

The Match Girl

ELLA STARED AT the trees around her, lost.

For the first time in her life, nothing in the forest she had called home for ages looked familiar. The bark was darker than she remembered, the snow-covered ground didn't yield to her footsteps, the bushes didn't point the way home.

For the Dark's sake...

She hadn't been gone from the Woods all that long!

Well, she had been spending an inordinate amount of time in the palace with Kit lately, but...

She couldn't help the grin that turned her lips when she felt for the ring on her finger, missing the husband she had left behind for her pilgrimage to the woods to celebrate the Longest Night with her family.

Her family.

Somehow, in the years since she'd been exiled and then allowed to return to the Dienobo, the elves that had once cast her aside had welcomed her home and she was accepted among them.

No longer the outcast. No longer feared.

Funny how the world turned.

But she wasn't going to make it home at this rate, and elves or humans, whichever family she was claiming for the night, wouldn't matter if she wasn't there to celebrate with them.

Ella rubbed her hands against her arms to bring the blood back to them.

None of this would have happened if her horse hadn't lost a shoe and she hadn't been distracted by thoughts of her room in the palace and the prince waiting there for her. When the animal bucked, she'd slipped from its back and it had bolted before she had a chance to stop it.

Which shouldn't have been a problem!

She was already deep in the Woods.

It should have been easy to find her way home through the forest paths.

She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders and stamped her feet trying to dislodge the largest clumps of snow from her boots.

The heavy white refused to budge, and her gloves were soaked through from pulling the clumps away by hand.

The snow, which was falling heavier by the minute, muted the world in a shroud of white, and Ella shivered as the past tramped through the ice beside her.