

Snowmane

Iseult Murphy

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One



Neci stood on the top of the cliff gazing out across the frozen water to the mainland, one thought echoing in her head cold enough to freeze her heart. How will Hoddle get home to me now?

It took her longer than normal to get down to the village, her uncooperative legs made particularly stiff and clumsy by her worry, and she was glad for the stout wooden staff Hoddle had made her. Several times she slipped on the loose stones of the narrow path and would have fallen past the nesting birds on the cliff face to land among the shivering seals stranded below if she hadn't planted her walking stick and saved herself with her strong arms.

Twig ran to embrace her as she entered the village, moving with the ease and grace that Neci would never know.

"Have you seen?" Twig said.

Neci crossed the space between the round wooden houses of the village, moving past the marriage tent erected for her and Hoddle without a glance. Earthed over fire pits full of slow roasting pig caused bumps in the path, and garlands of meadow flowers that Neci had collected with the village children hung from posts leading to the harbour.

“How will Hoddle get home to me now?” Neci clutched Twig’s arm as they leaned on the harbour wall and stared at the crystalline, sculpted waves of the stilled sea.

“He’ll find a way. Nothing will keep him from you,” Twig said.

Flames of love warmed Neci’s heart, melting her doubt. Twig was right. Nothing could stop Hoddle. He was the best of them, so strong and handsome and good. He would find a way across the slick peaks and hollows of the sea and return from the mainland triumphant in time for their wedding.

“It’s a bad omen.” Birch, Twig’s father, joined them, wiping soot from the fire pits off his hands. “It was brave of the lad to go to the mainland to find his gift, but he has obviously fallen foul of some sorcerer or imp. He’ll not return. I’m sorry, Neci.”

Could it be true that Hoddle had caused the sea to turn to land? She didn’t believe it. She thought of the warmth of his presence, how brightly he burned as he helped raise the houses or haul in the fish. Twig was right, nothing could stop Hoddle.

Down on the beach, several men and women tore their clothes and lamented.

“How can we launch our boats?” Uisce prodded the shoreline with his oar. The wood struck a note on the nearest incoming wave that resounded across the silent water.

Willow, a maid not much older than Neci and Twig, stood on a rock and shaded her hands from the sun, searching the green and blue depths of the sparkling waves. “Where are the fish? Are they alive under this covering, or are they stilled too? How will we get to them?”

Some of the children tried to walk out across the waves, but they quickly fell back, clutching their bare feet and rolling on the sand crying in pain.

“It burns. Oh, it hurts.”

Neci shivered and rubbed her arms. Dark clouds obscured the mainland and the cruel peaks that usually dominated the horizon. Strange shapes drifted on the wind, brushing against her face. She held up her hand, and beautiful white crystals landed on her palm before disappearing and chilling her further.

“What is it?”

Her mother, Ember, joined her at the sea wall and put her arm around her shoulder. “It’s called snow.”

The snow fell heavier near the mainland, turning the water white under the dark storm clouds. Three shapes emerged from the gloom, striding across the burning cold of the waves without hesitation. Neci’s heart leapt with gratitude.

“What’s that?” Twig huddled closer to Neci and Ember.

“It’s Hoddle. He has returned to me,” Neci said.

Two



Neci struggled down the steep path to the beach. She stuck her staff into the ground and supported herself on it while she waved at Hoddle.

Some of the younger men, Ash, Mel and Oak, got weapons and stood on the shore with her to greet Hoddle, and his best friends, Fidget and Arvie. Even her father, Tine, and some of the other older folk joined them bearing arms.

“It’s Hoddle, returned for our wedding. Are you going to greet him like a stranger?” Neci said.

Tine stood beside her, his filleting knife held still against his leg, watching the approaching men. “How do they walk on the waves without hurting themselves?”

“Why do they bring the storm with them?” Hazel, Twig’s mother, called out from further down the beach.

“How do we know that they are who they were and haven’t been changed?” Old Juniper tapped the blade of his hand scythe rhythmically against his palm.

