



Ice Medusa

Antonia Tom

Action/adventure, Supernatural

“Whatever happens, don’t go into the forest”

It always came back to the same sentence, spoken by her Mum. If Ella’s curiosity should ever spike, or a sense of rebellion begin to rise, these words of caution would echo loudly.

A sturdy, grey stone building, with a slate grey roof, Arnside sat in the middle of a small copse of trees (a couple of acres at the most) on the outskirts of the village of Athenice. During winter, the exterior of the building lay covered with a coating of the purest white. In fact, the location was so picturesque, it drew in many travellers to stay in the outbuildings, which Ella’s family had turned into guesthouses. A traditional outdoor oven to bake bread, and wood collected from nearby to fuel the fire completed the picture. A cheerful woodcutter & forager by the name of Persia would bring wood twice a week, which she provided to the family in exchange for freshly baked bread, and the occasional stay in one of the guesthouses.

The accommodation was usually very popular at this time of year, inhabited by those craving a white winter, perhaps not traditional in their country of origin. One thing was guaranteed; it always snowed in winter in Athenice. This year, things had been a little quieter, much to Ella’s Mum’s concern, seeing as the business was their lifeblood. In fact, the lack of occupants was beginning to put the business at risk. Ella was aware of her Mum working day and night to please the few visitors that they had; in the hope that they might return one day and bring friends.

The woodland directly surrounding the buildings was dense in places, yet sparse enough overall to allow in a good deal of light. The landscape was often bathed in that beautiful orange glow of the winter sun, creating

picture-perfect scenery. A road to the left of the woodland, however, led to a much darker place; the place that Ella must never visit. The long straight road tapered to an opening, framed by branches, leaning into each other as if pulled by some imaginary force, driven to keep out the light. A tunnel of total blackness.

In Ella's mind, there existed the eternal struggle between knowing that she must not go there, and at once, the childish curiosity that allows new discoveries to be made. Whilst Ella's mum would never speak of her reasons, Ella's Grandparents had often told stories about the 'Medusa of the Forest': a beautiful young woman, by the name of Melanie, who once lived in the town. She would boast about her beauty, comparing herself to every female who would come by. Melanie would admire her reflection in every glass pane, every hanging icicle and each frozen pond. She spent her days comparing herself to others and making those around her feel inferior. The villagers soon grew weary of Melanie, and her obsession with her own looks. It is said that they called upon a powerful white witch, who cast a spell upon Melanie, banishing her to the deep dark woods for all eternity. Forced to live outdoors, her face was contorted by the cold weather into a horrific sight, her skin changed to a bluish shade by the icy cold weather, and her beautiful shiny hair replaced by a mass of matted icicles. Apparently, anyone who looked directly into the pits of her black, soulless eyes would be immediately turned to ice: frozen forever mid-action, never to be returned to their normal life, such was the power of Melanie's bitterness. The villagers called her Ice Medusa, and all were wary to cross her path. Ella would shudder at the thought of this hideous woman; sometimes she saw her face vividly in her darkest nightmares, and would wake, hot and scared, calling for her mum, who would always come to comfort her.

Ella wanted more than anything to spend some time with her mum during the daytime. Ella was a lonely little girl, especially since her older brother Michael had left home suddenly some time ago, after a family argument. Ella missed him terribly. Thinking of how her life had changed for the worse, and wishing somehow it could be different, that the family could be happy again, Ella stomped across the front yard, her red boots crunching holes in the depths of snow beneath. She picked up a chunk of fresh snow, moulding it expertly in her palms, and aimed it at the empty bird table, smashing the ball to powdery pieces.

'Good shot!'

Ella turned around with a start. Directly behind her stood a girl, just like her; maybe a little older. Like Ella, she had dark brown eyes, black hair rosy red cheeks and a welcoming smile. She was also dressed for the cold weather, with her stripy bobble hat and gloves firmly in place. There was an instant connection to this stranger.

‘Thank you; my name is Ella- what’s yours?’

‘I’m Skye’

‘Where are you from?’

Skye quietly gestured toward one of the guesthouses

Strange thought Ella. I didn’t see her arrive. Ella usually noticed every arriving guest; she had become accustomed to weighing up the prospects of a new playmate. Nonetheless, Ella didn’t let this detail bother her mind. After all, there was a potential friend now by her side, which was exactly what Ella needed.

