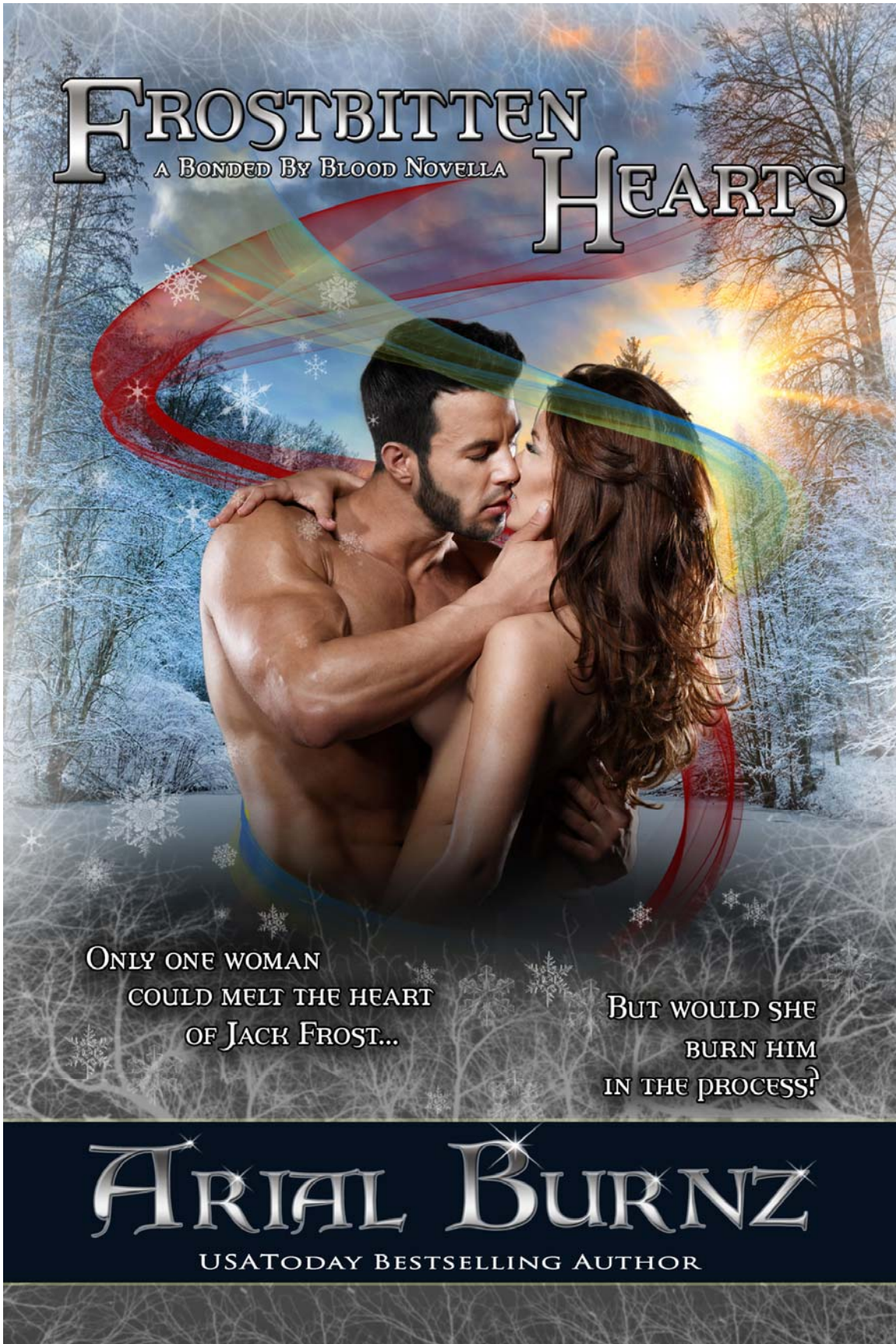


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# FROSTBITTEN HEARTS

A BONDED BY BLOOD NOVELLA

ONLY ONE WOMAN  
COULD MELT THE HEART  
OF JACK FROST...

BUT WOULD SHE  
BURN HIM  
IN THE PROCESS?

## ARIAL BURNZ

USATODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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## **Frostbitten Hearts**

*A Bonded By Blood Novella  
(Approximately 20,200 words)*

*by*

*Arial Burnz*

\* \* \*

### ***Dedication***

*To my husband, my cusper mage*

*From your fire witch*

*Together forever...eternally yours*

\* \* \*

“Arial Burnz crafts spellbinding tales that will mesmerize you from the first page and not set you free until the very last word. Entertaining, bewitching, alluring!”

