



# *Say Goodbye to Winter*

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Magic, Supernatural

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Once upon a time, there lived a young girl — full of spite and endless snark — who absolutely hated every facet of wintertime. This is precisely why she watched the first snowfall of the season with scorn. She looked through the mist fogging her four-paned bedroom window, through the bright orange reflection of the roaring fireplace, through the dried tears on her spectacles, and straight at the children who thrived in the shimmering snow. They were children clad in fleece coats and floppy wool hats and mufflers that hid their content smiles. She wished that spring could arrive sooner.

She watched it all — that silent, sneaky demeanor of winter as it dissolved the green in bright white— and frowned as her mother slowly approached from the kitchen doorway, finally stopping behind her and setting a palm on her shoulder. “Can you help me with the stove, Delphine?” She asked.

Delphine’s face stayed nondescript as she swiveled her neck and looked up at her mother’s expectant eyes. After one last look at the wintertime happiness flourishing outside of the walls of her cottage, she pulled the curtains shut and followed her mother into the kitchen, where boxes of quail eggs were stacked on top of each other in a messy tower and pots of boiled water lined the floors. She shuddered as her feet hit the ceramic tiles, but it wasn’t because she felt cold. A sense of unease at the pit of her stomach seemed to scream — she felt her heart drop in her chest in fear. Her mother stood stationary by the makeshift stove (the kerosene kind had been too expensive, and rather unnecessary anyway) and gestured for Delphine to finish her task.

Delphine leaned over the metal contraption, and focused her gaze at the pile of tinder lying lopsided on top of

it. She let the palms of her hands hover above the ochre twigs and leaves, and her eyes went cloudy as she felt the power surge from that mysterious nucleus of force that lived inside of her lithe body. She felt her limbs erupt in a tremor as the sparks of energy swam underneath her skin, through the arteries and veins in her arms, moving towards her shaky fingertips.

“Are you happy, Mama?” She asked, finally, after she pulled back her hands and stared at the kindling fire that had formed beneath it. “I did it.” She added.

Her mother did not respond, and instead started to gather ingredients from the larder.

Delphine turned her hands over so she could examine her palms, and she saddened as she looked upon their blackened state. When she wiped them on the skirt of her dress, ashes stained the pale pink tulle.

When she realized at last that she was no longer wanted by her mother, she walked back to her bedroom window, her hand trailing behind her on the walls, leaving a sad black line in her wake.

Sometimes she hated herself. She was only a child, but she was not the bubbly and excited kind. She did not care much for china dolls or sweetmeats. She was the kind of grumpy girl that stalked into her bedroom with sloped shoulders and a grimace in plain view.

Her bedroom walls were decorated with black handprints, and today she scanned them for some empty space. When she finally found a patch of untouched beige wallpaper, she pressed her palm against it. She closed her eyes and let the anger flow through her like a raft through rapids. “One, two, three, four . . .”

When she opened her eyes, she turned her head to look back out the window. “One, two, three four, five . . .” She swallowed down a rising sob as she watched the children dancing underneath the shade in the willowy valley, laughing as sheets of snow fell onto them from the leafy trees. “One, two, three, four, five, six . . .”

She stopped at six and her arm reclined. She stared at the remaining handprint on the wall with the kind of heavy sadness that no child should have had to bear. Delphine was stubborn and picky and intolerable at times, but she hated the winter because the winter was her victim. The winter was weak in the face of her fiery tenacity.

The winter never stood a chance.

You see, she would leave marks on the asphalt when she walked, melted puddles of snow like blobby shadows. By the time she would sculpt the perfect snowball, she would have to watch helplessly as the remaining water slipped through the gaps in her fingers.

She took in a breath, shaky and resigned, as she pulled up the window. The winter breeze slipped into the bedroom and suddenly the sound of the children's laughter was no longer muffled and silent. She listened to their song of joy and suddenly froze as a teenage boy looked away from his sloppily-made snowman and towards her. She averted her eyes immediately, but when she looked back at the scene, he still stared, fixated in a trance.

Delphine did the only thing she could think to do. She smiled. And she followed the smile with a slow, awkward wave.

The boy was the most beautiful she'd ever seen: sun-kissed skin, a tousled mop of berry red hair, and green peridot eyes. Those eyes looked as if they were lit up from the inside, she thought. He looked so alive — Delphine was not sure what that meant, exactly, but alive seemed the closest word to suit his appearance.