Neci let neither their doubts nor the increasing snow fall dampen her mood. She waved until she saw Hoddle’s face emerge from the blur of distance, and then she hooted her happiness at his return. Her

words carried shrill as a bird's cry, and through the air, softly deadened by the snowfall, came Hoddle's reply.

By noon they reached the island, and Neci's body cried with a million pains as she walked the few paces to the edge of the sand so that she would be the first to greet them. Hoddle towered over her, a massive white skin bundled across his broad shoulders, hiding his mane of black hair. Rabbit skins bound with leather wrapped his feet and hands, and a wolf skin covered his chest. Fidget and Arvie were similarly attired, but while Hoddle's skin still glowed with sun and health, their complexions looked grey and dull.

"Hoddle." Neci grew shy now that he stood before her, so many words and questions and emotions crowding in her throat that they got stuck behind her tongue.

He took hold of her, his movements clumsy due to the skins encasing his hands. "My love, I have searched the mainland and endured untold dangers to find the perfect gift to give to you to ensure our marriage is prosperous and happy."

All Neci cared about was having him back with her, but she gasped appreciatively as he removed the bundle from his shoulders and unrolled an enormous bear skin across the sand. The creature must have been a monster in life, and the claws still attached to the paws curved wickedly, each longer than Neci's hand from wrist to fingertip.

A small box fell out from the centre of the bundle and rolled towards Neci's feet. Beautifully made of cloudy sand quartz walls held in place with gold and copper binding, something sparkled inside that drew Neci and made her want to open the box. Where did Hoddle get it? She had never seen anything so intricate and beautiful. She knew she wasn't worthy to accept such a gift, but her curiosity overcame her humility. She bent to pick it up.

"No, don't touch it. It's mine."

Hoddle's bark struck Neci. She had never heard him speak sharply, not to her or anyone else, and the anger in his words made her stumble. She would have fallen but the strength of her stick held her up. Hoddle dived for the box, the storm passing from his face only when he had safely secured it within his wolfskin coat.

Looking at him for the first time without the bear skin, Neci saw that Hoddle's lustrous black mane had turned a startling snow white.

"Hoddle, your hair."

She forced her hands to grip her walking stick rather than touch the shoulder length white hair in case that made Hoddle angry too.

"What happened to you, son?" Neci noticed Yew hesitated to touch Hoddle too.

"This beast led us on a merry hunt. The storm grew bad on the peak and we were forced to shelter in a cave. Luckily Arvie thought to turn some skins into these coverings, or we would have lost our fingers and toes." Hoddle smiled, but Neci saw a shadow moving behind his eyes that made her shiver.

"Now that you're back, may as well get on with the wedding," Tine said, his presence sturdy behind Neci. "No use wasting the feast, and your gift is a good sign for the marriage. You can tell us all about your adventures after we've eaten."

Hoddle drew off the skins covering his hands and threw them onto the bear at his feet. "Carry it to the village."

Fidget and Arvie nodded and set to work. Neci wondered why they were so quiet and drawn. Were they sick? What had happened on the mainland to bring about such a change in all three men.

"I can't wait until we are wed," Hoddle whispered to her as he took her hand, and they started the steep trek up to the village.

Hoddle's hand felt snow cold as it curled around hers.

Three



Did the sun set early or was it the storm clouds dimming the sky as they scattered their snow across the frozen sea? Neci couldn't tell, but it bothered her little. The cool twilight made the village fire pit brighter and more enticing. Dancing flames turned the cream linen of the marriage tent gold and filled the flower garlands with bees of shadow and sparks. Neci saw pictures of her future in the heart of the blaze, and she thought she would burst from so much love and happiness.

"I've brought your gift." Ember held out two bundles of clothes, the garments Neci had spent the last few seasons weaving and sewing as her wedding gift. Tunic and trousers of red and gold for her, green and gold for Hoddle.

"For you, my love."

