

DELETED SCENE – A THREE-LETTER NAME

Wind. Freezing wind. Stinging needles of icy blasts driving into every pore of her body. El held tight to the edges of the tree stand, her fingernails driving into the wood. She'd already tied the safety rope around her waist and to the trunk of the thick oak tree. She'd even double knotted it using a trick she'd learned from an old Oceaner.

Another blast of wind sent her sliding to the edge of the stand, her feet dangling in the air sixty hands above the ground. El screamed in shock as the safety rope dug into her stomach. There would be no beasts hunting tonight. El knew that. But she'd decided too late.

Branches cracked around her, falling from the weight of the ice and crashing to the forest floor below her. El pulled on the rope and hoisted herself back onto the platform, her arms protesting with her effort. Usually, the best listener in the village, El had made so many mistakes today. She should have left her post earlier. She should have brought an extra coat. She should have listened to her instincts. But pride had gotten in the way. She was strong enough, and the village needed her. But she'd been wrong.

A blast of wind. More ice attacking her from the winter sky. The cold had already seeped deep into her bones. She couldn't feel her fingers or her toes, and her body ached, fighting to build heat. She scooted across the slippery wooden stand to lean her chest against the tree's trunk. She wrapped her arms and legs around it and held on for dear life.

The storm raged for what felt like hours attacking her with waves of ice that clung in her hair and froze it stiff. With the sun peeking over the horizon, the forest around her glistened like fine jewels. The layers of ice on the trees shimmered against the bluing sky. Her head sank realizing it was still too slick to climb down. And her hands were still too frozen. Oddly, a heat had begun to grow from somewhere deep inside. El didn't question it, she welcomed it as she pried her fingers from the tree trunk and stuffed them under her shirt. Fire licked her flesh as circulation returned and the cold left them.

Carefully, El tested her body's movement. A shift to the side. A turn of the head. It hurt to move, but she had to prepare her body for the descent. With the sun melting the ice from the trees, El knew she'd have to climb down soon. There was something wrong about the heat growing in her body, like a furnace in her core. Her mother would know what to do, which medicines to cool the fire inside and warm her frozen hands and feet.

Shifting her head, a sharp pain gripped her skull. El ground her teeth against the pain. It was the kind that made her head swim and her eyes lose focus. But she couldn't let that stop her. The ice was melting off the rough bark of the ancient oak tree. It was time. She had to get back to the warm fire and hot tea in her parent's home.

Standing was more difficult than she could have imagined. The fire inside her gut fought the ice still in her limbs, and her head screamed in pain with every breath.

Usually after a shift overnight keeping watch over the village, El would slip down from her stand, swinging on the branches like a playful child. Today, she moved like a slug, holding tight to each branch, her body complaining with every movement.

Near the ground again, there were only a few more branches to climb down when El's hand found a patch of ice hidden in a shadow. She slipped, plummeting to the ground.

Her scream echoed through the woods when her body collided with the firm forest floor. The world danced around her in blurred, confusing images. And through the haze, she heard her mother calling her name. The voice mixed with birds singing in the treetops and ice cracking in cascading pops.

When she woke eight days later, everything looked familiar. El was in her bed in her home with a soft quilt pulled up to her chin. Sliced onions left on the window sill blended their scent with mint tea boiling on the stovetop. Her limbs no longer licked with fire from the ice storm.

But the world was different somehow, more clouded and dulled. Everything was too quiet, too muffled. Her mother's mouth moved, and her eyes sparkled with joy seeing El sit up in her bed. As the other fixers in the room bustled around her, their voices distant and covered by a muffled hum, El felt trepidation rise in her gut.

"Mama?" she reached for her mother, unable to hear her own voice. Tears stung her eyes as her heart raced with the realization that the sounds she heard as she lay at the bottom of the tall oak tree were the last sounds she'd ever hear clearly.