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By Meg Smitherman

The Frost Queen's Blade

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The Frost Queen's Blade

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Seven Years Ago

News of her mother's death came without ceremony in the form of a hastily scribbled note. The pageboy hadn't wanted to say the words aloud, presumably, afraid of embarrassment or hurting Elma, whose mother was gone.

She held the letter in her hands long after the page handed it to her. Long after she read it. She sat in her favorite garden, the one with fruit trees and large firm plants shaped like artichokes, plants that thrived under a year-round sun. The stone bench beneath her was cool in the shade, her outstretched feet warming in a ray of sunlight.

You are summoned home, read the note. Your mother is dead. The king requires his heir.

You are summoned home.

Of course, Elma's father did not write a letter of his own. No, Elma thought – the moment his wife's last breath had passed her lips, the king would have ordered a messenger to send for his only daughter. Heir to the throne of Rothen. And thus, a messenger had arrived that morning with word of the queen's passing, and upon hearing it, Elma's pageboy scribbled a note and brought it to the garden.

So here Elma sat, finally crumpling the note in her fist.

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This moment had always been inevitable. Elma knew her life in Mekya was temporary, knew that the caress of hot dry air on her skin, golden sun against her eyes when she closed them, scratchy grass tickling the soles of her bare feet – it was all temporary. She was only in Mekya for safekeeping, to stay out of her father's way, to give him peace and quiet. To be someone else's problem.

Until she wasn't.

Elma had not thought that her mother would die before Elma came of age. She was only fourteen now. She had imagined returning home to her mother and father together, on the first day of her eighteenth year, as was tradition. Not with warm embraces, but with a distant formality, cold enough to fit the city of her birth.

'Your Highness?' The pageboy waited, uneasy, near the edge of the garden.

Elma shoved the note into her bodice – her dress was light and gauzy and not substantial enough for pockets.

'Don't call me that,' she said under her breath, not loud enough for the page to hear. She was next in line to the throne whether she liked it or not.

'I didn't quite catch that, Your Highness,' the pageboy said, his forehead shining with sweat. He clearly wanted to go back inside, where cool stone kept the heat from permeating. Out here, there was no escape from summer's scalding touch.

Elma loved the heat. Her naturally pale skin had long since browned in the sun, her thick black hair cut short to her chin to keep her neck cool. She was born of the north, but she had bloomed in Mekya, so Mekyan she would always be in her heart.

'I said thank you,' she lied, standing. 'Would you be so kind as to send a tea service to my rooms?'

'Very good, Your Highness.' The pageboy strode inside, his shoulders back, always with an air of confidence and efficiency that Elma wished she might emulate one day.

But she was only fourteen. She hadn't yet learned confidence. She felt as if she had only just begun to know the kingdom of Mekya and its walled city of Lothyn. But she hadn't learned who she was and still hated to be called *princess*.

Clenching her jaw, Elma slipped on her sandals. The leather was sun-warmed, and she sucked in a breath at the sudden heat. But instead of kicking them off again, like she wanted to, she marched out of the garden, away from the sun and a dry breeze in the leaves.

In a moment, she was inside, cloaked by shadows and cool air. There was no door to step through, only an arch of white stone that led into a brightly tiled vestibule. This was Orchard House, the only home she had ever known. Here, she had been raised by her mother's cousins. Three sisters, each loving and motherly in her own way.

Elma passed through the vestibule into a corridor lined with tall arched windows, open to the world beyond. It was never cold enough in Lothyn to require glass panes or outer doors – everything opened itself to the giving sky.

When Elma came at last to a carved wood door decorated with a wreath of yellow flowers, she flung it open and went inside, self-indulgently slamming the door in her wake. She heard a muffled thump as the wreath hit the floor outside. She didn't care. This was her room, *her* sanctuary.

Tears pricked her eyes, and she bit her lips, willing

them to go away. She plucked the pageboy's note from her bodice. The ink was smeared now, her sweat dampening the paper.