Neci gave Hoddle her gift, and he held up the tunic, praising her work and calling everyone to admire it.

"Thank you, my heart." He leaned down to kiss her, his lips leaving a cool spot on her cheek.

"Time to wash and change so that you're ready for your new life together," Ember said. She clapped her hands, and Twig took Neci's

arm and led her away to her house, while Hoddle took his new clothes and followed Fidget and Arvie to his home.

“Do you think Hoddle is ill?” Neci said.

Clean and dressed in her new clothes, Twig rubbed scented oil into her hands and feet while Ember brushed out her long, dark hair.

“He is tired, like Fidget and Arvie. Hunting that bear was a test of his strength, and the change in his hair will forever show how he triumphed over such a beast. It is a blessing,” Ember said.

“You don’t think it will change back?” Neci had chosen the green of his cloth to compliment his black hair, and she didn’t like how it looked against his snow mane.

“When life changes you, it is for you to decide whether it is a curse or a blessing. Either way, there is no way to return to what you once were. I might wish you were a child again, but today you are a bride, and that is a great blessing.” Ember finished combing Neci’s hair and kissed her on the top of her head.

Neci stood up and clasped her mother’s hands. She decided to accept Hoddle’s new appearance as a blessing too. It showed how much he loved her, for he had gone through a terrifying ordeal and returned to her. She would find a way to show him that her love for him was just as strong.

Yew and Tine had organised the placing of long trestle tables and benches around the hearth at the centre of the village, and delicious smells of roasted meat and vegetables, fish and fresh fruit filled the air. Neci’s mouth watered, and she realised she hadn’t eaten all day.

Twig and Ember twined their arms through hers as they walked to the fire, where Hoddle already stood looking resplendent and slightly intimidating in his new clothes. Twig and Ember kissed her cheeks and stood back, letting Neci walk the last few steps to the hearth on her own.

Hoddle took her hands, but the closeness of the flames had done nothing to warm him, so Neci stuck her walking stick in her armpit and wrapped both her hands around his.

“Neci, my heart, I pledge my name, my body and my love to you.”

His words filled her with a conflagration of joy, and the firelight playing on her red and gold cloth made it look like she burned with living flame.

“Hoddle, my love, I pledge my name, my body and my heart to you. For always.”

He drew her into his arms and kissed her on the lips.

“I’m so happy we are wed,” he whispered.

Around them, the villagers broke into hoots and cheers.

“Let’s eat,” Yew said.

The invitation to feasting was met with great enthusiasm. Twig, Fidget and Arvie surrounded Neci and Hoddle and escorted them to their place nearest the fire, protecting them from the passing friends and family who sought to touch them and share in their luck.

“You’re so cold, Hoddle. I hope you aren’t ill,” Neci said, rubbing his hands in hers to warm them.

“I’m sick with love. I can’t wait until we are alone together,” Hoddle said, slipping his arm around her waist. His touch awakened a different kind of heat within Neci and she wriggled closer to him on the bench, until their hips and legs touched.

“Fidget and Arvie seem so quiet and unlike themselves. Was the bear very frightening?”

Hoddle laughed, but Neci thought it hollow. “They’re jealous of my beautiful bride. Fidget, bring us drink. Arvie, we need music.”

Without seeing to their own needs, the two men did as they were told. Fidget brought a jug of ale and made sure their cups were never empty, while Arvie sat on a stool a little way from the tables and

plucked several tunes on his fiddle. Soon Hoddle's uncle Dale joined his voice to the simple melodies, and as the villager's bellies filled and cups emptied, they left the tables and joined in the music. Sapling got his skin drum, and Brook fetched her whistle.

"Let's dance," Hoddle said.

Neci looked down. She felt embarrassed with so many people watching.

"Don't worry, I'm with you."

She stood up, gripping her staff, but Hoddle gently took it from her and leaned it against the table. His smile smoothed away her cares as they joined the others dancing around the fire. He let her set the pace, his strong arms supporting her, and Neci found that together she moved more gracefully, and easier, than she had ever moved in her life.