Skye changed the subject, as she turned toward the road leading to the dark forest ‘What’s over there?’

A sudden gust of wind caused a raft of icy snowflakes to tinker across the rooftops, sweeping down toward the two girls, and becoming stuck in their dark strands of hair, like glitter.

Ella shivered. She explained to Skye that her mother had instructed her never to visit that place.

‘It’s fine! It’s just a forest, we drove by it on our way here. Why don’t we pop over and take a quick look. It won’t take long- she will barely notice you gone’

Well that certainly rang true with Ella. Her Mum seemed to barely notice her at all most days, so busy was she with running the business, looking after guests, making sure the staff were all doing what they should be. Ella’s heart raced with possibility. So many days and nights she had wondered about the dark woods, contemplating what lay over the threshold.

‘OK. I will go. But we must be quick. I don’t want Mum to ever know’

The two girls plodded, arm in arm, through the dense snow, until they reached the road. It was apparent that no vehicle had passed by here for days. Last night’s snowfall was too heavy. Most routes were at a standstill. The girls were happily able to inhabit the road space, taking advantage of the snow-covered recesses, indents

made by car tyres in previous days. A picture postcard view, the two young travellers, side by side, their breath exhaled in swirls, heading toward the forbidden forest.

As they grew closer to the entrance, Ella thought that perhaps it didn't seem so dark as she had imagined. Although the trees looked different somehow; more worn? More gnarled? The barks were certainly lifeless in comparison to the trees around Arnside.

They held hands, stepping into the unknown. The dappled light fell upon them through the twisted, tangled branches. Ella reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a small mirror. 'Oh I forgot that was there, I was using it to try and melt ice with the sun'. Ella's Grandmother had given her the mirror for Christmas one year. An antique object, two circles of mirrored glass, framed by a hinged case, with a beautiful black rose, engraved into the front. The clasp was in the shape of two hands, whose fingers would interlock when the casing was closed.

She reached further in to her deep coat pocket and underneath a clump of tissues, there was her torch. It was something that her brother Michael had left with her; he used to shine it under his chin in the dark and make funny faces. When Ella was little, this used to thrill and scare her in equal measure. Ella momentarily paused. Thoughts of Michael always made her sad. Since he left, nobody spoke of him. Mum would sob quietly to herself for hours. Things at Arnside changed the day that Michael left. Mum threw herself into the business and had little time for anything else. This torch was all that Ella had of her brother, and she treasured it. Ella wished more than anything that Michael would return, and that the family would be reunited one day. She turned on the little torch and shone it ahead. It helped the girls to avoid the thicker patches of ice on the ground. For in this forest, there was far more ice than snow.

There was a huge rustling behind. Ella and Skye held each other tightly, hearts beating fast.

'What are you doing here?!' boomed the voice. A voice that Ella instantly recognised to be that of Persia.

'Um oh we got lost'

'Go back to Arnside, there is nothing for you here. I am just gathering a few pieces of wood and I am heading back over there'

'Can we go with you?'

‘Do not go further into the forest. Wait right here for me and I will come back and find you’

The two girls stood perfectly still, as Persia passed by them. When she had reached the point where she could no longer be seen, Skye suggested that they should proceed, much to Ella’s reluctance

‘But Persia said we should wait here. I don’t think it’s safe to go on’

‘If it’s not safe, how come she goes in alone? She just doesn’t want us to get lost. We will be fine’

Ella felt very uneasy. Her tummy was starting to hurt, and her ears were burning cold, even beneath the layers of her hat and scarf.

‘Look’ said Skye, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a small bracelet, with tiny rose gold squares that linked together. ‘I will give you my bracelet. It has always kept me safe. If we become separated, or anything happens, hold the bracelet and think of me. Now we are friends, even when I am not by your side, we will be forever close together’

Ella reached out gratefully for the gift. She could sense the kindness and warmth in the gesture. She felt as though she trusted this older girl to keep her safe, to guide her through this dark and hostile place.