She read it again, vision blurred.

Your Highness –

Your mother is dead. The king requires his heir. You are summoned home.

Elma was happy in Lothyn. She was safe. Her mother, she was certain, had died of some natural cause. If she had been murdered, the king would have left Elma in Mekya, far from danger. Instead, he wanted her close. He would say that he wanted her in Frost, the capital city, where he could ensure that she understood her birthright. But Elma was certain, though he would never admit it, King Rafe did not want to be alone.

Elma bit back a sob as reality sunk in.

She did not remember her parents. The last time she'd seen them, she had been an infant. There were no memories, no blurred recollection of a pair of faces, of voices, of hands holding hers. She had been too young, sent away at the first possible moment, as was tradition. Babies did not fare well in Rothen. And so, everything Elma knew of her parents had been told to her or learned in rare letters from the northern kingdom. All she knew was Orchard House. And now, she was to be ripped from it, forced into a world of long nights and frigid snows and thick, dark windows.

Tears streamed down her face.

You are summoned home.

There would be no denying the king, her father. She

had never met him, not truly, but she knew what he would expect of her. She knew her basic duty as heir to the throne of a kingdom – to do her father's bidding.

She made a strangled sound of frustration, gritting her teeth.

Couldn't her mother have been more careful, for Elma's sake? The thought washed bitterly down her throat. No. Whatever had stopped the beating of her mother's heart, whatever ailment had taken her soul prematurely, was the work of fate. Nothing could have prevented it; Elma knew that much. She had spent enough time lighting candles under the moon, hands clasped with her three stand-in mothers, speaking to the world's heart.

She knew things like this never happened by chance.

A knock sounded at the door, the soft rap of a knuckle.

'Come in,' said Elma, pressing her eyes with the heel of a palm.

The door opened slowly, revealing first a tray of tea, and then Tammire, one of her mother's cousins. She caught Elma's gaze as she entered, closing the door behind her. There was love and warmth in her eyes, and a steady knowing – she had heard of the death of the queen.

'I'm sorry,' said Tammire, not waiting for any formalities to pass between them before she set down the tea tray, gathering Elma into her arms.

Finally, Elma gave way to grief. She wept loss into the embrace of one of the only mothers she had ever known. Racking sobs escaped her mouth, a stream of hot tears falling from her eyes until her nose was clogged and her breath came ragged.

She wept for the loss of Mekya, the garden kingdom,

the place she would love with every piece of herself until her dying breath. The loss of Tammire, Dae, and Sharra – the women who had shaped her, nurtured her from infancy. The loss of Lothyn, its narrow streets, crowded shopfronts, expansive ponds and gardens, the libraries, the musicians, the flocks of green parrots that cackled in droves atop swaying palms.

But mostly, she wept for the impending loss of a youth that had been so fleeting, fragile in the knowledge that it would be taken away.

‘Cry, cry, let it out,’ said Tammire, and Elma heard in the woman’s voice that she, too, wept. ‘There is no shame in grief.’

‘I don’t want to go,’ Elma said, desperate, over and over into her mother’s shoulder. ‘I don’t want to go.’

‘I know,’ said Tammire.

And even those two words, soft and helpless as they were, calmed Elma until her sobs lessened, until her breathing slowed. Had Tammire told her to stop crying, she would have wailed even louder. If Tammire had tried to assure her that things would be all right, Elma would have shoved her away, disbelieving. But Tammire, Dae, and Sharra had only ever shown love. Understanding. Compassion.

Dread caught at Elma’s throat. Would there be compassion in Frost? Would there be love, understanding, even acceptance? Or would her life become hard-edged, carved from ice like the glaciers that moved unendingly across Rothen like frozen seas?

‘Come,’ said Tammire, holding Elma at arm’s length so they could see one another clearly. ‘Have some tea. I’ll send for the others, and we’ll say our goodbyes.’