“Why don't you come outside?” The boy yelled in question, as he neared. “It's the first snow!”

Delphine crossed her arms. She tried to smile with her teeth but she wondered if it looked like she was baring them in a predatory manner. Even if it had come off that way, the boy continued to approach. “My name is Iain. What's yours?”

She watched the clouds of fog accompany his every breath. He stopped in front of her window and peeked into her bedroom, restraining himself as he looked upon her flushed cheeks. Delphine opened her mouth and took a sharp intake of breath.

“Delphine. My name is Delphine.”

“Delphine,” he repeated, smiling. “Why don’t you come outside, Delphine? You must be the last child in the village to not have had snow thrown at you. We should fix that.”

She laughed. “I don’t like the snow.”

“You’ll like it with me. I promise.” He assured, resting his elbows on her windowsill and leaning forwards mockingly. “You should get away from the fire.” He added, directing his gaze at her fireplace.

Delphine wondered if she’d ever, truly, be able to get away from fire. It lived inside of her; it coursed through her bloodstream like a drug. It almost felt as if it was a part of her, like a ticking-time-bomb set in stone that was locked up in her heart.

She was only a child, but most days she felt like she was destruction caged in a human shell.

“I like it better by the hearth.” Delphine retorted, looking back at the flames.

Iain frowned. “All alone?”

She sighed, and looked at him with annoyed eyes. “No one wants to be alone, but —”

“Come on, then. Grab your jacket, won’t you?”

Another sigh sounded from Delphine. “Who are you?” She asked.

“Iain.”

“I’ve never seen you around before, Iain.”

“And I’ve never seen you, either. Are you always locked up inside of that room?”

“No. I just don’t like the snow.” She repeated.

“Well, there’s a month of snow ahead of us, so you should get used to it. Get your winter coat.” He said. “I’d like to make friends with you.”

Delphine felt her heart dropping in her chest again, her fear rekindling like the flames in her fireplace. She

looked into Iain's eyes, his magical, other-worldly eyes, and nodded. She pulled down the window and latched it shut, laughing as he recoiled in surprise. She walked into the living room and stared at the boots and gloves that stood still on the shelf by the door. Her father, a budding scientist, had made them especially for her. They were insulating, so they kept the heat from her hands and feet bottled up.

She sat down and pulled the bulky black boots on, and after she buckled them tight, she slipped on the matching set of gloves. She ran quickly to her mother's room and stared at her odd reflection in the vanity mirror. She wore a sleeveless pink dress, delicate and lacy with a protruding skirt, matched with the ugly, cumbersome boots that looked fit for a thirty-year-old man. It'll do, she thought, and she sprinted out the door and straight into the unwelcoming arms of winter.

"Where's your jacket?" Iain asked in concern as he jogged up to her.

Delphine smiled sheepishly. "I don't need a jacket."

Iain's face twisted in confusion, and he began to take off his own coat when Delphine stopped him with a halting hand. "I don't need a jacket. It's okay."

He slid his arm into the sleeve again, and looked at her with a newfound curiosity. He raised his eyebrows and waited for an explanation.

Delphine only shrugged. "You wouldn't understand. What do you want to do?"

"What could we do that wouldn't kill you in this weather? Get something warm to wear, Delphine."

She grabbed Iain's wrist and pulled his palm towards her arm. He blushed as she set his hand on her skin, but that embarrassment quickly morphed into surprise. Then the surprise shifted into a soft smile.

"You're magic." He whispered, like it was a secret that would get them in trouble.

"Not the good kind." Delphine murmured. "These boots are hard to walk in. Tell me: what do you want to do?"

She had waited for him to say something relevant, or to make an inappropriate joke, or to ask her something insanely foolish about her magic. But instead, he bunched up the hair that framed the sides of his face with his fists and pulled it all back. Delphine stared at the uncovered sharp points of his ears, facing heavenward,

golden and pinked at the edges. Her eyes met with his once more. Other-worldly.

“You’re an elf.” She said, breathily. “Can you do magic, too?”

“Kind of.” Iain reached his arm out to hold her hand but frowned as his eyes came upon her gloves. “You should be proud of your magic.” He said.

She thought of the image that her mother had put into her head so long ago.

