

ABI ELPHINSTONE

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Prologue

Beyond the footsteps of the greatest explorers and up past the reach of the trustiest maps there lies a kingdom called Erkenwald.

Here, the sun still shines at midnight in the summer, glinting off the icebergs in the north and slipping between the snow-capped Never Cliffs in the west. But it does not rise at all in the long, cold winters. Then, the nights bleed on and on and the darkness is so thick you cannot see your hands in front of your face.

This far north, even the stars do not behave as you might expect. And that is probably just as well because without Ursa Minor breaking a few rules we would not have a story at all . . .

The Little Bear, some call this constellation, but if astronomers knew the truth – if they could see into the heart of things and out the other side – perhaps they would have used a different name. For these seven stars are in fact Sky Gods, mighty giants carved from stardust, and the brightest of them all, the North Star, was the one who first breathed life into Erkenwald.

Such was his power that he only needed to blow the legendary Frost Horn once and the empty stretches of ice many miles below began to change. Mountains, forests and glaciers appeared. Then animals arrived: polar bears to roam the tundra, whales to glide through the oceans and wolves to stalk between the trees. Finally, the music of the Frost Horn conjured people: men and women of different shapes, sizes and colours scattered throughout the land.

As the years passed, these men and women formed three tribes: the Fur Tribe built tipis from caribou hides in a forest to the south of the kingdom; the Feather Tribe settled inside caves in the Never Cliffs to the west; and the Tusk Tribe built igloos along the cliff tops on the northern coast. Each tribe had their own customs and beliefs, but they lived in harmony with one another, sharing food whenever they passed and offering shelter when the weather closed in.

Because magic often lingers long after it has been used, the power of the Frost Horn hovered over Erkenwald, and as time went by the people learnt how to use it. They spun hammocks from moonlight which granted wonderful dreams; they trapped sunbeams in lanterns which burned through the winter months; they stored wind inside gemstones which granted their boats safe passage through stormy seas. And the people knew all was well in their kingdom whenever they saw the northern lights. For these rippling colours were a sign that the Sky Gods were dancing – and that meant the world was as it should be.

But darkness can come to any kingdom, and so it came to Erkenwald.

The smallest Sky God grew jealous of the North Star's power and, seeking to rule Erkenwald herself, she pulled away from the constellation one winter night and plunged towards Earth. The North Star acted swiftly and trapped her in a glacier before she could spread her evil across the land. But the Sky Gods stopped dancing then because they knew that it was only a matter of time before someone heard the whispers of the fallen star calling out behind the ice.

And, before long, someone did.

One night, Slither, the shaman for the Tusk Tribe, was drawn to the glacier and he listened as the voice within promised him dark powers if he killed his chief and made it look like a plot brewed by the Fur and Feather Tribes using Erkenwald's trusted magic.

Although the words were only whispers, they plucked at Slither's heart and, believing all they said, the shaman slew the Tusk Chief while he slept with an enchanted knife. In the weeks that followed, distrust between the tribes gave way to hatred and faith in Erkenwald's magic died. And it was then that Slither climbed back into his skin-boat and paddled beneath the cliffs towards the glacier.

The voice was still there, only it was louder now – as if the hatred between the tribes had given it fresh force – and this time Slither could make out the body of a woman behind the ice. She was tall and slim, with skin as white as marble and lips a cold pale blue. Her eyelashes were crusted with frost, her silver hair twisted through a crown of snowflakes

and in her hand she held a staff of glittering black ice. Slither raised a palm towards the Ice Queen and, because this was a palm that had done a terrible thing, it melted the frozen wall before him and the woman stepped out from the glacier and into the skin-boat.

She held up her staff and thunder rumbled across the sky as every man, woman and child in the Tusk Tribe, now locked under the Ice Queen's hold, stepped out of their igloos. They watched in silence as she pointed her staff towards the glacier she had been trapped inside. An enormous chunk of ice broke free from its tip and slid into the sea, but it did not drift away. The Ice Queen waved her staff and a bridge snaked out between the cliff and the iceberg, tethering it in place. Then domes, turrets and towers formed, shooting out of the iceberg with ear-splitting cracks until, finally, there stood a shimmering fortress carved entirely from ice.

Winterfang Palace was born; the reign of the Ice Queen had began. And to reward his loyalty, the Ice Queen gave Slither command of the Tusk Tribe and taught him how to wield the very darkest magic.

Spring came, then slipped into summer and, from afar, the Fur and Feather Tribes watched as the Tusks left their igloos every morning and walked across the bridge into Winterfang Palace. A battle was brewing – the Fur and Feather Tribes could hear the sharpening of spears and hammering of shields – and, fearing that the Ice Queen meant to drag all the tribes under her command, they launched an attack on Winterfang.