Elma said nothing, afraid to speak, should she start crying again.

‘It won’t be forever, love.’

The next day, Elma set off for Rothen. She had three bags full of belongings, all piled neatly on top of the carriage that would bear her across one kingdom and into another. Her gauzy dresses would stay behind, just like her sandals. They wouldn’t be needed in Rothen. Instead, she wore plain trousers, a tunic, and a long woolen cloak to keep her warm at night.

The journey would take weeks. A small contingent of guards was hired to protect her, in addition to a personal maid and various other members of the traveling party whom Elma couldn’t identify and had never met.

Tammire, Dae, and Sharra hugged her all as one before she left, their bodies nearly smothering her with unadulterated love. They were much like Elma, physically. Tall, graceful, their faces lined with decades of laughter and expression. They wore their hair long, thick, and gray. Tammire’s hair was plaited, a thick braid down her back. Dae and Sharra wore theirs loose about their shoulders.

Elma breathed them in desperately. They smelled of cloves and orange honey, their soft embraces a lifelong comfort. She had felt so safe, so loved and protected in her fourteen years at Orchard House.

‘I love you,’ she said, muffled by the embrace, through the tears that streamed down her cheeks. ‘I love you, I love you.’

‘We love you, Elma,’ they said, kissing her on the forehead, taking her hands, speaking soft prayers in the pale morning. ‘We’ll light a candle for you and keep it lit until we know you’re home. Safe.’

Elma climbed into the carriage at last, biting back the wails of sorrow she wanted to unleash. *Home*. Home was here, in Orchard House. But she was a princess. She was on her way to fulfill her role as the heir of a kingdom. She must compose herself.

Her mothers blew kisses as the carriage rolled away, bumping over uneven cobbles. Elma watched until the three figures disappeared around a bend in the road, the last she would see of them.

'It won't be forever, love.'

The memory of Tammire's words cut her like a dull knife. Because Elma knew, deep down, that they were untrue. She had always known that the moment she left Mekya, she would never return.

Present Day

Boredom was too kind a word for what Elma felt. *Resigned disgust* would be a more accurate descriptor. Only her father's presence beside her, his large-knuckled hand propped against a vacant face, kept her dutifully seated. Otherwise, she would have excused herself hours ago.

They were in the Frost arena, presiding over the Death Games. It was the king's privilege, and his daughter's as well, to watch over whatever revelries occurred from day to day. King Rafe Volta always chose to indulge in the Death Games. It was his particular favorite pastime, the brutal battles that were carried out in dramatic fashion in the snow-swept arena far below.

Elma only ever saw her father truly eager when there was a smell of blood in the air.

Had it not been Elma's twenty-first birthday party, with nearly all of the Frost court in attendance, she might not have felt so miserable. If this were a typical Death Games, she would have amused herself by wandering into the underbelly of the arena to joke with the arena men, and maybe even catch a glimpse of one of the champions on his way to dismember someone.

But it was her birthday, and abandoning the celebration would be rude.

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'No storm today,' her father had said that morning over breakfast, stray beads of hot wine clinging to his graying mustache. 'Your twenty-first year will be plentiful and easy.'

'Yes,' Elma had said, her thoughts elsewhere as they always were. And anyway, *no storm* meant very little in Rothen. Snow still fell, relentless and white. Though today there were no harsh winds to batter it against the fighters in the arena, or against the Frost Citadel where it perched above the city, a gargoyle of black stone and sharp steeples against a jagged mountain peak – the seat of the King of Rothen.

From her covered seat in the stands, Elma watched as a man eviscerated his opponent, a slop of gore falling out onto the dirty snow below.

Her father slammed his fist on the arm of his chair, leaning forward, teeth bared. He rarely took sides at the Games – he only cared to see brutality. It was the Volta way. The Death Games had never enticed her the way they were supposed to. They were repetitive and dull; the same champions always won in the same brutal ways. Elma leaned back in her chair, trying not to glower.

