben muttered softly.

"Yes. Out of all my brothers, I'm glad it was Ben who was given this assignment together with me. Anyway. Five centuries ago, Queen Beira sent us to this mountain range on a recon mission. I won't go into detail, but we were told to stay with the humans, blend in, observe them. So we did. Until a young woman fell in love with us."

"And you with her?" I asked. For some reason, I was concerned about the answer

they might give.

"No. At first, we didn't realise how serious her feelings were. I admit to leading her on for too long. Among Guardians, relationships are rarely as deep and permanent as among humans. Especially back in those days. Long story short, when she wanted more than we could give her, we ended it. We made it very clear that there was no future for us and that she should look for a husband among humans. She didn't take it well."

Ben scoffed. "Understatement of the millennium. She cursed us. Don't ask me how she did it. She was human; she shouldn't have been able to. But she did. Cursed us to stay on the mountain towering above her village forever, unable to leave, until one day, we'd find a woman who'd want us. We figured out the smaller details of the curse later, after she'd died of old age."

"Like that there are only two days a year that we are able to show ourselves to a human," Mac added. "The summer and winter solstices. And that the woman has to be her ancestor. A MacDuff. She really didn't make it easy for us."

"Hence why we've been trying to lift the curse for hundreds of years. It's hard to meet MacDuff women on Ben Macdui, especially when one of us has to constantly haunt anyone who sets foot on the mountain, and the other is busy making sure nobody dies as a result of our curse. And, of course, nobody is able to see us. Not until today."

By now, their bodies were almost completely solid. Only their long hair was still translucent at the ends. I didn't need my glasses to see their ethereal yet rugged beauty.

"What happens after today?" I asked. "After the solstice. Will I still be able to see you?"

Mac ran a hand through his beard. "I don't know. It's not like the curse came with an instruction leaflet. Half the time it feels like the curse is evolving, closing any loophole and chance of escape as soon as we find one."

"It's been a long five centuries," Ben sighed. He motioned for the whisky bottle which I realised I was still clenching in my hands. I took another sip, relishing the burn down my throat, then gave him the bottle.

Ben sniffed the whisky, inhaling deeply. "If we are freed tonight, I will buy you the largest bottle of whisky they have. No, I will buy you whatever you desire. Jewellery, clothes, books, the moon. Anything. Everything."

His words left a bitter taste in my mouth. Was he trying to bribe me? Tempt me into...doing what exactly?

"What is my role in this?" I tried to keep the bitterness from spilling over, but I wasn't sure if I'd succeeded. "You said she cursed you until you found a woman who wanted you. How do I have to want you? Is this about sex? Are you trying to get me to jump into bed with you? Both of you?"

The brothers exchanged a look. "We don't know," Mac admitted. "Maybe it's enough if you desire us. But-"

"Do you?" Ben interrupted. "Desire us?"

I looked at him, squinting to get rid of some of the blurriness. He was all a woman could ever dream of. An angular, rugged face with a thick beard that I wanted to brush my fingers through. His hair fell down to his broad shoulders, while his arms looked like they could easily lift me. His shirt sat tightly against his muscles. He could have passed for human, albeit a very large one, if his skin hadn't been the colour of granite. The legends had got that right.

Ben's question echoed through my mind. My cheeks were burning with embarrassment, but I forced myself to look him in the eyes. "What if that's not enough?"

"We would never force you," Mac said, stepping into my field of vision. He took the bottle and drained the last remaining traces of whisky. He twisted the bottle in his hands, rubbing the opening. I wouldn't have been surprised by a jinn suddenly erupting from it. By now, my mind was open to all possibilities, no matter how outlandish.

"This is how I felt," he muttered, gaze still on the bottle. "Empty. Drained. Until I saw you." He looked up, grey eyes finding mine. "We don't know you. We have only just met. I don't know when you were born, I don't know what you dream of, what you like to eat, what you do for pleasure, which gods you pray to. But I know that I want you. I desire you, Claire MacDuff. Not because you are the one who could lift our curse. Because I feel a connection. And every part of me is hoping that you feel the same."

He knelt by my side and took one of my hands in his. With a small smile, his brother did the same thing on my other side. One warm, one cold. One cursed to haunt, one cursed to save. Two tormented men with centuries of pain shimmering in their beautiful eyes.

I didn't know what to say.