—**Amie Louellen**, bestselling author of the *Hot Southern Romance* series

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## **Prologue**

*A Remote Location in the Welsh Countryside—March, 1759*

“Oh, Jack...”

Jack winced as the slimy sing-song voice of the vampire drizzled down his spine. He had hoped to avoid Rasheed tonight. The vampire stalked the Elemental nursery like a rat creeping along the shadows searching for scraps. Jack clenched his jaw and slowly rotated on his heel to face the Vamsyrian, *cooling* his rapid pulse to a calmer pace.

Jack flexed his hands and absently rubbed under the smooth steel shackles at his wrists. The vampires—breeding Jack and his *nursery mates* for their magic—needed the Elementals’ wrists bound to keep their powers under control. Jack tugged at the band around his neck, connected to steel chains snaking down his sleeves and welded to the bracelets. They effectively connected both of his wrists without impairing his daily activities, and were annoying as hell.

At least Jack had his magic available *internally* where, right now, it mattered most.

Rasheed’s glowing eyes pierced the darkened hallway, the lamps turned down for the coming day of sleeping. The silver glow in the pupils of the vampire’s eyes made it obvious he had unleashed the *Hunger* and was eager to feed.

“How may I be of service, Master Rasheed?” Jack nodded respectfully, but kept eye contact with the predator.

Rasheed grinned. “So good at schooling your emotions when you deal with me,” he complimented. “I should caution you, however, to watch the blocking of your thoughts. You’re skills are improving in that area, my little cusper, and it’s causing some concern amongst my colleagues.” He crooked a long, thin finger. “Come to me, my mage.”

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Jack forced a sigh to feign frustration and mask his fear, marched forward and turned his head to the side. Though he presented obedience by baring his neck for the feeding, he *froze* selected thoughts to keep them from the elder Vamsyrian...he hoped. With the element of *air*, Jack let his annoyance flow freely to give *something* for Rasheed to sense. The vampires held tight to their brood of Elementals and didn't like any secrets. If Jack was hiding *all* his thoughts, they assumed he had something to hide.

But freezing thoughts were one thing. What translated through blood was another. Whenever a Vamsyrian fed from their victims, they would learn everything about their prey...from the moment they were born until the moment of the feeding. Lives were at stake, but resisting Rasheed was useless and would cause suspicion. Willing or not, Jack could not keep his blood from the vampire. This was the moment of truth.

Rasheed moaned as he ran delicate fingertips over Jack's skin—from his earlobe, down to the smooth steel collar. The vampire clutched the connecting chain and dragged Jack forward. Rasheed chuckled, his breath feathering against Jack's artery. "Such a tease not to resist me. You know I enjoy the predatory role."

Jack clenched his fists as the vampire licked the length of his neck, fluttering over the place he would feed. Jack placed a steadying palm on the wall to be ready when the euphoria hit him. The fangs tore at his flesh and he hissed, then stumbled as Rasheed's mouth closed around the wound and the intoxicating effects surged through Jack's bloodstream. The Vamsyrian slipped his arms around Jack to keep him from falling. In such a state, Jack was helpless to reposition himself, and inwardly cringed as the vampire's thigh nestled between his legs.

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Rasheed finished feeding and healed the wound by applying a small amount of his immortal blood to the gash. He pushed his palms to Jack's chest, holding him against the wall while Jack recovered from the drug-like encounter.

"You may not enjoy your time here with us, my little cusper," the vampire whispered. "But I'm glad to know you are at least faithful to your job." He caressed Jack's cheek with the back of his hand, his black eyes searching Jack's face and the silver glow fading. "You are right to worry about whose bed in which you lie. Your time with the fiery Aideen is drawing to a close. Impregnate her and you will receive special treatment. If she produces the spirit Elemental we want, she can be your life mate." The vampire brushed his thumb over Jack's lips, a longing in his eyes. Then the Vamsyrian vanished in a blur, and Jack stumbled, having to unexpectedly rely on his own support.

He glanced left and right down the hall. He was alone.

Either Rasheed had lied by omission when he didn't mention the plans of the rebellion Jack had overheard, or Jack's experiment at *freezing* his memories through his blood had worked. He sank to the floor with staggering relief and raked rigid fingers through his black hair. Perhaps their secret was still safe and Jack did indeed succeed.

