

# Detective Iceheart Twin Crowns

A Detective Runewall Novel

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*B.T. Frost*

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Book Jacket – B.T. Frost  
Editing – McKenzie Spies

Website: [www.author-btfrost.com](http://www.author-btfrost.com)

**Other works by B.T. Frost**

**Detective Runewall Series:**

**Book 1: Detective Runewall: Uncut Gems**

**Book 2: Detective Runewall: Grave Secrets**

## Acknowledgements

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# Chapter 1

Amelia Iceheart didn't awaken. Awakening suggested she slept. She lost consciousness and slowly regained it. Recovering from a drinking sickness was never pleasant or easy. Her memory was jumbled at best, and she couldn't recall how she had gotten home. Thankfully, Bluregard had tended to her needs throughout the night.

His presence was constant throughout the brief moments that she was cognizant. She hoped he had at least gotten some sleep of his own. She didn't need much attention, if any. A glass of water and a strong bitter tonic did most of the work. She didn't remember drinking any of it, but the familiar aftertaste of the tonic lingered on her tongue.

Drinking was not something she was accustomed to. When attending the funeral of a dwarf, one was expected to divulge in drinking games until one couldn't stand. She had undeniably succeeded in that aspect.

Any attempt to call for her lifelong companion came out as little more than a whimpered murmur. Yet, he somehow always heard her.

Blueregard entered her room with a graceful ghostliness; she hadn't heard him at all. It was also entirely possible that she had been unconscious and entirely incapable of hearing anything when he arrived.

"You called, ma'am?" He had a strong, rumbling voice, but he managed to keep his tone low and soft.

With her head pounding rhythmically against the sides of her head and her stomach rolling like a rowboat on stormy seas, she didn't trust herself to speak. Instead, she let out another grumbled whimper and lazily pointed to the back of her neck as she buried her face into her pillow.

"At once, Ms. Iceheart," his voice just as gentle as before. Blueregard turned on the spot and silently stepped from her room. Again, he was a ghost and didn't make a sound.

*You are a blessing.*

As a result of the many years that Mr. Blueregard had served her family, then her exclusively, the man had learned many of her wants and needs without her even having to vocalize them.

In short time – or perhaps she lost consciousness again – Blueregard returned. She almost jumped from the sudden touch of a soft cool cloth on the base of her skull beneath her hairline.

"Gods..." She couldn't help but curl her toes a bit and sigh in relief from the familiarity and ache-easing coolness. She breathed in deeply and exhaled the heat from her body.

"I take it the anti-toxin tablet didn't hold out against the might of dwarven ale?" Amelia couldn't see it, but by the tone of his voice, she was almost certain Blueregard was raising his eyebrow in his 'I told you so'

sort of way.

The aforementioned tablet was often ingested prior to attending drinking parties, designed to help absorb the alcoholic toxins. Sadly, they only lasted a few hours.

The entombing ceremony lasted far longer than she expected. She'd never attended a proper dwarven funeral before and had no idea how much was involved.

Part of the ceremony included turning the deceased into a statue. That meant that they needed dwarven wizards with transformative or polymorphic abilities. Only a few of them existed, and they were in high demand. Due to the exhaustive nature of the work, they had to take turns, and there were only two of them last night. The laborious difficulties of the endeavor didn't even include the over-exaggerated necessity for dwarven chest-thumping heroism. Officer Dromvil Anvilhearth was positioned so that he appeared to be roaring and flexing.

According to tradition, nobody was allowed to drink a drop until the transformation was complete. By the time they had finally finished, the tablet had long since been digested and she was both starving and thirsty. Dwarven ale and heavily-spiced meats were all that was served. Drinking sickness wasn't exactly something that could have been avoided in that particular scenario.

Her answer to his rhetorical question was to grumble and curl up under the blankets as she pulled them over her head. There wasn't much light in the room, so she mostly did so in order to hide from his scrutinizing gaze.

“Shall I draw you a bath, Ms. Iceheart?”

Amelia stuck a hand out from the corner of the bed and lazily waved him toward the water closet. It was her way of saying 'yes'.

It didn't take long for her to hear the familiar



squeak of the taps, the rattling of the pipes, and the muffled rush of water. The lack of footsteps wasn't surprising as her bedroom was carpeted.

With her magic slowly returning to her senses, she could feel the shifting warmth in her room. Through it, she could tell that Blueregard had returned from the water closet. "Your bath shall be ready momentarily, ma'am. Would you care for assistance in getting to the tub, or would you prefer I begin brewing a tea to help settle your stomach?"

She lifted her dangling arm from the side of the bed and pointed to the kitchens.

"Very well. If you require any assistance, I am always within earshot." His warm presence slipped from the room, and her door shut behind him.

Amelia took in a deep breath through her nose and released another breath of hot air. Lowering her core temperature helped to ease her stomach and temper some of her pounding headache.

Despite all her gifts as a wizard, snapping her fingers and banishing a drinking sickness was not one of them. She could, however, use her talents to combat some of the symptoms until her body could recover normally.

She took in another deep breath and lowered her temperature yet again. The thunderous pounding that sat behind her eyes and squeezed the sides of her head slowly eased to a dull thrum. It would have to do.

Amelia groaned and slowly pushed away the bed sheets, then gingerly stuck one foot at a time out from the bed. Sitting upright was to be the true test of her rolling stomach.

She opened one eye and peered about the room. Her vision wasn't tilting, rolling, or swaying.

*That's always a good sign.*

Not taking any risks, she kept the other eye closed and eased herself up from the bed. Her hair stuck

to the pillow, and the pillow came up with her.

*That's never a good sign.*

She couldn't smell any vomit or ale. There was at least that good news. She swatted the pillow back onto the bed. Her hair stayed exactly as it had been while stuck to the pillow – everywhere. It stuck up at odd angles and remained plastered to the side of her face.

Afraid of examining her hair and learning what she could have possibly gotten into it, she opted for ignoring its existence and focused on getting to the tub.

She was about to test her legs and stand up from the bed when she noticed she was wearing her white trousers. Further tilting her chin downwards, she couldn't help but notice that she was still in her detective's garb. Her trench coat was on the floor beside her bed, but she was wearing her enchanted vest.