She thought of a fishing town — she imagined her mother’s six-year-old hand grasping her grandfather’s, the black of their irises reflecting the crimson and orange of endless fire. A fishing town, burning down into nothing but a dark spot on flatland. A fishing town, full of families and stalls shaded by striped awning and palm trees drooping with the weight of coconuts.

A fishing town that had, one day, simply ceased to exist.

“Fire is dangerous,” was all Delphine could think to say in response.

Iain clenched his jaw. “Let me show you something, Delphine.”

Delphine thought of her mother. What would she think of this? What would she think of her oddball daughter venturing into the thick of the woods with an older boy?

Iain stopped and turned around when he realized that Delphine had stopped following him. “What’s wrong?”

“Who are you?” She asked again. She didn’t know how to stop asking questions like that.

“Iain.”

“That’s just a name. It could mean anything.”

“I am no danger to you.”

“How could I know that?”

“You have the power to take your gloves off and ward me off if necessary.” He pulled up his sleeve and showed her a line of burns on his bicep. “I’m terrified of fire. So I wouldn’t be stupid enough to be alone with you if I

had bad intentions.”

“Oh.” She fell into step with him as his pace slowed. “Are you terrified of me?”

He turned his head to the side and grinned. “Not in that dress, no.”

They walked and Delphine dragged her heavy boots along. She felt the dreadful weight of them with every step she took.

The two of them left strange footprints in the powdery snow as they moved along; Iain’s small and dainty ones looked aloof next to Delphine’s.

The winter made the woods less scary, Delphine noticed, as she looked around. Tall giants — spruce trees — looked over them as they continued upon their promenade. Finally, Iain pointed towards a shape in the near distance. Upon closer inspection, Delphine could make out grey clouds rising from a chimney in rhythm, the cobblestone exterior of a cottage, an ominous door painted in the dark color of spruce foliage.

“That’s where you live?” She asked. Iain nodded. His unkempt hair was now tamed and stayed tucked behind his ears, and Delphine stared at their bizarre shape wondrously. “What do elves do, exactly?”

“We take care of the forest,” he bent down to pick up a browned daffodil that had been stepped on. “It gets harder during the winter.” He pocketed the dead flower and Delphine decided not to ask about it.

When they reached the door, Iain gestured at the rusty door knocker that was made in the shape of a horseshoe. “Why don’t you knock?”

So she knocked, because what else was there to do? And then, when the door opened, she screamed, and the trees echoed back the sound. In the open doorway, a wizened woman stood with wholly black eyes and a gummy, evil smile. Delphine screamed and screamed and screamed.

“Sorry, mother.” Iain consoled, stepping forward and pulling his mother into an embrace. “She’s new.”

Delphine suddenly shut her mouth. “But her eyes, they’re —”

“Delphine.” The old crone interrupted. Delphine could not possibly believe that young Iain had such an old

mother. And how did his mother know her name, anyway?

“That’s my name.” Delphine turned to Iain. “How did she know?”

“Mother might be blind, but she can feel everything. She knows everything.”

“Why are her eyes black?” Delphine couldn’t help it.

“It’s my curse.” Iain’s mother replied, her voice cracking at every syllable. She stepped away from the doorway to let them in.

Delphine stared into her empty eyes. “I really hate winter,” she said, out of the blue. “Did your curse make you feel that?”

“Indeed. You’re the fiery girl that Iain has told me about.”

Delphine felt a shudder run down her spine. “You knew about me already?” She asked Iain. He pursed his lips.

“I had to make sure.”

“Why?”

“Because I need you to do something for me.”

“Oh.” Of course. Delphine scoffed and began to walk backward when the old crone’s hand latched onto her wrist. Delphine attempted to pulled away to no avail.

“I just —” Iain looked out the window and at the blizzard that was beginning to coalesce outside. “You see, I need to die.” He pulled out the flower that he pocketed earlier, and Delphine looked at the pile of dust that remained in his palm. “I am poisoning this forest.”

“It’s my curse.” His mother began to explain. “I was not to have any children. But then Iain, the most beautiful babe on the Continent, I’d thought, came along, and suddenly my vision began to close in on itself until everything went black. They told me that I wouldn’t be able to see my child’s true nature — it turns out they meant it both literally and . . .” She paused, and maybe she didn’t have the heart to say that her child was some kind of abomination.

Delphine stood static in confusion.

“I am just a child.” Delphine said. “I am just a child.”

The strangest part was that Delphine did not find this revelation strange. She’d always felt as if the fire that ran free inside of her was meant for a spellbound purpose. And here it was, like she’d always imagined.