However, his ability to use his powers internally explained why he had not been able to get any of the witches in the nursery pregnant. Jack didn't *want* to bear children in this place, so his intentions *froze* his ability to procreate, too. Either that or he was sterile, which was much worse. The vampires' whole purpose for Jack was to breed. And if he couldn't, his Vamsyrian captors would have no use for him. Elementals who could not breed were disposed of like rubbish in a bin.

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Since the age of fourteen, he'd been forced to bed each female in the nursery who was of child-bearing years—five women total—and once he had been with them all with no success, his captors commanded him to cycle through them again.

All but Aideen...the lovely fire witch who'd caught his eye the moment he'd transferred to this prison. Her rich auburn hair and hazel eyes matched the fiery sign under which she'd been born. Shortly after turning sixteen, when her powers finally fully manifested, she still had not started her menses. Five months before her seventeenth year, when Jack was eighteen, Rasheed had told him to breed with her anyway.

So far, Jack had spent seven glorious months in her arms but, as the Vamsyrian had said, if Jack wanted more time with her, he had to get her with child. Knowing she would be taken from him was more than enough motivation.

Just as Jack rose from the floor, Rasheed marched into the hall, hard lines of fierce determination creasing his face. Jack held his breath and backed against the wall. Perhaps the vampire *had* gleaned the memories from his blood. His wide eyes followed the angry vampire, but Rasheed stomped past him without a single glance.

Elwin, one of the other vampires managing the nursery, followed close behind. His thin, blond hair fanned outward from his jaw as he scampered after his elder, complaining. "But it is so close to dawn, my master."

Rasheed whirled and stood nose to nose with his stunned companion. "If you wish to make snide remarks about my skills as a battle mage, then you shall suffer the consequences of a duel." He sneered. "Besides, I will win quickly and you will limp back into your crypt. None of you are a proper challenge for me, so I hardly have the opportunity to increase my skills to finally beat Prince Jesse. How dare you insinuate—"

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“It was not my intention—” Elwin tried to explain, but Rasheed headed toward the dueling arena... a place reserved only for the vampires to practice using the magic they stole from the Elementals.

Jack dropped his head back against the wall and sighed.

“Jack?”

He lifted his head and smiled as Aideen strode down the hall to his side, worry rimpling her brow.

“I’m well, Spark.” He used the nickname he’d given her, hoping it would ease her fears.

She pursed her lips and shoved his shoulder in protest. “You look far from being well. Don’t lie to me.”

He chuckled.

She glanced over her shoulder. “Sounds as if Rasheed is determined to prove his worth as a battle mage again. I suppose the prince is still undefeated, much to Rasheed’s disappointment?”

“I guess so.” Jack pulled her into his arms, reveling at the heat of her body pressed to his. “Rasheed’s competitive streak is none of my concern, and neither is the vampire prince’s dueling record.” He sampled her lips. “Come,” he whispered against her mouth. “Take me to bed and help me to forget all else but you.”

Her hazel eyes sparked and she leaned in for an open-mouthed kiss. Jack groaned and lifted her into his arms. She muffled her laughter against his neck and held tight. As he set her down before their door, Gerard—one of the elder Elementals—caught his eye. The older man’s gaze was flooded with worry, his brows turned down with an intense, unvoiced question.

He must have seen Rasheed approach Jack. Jack shook his head, a subtle gesture to let the man know the overheard rebellion was still a secret.

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Gerard's brow softened and he sighed, nodding his dark head before disappearing into his own sleeping chamber for the day.

Aideen yanked Jack into their room and, as he closed the door behind them, she pushed him against the heavy oak and covered his mouth with hers. He laughed through their kisses then inched her toward their bed as he divested his fire witch of her clothing.

She laid back on their mattress, clad only in her bracelets and chains. His eyes devoured her creamy flesh, indulging in her lithe curves.

Jack caressed her cheek and bent forward to cover her lips with a deep kiss as he joined her on the bed. Using his knees to nudge her thighs open, he plunged deep into the heaven of her warmth. He slowed his pace, prolonging their lovemaking, not wanting to climax just yet, reveling in the sweetness of her arms and the hopes they could endure the next few hours. They would soon be free.

Thrust after thrust, he drove into her and Aideen tossed her head back, whimpering his name through her climax. Shuddering and bucking as he came, Jack willed his seed to fill and claim her.

The resounding thud of the iron door to the underground vampire lair was a confirmation of the time. Dawn would break in just a few moments. Though he was tired, he didn't want to leave her warmth. "One more time and I will let you rest," he whispered.