Mortifyingly, the vest was unbuttoned down to her navel, and so was her shirt. The only thing that had kept her decent was her brazier. "Oh, gods!"

Amelia rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands and prayed that whatever unbuttoning had taken place was done once she had gotten home to bed. Her stomach rolled from the anxiety of having done something publically inappropriate. A quick strengthening of her will and a calming breath settled the storming sea in her gut.

By the sounds of the water filling the tub, it was nearly ready.

*One problem at a time.*

Amelia put one hand on the bed and held the other out before her for balance, then slowly pushed off to begin the perilous and nauseating journey to the water closet.

It didn't take her long, and she managed to finish stripping down along the way. It didn't take much effort to undress either, as she was nearly undressed to

begin with; that bothered her deeply.

The water was exactly as she liked it, only a touch warm. She shivered a little as she dipped one foot in, then eased into the waters and soon acclimatized to it. Once in the tub, she was able to push her body heat out into the waters and breathe in cooler air. The water began to steam as she pushed out the stresses and cooled herself down. The pounding behind her eyes alleviated itself. Her stomach was still a bit floppy, but it would be dealt with in time.

With the water at the right temperature, she got to investigating why her hair was so stiff. A few dunks of her head and several vigorous brushings of her hair revealed thick white clumps of wax.

*Why in the storming devils do I have wax in my hair?*

She truly hoped that she hadn't made some unsightly scene at Anvilhearth's funeral. As much as dwarven funeral rituals involved excessive drinking and vulgar obscenities, she didn't feel like being lumped in with that sort of lot.

A few more furious combings of her hair resulted in a length of wick. One end was burned.

*Oh... I fell asleep by a candle.*

The funeral had been held in a traditional dwarven grand hall, where lantern lights had never been installed. Everything was lit by candles. She must have passed out on the table and a candle melted into her hair.

With a clean scrub and well-combed hair, she took a minute to soak her stresses away into the water before emerging to get ready for the day.

She unplugged the tub and allowed it to drain. Once the tub was emptied, she breathed in deeply and released all the heat from the surface of her skin. The water droplets that had clung to her flesh quickly solidified into crystals of frost, ice, and snow.

A gentle shake, pat, or brush was all she needed

to knock it all free from her body; she could then step out of the tub without the need for a towel.

The full-length mirror beside her sink allowed her to examine herself. It revealed that she hadn't suffered any injuries or bruises from the night before. Nothing suggested that she had stumbled home drunk. That was a slight relief.

The mirror above her sink revealed that her stark white hair had combed out straight, and there didn't appear to be any leftover wax.

A quick check revealed no blemishes either. Despite what many women thought, Amelia didn't apply much makeup. A moisturizing cream and a touch of Stormbay Gray eye shadow was all she ever used. Her white eyelashes, eyebrows, hair, and lips were all a result of her ice magic.

Magic, in all its wondrous incarnations, altered the form of the human body. The more frequently a type of magic was used, the more it altered the body. It wasn't always an apparent difference, but her use of magic clearly made an impact.

She opened a jewelry box she kept beside the sink and perused her earrings before deciding on a small set of spiraling snowflakes. Thankfully, they didn't require her ears to be pierced; they simply latched onto her earlobes with the smallest string of magic.

Once set for the day, she turned to her bedroom and the fuzzy white carpet upon which she had tossed her clothing. Amelia pulled her blue detective's vest from the rest and gave it a quick flick to shake off anything that might have possibly settled on it. The vest had enchantments that protected her from harm. Subsequently, the vest never got soiled or dirtied. She could wear it endlessly without the need to ever clean it.

Amelia turned to her closet and the clothing within. Her apparel never truly changed except for

outside of work, so it was merely a matter of grabbing a pair of white slacks and a blouse to go with her vest and trench coat.

She appreciated simplicity, and so her room had been decorated in a stark white design. The walls, baseboards, ceiling, doors, carpet, bed, bed frame, night stand, and night lantern were all painted white. The only thing that she left unpainted was the dark walnut lectern that held aloft her spell-tome.

Amelia wasn't one for nuances. Simplicity appealed to her far more readily than anything else did. That wasn't to say she couldn't understand nuance. She likely understood it far better than some others; she merely preferred simplicity.

Clean and dressed, minus her trench coat, she was as ready as she was going to be to face the aftermath and horrors of the drunken dwarven funeral. She also couldn't seem to find her staff, so she had no choice but to head for the kitchens.

Amelia snapped her fingers to shrink her spell-tome down to pocket size, picked it up off the lectern, and stuffed it in her trouser pocket. She then stepped up to the door to the kitchens and prepared herself for the onslaught of questions she was about to receive.

Opening the door proved to be a horrible mistake; the sunlight that assaulted her eyes near reawakened the headache she had earlier banished. "Oh, gods."

Amelia shut her eyes and raised her arm to block out the morning sun that was penetrating the kitchen windows to her immediate right.

A fog of cold air billowed into existence in the doorway as the two climates collided around her. She preferred a much colder bedroom. That differential, too, threatened to reawaken her headache.

"Mornin', sunshine!" Her fellow resident, Ms. Betty Hopper, was as cheery as a child with a handful of

sweets. The volume level at which the woman spoke caused Amelia's hair to squeeze her head.

Ms. Betty dressed in bright, patterned dresses. Her hair never stayed the same color from one moon to the next, and it was pixie pink that morning.

The loudness of her appearance threatened to make Amelia's stomach upheave in absolute mutiny. In response, Amelia shut her eyes and breathed steadily.

Betty was only a little younger than Amelia, and the youngest child of an engineer and factory owner. The two of them split the cost of their loft residence. The poor woman also routinely scared away young men with her overly zealous attempts to land a husband, while Amelia deliberately scared men away.

"Where's—"

"On the table, Ms. Iceheart." Blueregard noted.

Amelia peered out of her left eye and noted that her tinted spectacles sat upon her empty plate. "And my—"

"It is leaning in the corner by the door. You dropped it on the kitchen floor this morning, ma'am."