‘Ok, but If we go, we must be quick. I am not going very far’

‘Well let’s just head over to where she went’

With that, the girls followed a straight path ahead, often using the solid bark of a tree to avoid slipping on the compacted ice. The forest felt strange. Not at all like the woods around the house. There seemed to be no animals here. No little tapping of the birds, no furrowing of a squirrel, no scurrying of a mouse. It was just an eerie, still silence. Ahead, the girls could see the glow of a clearing. Perhaps someone lived up there. Again, the silence was deafening. All that could be heard was the crunch and slide of the two girls’ feet along the forest floor. They stepped cautiously toward the clearing and took a deep breath. Framed by gnarly black trees, it felt like they were stepping into the set of a scary movie. Yet nothing could have prepared them for the sight that greeted their young eyes.

Bathed in blue and purple light, arranged in concentric circles, there were people and all kinds of animals. This was strange enough, yet every single one was frozen. Captured like a snapshot in time, rigid in the last activity

that they had undertaken. All with the same horrified expression on their face. The little boy with his hands up in the air, surrendering for mercy, a coating of ice making his terrified features appear even more alarming. A man who had been chopping wood, his axe aloft, ready to make the final chop, as he must have been distracted and gazed ahead, only to be captured this way for all eternity. The piece of wood still at his feet, incorporated in the giant ice cocoon. A squirrel, mid-jump, it's limbs outstretched, it's eyes bulging with fear. A family dog, body curled up almost as if asleep, eyes staring helplessly ahead. The grandmother, holding a tray of cookies, suspended in time. A wedding couple, side-by-side, immobilized by their arctic prison.

Ella and Skye froze with fear. Ella's mind flashed with thoughts of the Medusa. All those stories that her Grandparents had told, suddenly becoming very real. Ella could feel a tear burning on her cheek. She would never see her family again. Ella was not sure whether Skye knew about the legend. Probably now was not the time to tell it. In any case, her words were stuck; she paused, unable to utter a syllable.

Then, from the other side of the clearing, there emerged a figure of a woman. Had she heard the girls? Had she come to find out what the disruption was and finish them off? The woman had the most hideous, contorted frozen features. Her hair a solid mass; snake-like icicles, reaching from her scalp menacingly. She gazed around the circle of frozen bodies, assessing whether anything had moved. The girls were hidden behind the body of a bride groom, and his bride beside. The wedding dress frozen to ice crystals, making her sparkly dress shine even more. Satisfied that nothing had changed, the Medusa woman turned as if to walk away.

Skye reached over to Ella's pocket.

'Don't look at her face. Turn around'

She pulled out the mirror.

The girls both slowly turned around to face the woods behind.

Skye held up the mirror between them. Through a gap underneath the bride's bouquet and between where the couple held their frozen hands, they could tilt the mirror to see what the strange lady was doing. From this angle, it was also possible to study the individuals within the circle a little closer; an entire dancing troupe, frozen in time, stood with legs and arms making eerily concrete patterns; a group of musicians; one holding a flute, a violinist mid string, a triangle held aloft, with tiny icicles hanging from the metal; all manner of birds, large and small, some kinds that Ella recognised, others that looked as though they came from foreign lands.

Then Ella's eyes settled on a familiar sight. She blinked, focusing her dark brown eyes as intensely as she had ever done before; for Ella was looking at the motionless body of her brother Michael, caught wide-eyed in a running-man pose, still wearing the same brown coat, blue cord trousers and green wellies that he was when he left Arnside, which seemed like years ago. Ella sobbed loudly.

Ella's outburst of sorrow had caused the mirror to move. A beam of light from above bounced from the mirror, hitting the lady on the side of her face, and this, along with the sudden noise, caused her to furiously scan the outer edges of the circle.

Skye and Ella held their breath, barely able to contain their terror.

'Who goes there?' came the voice. Deep and throaty, tinged with hatred.

The girls peered into the tiny mirror, watching their fate unfold. Almost in slow motion, the hideous beast locked onto her target, and began travelling in Ella's direction. The light turned from bluish purple to a deep, dark grey. The hideous being appeared to float just above the ice and was approaching quickly. The ice guests were eerily silent, and it looked as though they were about to be joined by a couple of new additions.

'Don't turn around' whispered Skye. Ella was trembling so violently that she almost dropped the mirror. Every muscle in Ella's body felt rigid. This was it, she was sure. She would never see her mother or grandparents again

Just as the old hag was inches away, Ella noticed a shape in the background. Arms aloft, and axe in hand. It was Persia. She had spotted the girls in the clearing.