Night drew deeper and flurries of snow blew around the edges of the village. Most of the elders had returned to their homes, but Arvie still played, joined now by Fidget with his own tin whistle. Neci thought the tune mournful, and she longed to retire to the marriage tent with her husband, but Hoddle seemed restless and unable to stop dancing.

"Alas, all good things must come to an end," Tine said, placing his hand on Hoddle's shoulder and stopping his movement. "Tell your friends to end their noise, they won't listen to me. Marriage is hard work, and you will need your rest to face it in the morning."

Hoddle nodded and left to say his goodnights to Fidget and Arvie. Neci wrapped her arms around her father's solid waist.

"Thank you, Da."

"You're a wife now, you call me Tine," he said, but he rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head.

Ember approached with her stick, and Twig ran up too. She looked like she'd been crying.

"You look so beautiful," Twig said, hugging Neci warmly.

"Sleep well, Neci. Always look for the blessings," Ember said. She brushed her daughter's cheek and looked at her with such sadness that Neci grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

"This is a blessing," she said. Ember nodded, but she still looked sad.

Neci felt bone tired as she walked slowly towards the marriage tent, leaning heavily on her walking stick. She was excited to be alone with Hoddle, to find out about his adventures on the mainland, and to start their own adventure together. She found him asleep on the bed, and even though she thought he was pretending at first, she couldn't rouse him by whispering his name or shaking him gently.

Disappointed, Neci took off her trousers and climbed into the soft bed. It had been a long day, and they had many years together to look forward to.

Shortly before dawn, Neci woke shivering. She felt the bed beside her, but it lay empty and chilled. Hoddle was gone. She crawled out of bed and felt around for her trousers, pulling them on with difficulty. The cold had made her limbs stiff and her body uncoordinated.

Stumbling to the entrance, she pulled back the opening of the tent to let in some light. She knew there were extra blankets somewhere, but she didn't want to crawl around in the dark to find them. The fire had become nothing but ash in the great hearth outside the tent, and a thick covering of snow had transformed the village into a strange landscape of white shapes that Neci didn't recognise. Was Hoddle out there, lost under the snow? Neci stepped out of the tent, but the cold ground drove her back inside. She leaned on her stick, scanning the strange landscape, looking for her husband.

Movement on the other side of the village drew her attention. She was about to call out Hoddle's name, when the figure stepped closer and she saw that it wasn't her husband, but an enormous white wolf with a black nose and eyes. It stared at Neci, and she felt paralysed by its gaze. Huge wings beat the air, and an owl as tall as Neci landed softly on the table beside the wolf, its large round eyes and sharp beak glossy black. The wolf turned its head to look at the owl, and Neci took the opportunity to close the tent and hide under the bedcovers, hoping she would live to see morning.

Four



Neci woke in the morning with Hoddle standing beside the bed, grinning. He had dressed in the furs and skins again, although his hands were uncovered. She shivered and wrapped the thin blanket more tightly around herself.

“Where were you? I woke in the night and you were gone.”

“I’m sorry, I got up early to make you these.” He produced a bundle of rabbit furs from behind his back and watched her expectantly.

“What are they?” Neci frowned. She felt out of sorts, and she didn’t know if she should mention the wolf and the owl to Hoddle or if she had dreamed them.

“They’re for your feet. I’ll show you. Sit up.”

Neci slowly straightened out her stiff limbs and sat on the edge of the bed. Hoddle took each foot and placed rabbit fur over it, wrapping the boot securely in place with strips of leather.

“They’ll protect you from the snow,” he said.

Neci wriggled her toes in the boots, the rabbit fur soft against her skin, and felt her feet slowly thaw. “Have you another jacket like yours? I’m still cold.”

Hoddle looked thoughtful, then he ran over to the side of the tent and grabbed a couple of blankets. He draped one around her shoulders, then took her arm and pulled her to her feet.

“Come on, there is something I want to show you.”