Amelia squinted and peered at the corner by the door to the hall. Her staff was indeed leaning there. Her belt, gun, and holster were similarly in the corner.

*Truly a blessing.*

Amelia set her trench coat over the back of the chair, picked up her spectacles to put them on, and sat down. "My hat?"

Blueregard turned away from the kitchen stove and used a pair of metal tongs to place two pieces of toast on her plate. "It is hanging on the rack by the door." The toast was perfectly browned, and she could smell a hint of ginger spice. For the first time that morning, her stomach rumbled in a good way.

Following the toast, a mug of steaming tea was placed on a saucer just north of her plate, its aroma a mixture of mint and ginger. It too helped to settle the

flopping in her stomach. She was truly touched by his care and the effortless way in which he exhibited it. “Thank you, Blue.”

“You are eternally welcome, Ms. Iceheart.”

Amelia turned to Betty and greeted her in turn. “Morning, Betty.” The woman absolutely beamed and clapped excitedly, as she did every morning.

With the pleasantries aside, she took a hearty bite of her toast and curled her toes again in joy and the relief of finally getting something into her system to help aid in her recovery.

“Sooo... who did you meet last night, puddin’?” Betty routinely used endearing terms when trying to coax gossip from Amelia. It never worked, but she also never told her to stop trying.

Amelia finished chewing and swallowed before speaking. “It was a funeral for a fellow fallen officer, Betty. I met my colleagues at the precinct.” She picked up her tea and sipped it to test. It warmed her throat and stomach, and she shut her eyes to revel in it for a moment.

“And... who else was there?” The woman was endlessly and doggedly determined to see Amelia find someone. Amelia was just as determined not to.

A quick puff from her breath cooled the brew so that she could greedily drink from it. “There were a great many dwarves there. It was a dwarven funeral.” She proceeded to take in a mouthful of tea so to cleanse her palette before taking another bite of toast.

“Oh! I heard they’re passionate lovers!”

Amelia choked on her tea, sucked it in, and shot it out her nose and back into her cup. She proceeded to cough and water from the eyes as she thumped her chest with her fist.

*Gods, woman!*

Bluregard was quick to offer a towel so that Amelia could clean herself up. She put down her teacup,

took the towel, and coughed into it as she wiped her face.

“Oh dear! Honey, you have to be more careful with your tea. All that huffing and blowing you do with your magic is bound to cause you to suck it down into your lungs. That can’t be good for you.” Betty got up from the table and hurried over to pat Amelia on the back as she continued coughing.

*Passionate lovers?*

The thought of a dwarven man yanking on a dwarven woman’s beard caused her stomach to turn. Her coughing eased up quickly as she felt a deep-pitted burp rise to the surface. It was horrible and tasted of dwarven ale, spiced meats, and regret.

Having stifled her coughing fit, she dabbed her eyes and grimaced at the toast in front of her. She didn’t feel like eating any more. Not after the horrible image that Betty had inadvertently stuck in her head. “Blue, do you have more—”

As she turned to look at Blueregard, she gladly spotted her favorite cylindrical heating container in his hands. “More tea, ma’am, in your favorite travel container.”

She sighed and thanked him under her ragged breath. “Thank you.”

“As always, Ms. Iceheart, you are eternally welcome.” He offered the briefest of smiles before bowing in the old court fashion.

Amelia stood, went up on her toes, and kissed the old man on the cheek. “You truly are a blessing.”

He tilted his head a bit higher in acceptance of her praise and strode across the room so that he might open the door for her.

“Puddin’, you’re not done your breakfast; do you have to go so soon?”

Amelia checked the time on her watch and sighed, “Yes, sadly.” She had a few minutes to spare, but



the conversation had turned far too uncomfortable far too quickly. She grabbed her trench coat as she headed for the door.

She picked her hat up off the rack and placed it on her head. She adorned her belt and holster as each was handed to her by Blueregard. Once buckled in, she shrugged on her trench coat. Lastly, she accepted her staff.

A thought then occurred to her and she quickly turned back to him. "When I got home... was my... vest..." She cleared her throat and made a brief and quick gesture up and down.

"You were decent, I assure you. You did not attempt to disrobe until you were already in your room."

*Thank the merciful goddess.*

She dared to follow up that question with another. "How did I get home?"

"Master Stonehand brought you home."

*Thank again the merciful goddess. John's always respectable.*

"Well that's—"

"Limp as a fresh corpse and swung over his shoulder like a carcass on a meat hook."

Betty giggled.

Amelia sighed and stared at Blueregard for a moment. "Thank you for that degrading and completely unnecessary description."

"You're quite welcome." She could see the slightest glint of joy in his eye. He took pleasure in humbling her from time to time. It was rare, but it certainly showed he had a sense of humor.

"Good day, Mr. Blueregard."

"Good day, Ms. Iceheart. I will see to it that there is a hearty meal prepared for you upon your return home."

"That would be lovely." She turned to leave but was quickly stopped by his hand on her arm. He didn't

grab her, but he did grab her attention.

“One last thing, Ms. Iceheart.”

She turned back and raised an eyebrow. “Yes?” Her voice croaked a bit from the coughing fit earlier. She cleared her throat and repeated, “Yes?”

Mr. Blueregard reached into his inner vest pocket and produced a letter envelope. It was stamped with a familiar red seal.

*Blast it all. Not today.*

“Burn it.” She knew who it was from and had no time for them. Amelia turned to head out the door when she heard something she wasn’t expecting.

“I already tried, ma’am... The letter is protected this time.” He was sincerely apologetic as he said it.

*That can’t be good.*

She slowly turned back and sneered at the envelope being proffered to her. “I hate family.”

## Chapter 2

Amelia lived on the second level of a three-level abode. Blueregard, Amelia, and Betty all lived on the same level in separate rooms. She descended the stairs to the main floor and out the door to the cobblestone streets.

It was a drizzly day but there were rays of sunshine piercing the clouds. Many people were already out and about, heading to work, as she was.

She affixed her tinted spectacles on her nose and did her best not to look at anything too bright. The air was fresh, so the walk would hopefully help ease the slight headache she had redeveloped from the sudden coughing fit.