She was built to destroy.

“Is there no other way?” She treaded the waters.

“It has to be you.”

“Why?”

“Do you ever feel scared?” Iain then stopped to clarify. “Scared as in you can feel it if something bad is going to happen?” Delphine nodded, and Iain lifted his hand up to cup her chin.

“What do you feel now?” He asked.

Delphine gulped. Where to start? She felt that familiar dropping of her heart like an anvil in her ribcage. Her bones felt weak and her throat tightened. She closed her eyes and in the black of her eyelids she could see constant eruptions of red light.

He took his second hand and held it to the side of her face. She began to convulse as he did so; her limbs shivered in fervent chaos. He pulled her closer and the fire inside of her began to shine blue. She could feel it, she could feel it so strongly that it made her want to retch.

“Stop it!” She yelled. “You’re the sick feeling I feel every day when I wake up! It’s you.” She pushed him back

with brute force. "It's you! Don't touch me."

Delphine looked at him with wide eyes, and she balled her hands into fists at her sides. "Don't touch me," she repeated. Delphine wanted to be back with her hostile mother who loved her discreetly, back with their stupid makeshift stove and her bedroom that was too small to keep her caged indefinitely.

"Take your gloves off." He prodded, taking a few steps backwards. "Aren't you angry at me, Delphine?"

She was so, so angry. She felt the anger rising up in her throat like bile, and she didn't feel like repressing it. "Can I leave?" She began to gnaw on the inside of her cheek. She didn't like feeling this way: scared and uncertain of the control she had over her fire. She could feel the wispy flames yearning to escape.

"Take your gloves off." He said this with a dominant cadence. "And then we'll go out into this storm, okay?"

Delphine stared at the frail hand that clasped onto her wrist, all protruding veins and wrinkly skin and pale alabaster. She fidgeted and Iain's mother's grip finally loosened. She pulled back and caught a glimpse of the blizzard through the window.

"There are never blizzards here," she whispered.

She shuddered once more as Iain said: "I am poisoning this forest." She took off her gloves in defeat and stared at the wooden planks that made up the floor. Weeds sprouted from the gaps between them. She focused on those dandelions as she heard his quickening, nearing footsteps.

Iain moved closer and she could feel the screaming in her head get louder as the distance closed between them.

He prodded the door open with his elbow and looked back at her. "Come on, now."

Delphine stared at the open doorway and at the endless white outside. Nothing could be seen but the snow falling with ferocity.

"Put on a jacket." She said. Delphine looked at the sad, tight-lipped smile on his face. He took a few steps outside, his arms hugging himself and his skin an endless expanse of goosebumps, and waited for her patiently.

Delphine looked back at the old crone. “This is all your fault.” She said, and as if she hadn’t said it enough already — “I really, really hate winter. I loathe it. This is why.”

As she walked through the harsh snowfall, she kept her eyes on Iain’s foggy silhouette. That screaming in her head did not shut up, even as he moved farther away. Suddenly, after a few minutes of miscellaneous walking, he stopped and made accepting eyes at her. “Do it.”

“Do what?”

He held out his hands, and Delphine hesitated before intertwining her fingers through his. She pressed her eyes shut as the internal loudness went even higher in volume. She felt the heat inside of her body so wholly, so much that the blizzard itself seemed almost non-existent.

“Open your eyes,” he said. She looked into his beautiful green eyes, the ones that she had thought to be so purely magical. She watched his pupils carefully — keeping her surprise restrained as the green of them got dissolved by the grayish white of winter. He blinked back tears as he stared back into her eyes.

His own eyes were now depressing grey like the color of the sky during a rainstorm. Warily, he looked down at his hands.

Delphine followed his gaze and looked down at her arms. She almost jumped.

“Your fire is so beautiful,” Iain murmured.

Delphine looked down at her legs and at her fingers and let her mouth open into an O. She was glowing like a hot coal, white at the edges, painted in the colors of autumn all throughout. Her arms were slightly opaque, and she could see Iain’s hands through her own.

Delphine took a few deep breaths. “What’s happening?” She felt no shock, only understanding, as the orange colors of her skin deepened into vermillion red.

“You hate the winter, don’t you?” He replied. She nodded. Iain looked down at his paling hands. “I am the winter. I am poisoning this forest.” Delphine looked down at her fingertips, where weak, dancing flames began to rouse. Iain scrunched his face up in pain as the fire set his skin alight.