The Ice Medusa was so close, that her foul breath steamed in a cloud behind the girls' ears. With seconds to spare, there came an almighty swish followed by a thud. Medusa's body carried on moving toward them and fell in a slump upon the girls. Her head rolled away in the opposite direction, landing face down, and skidding across the frozen ground.

Persia lifted the lifeless, frozen body from on top of the girls, throwing it off to the side. The girls embraced each other, Persia stood with a hand on Ella's shoulder. They stayed for a few seconds like this. Breathing heavily in relief, no words would come.

There was a rustling, cracking noise behind. Persia jumped to attention, axe above her head again. But this

time it was not needed. For each frozen being was coming back to life. Their cold shackles melting away. The little boy's face relaxed to a smile and he shook his head as the last of the icicles dropped to the ground. The bride and groom, hands held tightly, looked into each other's eyes and then they kissed. A squirrel leapt past Ella. Little mice scurried around her feet. Birds, somewhat disoriented from their icy sojourn, were busily remembering how to fly. The woodcutter's axe fell to the bark, sticking in there as he raised his hands above his head and cheered. The dancers resumed their wonderful dance, and the musicians, following behind, made the most enchanting music.

Persia led the way out of the clearing, followed by Ella, and then, in turn, the newly freed characters from the forest. Their music and laughter rang out into the night, permeating the wintery air, and bringing life back to the forest. They all made their way back to Arnside. The snow had begun to melt, the pathways were clearing, and the walk back home felt just right.

Ella's Mum, spotting them on the horizon ran up to embrace Ella, tears in her eyes.

'My darling girl, where did you go?'

'Mum, I have someone here for you'

At this moment, Michael stepped forward from within the crowd. His head slightly bowed, his cheeks flushed. He slowly raised his head and looked into his mother's eyes.

'Michael!'

Michael, Ella and their mother embraced, holding each other closer than they ever had before. The family were reunited. Ella's Mum, when she had momentarily recovered from the shock, tears streaming down her face, wanted to know every detail of their adventure.

Breathlessly, Ella recounted the story. She told her mum how she and Skye had ventured to the dark forest and how Persia had come to the rescue. Ella's Mum looked puzzled.

'Skye?'

'Yes she's my friend, from the guesthouse'

Ella turned to her side, but her new companion was gone. The hum and the buzz from the former captives was

overwhelming; music playing loudly, dancers making wonderfully fluid motions, their bodies feeling the full benefit of this newly-found freedom. Ella's heart was beating quickly, she couldn't understand where Skye had gone.

Ella's Mum looked pitifully at Ella 'There is nobody staying in that guesthouse my love. No matter. I am just glad you are back'

Ella tried to talk, but her Mum was too jubilant to listen.

'To all who have been freed from the forest, I invite you to a party at Arnside. We will have the biggest, best party that we have ever thrown. My son, he was lost and now he is found. My daughter is returned home too. Nobody shall be hungry. Persia, please go and light the fires'

Ella's Grandfather set out the wine, and Ella's Grandmother brought the freshly baked bread, and the hunks of meat. The guests all buzzed around, helping to lay out tables, and making sure there were enough seats for everyone. It would be the best party that Arnside had ever seen.

Other villagers, hearing the celebrations, came and joined in the party. Reunited with lost relatives, missing pets, and faces they thought they would never see again, they were all in awe of this miracle.

Ella, rather overwhelmed by the events of the day, sat down on the front porch to gather her thoughts. As she sat, something fell from her pocket into the melting snow, clattering on the exposed paving stones beneath. Slowly, Ella reached down. She picked up the small rose gold bracelet and held it to her heart, smiling warmly.

And with that, the crowds partied late in to the night, happy in the knowledge that the Ice Medusa was dead. There was adequate room in the guesthouses to accommodate these new arrivals. As a result, the reputation of Arnside went from strength to strength, as the village folk would never forget the kindness of the family that night. Ella's Mum was able to employ Persia on a permanent basis at Arnside, offering her one of the smaller guesthouses to live in. Persia was hailed a hero by the village folk, and a statue was erected in the centre of Athenice in her honour.

Ella and her family, now reunited, vowed never to be parted again.

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