She smiled and ground her hips against him. Jack groaned.

They climaxed in each other's arms once more, then settled together under the covers.

The soft steady breathing of Aideen sleeping teased him to join her. He fought the temptation. Jack's eyes drooped. He smirked. "Soon, Spark."

\* \* \*



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Aideen started and sat upright in bed, bleary-eyed and squinting to see what the commotion was about. The door nearly rattled off its hinges by whomever pounded so frantically on the other side. Didn't they just lie down to sleep for the day? It couldn't possibly be sunset already.

"Jack, get up!" The mini-door to the viewing window opened, but no face appeared. "It's time. Prepare for travel." That sounded like Shep, but a cacophony of voices echoed in the hallway, making it difficult to be sure.

"We'll be right out." The small door closed and Jack turned worried eyes toward her. "I haven't told you because I didn't want to take any chances the vampires would feed from you and find out. Gerard and a few others are planning an escape."

"A what?" Aideen caught her chemise as Jack tossed it her way and she began dressing. "How is anyone going to escape?"

Jack stepped into his trousers. "With the help of the werewolf guards."

"But the werewolves will never get the cure if they do that!" She pulled a blouse over her head.

"Gerard said Marlon heard pieces of the cure on the wind when the vampires were talking about the ingredients. He promised to give the guards the cure in exchange for freedom."

Aideen dragged her skirt over her hips and fumbled with the ties at her waist.

"More importantly, Marlon heard there was a grove of free Elementals not far from here."

Aideen plopped onto the bed in shock. "Free Elementals. I almost believed we were the only ones left."

"The vampires certainly want us to believe none of our kind remain outside of these nurseries." Jack knelt before her. "This is our chance to finally be together, Spark. Just you and me."

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She smiled and framed his face with her hands, allowing the excitement in her breast to bloom. “Just you and me,” she whispered.

He kissed her palms, then rose and planted a hard kiss on her lips. The voices outside their room escalated to a chorus of shouts. Jack strode to the door and wrenched it open, only to leap back and dodge someone running down the hall. “Come on! There’s trouble.”

Aideen slipped on her shoes and Jack grabbed her by the hand. They rushed down the hall toward the gathering room. She squinted at the bright sun streaming in through the narrow windows bordering the top of the large octagonal space. Gasping, she clutched Jack’s hand tighter as the crowd parted enough to reveal who stood at the center of the commotion—Gerard and Caedric, her father. Tugging at the mages holding them back, spit flew from their mouths as they yelled obscenities, but their words were lost in the din of everyone else joining the argument. As far as Aideen could surmise, every single Elemental in the nursery crammed into the room, which was clearly divided into two groups supporting the arguing elders. All four of Aideen’s siblings stood behind their father.

“That is enough!” Dooley, the head werewolf guard, shoved his giant frame past Aideen and Jack and marched between Gerard and Caedric. Covering their chests with his large hands, he pushed them apart and hollered at the crowd to settle down. Three of the other guards stomped into the room to help.

Werewolves were selected by the vampires not because of their ability to change into gruesome creatures when the full moon cycled around, but for their height and strength. They were hardly ever in their grotesque man-wolf forms. Like Elementals, they were prisoners. They’d been caught as humans and infected with the werewolf curse as leverage. If they guarded the nurseries and kept them secret, after five years, the guards would be given the cure and sent

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on their way. The newly cured werewolves would be watched, and if any one of them tried to reveal their secret, they and every member of their family would be killed.

“We don’t have time for this,” Dooley scolded. “None of the werewolves are staying, so those of you left behind will be on your own.”

“No one is staying behind!” Gerard insisted, and the group of Elementals behind him resumed shouting in agreement. “If we slay the vampires while they sleep, there won’t be anyone to hunt us down, so you have nothing to fear!”

Caedric flexed his arms against the two men holding him. “The other vampires will retaliate! There’s a reason no one has ever escaped the nurseries. None who have tried have survived!”

“Any attempts at escape in the past have failed because someone stayed behind. Coming with us is the only way we can ensure everyone’s safety. Don’t be stubborn!”

Caedric shook his head. “You’ll get everyone killed.”

Aideen barely heard her father’s words over the crowd. But his lower tones caused the room to drop to a hush, save for two infants crying. He shrugged his arms free from Baldwin and Welch.

Seeing Gerard more sedate, Dooley nodded to Marlon and Shep, who released the elder.