The envelope – the current object of her ire – was in the inner breast pocket of her trench coat. Blueregard had placed it there for her. She feared touching it with her hands, as it might trigger some form of blood-bound binding magic. It wouldn't be the first

time her family had used such underhanded methods to get her to the table.

Advocates used to use a binding magic in their legal documentation, making it so that the recipient was bound to appear on a specific day and time. Any attempts to refuse would result in that person being bewitched. Their body would walk them to the destination, no matter how far away it was.

A professor at the Arcanum had warned students of several instances in which binding magic got the recipient killed. If the person was on a boat, the spellwork didn't care if they couldn't swim. If they were leagues away, they would march the poor victim to death. Due to those mishaps, the utilization of that particular form of binding spell was deemed illegal.

As far as Amelia was concerned, legality was beneath her family. Thus, she didn't want to touch the envelope until someone else had examined it.

She didn't want to have to ask him, but Joseph Runewall – Rook, the rookie – was her best choice. The man had a unique talent when it came to barriers, traps, locks, and the like. He would certainly be able to give the envelope a thorough once-over and determine if it was safe for her to handle.

Amelia shrunk her staff to the size of a wand and pointed it skyward to use its magic to deflect any rain droplets. With her heating container in the other hand, she set off for work. Hopefully, she would arrive before Joe did, and she'd be able to have him examine the envelope before he began work.

A squeeze of a button on the side of her heating container caused a small flap to open on the top. The strong scent of ginger and mint rose up in a wafting steam.

Amelia wove her way around a gentleman in a raincoat – he was heading the opposite direction down the cobblestone walk – and took a sip of her tea. Her

stomach thanked her for it. Her nose still burned from the earlier violent expulsion.

The walk helped to clear her head a bit and ease some of the drinking sickness. She even managed to enjoy a ray of sunshine for a brief moment.

It was a peaceful morning... *was*.

She was halfway to the precinct when a sudden eruption of glass and shouting came from a storefront window half a block back. Amelia rounded on the spot to try and locate the source. Unfortunately, there was a wall of pedestrians between her and the storefront. All of them had turned, same as she had, and blocked her view.

Based on the distance and general location, she guessed it to be Mr. Greenthumb's Flower Boutique.

"Get back 'ere, ye filthy rascal!" A booming explosion of gunfire followed the shouting. It was undeniably Mr. Greenthumb.

Men and women screamed, turned, and began running past her in a panic. They gave no care for who they shoved out of their way in the process. A squat and stout dwarven woman in a flowery raincoat had the audacity to shove Amelia aside and against a brick building.

She grunted from the shove and gripped the building. Sadly, she had to let go of her heating container in order to hold on. Dropping her wand wasn't an option. Her tea had to be sacrificed. The heating container clattered across the cobblestones and out of sight. "Blast it!"

The panic and shoving only lasted for a brief moment, but it was long enough to give the assailant a head start.

As soon as Amelia was able to peer through the crowd, she spotted him. A thin and wiry man was etching history into the soles of his shoes and putting as much distance between himself and the storefront as

one possibly could. He had a flat cap, a patched jacket, worn brown trousers, suspenders, and a yellowed and dirty button-up shirt.

“Freeze!” Amelia released her wand into a staff and pointed it directly at him. The many glistening facets refracted the dozens of raindrops that struck it, causing her crystalline staff to appear as though it were glowing with great power in the drizzly morning sunlight. It was, but the power wasn’t readily visible.

The man peered over his shoulder and spun about mid-stride in order to see who had yelled at him and from where. Amelia noted that he carried plants, herbs, and brown bags.

Their eyes locked, and even from the great distance between them, she could tell he was about to rabbit. His body language said it all. He thought he had enough of a headstart, and he was going to risk it. The man jolted on the spot, turned, and ran full-tilt down the cobblestone road, beelining for a nearby alleyway across the street.

“Blast it!” She pointed the tip of her staff to the cobblestones and used a touch of magic to summon up all the water and moisture that had collected throughout the drizzling rainfall. A sizeable puddle quickly formed around her feet.

With her staff in hand, she didn’t need to breathe in or out in order to alter the temperature of the water. The staff had been invested with countless hours of energy by her and those that came before her. It had energy of its own and responded to her will.

A focused bit of energy flowing down her arm and extending through the core of her staff allowed her to reach out and push the heat from the water. It immediately froze around her feet and turned into a sheet of ice, locking her legs in place.

Another quick motion of her staff brought the water beneath the ice rolling and pushed her along. In

less than four shakes of a stiff drink, she was sliding across the cobblestones. She picked up speed and was soon gliding along far quicker than most could run.

She passed Mr. Greenthumb's storefront just as he emerged from the door with a smoking long-barrel. "Get 'im, Ms. Iceheart!"

Amelia pointed a finger back at him and hollered over the wind whipping past her ears, "Put that away!"

The culprit managed to make it to the alley just as she was closing in on him. A reeling in of her staff and a twisting motion made it so that the ice sheet around her feet tilted up on one side. It brought her into a turn and curved toward the mouth of the alley.

A quick focusing of her mind allowed her to reach out and search. All she could sense was the ambient chill of the morning rain. She couldn't see any warm bodies or significant masses of heat anywhere near the mouth of the alley. He wasn't waiting to ambush her; he didn't seem like the type to do so anyway. Amelia made the corner and bent deep at the knees so that she might better absorb the forces associated with the sudden change in direction.

As soon as she rounded into the mouth of the alley, she realized it was a dead end and brought her ice-sheet to an immediate stop. Bits of snow and ice scraped off the bottom of her makeshift transportation and sailed out into the alley. The cast-off quickly melted back into water. Releasing the magic that held the ice together resulted in an almost immediate melting. A pressing of heat into the ice caused it to melt even faster and release her boots.

A quick scan of the alley revealed that there were only two doors. A sturdy door to the right led into a smoke shop. The door on the left led to the back end of a respectable tea shop. She couldn't hear any commotion from either building, there didn't appear to

be any ladders in the alley leading to the rooftops, and the far end was a flat brick wall. They were hiding.

*Coward.*

Trash littered the alley, and there was a metal trash bin just beyond the door on the right. Her bets were on the suspect hiding behind the trash bin.