'Don't be so grim,' said King Rafe, leaning close so no one but his daughter could hear above the din of the arena crowd, the excessive indulgence here in their sheltered box seats. 'They will suspect you don't like your gifts.'

Elma glanced at the pile of trinkets next to her chair, gold and jewels, gifts of wealth that she didn't want or need. 'I don't,' she said. Her father was no stranger to Elma's insouciance, which tended to border on sullenness.

The king's frown deepened: a warning. But Elma's verbal punishment was cut short as a well-dressed young man approached their seats. He was smiling far too brightly, an

expression that was as obviously forced as his deep bow and stiffly styled hair. Elma recognized him as one of her cousins, a lordling by the name of Jarian, or . . . Jedner.

'Lord Jarlen,' said the king.

Jarlen, thought Elma. *Close.*

'Your Majesty,' said Jarlen, straightening from his bow. The grin remained plastered to his white face.

He wasn't a fighter then, but one of the sheltered noblemen who preferred to stay indoors and attend parties in favor of protecting the realm from whatever horrors came out of the snowstorms. Elma's uncle had taught her, upon returning to Rothen, how to recognize a warrior. He would be sun-tanned from being outside all day, where the sun reflected a million ways off the snow. And he would hold himself in a way that spoke of ease, comfort, a man whose body and mind worked in concert.

Lord Jarlen's body could not have been more awkward, as much as he tried to appear relaxed. He swept his fur-lined cape aside in a dramatic gesture and managed to catch it on his sword pommel. Flustered, he fiddled with it for a moment, tassels swaying from his hat.

'What is it you want?' the king asked, his tone unchanging.

Elma glanced at her father. He was not a kind man, but she had become almost fond of him in the past seven years. And she was grateful that he allowed her to sit in silence in these moments, saving her from the pain of interacting with distant third cousins who couldn't even bow without causing a tangle of themselves.

'I've come to wish Her Highness Princess Elma well on this, her twenty-first birthday.' He swept another bow, this time managing to avoid tangling his cape in his sword.

'She extends her deepest thanks,' said King Rafe.

Normally, courtiers like Jarlen would smile politely, turn, and depart. But Jarlen only stood there, smiling. His gaze found Elma's, and she had to fight not to wrinkle her nose at him. 'Your Highness, I thought . . .' said Jarlen, his words tumbling over themselves as if he were reciting a rehearsed line, 'I thought I might perhaps offer you a gift on this most, ah, auspicious of birthdays.' He lifted one arm and extended it outward and behind him.

This gesture piqued the interests of the courtiers who had been milling about in the stands nearby, watching the exchange with sideways glances, their hot wines sloshing. Small gasps broke out as those gathered saw what was making its way through the crowd toward the dais.

A well-clad pageboy — clearly Jarlen's — holding a delicate gold chain in one hand. Behind the pageboy, their wrists bound and attached to the chain, were a pair of scantily dressed men.

They wore flimsy gold cloths across their hips, and jewels adorned their fingers and hair. Heavy fur cloaks fell over their shoulders, shielding them from the worst of the weather. Their bare chests were utterly hairless. They were fair-skinned and lovely and close to Elma's age. Her gaze alighted on the delicate bindings about their wrists and the chain. She didn't look away.

'For you, Princess Elma,' said Jarlen, bowing again.

Elma said nothing.

'They are bed slaves,' said the king, looking at her side-long. 'No small gift.'

'And well trained,' said Jarlen. He snapped his fingers, and at once, the two beautiful men drew toward one

another, embracing, exploring one another as if the entire court of Frost weren't watching.

It was obvious from the gasps and titters that those present did not object to this display.

Elma swallowed, her mouth suddenly far too dry. This felt somehow obscene, even compared to the Death Games' letting of blood for enjoyment.

'From Slödava?' The king's voice rang out over the arena's noise.