“Just this argument alone is going to get us disciplined. Rasheed already fed from a few people last night and we’re lucky it wasn’t one of you.” Caedric pointed to Marlon, Shep and Gerard. “Who else knew?”

“I did.”

All eyes in the room turned toward Jack.

His postured stiffened under the scrutiny. “I only overheard their initial conversation, but I was able to use my magic to keep Rasheed from learning anything.”

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“Master Rasheed fed from you and you knew?” Caedric’s glare intensified and, if her father’s earth abilities had been free, the building would have come down on their heads.

Aideen gulped at the granite glinting in her father’s gray gaze.

“How do you know he didn’t just hide what he learned from your blood?”

“I don’t, sir, but—”

Caedric shook his fist at Gerard. “You’ve put us all in danger just by starting this damned rebellion.” He paced, running his fingers through his red hair. “I’m staying. And those of you who are staying with me will be under my protection. I will go before Rasheed and tell him what happened and take full responsibility.”

Aideen gasped and rushed forward. “No, Papa Caedric! They’re sure to kill you!”

“That’s a chance I’ll have to take, little girl.” Judging by the sorrow that softened his warm gray eyes, Caedric knew he was as good as dead.

“That’s suicide!” Gerard stood nose to nose with Caedric. “And you’ll get everyone killed with your misplaced heroics.”

“If any one of us dies, it will be on your head, not mine.” Caedric narrowed his eyes.

“Refusing to go with you might be our only saving grace, and maybe they’ll spare me for taking such a stand. But make no mistake, Gerard...this is all on you.”

The two elders glowered at each other, fists clenched in a silent duel. Gerard was the first to break eye contact. He marched toward the passage to the sleeping chambers. “Those of you with us...we’re leaving now!”

Some of the Elementals standing behind Caedric exchanged worried glances and scampered after Gerard. Caedric leveled his stone gaze at Aideen’s siblings, who shrank under his silent warning. Aideen quaffed.

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A bustle of people scattered about the room, either weeping over their unknown futures or rushing to get what little belongings they had.

Aideen faced Jack, her heart racing.

“Are you with me?”

She nodded. “I’m with you—whether you leave or stay.”

He cupped her face with his palms. “I want no one else. If it’s going to be just us, we have to go.”

“You’re not taking her anywhere.” Caedric stood behind him, hands on his hips and brow furrowed.

Jack’s determined yet love-filled eyes locked with Aideen’s. “I’m sorry, Caedric, but she’s not staying.”

“She is my daughter and there is no way I’m letting her—”

“I love her!” Jack whirled to face the elder, keeping Aideen behind him. “I’m not leaving her here to be tortured or live as a captive anymore.”

“Stay here,” Caedric pleaded. “You know the vampires won’t let everyone just walk away...especially you. You are their prized possession! The only male cusper they have!”

“I cannot stay here and I won’t leave her behind.”

“I want to go with him!” Aideen clutched Jack’s tensed biceps as she peered around his tall frame.

“No, Aideen.” Caedric reached forward, but Jack seized his wrist. “Let go, son. Dooley!”

Jack shoved Caedric into the advancing werewolf guard, whirled around to sweep Aideen into his arms and ran down the hall, painfully clutching her against him. He stumbled to a halt and Aideen’s stomach flipped, fearing he might drop her.

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Radcliffe blocked their door to freedom. “Jack, be reasonable.” The werewolf guard held his arms out, filling the space.

Dooley and her father closed in behind them.

“I should have a choice!” she demanded of her father.

“Not if it means you’re putting your life in danger!” Caedric marched up and grabbed Jack’s arm. “Let her go, son, or stay here.”

Jack tried to shove past her father and Dooley...then a flurry of confusion sent Aideen reeling. Radcliffe jumped into the mix, grabbing Jack by the shoulders as Dooley struggled to pull Aideen from Jack’s arms. She fisted Jack’s shirt, hanging on with every ounce of strength she had. Just as Jack spun from Dooley’s grip and lunged for her, Papa Caedric clobbered Jack’s head and he went limp in her arms. Radcliffe encircled her waist and Dooley tugged at Jack’s unconscious form...and the ripping of his shirt joined her wails as they tore her beloved out of her reach.

“Get him out of here!” Caedric commanded. “If he wants to go, take him to Gerard.” Her father turned to Radcliffe.

Aideen yanked repeatedly against Rad’s iron grip, her skin chafing. The man was an intolerable beast.