But to fight for something you believe in requires trust as well as courage – and there was not enough trust between the Fur and Feather Tribes that day. There was no faith in Erkenwald's magic either and the weapons of even the most skilled fighters were nothing against Slither's Tusk warriors. They fought with black ice javelins and shadow-shields and soon every man and woman from the Fur and Feather Tribes was imprisoned in the palace towers. Slither's warriors seized a child, too – the only one who had been granted a place in the battle – because this was a child marked out by the Sky Gods, a child that the Ice Queen had been looking for ever since she fell from the sky.

The other children remained beyond the Ice Queen's grasp and, though Slither's warriors scoured the kingdom all through the summer and on into the winter, they found no trace of them. Erkenwald became a land shrunk to whispers, but, because a fallen star can only survive one midnight sun on Earth before its magic fades, the Ice Queen set about finding a way to gain immortality.

Voices, she discovered, were the key, and if she could swallow the voice of every man, woman and child in Erkenwald before the next midnight sun rose she would possess the eternal life she craved. By midwinter, a new sound rang out from Winterfang: an anthem played on an organ made of icicles, accompanied by a choir of voices that once belonged to the Ice Queen's prisoners.

The anthem called some children out of hiding, so desperate were they to be reunited with their parents whose

voices they could hear above the music, but most knew better than that. They realised that the stolen voices were a trap and they vowed to lie low until they could form a plan to defeat the Ice Queen and rescue their parents.

But some people are not very good at lying low. They have wandering limbs and fierce hearts and more often than not they have heads full of wild ideas. Our story follows two such children – an unlikely pair, some would say, but you cannot pick and choose who adventures happen to. They pounce when you are least expecting them, then they hurtle forward with surprising speed. In fact, once an adventure digs its claws in, there is not an awful lot you can do about it.

Especially when magic is involved . . .



Chapter One
Eska

Eska sat, knees tucked under her chin and head bowed, on the pedestal inside the music box. Its glass dome curved around her, fixed tight to the silver base, and with her flimsy dress and bare feet she might easily have passed for a mechanical ballerina. But Eska was no clockwork figure. She was a twelve-year-old girl with darting eyes and a pulse that trembled every time the Ice Queen drew near.

Eska closed her eyes and tried to wiggle her toes. They didn't move. She made to arch her back and then stretch her neck. Again, nothing moved. Even her hair – a tumble of red so full of knots it seemed to grow in circles – lay absolutely still down her back. But it was a ritual she attempted every morning in case, by some miracle, the Ice Queen's hold over her limbs had weakened. It never did though. Not for a second. The music box had been Eska's prison for months and she could only blink wide blue eyes at the horrors that unfolded in Winterfang's vaulted hall.

She looked beyond the dome, through the ice arches

in front of her which faced out over Erkenwald. The first sunrise in six months spilled across the horizon. Frozen rivers shimmered, the snow on the tundra sparkled and the sea was a dazzling jigsaw of ice and meltwater. It was mid-March then, Eska thought. That was when the light returned to the kingdom – she'd heard the Tusk guards talking.

Her chest tightened as she thought back to the day she'd awoken in the music box, her body locked under the Ice Queen's spell. The midnight sun had been burning and she had watched it for two whole months before the dark stole in. Eska swallowed. With the light returning now, she knew she had to have been the Ice Queen's prisoner for nine months, but even more frightening was the knowledge that she didn't have a single memory of her life before Winterfang. There must have been something else once – a home, a family, friends perhaps – since the spell the Ice Queen uttered every morning spoke of her as *the stolen child*. But stolen from where? From whom? It was all a terrible blank. Because the Ice Queen didn't only steal people and voices: she stole memories, too, if it suited her.

At the sound of footsteps, Eska snapped out of her thoughts, and from the corner of her eye she watched a familiar scene unravel. The Ice Queen sat, very still, before an organ made of icicles in the middle of the hall, then she raised her hands to the keys. Eska waited. She knew what came next because it was the same every morning.

Chords drifted through the palace – up and down the

snow-strewn staircases, into the towers surrounding the palace domes, across the bridge connecting the iceberg to the mainland and then out over the miles of frozen tundra beyond. The chords were solemn, like the groaning of a faraway glacier, and as they swelled and throbbed Eska winced. The Ice Queen was getting ready to feed on her stolen voices.

A melody rippled out from the silver trees lining the hall. Their roots sprawled over the ice floor and from their bony branches hundreds of glass baubles hung, each one filled with a golden glow. *This* was where the melody was coming from because inside each bauble was a voice. And as the chords grew louder the baubles shimmered and the voices of the Fur and Feather men and women singing a wordless anthem joined with the organ's steady pulse.

Eska watched as the golden glow from one of the baubles drifted towards the Ice Queen's mouth and slipped down her cold white throat. The organ grew louder as the Ice Queen swallowed, then she threw back her head and laughed.

'Another voice closer to immortality!'

She raked her nails across the keys. The chords clashed, the voices stopped and the baubles dimmed. Then the Ice Queen snatched up her staff and strode towards the arches, her sequinned gown swishing behind her.