She rolled her wrist a little and made a circle with the butt end of her staff. A large puddle of water quickly formed around her at the entrance of the alley.

Amelia took a moment to calm her hammering heart and prepare her mind to open to the greater ‘verse. It didn’t take her very long, as she had spent years practicing. With only two deep breaths, she was ready. A blink was all that was needed to open her mind and expose the world around her in all its temperate glory.

She saw everything in shades instead of lines and colors. The darker the shade meant the object was colder to the touch. The brighter the shade meant the object was warmer. People tended to be brighter than the room they stood in or the world around them. It wasn’t always accurate, as there were days when the hot sun made everything bright. On a drizzly day, a person would stand out like a lantern light in a darkly lit room.

She saw a brief cloud of light billowing up from a storm grate, and a bit of heat emanating from the lantern lights above the doors. Otherwise, she didn’t see any body heat.

With her eyes open to the ‘verse, she slowly reached into her trench coat with one hand and drew her six-shooter. She eased her way into the alley, stepping wide of the bin. It didn’t take her long to realize that nobody was hiding behind it. There simply wasn’t any body heat.

Amelia was about to begin cursing her luck when she noticed tendrils of concentrated heat curling up from the cracks, crevices, and seams of the trash bin. There was too much heat for simple garbage.



“I hate it when people run.” She intentionally raised her voice so that the perpetrator would hear her.

There was a clattering noise from inside of the bin. They heard.

“Especially when I yell—”

The culprit burst from the trash bin, throwing the lid up and open. He leaped over the edge with one hand on the rim. His sights were set on the mouth of the alley. The eyes were wide as tea saucers, and he looked as pale as the dead.

“—Freeze!” Amelia slammed the butt end of her staff on the cobblestone. The puddle of water she had earlier gathered jumped up and snatched the thief from the air.

The man found himself encased in a prison of ice shards and tendrils and suspended two steps off the ground. He screamed and began shivering violently, “P-p-p-please d-d-d-don’t k-k-kill m-m-m-me!”

Amelia blinked away her arcane vision and looked at her six-shooter before holstering it. “I’m not going to kill you, you whimpering ninny!” She made her way back to the mouth of the alley, set her staff to stand on its own, crossed her arms, and glowered at him. “I’m arresting you for theft, numbskull.”

He seemed to mutter something under his breath as his teeth chattered. He also seemed to calm a bit.

Amelia thought nothing of it. Criminals muttered curses about their bad luck and others tended to exhibit signs of relief when caught. She couldn’t imagine that running from an officer of the law wasn’t stressful.

Running from a blue coat was one thing; they didn’t have magic, or at least weren’t legally allowed to use it. Trying to escape a detective was something else altogether. All detectives were wizards; they all had specialties, and they were legally charged with using

those abilities to catch criminals. It made them into living nightmares for the lawless.

She sighed and pulled a set of irons from her back belt pouch. "I'm going to release you from the ice, and you're going to let me put these on you, right?"

The man couldn't get out a single word. He was shivering too violently and was simply too cold. Instead, he nodded his head as best he could, sniffed, and continued to shake.

"Good."

~~

Amelia made her way back to Mr. Greenthumb's storefront with a handful of the stolen goods. The culprit, known to her then as Garrick Jenkins, had been about the dumbest thief she'd ever met. He had attempted to steal dried herbs, a potted flower, and a small brown bag of fertilizer.

"Hi, Allen," Amelia hefted the armful into the bigger man's arms. "I believe these belong to you."

Mr. Allen Greenthumb had a farmer's frame with the shoulders of an ox. He also had the body hair of a werewolf dwarf during a full moon. The armful that Amelia had unloaded filled only one of his massive meaty hands.

He wore a soil-stained green apron and hearty gardening gloves with holes in a few of the fingers. The handles of sheers poked out of one of his apron pockets and a spade out of the other. His massive eyebrows looked like two rabid weasels kissing at the nose. They entirely covered his eyes and made it impossible to determine what the man was looking at.

"Did ye get 'im?" His voice was deep, and he had a touch of a farmer's accent; it wasn't an attractive accent.

Amelia shut her eyes and nodded, "Yes, Allen, I

got him. I wouldn't have brought all this back to you if I hadn't." She gestured to the returned items she had just handed him.

Allen lifted his head and looked up and down the cobblestone street. "Where?"

"A blue coat came and escorted him back to the precinct. They headed up the street while you were sweeping up the broken glass." She pointed toward the precinct in the distance. She could see the top of it peering over the buildings a block over.

"Now," she took out her notepad and stylus, "can you tell me what happened, prior to you shooting and shouting at him?"

As slow as the shop owner seemed at times, he was practiced at delving out specific details. He had been robbed before, but the criminals had always been after his transactional station, never his plants.

Amelia took her time jotting down notes and asking follow-up questions to make sure she had gotten everything correctly.

Mr. Jenkins had apparently entered the shop and had looked a bit jittery and ragged, as if he'd seen a ghost. The man proceeded to frantically search about the store and had inquired as to whether Mr. Greenthumb carried any blood lotuses.

That small detail caught Amelia's attention. "Blood lotus... isn't that used in healing potions?"

The big man slowly nodded his balding head. "Among other things."

"Like what?" The crime had suddenly taken an interesting twist.

The big man looked around his store, as if making sure nobody else was listening in.

Amelia, puzzled, glanced about the empty flower shop as well. Nobody else had stepped inside, and it didn't look like he'd be getting any business until he had his front window fixed.

Allen lowered his voice and cupped one side of his mouth, “Brewin’ ‘alf-moon.” He had trouble enunciating his ‘h’s.

She was taken aback by the sudden mention of an illicit substance. “You know about half-moon?”

He nodded his head. “I get the odd dirtblood in ‘ere, asking if I ‘ave any dried blood lotus petals or ‘owler root.” ‘Dirtblood’ was a derogatory term for werebeasts, commonly known as Lycans.