“Are you staying?” Caedric asked.

Radcliffe shook his head.

“I understand. Get her secured. I’ll have someone come to her door and watch her. Now go!”

“Papa Caedric, don’t do this! I love him!” Aideen bawled at her father’s retreating figure as Radcliffe dragged her down the hall.

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## Chapter One

*Underground Nursery beneath Brecon, Wales  
Late Autumn, 1769 (ten years later)*

Aideen clutched her sons to her sides, trying to cover their ears as she turned their faces away from the burning pyre. The last of Steven's screams poured from the roaring flames and echoed off the vast, craggy walls of the caves.

"Do not keep them from seeing this!" Rasheed pointed a rigid finger at Aideen, his glowing vampire eyes piercing her across the play yard.

"They're just children!" She whimpered through her clenched teeth.

"This is the lesson you *all* should have learned years ago!" Rasheed glared at Aideen's nursery mates, huddled against the masonry walls bordering the smooth stone floor of the courtyard. "I spared everyone from watching Caedric burn, thinking his cries of agony would be lesson enough. And yet Steven had rebellion in his heart."

The vampire pointed back to the father of Aideen's two youngest children. Steven's charred, slouching body continued to blaze, chained to the stake on the pile of wood where the vampire had made an example of him.

"Be thankful I saved you from his fate or you would be burning with him. When will you ungrateful wretches understand you jeopardize us all—Vamsyrians *and* Elementals—by leaving?" Rasheed pinched his nose and closed his eyes, seeming to make a great effort at keeping his anger in check. Taking a deep breath, he regarded the group, his beady black gaze darting from one face to another. "It is only by sheer luck or miracle the Vamsyrian king doesn't yet know about our efforts. Must I continually remind you?" He pointed to Cara. "What is your *one* purpose?"

She wiped the tears from her face and cleared her throat. "To save both of our races, sir."

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Rasheed pointed to Baldwin. “How will you do that?”

“By producing a spirit Elemental, sir,” he rasped, grief pulling his mouth into a frown.

“And why do we need a spirit Elemental?” The vampire pointed to Aideen.

She forced a slow breath through her flared nostrils and steadied her rising temper. “To overthrow the king so he will no longer terrorize the Vamsyrians with his tyrannical rule.” She couldn’t keep the venom from her voice. “*Sir,*” she added as an afterthought.

Rasheed grinned and sauntered toward her. “What a thorough answer, little Aideen. Such a studious pupil.” His voice matched her sarcasm. “And what role do Vamsyrians play in all this?”

With the stench of Steven’s burning flesh lingering in the air, she loathed giving the expected response.

“Come now, my child,” the vampire coaxed with mock sympathy. “You know what we Vamsyrians mean to all of you. I want to hear you say it.” He smiled at Aron, her eldest son.

As he reached for the boy’s face, Aideen pulled him out of the vampire’s touch. “You are our saviors and protectors,” she answered to bring his attention back to her. “In overthrowing the Vamsyrian king, you will free us.”

The vampire’s grin widened. “And?”

She had hoped that would be the end of it, but obviously Rasheed enjoyed seeing her squirm. “Our valiant sacrifices make us heroes to our own race and we will be hailed for eternity, thereby making us as immortal as the Vamsyrians...*sir.*” She struggled to keep her disobedient thoughts to herself, not wishing to give Rasheed another body to burn.

*Very wise of you to keep your tongue.* The vampire’s thoughts slithered through her mind like a cluster of worms burrowing through the earth. *We wouldn’t want your children to lose both parents today, would we?*



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He swept his eyes over Aideen's nursery mates, almost as if waiting for anyone else to add their comments. No one dared to say a word. Nodding, Rasheed exited the courtyard. As soon as he, the headmaster and nanny disappeared from their presence, the tension lifted. Aideen and many of the other Elementals collapsed into tears, hugging their children.

Aideen's nightmares had plagued her for months after hearing the cries of Papa Caedric when he died. How long would her children's nightmares last after watching *their* father burn? She crouched beside her boys and engulfed them in her arms.

Caedric had been right. The vampires had punished him for allowing the others to escape. However, his life spared everyone else from punishment. The vampires were impressed with his bravery at accepting full responsibility for Jack's escape. At least Caedric died knowing he had saved lives. Of course, in hind sight, she realized the vampires wouldn't risk killing the only Elementals they had left after the rebellion. Caedric's sacrifice meant nothing.