Eska's insides churned as the woman knelt before the music box and slipped a key into the base. Then she uttered her spell and her voice came hard and pointed, as if full of unpleasant corners:

'Three turns to the left then half a turn right
With a key cut black as the deepest night.
The magic awakes, then limbs unfold
As the stolen child comes under my hold.'

The Ice Queen turned the key and, as it wound three turns to the left then half a turn right, music began. It was different from the melody that came from the trees; this was a gentle, almost magical tinkling, like tiny bells chiming or dozens of stars falling to Earth.

And, at the sound, Eska felt her body stir. First her head lifted, then her hands pushed down and her legs extended until she was standing on the pedestal. She tried to hold the curse at bay, to take control of her body, but she was up on the balls of her feet now and her arms were outstretched. The Ice Queen breathed a crystal mist over the glass dome, making it disappear from sight, and, as the pedestal turned, round and round, Eska danced on trembling feet.

Unscrewing the orb from the top of her staff, the Ice Queen held it before Eska. 'Your voice is cursed by the Sky Gods, child. But I can relieve you of it.' She moved the orb nearer Eska's mouth. 'Speak now – let your words slip into my orb – and you will no longer have to bear such a burden.'

Eska's frail arms rose and fell and her body stooped and arched, but she said nothing. Minutes passed, the only sound in the room the fluttering of Eska's dress as she turned, then the music ground to a halt, the pedestal stilled and Eska

stopped mid-pirouette before folding herself up into a ball again.

The Ice Queen twisted the orb back on to her staff, then she seized Eska's wrist. 'I am not asking to hear your voice because I value your opinion. I am not asking to hear your voice because I care about your feelings. I am asking to hear your voice *because I own you*.' Her eyes darkened. 'You bear the mark of the Sky Gods, Eska, the very Gods who used terrible magic to stir up hatred between the people of Erkenwald. But I will use your voice to tear the Sky Gods down and rid this kingdom of their evil for ever.'

Eska's mind whirled. The Ice Queen often spoke like this – about cursed marks and dreadful Gods – but, even though Eska could recall nothing from her past about either, some deep-rooted things couldn't be erased, like knowing right from wrong and sensing truth from lies. Something about the Ice Queen's words smelled of lies, as if she was spinning a story that just happened to suit her, and for this reason Eska kept her voice a secret inside her.

The Ice Queen loosened her grip. 'You will remain locked inside this music box until I hear you speak.' She paused. 'And you will go without the dome tonight; perhaps a little cold is exactly what is needed to shock you into behaving.'

Eska stayed silent, huddled on her pedestal, then there was a cough from somewhere nearby and the Ice Queen spun round.

A bald man dressed in sealskins and a walrus-tusk necklace

stood before them. He was small and fat, with an oily smile, and as he dipped his head Eska glimpsed the edge of the tattoo of a large black eye stamped on to the back of his skull.

'Forgive my intrusion, Your Majesty.'

The Ice Queen nodded. 'Come, Slither. It seems I am still not getting through to the girl. My magic holds her body under its spell, but it cannot draw out her voice. She is mute – and perhaps she has always been that way – but somewhere inside her there must be a voice, even if she has never used it.'

'I have some news that may interest you.' Slither smirked. 'The contraption I have been working on these last few months is almost finished.'

The Ice Queen paced back and forth beside the music box, a smile forming on her blue lips. 'You're quite sure it will work?'

Slither ran a hand over his bald head. 'I am the most powerful shaman in Erkenwald. It will work.'

'We cannot delay any longer. I must have Eska's voice in the next few days.'

'There are still adjustments to make. I need at least a week before—'

The Ice Queen tilted her head and the sunlight flashed off her crown of snowflakes. 'Work through the night, Slither. Get it done. To achieve immortality, I must steal every single voice in the kingdom before the midnight sun rises in two weeks' time.' She paused. 'Even your fiercest warriors have not been able to find the Fur and Feather children, but if I have Eska's voice I can use it to summon the tribes to Winterfang.

Then I will tear the Sky Gods down from the heavens and all will surrender to me.'

Slither bowed and then scurried from the hall. The Ice Queen followed slowly, but, when she reached the shadows, she glanced over her shoulder at Eska.

'I *will* take your voice,' she snarled. 'I get everything I want. In the end.'

Eska stayed with her head bent over her knees until the last of the Ice Queen's footsteps faded away. Then her eyes flicked open and fixed on the key. Distracted by Slither, the Ice Queen had left it in the lock. Eska remembered how the woman had turned it the wrong way by mistake one day and it had undone the spell over her body for a moment. If only she could reach it now . . .

But Eska's limbs were frozen; there was no chance of escaping and she could only gaze through the arches at the world beyond, wondering who she really was. A child cursed by the Sky Gods? Or somebody else entirely?

A cold wind swept through the hall and Eska blinked at the chill. The Ice Queen held her body in a music box and her memories in a locked chest somewhere deep within the palace – it was almost enough to make Eska give up hope of ever finding a way back into her past – almost but not quite.

Because Eska knew something the Ice Queen did not. She *could* speak.

She just didn't want to.