Half-moon was an alchemical accident. A student at the Arcanum had recently attempted to discover a means by which to activate certain lycanthropic properties without physical changes. Lycans have accelerated healing – a desired trait for many. The student attempted to extract that one ability and bottle it. Instead, they developed a drug that could trigger a transformation without the need for a full moon. If wrongly administered, a single dose could drive a lycanthrope into a blood-craze, or kill them. Newly-bitten Lycans were sometimes too lazy to learn how to control the animal spirit within, and turned to alternatives.

Half-moon had been on the street for a year, and Amelia hadn’t managed to track down the alchemist making it.

“Next time you have someone asking you about those ingredients, you bring it to my attention, understand?” She made sure to give him a stern glare.

He nodded his head in understanding.

“Good. Then what happened?”

Allen continued to describe the interaction in the store. Mr. Jenkins became impatient and simply started grabbing things off the shelf and bolted for the door. That was when Allen had pulled his long-barrel from beneath the counter and fired.

Thankfully, the man had purchased and utilized non-lethal ammunition. He used pea-rocks and salt; it

packed a hearty wallop but didn't do any more than leave a nasty bruise... and break windows.

Amelia sighed, flipped closed her notepad, and thanked the big man for his cooperation. She left the man to clean up his store and began heading back toward the precinct.

She paused momentarily to search the cobblestones. Eventually, she found her heating container and the puddle of tea it sat in. Amelia grumbled and used a touch of magic to rinse off the container with some drizzle collected from the sky. Once emptied and cleaned, she stuffed it into her outside trench coat pocket.

It only took a few brief minutes to reach the steps; she hadn't been that far away. As she began climbing the steps to the main doors, John Stonehand began descending them. "Hurry up, we'll need your help."

John was a detective, like her, and had a good bit of height on her. He had massive broad shoulders and dark skin. Like the dwarven wizards at the funeral, he had polymorphic and transformative abilities.

Amelia stopped and turned on the spot as John stepped past her. "Help with what?"

"There's a bunch of bodies over by a warehouse in the industrial district. I hope your stomach is settled because I heard there's a bunch of murder and mayhem to clean up today." John marched on as though he hadn't even touched a single drop of dwarven ale from the night before. Despite not remembering how she got home, she definitely remembered him drinking far more than a drop.

As much as she decidedly wanted to shout some angry quip at him for being so damned cheery, she couldn't. He had carried her home and had made sure she had gotten home safely. She owed him. He had perhaps carried her in an undignified way, but she

couldn't be sure that he had done it the whole way. It was possible he had only carried her in that fashion in order to get her up the steps.

"Morning." The voice was horribly gravelly, but it sounded like Joseph.

Amelia turned and near shrieked upon spotting the man. His metallic silver eyes were bloodshot, his left eye had a black ring around it, and he was as pale as the walking dead. His hair was disheveled, he shuffled by with a limp and a hunched back, and one arm was tucked to his side. "Good gods!" His trousers even looked dirty and wrinkled. Mind, his clothing always looked dirty and wrinkled.

Petals – Wadnar Pettlebottom – their precinct training officer and trickster gnome extraordinaire, happily and mirthfully chuckled, "Hahaha! That's what I said when I saw him this morning. Looks like a valiant crusader mistook him for a zombie and beat him with a club, doesn't he?" The little man looked just as cheery as John did – he hadn't had enough to drink. Or if he had, he'd clearly found some means by which to combat the drinking sickness that she hadn't.

Amelia scowled at Petals, then looked up at Joe and couldn't help but scrunch her nose a little.

*I'll ask him later.*

## Chapter 3

Amelia removed her tinted spectacles and greeted the lobby clerk, Ms. Mistwind. She then ascended the spiral metal steps to the detectives' bullpen. It was mostly empty, thankfully; she didn't feel like having any pleasant conversations that morning.

As soon as she got to her desk, she hung up her trench coat and hat and set to generating her report for the morning's arrest. She was momentarily delayed when she had to replace the ink cartridge in her arcane mechanical typographer and was also interrupted by Blue Coat Argen Tannen.

The young man had graduated from the Academy at the same time as Amelia, but he didn't have any mystical talents. He would forever be a blue coat. Despite that, he was a skilled officer. The man was smart, quick, strong, and respectable.

"Ms. Iceheart?" Mr. Tannen stepped up to the

side of her desk and removed his hat as he spoke.

“Yes, Officer?” Amelia turned her full attention to the young man.

“The thief you arrested this morning...”

She eased back in her chair and crossed one leg over the other. “The plant thief. What about him?”

“He keeps shouting ‘She’s going to kill us all.’ I...”

Amelia shut her eyes and let out an irritated sigh, “I didn’t threaten the man. I have no idea what he’s on about.”

Mr. Tannen took her word for it, nodded in acceptance, and excused himself before putting his hat back on and leaving.

Her stomach gurgled a little, announcing its displeasure at having missed most of breakfast. She soothed her tummy by patting it. “Don’t worry, we’ll stop by a pastry shop on the way over.”

Amelia refocused her efforts and finished the remainder of the report. It didn’t take her more than fifteen minutes in total, including the interruption and ink cartridge exchange.

She set aside the two pages of the report so that the ink could dry. While waiting for that, she plucked the heating container from her trench coat pocket and made her way to the tea table at the far end of the office.

There wasn’t any ginger mint tea left. “Blast.” She snatched up a regular red leaf packet and dropped it in her container. A quick glance at the temperature crystal on the back of the kettle showed that the water was tepid at best. “Double blast!” Lifting the kettle then revealed it had barely any water in it. “Blasted thundering—!”

“Detective?” Captain Adragan ‘Bolt’ Thunderhowl’s rumbling voice carried across the bullpen, startling her. Amelia almost jumped out of fright. She let out a calming sigh, released the tension,



put down the kettle, and turned to face the dragon kin.

The captain of her precinct was a storm variant of dragon kin. He stood two heads taller than her and had the frame of a brick building. Storm gray scales covered his entire body and translucent electric blue horns jutted from his head and chin.

While it was fitting to find such a creature in a stormy seaside city, it was no less surprising, and he was no less intimidating.

“Yes, Captain?” Outwardly, she kept a cold and calm appearance. Inwardly, she screamed like a little girl whenever the captain caught her off guard. Despite the years she had worked at the precinct, the captain always set her at unease.