Outside, the sun was rising. Once it reached its zenith, it was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. From now on, the days would get longer again. Unnoticeable at first, but in a month or two, it would feel like winter was finally waning. I always loved that time, when the first snowdrops blossomed and life seemed full of possibilities. Six months of a little bit more light every day. Until the summer solstice turned the tables. I imagined myself half a year from now, looking back at this very

moment. Would I regret it if I left? Would I regret it if I tried to save them?

For a moment, I closed my eyes, listening to my future self. And then I made my decision.

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" I want you. Both of you."

The words echoed through the cave before they were swallowed by the darkness that the fire did not reach.

I barely recognised myself. I wasn't someone who usually hooked up with strangers. But this moment felt important . I didn't have a choice. And besides... I hadn't lied. I wanted them. Desired them. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I'd been horny ever since I'd realised I was only in my underwear.

"Are you sure?" Ben asked slowly, as if he couldn't quite believe this was really happening. I imagined that after waiting five hundred years for this moment, they had probably given up all hope. Now this had to work. If it didn't... well, we'd cross that bridge once we got to it. I was a trained mountain rescue volunteer. I was good at crossing crevasses.

I smiled at him. "I've never been more sure of anything. Do we have to wait until the sun is at its highest, or do we start now?"

Mac cupped my face and made me turn towards him. "We start now."

His lips crushed into mine, taking my breath away. He tasted of whisky and something older, deeper. I opened myself to his kiss, letting his tongue slip past my lips, while Ben pushed the blanket off my shoulders, exposing me to the cool air in the cavern. His hands settled on my shoulders, then slid down, exploring my body, caressing every inch of my skin. I could barely concentrate on what he was doing; there were too many sensations. His brother kissing me like he was drowning. Ben's

lips on the nape of my neck. Mac's hands on my waist, pulling me closer. Everything became a maelstrom of kisses, touches, moans.

I barely knew what was happening. One moment I was sitting on the cave floor, the next I was standing, sandwiched between the two men, no, Guardians, their hard bodies pressed against me, one hot, one cold. I was swirled around, then Ben was kissing me like there was no tomorrow. And maybe there wasn't. I didn't care any more. All I wanted was them.

Mac slid my panties down. With other men, in the past, I'd been self-conscious, embarrassed even when we got naked for the first time. But not with these two. It felt right. I clawed at Ben's shirt, needing to feel his bare skin against mine. He helped me, ripping off his shirt while his lips never left mine. I was breathless, hot, my head spinning, my core throbbing with need.

His erection was hard against my belly. I fumbled with the button of his old-fashioned trousers, failed, but he helped, freeing himself. His cock was huge in my hands and for a moment, I worried that I may not be able to take these oversized men.

I heard clothes rustling behind me. I hoped that meant Mac was undressing. His hands found my buttocks, massaging my cheeks, before pushing one finger into my wetness. I moaned against Ben's kiss and he took that as a sign to reach between us. He found my clit, rubbed it in slow, drawn-out circles that only made me moan even more.

"You are so beautiful," Mac whispered hoarsely. "Are you ready?"

I could only nod in response. Ben swiped his tongue against my bottom lip as if to say goodbye, then spun me around so I was facing his brother. I felt his erection against my back, as hard as the mountain. I was dripping wet, ready to take them. Would they both want to claim me at the same time? I'd never done that before, had never been with two men at once.

Mac lined up at my entrance and pushed. He pushed deep inside me, filling me up until I thought I'd burst with pleasure. I gasped, then relaxed into his slow, steady thrusts. His hands settled on my hips and he used them to guide me against him, rocking against each other in perfect harmony. Ben stepped closer and his hands joined Mac's on my hips, pushing us even closer together.

It was perfect. I couldn't think, couldn't do anything but feel. I closed my eyes and gave in to the sensations they were arousing in me.

"Open your eyes, Claire," Mac said. His voice sounded like the depths of the mountain itself. "I want you to see it, feel it. I want you to remember this." His rhythm was steady, his thrusts deep. Ben's hands were pulling me back against him, using my body to rub against his own erection.

I hadn't thought it was possible, but my need was growing, like a fierce fire that would consume me in flames.

I couldn't take it any longer. "I... I can't," I moaned. "I need you both. Please, please!"

Ben's hands on my hips went still and Mac stopped thrusting into me, which made me cry out in frustration.

"Anything you want," Ben whispered. He dipped his hand between us, drenching his fingers in my wetness before gently pressing one finger against my puckered hole. Fuck. They really were going to take me at the same time.