He pulled her towards the entrance, and she resisted him as she tried to pick up her staff from where it had fallen beside the bed.

“Wait, my stick,” she said.

“You don’t need it, I’m with you.” Hoddle put his arm around her waist and escorted her firmly from the tent. She tried to break free, but he was too strong. More snow had fallen while she slept, and she could no longer see the fire pit or the benches, although the tables stood out as mounds of snow between the huts.

In front of the tent stood a wooden sled, some furs covering the boards, and Fidget and Arvie stood at the front holding ropes.

“What’s this?” Neci said. She looked to Hoddle, who seemed giddy with excitement. He picked her up and settled her onto the furs, wrapping the second blanket around her legs.

“Wait until you see my wedding gift for you.”

“I’ve already seen it.” Neci tried to stand, but Hoddle pressed her down again. He moved behind the board at her back, and she felt the sled wobble as he stood on the runners.

“Let’s go,” Hoddle said. At his command, Fidget and Arvie tightened the slack on the rope and surged forward, pulling the sled after them. Neci noticed they wore large wicker ovals, like tapered basket lids, tied to their furry boots. The contraptions seemed to make it easier for them to walk on the snow, almost gliding along like the runners on the sled.

As they left the village, Neci saw Twig and her parents standing at the door of their hut. She waved, but they watched her pass without

acknowledgment. They looked tired, and their skin looked dull like Fidget and Arvie.

“What’s wrong with them?” Neci craned her head back to see Hoddle standing behind her. He stared ahead, still grinning, the cold wind blowing back his snow mane.

“Who?”

Neci gestured to Fidget and Arvie, waved her hand towards the huts they had passed. “Your friends. My friends. Everyone. They look unwell.”

“Probably drank too much ale last night.” Hoddle laughed.

Fidget and Arvie turned onto the narrow road to the top of the cliff. Snow covered the island, hiding the landmarks that were as familiar to Neci as the pains in her legs and hips. It disorientated her and left her feeling vulnerable. She was grateful for the clear sky and counted that as a blessing.

“Are we going to visit my parents?”

“What?”

She pointed to the steep incline ahead of them. “This leads to my parents’ house.”

“No. Be patient and keep looking forward.”

Neci pulled the blanket up to her chin and folded her arms, pressing her hands into her armpits to get warm. The journey terrified her, never knowing if Fidget and Arvie were going to sink into the snow or if the sled was going to slide away from them and crash over the cliff edge. She tried to see the blessing in her new circumstances. At least she didn’t have to walk, and she had blankets and furs to keep the worst of the cold at bay.

Ahead, the island seemed to continue to rise into the sky. Neci blinked, the sunlight reflecting off the ice dazzling her. She shielded her eyes and looked at the sparkling structure again. The cliff top

levelled out as always, but over night a towering ice castle had formed, anchored on the cliff, and rising high into the air in swirling turrets and towers. She gasped.

“Welcome to your new home,” Hoddle said.

He called Fidget and Arvie to halt and hurried to lift her from the sled. Walls of ice stretched around and above her, so reflective in the daylight that she could see herself as Hoddle carried her towards the door. She looked twisted, distorted into a tiny, hunched thing, while Hoddle was pulled into a tall, thin weed with a cluster of white fluff around his head. Behind them, Fidget and Arvie stood as statues, their faces so blue they could have been carved from ice.

“How did you do this?” Neci looked around at the mirrored surfaces, grimacing as her face repeated back at her from every wall, ceiling, and floor.

Hoddle carried her into a huge dining hall, with a large hearth and a long table made from ice. Intricate carvings adored the mantle, twisted across the plates set out upon the table and leered from the cutlery. The sight repulsed Neci.

“Nothing is too great for you, my love.”

She wasn’t satisfied with the answer. He carried her up a broad, curving stair high into the tower and at the top they entered a bedroom. The bear skin he had given her draped across a massive block of ice in the centre of the room, and windows looked out in all four directions. Hoddle carried her to the window facing the mainland and set her on her feet. With a clear sky, she could see the distant mountains perfectly, the shadows on the slopes of the highest peak scowling at her like a malevolent face.