The snow had begun to fall thicker now, giving their covered section of the stands an almost cave-like feeling.

'Where else?' said Jarlen, his confidence seemingly growing. 'They're beautiful, are they not? Pure white hair and made for pleasure. We only feed them once a day; they're far too weak to fight. The princess would be utterly safe.'

Slödava. Elma had seen the elusive northern men before, captured spies and assassins from that remote enemy enclave. Slödava was a city-state swathed in shadow and ice, a place that Elma might not have believed existed at all were it not for the prisoners she'd seen.

I don't want them, Elma wanted to say, unable to look at the bed slaves. *Get them away from me.* But she rarely spoke in front of the court. The less she interacted with the people of Frost, the less she believed she might one day rule them.

'Would Her Highness like further demonstration?' Jarlen asked, snapping his fingers again.

At that, the slaves began to kiss, slow and deep. Elma watched, horrified, as their hips rocked together, as their breaths grew shallow. Public displays of intimacy, even orgies, were not uncommon in the Court of Frost. Elma had attended but only observed, yet she had never seen

two people *forced* to touch one another. Forced to become aroused.

‘That will be enough,’ said the king.

Jarlen snapped his fingers, and the slaves drew apart. Elma turned her eyes away from their obvious shared arousal, though she knew she was one of the few who did. His demonstration finished, the lordling continued to watch Elma with an uneasy eagerness.

‘Your Highness,’ he said, almost vibrating like an excited child, ‘does my gift please you?’

Elma sighed. So, *this* was the point of all that flaunting, all that bowing, and the ridiculously showy gift. Lord Jarlen had not taken his eyes off her, and she ought to have recognized his intent immediately. Men of Rothen had been courting her since her arrival at the citadel, and Elma had refused each of them out of hand. Jarlen would be no exception.

A flaming brazier near them, an enormous thing that could have housed a whole family, roared hotly. Elma felt its heat too keenly.

The king shifted, lowering his meaty hand from his chin.

Everyone was waiting for her to respond. To say something. Just one word would do.

Countless glazed eyes gazed at her from the stands nearby, drunk on bloodshed and wine, all in celebration of their princess. Elma Volta, a woman who wanted nothing to do with them. Who might have given anything to be rid of them, of this life.

‘No,’ said Elma. Her voice, rough from an evening of disuse, was hoarse. ‘Your gift does not please me.’

Jarlen’s grin crumpled. Amidst the low hubbub, the gasps and muttering that fanned out through the seated

courtiers, Jarlen gestured at his pageboy to take the slaves away. Elma heard his hissed commands, though she couldn’t parse the words.

King Rafe frowned but said nothing. Perhaps, Elma thought, he was recalling the time he had forced a fiancé upon her, only for the man to be poisoned in his sleep within a fortnight.

This place is a grave. Fed up and miserable, as she was on each of her birthdays, Elma stood to go.

The attending courtiers rustled in response, a whisper of fabric as they stood and bowed low, as hats were removed from heads, as skirts spread out around bent knees.

‘Thank you for coming,’ Elma said, trying to speak above the sound of battle and death below. She considered saying something about a headache, or asking her father for permission to leave, but it would make no difference. He would be in a rage the next morning, and she’d face the consequences of her insolence one way or another.

Elma paused, bending to pick up one of her gifts, a gold and tourmaline necklace, before sweeping out of the box, head held high.

Cora, Elma’s maid, met her in the arena’s inner corridor.

‘Leaving early again?’ Cora said, hurrying to keep up with the princess’s long strides. ‘What happened this time?’

‘Here,’ said Elma, holding out the necklace and deftly sidestepping the question. ‘My father will keep the rest as part of my dowry, or I’d let you have every last cursed trinket.’

Cora took the necklace with a pinched smile, shoving it deep into her bodice. ‘One day he’ll notice you’re stealing your own birthday gifts.’