She never feared that the captain was untrustworthy or incapable; she simply feared him. The man was a mythical beast and had unparalleled strength and power. Like the ever mysterious trickster gnome, she didn’t have any idea as to how old the captain was or what all he was capable of doing.

“Why are you not with the others?” Despite the extraordinary depth of his voice, he didn’t need to raise it in order to be heard. It rolled across the room.

“Sir, I made an arrest this morning while on my way into work.” She pointed at her desk. “It’s there; I was just getting some tea while waiting for the ink to set.”

The massive lumbering beast of myth slowly turned to look upon her desk. He nodded in approval before heading back to his glass-paned office. “Very good, Detective. Bring it to me when it is ready.”

Amelia watched the dragon kin lumber back to his office and slowly shut the door behind him. She let out a deep sigh before turning back to the kettle. Grumbling, she picked it up, walked it over to the tap, and filled it. Once full, she set it back onto the heating plate and flicked the switch.

It would take a minute to heat, so she headed back to her desk, organized her report into a file, and hurried back when the kettle started to whistle.

With a new container of tea, she quickly made her way back to her desk, picked up the report and her trench coat, and put on her hat. Once ready, she prepared herself to step into the captain's office.

She knocked on the glass pane, then opened the door. The captain lazily waved her inside as his eyes slowly scanned a report. It never ceased to amaze her how he managed to hold the reports in his massive clawed hands.

Amelia stepped inside, closed the door behind her, and took up position in the middle of the room before his desk. She held her report at the ready in one hand with her trench coat draped over the other arm. Her heating container was stuffed in her coat pocket again.

The captain set down the file and closed it before turning his attention to her. Amelia briefly stepped closer to hand him the file and promptly returned to stand at attention. Through her time at the precinct, she had learned that the captain praised order and militaristic discipline. One could only assume that the captain had served at some point in time. Unfortunately, natural curiosity could not be appeased. It was against regulations for one officer to pull another's records.

The captain opened the file and scanned through it with a slow yet discerning eye. It only took a minute, but it was a very unnerving minute. Dragon kin had the natural ability to radiate intimidation magic, and it was working. Amelia had grown accustomed to its overpowering presence, but was never able to fully hold it at bay. The longer she stood in the office, the more it chewed away at her mental faculties and set her stomach churning.

He closed the file, gave her his nod of approval, and stamped the document. “The others have already left for the crime scene. The lobby clerk has the address.”

Amelia nodded in understanding and waited for her formal dismissal. A cold sweat was threatening to break out on her brow if she didn’t get out soon.

The captain leaned forward, placed his elbows on the desk, and entwined his scaly clawed hands. “Considering the past night’s festivities, and the sore state of some of my detectives,” – Joseph’s ragged appearance came to mind, and the cold sweat emerged – “I feel it is pertinent that I ask you to take your time, steady any sickness you may be feeling this morning, and focus on your duties.”

The warning was as clear as a dinner bell. “Yes, sir.”

“You are dismissed, Detective.”

Amelia turned on the spot and almost threw herself out the door. She closed the door behind her and breathed out a deep and slightly nauseated sigh. A few more deep breaths helped to steady her stomach and banish the cold sweat. Her stomach gurgled a little more loudly. If she didn’t get something into her stomach, she’d be no good to anyone.

She marched her way to the steps, descended to the lobby, and made her way over to Ms. Mistwind. “Hi Maggie, the captain said you have the address to where all the others are heading?”

“Of course.” She gave Amelia a tight-lipped smile, and turned to pull the report from a tray while fixing her horn-rimmed spectacles on her nose.

Margaret Mistwind was a recent addition to the precinct. She transferred over shortly after the Bloodvault Incident. The finance officer, Ms. Penelope Rosewater, had been arrested for secreting personnel files to her half-brother, a criminal. Ms. Rosewater’s

vacant position was then filled by the lobby clerk that Ms. Mistwind replaced.

“The report says you’re heading for the industrial district just south of Red Lightning Boulevard; Iron Way, Warehouse 57.” She smiled a little more broadly and lifted a parchment baggie out to Amelia. “And make sure you give these to Johnny.” She was rather smitten with Detective Stonehand.

Amelia couldn’t help but immediately sense the heat emanating from the bag and raised a curious eyebrow alongside a smirk. “And what’s in this?”

Maggie absolutely beamed, “Breakfast biscuits! I baked them myself. They’re my grandmother’s secret recipe. She’d make them whenever grandpappy had the drinking sickness.”

Amelia couldn’t help but perk up at the mention and pull the bag a bit closer so she might breathe in the intoxicating aroma. “Oh my gods.”

The woman closed her eyes and nodded in understanding. “Grandpappy was a sailor... he had the drinking sickness a lot.”

Despite her best efforts, her stomach gurgled in greed. “Maggie, I hate to ask, but can I have one?”

“Of course! Just don’t eat them all and make sure Johnny gets them, and don’t go giving any to that Runewall putz!” She pointed a rather stern finger in Amelia’s face.

“You really don’t like him, do you?”

“He’s a putz! He made me take care of his landlady like I’m some damn maid!” She shook her finger a bit more vigorously, “Promise me that he won’t get a single biscuit!”

Amelia raised her hand and swore, “I promise he won’t get any.”

“Thank you.” Maggie sat back down upon her chair with a bit of a harrumph.

Amelia glanced at the drizzle outside and began

to throw on her coat. She set down the parchment bag before turning to put the coat on. “He’s not all that bad. He’s just an idiot when it comes to talking to women.”

“He can’t be all dumb.”

She chuckled and heartily disagreed, “Oh, he’s very dumb when it comes to women.”

Maggie shook her head and crossed her arms. “Can’t be that dumb if he’s spending time with that nurse.”

Amelia paused from straightening out her trench coat to rerun what was said back through her head. “Nurse?”

Maggie nodded. “Uh-huh; she’s a looker too.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Maggie said it as though it was the most unbelievably delectable gossip she’d ever heard.

Amelia gaped, “Thun—”

“Detective?” Captain Bolt’s rumbling voice carried out from overhead.