Morgen shivered under her left arm, hiding his face in her bosom. He was only five years old. How would the poor darling survive? Aideen burst into new tears as Quinton, her seven year old, stroked the chestnut hair of his little brother while he knelt beside her under her right arm.

"Such a sweet soul you are, Quinn." She brushed his golden-brown hair aside and kissed his brow.

And standing before her, anger and tears in his ice-blue eyes, was her eldest and bravest son...Aron. He swiped at the raven curl on his forehead and crossed his arms. Every time she looked into Aron's eyes she saw Jack...her beloved Jack. Was he still alive?

Aron opened his mouth, but Aideen shook her head. She glanced to the tunnel where Rasheed and the other vampires had exited, then turned a warning glance to her son. "I know what you would say, my love," she whispered. "Save it for the daylight."

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His bottom lip trembled and jaw muscles twitched, but he shrugged and hugged his midsection. Aideen lifted Morgen into her arms when she stood. She nodded to Aron, who returned the nod and put his arm around his half-brother, Quinton. They both shuffled close as she headed toward the sleeping rooms.

“I don’t want to go to our chamber, Mama.” Quinton clutched her skirts.

“I’m so glad you said that, my sweet,” she whispered. “I was hoping the three of you would keep me company today. There is room enough for all. I don’t think I will be able to sleep without my brave boys at my side.”

“We’ll protect you, Mama.” Quinton’s chest puffed out, displaying his newfound courage.

“I knew I could count on you, Quinn.” She pulled her middle son to her hip and glanced over her shoulder at Aron. The corner of his mouth turned up in a half-smile.

Aideen led the children to her sleeping chamber to get them ready for bed. Dawn was approaching.

Ever since they had moved to this new location two months ago, the regular routines and nursery business seemed peculiar in subtle ways. Perhaps living under a city had a different influence on the daily comings and goings. And the werewolf guards selected for this location were especially contrary to the type of people recruited for the task. Though they were still large in stature, there was a dark edge to each of them.

“Mama?” Aron touched her shoulder, bringing her out of her thoughts.

“I’m well.” She caressed his cheek. “Get the boys into bed. I’ll be right there.”

Aron did as she requested while Aideen slipped behind her dressing screen and changed into her nightdress. She plaited her long, auburn hair then climbed into bed between her boys—Morgen and Quinton under her right arm; Aron on her left. He laid on his back, staring at the

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ceiling with his arms crossed. It wasn't long before Quinton and Morgen's uneasy breathing settled into the steady rhythm of sleep's repose. Morgen sucked his thumb intermittently as he dozed.

She glanced left. Aron's intense blue eyes studied the nooks and crannies of the earth above.

"When I grow up," her brave little earth mage vowed, "I'm going to make this cave come down and bury those vampires in their crypt."

She couldn't blame him for his anger...nor could she bring herself to correct him.

Aron's eyes glassed with unshed tears. "Do you think he's still alive?"

She wrapped her arm around him and kissed the top of his rich black curls. "I'm certain of it."

"Then why hasn't he come for us?" His voice cracked.

Aideen pressed her fingertips to his forehead and forced him to gaze to her. "The vampires moved the nursery, son. He might still be looking for us. Don't give up hope. I haven't."

He nodded and finally buried his face in her neck and let his tears flow. She hugged her son tight and let her own tears fall into his raven locks.

*We must get out of here, and I can no longer wait for Jack.*

\* \* \*

Jack glared at the iron door sealing the vampires' crypt. Extending his hands, he concentrated his air powers to force out any heat gathered in the metal, and simultaneously used his water powers to constrict the physical matter in the absence of heat. Blue-yellow swirls of light and sparkles flowed toward the door, intermingling and smoking over the surface. The metal groaned and creaked as crystalline patterns spider-webbed from the edges, across the dark façade, gradually spreading inward toward the center of the door.

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“As many times as I’ve seen you do that, it never ceases to amaze me.” His brother Brian’s smile gleamed in the light of the torch he held high.

Jack smirked, took one step forward and smashed his foot through the iron door. The once-solid metal barrier shattered into a thousand pieces, tinkling across the marble tiles into the crypt.

Brian used his torch to light the two iron sconces just inside the entrance. “I’ll ask about Aideen while you finish them off.”

Jack shook his head and frowned. “Don’t waste your time. I already inquired.” He unsheathed his silver-plated short sword. “They don’t know her.” Disappointment weighted his words. “I’ll meet you and the others upstairs.” Jack stepped into the crypt.

Brian nodded and stomped up the stone staircase.