Ben moved his finger in slow, gentle circles, while Mac started to thrust into me again. I felt my orgasm approaching. It was going to be bigger than anything I'd ever experienced. And before I knew it, the climax hit me. I screamed as the waves of pleasure rippled through me. Mac let out a deep groan and Ben moved his finger a little more insistently, a little deeper, driving me into another orgasm that was even more powerful than the first, so powerful I couldn't even scream, only moan and buck

my hips against them. They were holding me up, my legs too weak to stand on.

I had only just met two men for the first time, but my body recognised them. We were meant for each other. My body was on fire, burning with pleasure. My nerve endings were alight. I was going to come again. I wanted to come. I needed to come. My toes were curling with the need to release. I moaned again and Ben pulled out his finger, only to replace it with his cock. I was tight around him, but he took his time, slowly pushing in, until he was fully embedded within me. He started with a few slow thrusts, while Mac stayed still, his cock filling my other cave.

Ben growled and nipped my ear. His thrusts became more urgent.

I could feel the pressure building, could feel them swelling inside me, growing bigger and bigger. I didn't know how much more I could stand. How much longer I could hold on. Then Mac started to move in sync with Ben, both of them thrusting into me, and everything exploded into bliss.

They came at the same time. Heat spread through me, their warmth melting into my own, until I didn't know where I ended and they began. For a second, the world seemed to hold its breath. Mac flickered before my eyes, turning invisible for the blink of an eye. Then he appeared again, solid and real, and I knew deep inside that it had worked. The curse was broken. It had to be.

"Did it work?" I whispered hoarsely, praying that I wasn't mistaken.

"Yes," they said as one.

"I can feel it," Ben said from behind me, leaning his head on my shoulder. "Until now, every time I thought of leaving the mountain, there was this pressure in my head, almost painful. Now, I imagine walking down into the valley and all I feel is joy because I know that you will be waiting there for us."

And he was right. This was only the beginning.

We emerged from the cave blinking into the sunlight. In an hour or so, the sun would disappear behind the horizon, heralding the longest night of the year. In the distance, I could hear a helicopter. Were they searching for me? I hated that I'd caused my teammates both worry and extra work. They'd likely spent all night and day on the mountain, taking turns in calling out my name, wondering where I'd disappeared to. If the snowfall had stopped shortly after my fall, they may have been able to see my tracks. But no, a flurry of tiny flakes still continued to fall from the skies. The snow on the ground was so thick that it looked like it must have snowed almost continuously.

Mac dropped my backpack next to me. "I lied earlier. I found your radio where you'd fallen. I just didn't want you to use it when you woke up." He handed me the device with a chagrined smile.

I wanted to be angry at him, but I couldn't. I understood why he'd kept it from me.

"I don't suppose you also found my glasses?"

"No. Sorry. They really were broken."

Oh well. I had some spare specs at home.

"What do I do now?" I asked. "If I contact them, they'll want to know where I was, what happened. And if you two are with me, they'll have a whole lot of questions for you. Questions I don't think you'll want to answer."

"We will make our own way down the mountain," Ben said. "If you want, we can come to your house. If not... we shall return to the Winter Realm and report to Queen Beira. We will have to do that either way, but I'm sure she'll understand if we don't come straight away. She's waited centuries for us. She can wait a little longer. And

maybe... she has given permission for humans to visit the Realm before. We could show you our home."

"Are you saying I could meet a unicorn?"

Mac laughed. "Typical. More interested in unicorns than in us."

I shrugged. "Can't blame a girl for wanting to see a legend come true." I lifted the radio to my lips. "I'll see you at my home. If you're there before me, light the fireplace."

"Your wish is our command," Ben said with a mock bow. "I still can't believe we're about to leave this mountain. Finally."

They both pressed a hot kiss on my cheeks, then slowly walked away. I took a deep breath, then pressed the button.

"Claire MacDuff to MRT HQ, come in."

While I waited for Rescue 951, the coastguard helicopter from Inverness, to come and get me, I thought about what I'd tell the others. Sorry, I was kidnapped by two mountain men who turned out to be immortals from a mythical realm and I freed them from a curse by sleeping with them. That wouldn't work. They'd take me to hospital straight away to check I hadn't damaged my brain. I didn't have the time for that. I had two Guardians waiting for me in my living room. In front of the fireplace. Naked, hopefully. Even though the curse was broken now, I desired them. Or maybe because of it. I couldn't wait to be in their arms again. We'd get to know each other one day at a time.

I blinked at the waning sun and smiled. Life was about to get a whole lot more exciting.

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