Amelia almost shrieked. She jumped a little on the spot and turned to peer up at the detective’s bullpen. The captain was standing at the railing and peering down at her with his hands clasped behind his back. “I take it you’ve learned of the address.”

“Leaving now, sir!” Amelia snatched up the bag and made a mad dash for the door.

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Amelia quickly devoured one of the biscuits while waiting for the gnome cart; it was salty and savory. From what she could tell, there was some form of cured ham or bacon chunks mixed into the dough. It was buttery, greasy, and hefty.

It did exactly what Ms. Mistwind said it would – it helped to cure a bit of her drinking sickness and settled her stomach significantly.

When the gnome cart arrived, she squeezed into the back, provided the destination, and dropped the appropriate coin into the tray.

The trip would likely take her a few minutes, so she decided to take the time to pull her personal spell-tome from her trouser pocket and study. Thankfully, her sensitivity to light had abated enough that she no longer needed her tinted spectacles.

The tome was compressed and no bigger than a notepad, so she first had to release it. A snap of the fingers was all that was needed. It expanded significantly and thumped weightily into her lap. It was of standard size; one and a quarter steps in height and one in width. The leather binding was white with flaked frost and snow covering it.

In typical wizardly paranoid fashion, she kept it locked. Students from the Arcanum were repeatedly taught to keep their spellcraft locked and protected from non-magical eyes.

The metal binding and lock on her tome was made from dwarven dark iron. The key, however, no longer existed; she had destroyed it. Amelia lifted her wand and pointed the tip at the palm of her hand. A focused bit of magic and a recalled memory resulted in the creation of a solid key of ice.

Unlike Joseph, she couldn't fully partition her mind. She did, however, have the ability to lock away certain thoughts and memories and recall them when needed, but that was the extent of her mental magic abilities. By destroying the original key and recrafting it from ice when she needed it, she was able to keep her spell-tome much more secure.

The key fit perfectly into the lock, as it always did. She gave it a twisting jerk and the metal binding released. A second touch of magic melted the key back down and it evaporated into the air.

She shifted the tome in her lap and opened it to

the first page. Like any professional wizard should, she refreshed her memory on spell structure and arcane frameworks. The first half of the tome covered the basics and fundamentals, and she was able to breeze through it quite quickly. Any practiced wizard would be able to do the same.

The latter half of her tome focused on specific spells she favored and their frameworks. The further to the back she went, the more complex the spell structure became. Elemental magic at its core wasn't very difficult to summon. Controlling the magic was the difficult part.

Much of Amelia's concentration in ice magic was in controlling the temperature of objects and the surfaces surrounding them. She had graduated from the Arcanum at the top of her class in Combative Elements.

The most common spells in her arsenal consisted of ice shards and temperature manipulation. There was a shield spell she had learned while at the Arcanum, but she barely ever used it or needed it. Despite that, she spent a minute memorizing the framework and necessary steps to summon and tether the free-floating block of ice so that it followed her without her having to hold it or lift it.

Ice was heavy. Having to lift it up with her own hands was a non-starter. To that end, she needed to know how to connect objects with tethers and levitation.

The most difficult of spells consisted of freezing auras and mass manipulations. Given appropriate time and preparation, she could utilize one or the other but not both.

"Ma'am? I'm afraid this is as far as I can take you." The gnome cart came to a rumbling and puttering stop in the middle of the cobblestone street.

Amelia lifted her head from her reading to give the driver a piece of her mind. That was when she saw the thing that had caused the little gnome to stop. "Holy thundering fireballs!"

The street was blocked by a veritable icefield. It stretched from one side to the other and even crawled up the brick buildings. Great white and blue shards of solidified water jutted up into the sky at jagged and tilted angles. Amelia couldn't help but gape at the stunning display. "I think you're right."

A frozen body looked to be impaled from behind and the arms and legs were dangling from one of the jutting ice spears. Only the tip of the ice was red; otherwise, there didn't appear to be any more blood.

She slammed her spell-tome shut, flicked the metal binding closed and pressed until she heard it click and lock into place. Practice made it so that she didn't even have to look while doing so; her entire focus was fixated on the jutting spires of ice.

A quick snap of her fingers made the tome shrink again. She blindly stuffed it in her trouser pocket and stared out the front window at the horrible display of power before the cart.

A brief moment passed, then her cart door opened. "Amelia." It was John's voice. She glanced away from the chaotic scene in front of them and noted that John was holding the door open for her.

The gnome cart driver mumbled a prayer in the gnomish tongue as Amelia exited the cart; he seemed to be terrified, and she didn't blame him. The amount of power required to turn an entire cobblestone street into a field of sharpened icicles was staggering.

Amelia lifted the parchment bag and held it out for John. "Maggie made these for you."

"I... uh... thank you." John took the bag from her hand.

She shut the cart door and slowly stepped toward the extraordinary feat that was before them. "Who... how?"

"That's what we're trying—" She heard a brief sniff and the crinkling of the parchment bag. "—Oh!"



There was a louder and longer sniff. “Oh gods, yes. These are exactly what I need this morning.”

Amelia took in a deep and steadying breath and did her best to ignore the sudden screeching of tires as the gnome cart driver made a decidedly expedient exit. She took in another deep breath and ignored the happy mouthful-moaning of John. With her heart a bit more settled, she closed her eyes and reopened them to the greater power of the ‘verse.

The world shifted into shades, and revealed to her the disturbing truth of the ice magic. Some of the jutting shards weren’t just being utilized as spear barricades. They were also ice tombs. She could see the outlines of bodies, and they were just as cold as the ice that encased them.

“Sweet Goddess of Mercy...” she said under her breath.

John stepped up to her side and stuffed the remnants of a biscuit into his mouth. She didn’t bother asking him any questions, as he wouldn’t be able to effectively answer.

Petals, their senior officer, stepped up to her other side. “What do you see?” He sounded genuinely interested and entirely somber. His usual joviality wasn’t present.

“Bodies.”

The little man nodded his head. “At least we’ll be able to gather evidence from these ones when they thaw out.”

She figured there were more. “What happened to the others?”

“Incinerated.”