Jack whirled to face the three sarcophagi in the center of the small underground chamber. With a hefty shove from his heel, he pushed the stone lid off the first coffin, which thumped to the floor and cracked the tiles. He snarled at the sleeping vampire. Grabbing the monster by the lapels, he dragged him face down from his stone sarcophagus, enough for his head to hang over the ledge.

With his foot on the vampire’s shoulder blades, Jack aimed the edge of his weapon between the lumps of two vertebrae, raised his sword high and, in one swift stroke, brought the blade down and sliced through the Vamsyrian’s neck with a clean cut. The head tumbled across the marble tiles and the body slumped back into the sarcophagus. He pivoted to the next stone coffin, thrust the other lid aside and separated the nanny’s head from her shoulders. He then stalked to the final coffin and finished off the headmaster.

“Let’s go, Frost!” Brian shouted down the stairwell. “We’re ready for the razing.”

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Jack clenched his jaw and gave one last glance at the headless corpses before he trotted up the stairs to the ground level and joined the others. At least thirty Elementals of varying ages huddled around each other several yards from the compound. Jack and the other members of his grove swarmed about the buildings, positioning themselves to begin the destruction.

Once the nursery was secured by the rescue team, a clean-up crew gathered whatever vampire blood was in the laboratory. The vampires drank from all four Elemental types to absorb the abilities of their magic. Because the vampires' blood was immortal, they would frequently harvest their own magic-infused blood and keep it in vials for later use.

The Elemental-laced immortal blood was primarily collected for the werewolf guards—an ingredient in a recipe for the cure of the werewolf curse. The spell had been handed down from a powerful fire witch in Germany over one-hundred years ago. Legend had it she was married to a Vamsyrian, which was how she had discovered Vamsyrian blood was the final ingredient for the cure. She had been searching for the remedy to heal her own father, who had been infected. Jack's grove used the cure as leverage to convince the werewolves to abandon their loyalty to the vampires and help them release everyone from their prison.

With Jack's people now positioned around the structure, Beth stepped forward with a torch in each hand. She was the group leader for this run, and once an adolescent in the nursery where Jack and Aideen had met. Red streams of light shot from the palms of the fire witches and mages as they called the flames to their outstretched hands. Jack extended his left palm toward the structure and blue smoke-like swirls of light wisped over the fallen snow, lifting it like crystal dust and gathering it into large drift piles he positioned to the side for later use. The water Elementals reached both their hands toward the buildings, and any melted snow or moisture was sucked from the wood to ensure it was dry enough to burn.

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Since Jack also had the power to wield air, he joined his efforts with the other air Elementals, extending his right hand forward. Golden streams of light shot from his fingers and mingled with the crimson powers of fire, not only fueling the flames of the fire witches and mages, but containing the blaze for a controlled burn. Like an orchestra working together and building for the climax, the earth Elementals stepped forward, raising their arms. Emerald waves of light shook the foundation of the grounds, reducing the prison to a smoldering pile of rubble.

As the earth mages and witches strolled over the compound, the rubble became tilled earth under their feet. They stopped, scattered equally across the newly churned soil, arms out to their sides. The air Elementals, including Jack, gathered seed from the forest, blew it over the fresh dirt and settled it into the ground for the spring.

Only Jack was able to give the area the final touch. Extending his arms, he called to the snow he'd set aside. Sapphire and amber lights spiraled from his hands for a spectacular display against the white landscape. He swept his hands in an arc over his head, lifting the water and ice high into the air. Thrusting his palms upward, yellow and blue plumes exploded skyward for the finale.

He dropped his arms to his sides and glanced at the crowd of captives, their mouths open in awe. In moments, the air was hazy with the gentle fall of snowflakes, dusting their eyelashes and melting on their smiles. The fresh-tilled earth would be covered with newly fallen snow, leaving no trace of the nursery. Beth instructed everyone to file through the forest to flatbed wagons, which were waiting to take them all back to the grove's village just a few days' journey away.

The group leader strolled up to Jack and fell in step beside him. "I'm sorry, Frost." She patted his back. "One day we'll find her."

Jack nodded and frowned. "She's out there. I know she is."

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He straggled behind the group and faced the direction of the field where the nursery had once been. Raking his hands through the air, Jack willed yellow and blue mist across the ground to ruffle the foot-packed snow and a cloud of snowflakes blanketed their path to cover their tracks.

*You Have Reached  
The End  
of this sample of Frostbitten Hearts*

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