“I’m sorry,” Delphine tried to recoil but Iain stayed firm in his place.

“You don’t want me here.” He asserted. “I am poisoning this forest.”

“I don’t want you here, but that’s not your fault. It’s mine.” Delphine struggled, but she undermined the strength of Iain’s hold on her. “You are beautiful, and I thought that when I first saw you. The kids seemed to love you, didn’t they? Only I thought differently and I don’t matter.”

His face looked ethereal as her own light fell over his features. He smiled. “I think that you matter the most, in this village.”

“Stop,” Delphine said, as she watched a layer of fear blanket his face like a veil. “Let go of me, I’ll take you back home.”

“Shh,” he hushed. “Nobody wants me here.”

“I don’t understand. What do you mean, you are the winter?”

“I’m a nature spirit — winter in its worst form. I’m like a black hole, slowly letting the beauty of the season fold in on itself until it will be nothing but a cautionary tale. I think that I should go, Delphine.”

He stared up at the total white of the sky and frowned. Delphine still desperately tried to tug her hand back from his grip. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“So afraid.”

“Then let go of me. Please!” She didn’t want to be behind this. The confusion on her face must’ve been clearly visible, and Iain must’ve known that she wasn’t listening to his message very closely. She was so absorbed in the firelight that seemed to create a sphere of orange warmth around them. Firelight in the middle of a blizzard — firelight that couldn’t be extinguished without a fight.

Iain looked back down at his hands that were slowly being consumed by Delphine’s flames. “I never liked the winter, either.” He said, his eyes focusing on something in the distance.

“I’m sorry.” Delphine looked into his eyes. “Is this happening because I wished for spring?”

“You wished for spring?” He disguised the sadness in his eyes.

Delphine didn’t know what to say. She settled on “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad to go.”

“You don’t have to.” She whispered. “Spring always comes, even if it’s after a blizzard.”

He winced as the fire raced up the length of his arms. “I have to,” he reassured. Delphine frowned. “At least I’m not alone.” He said, after a moment of tension-filled silence.

“What about your mother?”

“She never really cared for me.” He looked to the side so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact with the rising flames. “But it’s okay. I’m so glad to go.”

“Okay.” Delphine had lost track of the situation. She was no longer sure of what was happening — it was so much all at once. Her fingertips began to go blue and Iain’s breathing got deeper.

“Thank you.” Iain beamed, and Delphine wondered how he could possibly do so. “It doesn’t hurt.” He added.

“Don’t feel bad.”

“Are you going to die?”

“I was put in this world with the sole purpose to die.”

“Isn’t that the same for everybody?”

“Not really,” he sighed. “Thank you, Delphine. You are so young. Maybe you will stalk back home and this will all have been a lucid dream.” And suddenly the firelight was doused and Delphine closed her eyes in fear as she stopped feeling the grip of Iain’s hands in her own.

She began to hear birdsong, and she could see that orange glare of sunlight behind her eyelids. She opened her eyes and stared at the ground, where her feet stood hidden in large tufts of green grass. Her eyes explored the scene and she stayed quiet. Iain was no longer in front of her. There was no pile of ash, no black shadow, no identifiable marker to prove that he had ever existed in the first place.

The blizzard had subsided, too.

Spring had come, just like she had said it would. She walked back to the place where Iain’s mother’s cottage had been and it was no longer there. Instead there was a grove of magnolia trees taking up the space. And then she ran back home and into her small house, straight into her bedroom and in front of her hearth. The kids outside were still laughing — girls picked springtime blooms in their wicker baskets and boys ran around with rubber balls in their khaki shorts. She could hear the muffled distant bleating of goats and the cacophonous noise of chickens clucking in their pens. The world seemed so oblivious.

Spring had come. Spring had come! Delphine took off her black boots and set them by the door, and then, she lied in her bed for a while, suspended in thought. Finally, she fell into the drowsiness that preceded a nap.

When she woke up after a few hours with a stretched yawn, she sprinted to the kitchen.

“Mama, I dreamt something crazy last night, can I tell you about it?”

“Help me with the stove first, Delphine.”

Delphine grinned and told her mother about all of it — the glowing and the old crone and Iain’s pretty face — as she let her palms hover above the pile of sticks on the stovetop like she had done the very same morning.

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