“Do you love it?”

Hoddle stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her, gazing out across the frozen sea at the mountains.

“It is amazing, I don’t know how you did it, but I can’t live here. I’ll freeze.”

She felt him stiffen. She turned to look at him, and a dark look twisted his face.

“Maybe if some fires were lit and more furs were procured, it wouldn’t be so bad.” She could make a blessing of this too. She didn’t know what change had come over Hoddle, but it was obvious he wanted her to like his gift.

He nodded, but his frown didn’t lift.

“I’m hungry, Hoddle. Let’s go to my parent’s house and break our fast with them. I’m eager to tell them all about your wonderful gift.”

Now his smile returned. He scooped her up and carried her back to the sled, where Fidget and Arvie stood waiting. Once he had settled her into the furs and blanket on the sled, he stood on the runners behind her and commanded his friends to bring them to her home.

The house was almost buried by snow, although there was access to the door, but no smoke rose from the hole in the roof. Neci tried to silence the alarm within her and rose from the sled with difficulty as soon as it stopped moving.

“Let me help you,” Hoddle said, rushing to her side.

“You’ll help me better by fetching some firewood. Tine must have forgotten to stock the hearth after the excitement of yesterday.” She waved him away.

“I’ll send Arvie and Fidget to get it.”

“Go with them, you know what those two are like.” She smiled, and Hoddle seemed convinced by it, because he nodded and walked away calling his friends with him.

Neci’s hands shook as she pushed open the door of the house. She didn’t know what she’d find inside. The small living area was in order, a fine film of ice covering everything, but her parents weren’t there.

She moved slowly into the next room where they slept. The beds were made up, as she had left them on the previous morning.

She sighed with relief. She knew her parents had most likely stayed in the village, but she was afraid she would find them frozen in their home, as cold and beautiful as the palace Hoddle had made for her.

The door creaked and she turned, expecting Hoddle. Instead, the wolf from the night before squeezed its head and shoulders into the hut.

“Don’t run away. I need your help,” it said.

Five



Neci gripped the wall, afraid she'd fall and slide across the icy floor straight into the waiting jaws of the wolf. She was surprised at how melodious and feminine the wolf sounded.

"Please, don't eat me."

"I don't want to eat you. Your husband has released a great darkness from the mountain, and I need your help returning it to its prison."

"I don't know how I can help you with that." Neci wondered if it would be easier to be eaten by the wolf.

"Once a great sorcerer named Winter ruled the land, covering it with cruel ice and snow and turning everyone into his slave. We three, the animals of Winter, managed to trap him within a cave in the mountain, where he succumbed to his own cold powers eons ago."

The wolf licked her lips, surprising Neci with the pinkness of her tongue.

"Three animals. You, and the owl, and one other? The bear was the third, wasn't it? Hoddle killed it and set Winter free?" Neci dragged herself across the room to a stool and sat down, her hips and legs screaming at her more loudly than usual because of the cold. She wished the seat wasn't so near to the wolf's jaws, but she was fairly confident she wasn't going to be eaten.

The wolf moved her head from one side to the other. "Yes, he killed Bear, but he took something of Winter's which allowed the sorcerer's trapped spirit to enter him. Hoddle's love for you has kept him from turning you into an ice slave, like the others, but Winter grows stronger and I don't know if Hoddle will be able to stop him for much longer."

Neci thought of the little box that fell out of the skin when Hoddle unrolled it. "There was a box, if I found it and gave it back to you, would that return Winter to his prison?"

The wolf shook her head. "Doubtful. The box was merely a conduit for Winter to take possession of Hoddle."

"What do I have to do to free Hoddle?" Neci clenched her fists under the blanket around her shoulders. This was the blessing that would enable her to show Hoddle how much she loved him.

"Hah, he belongs to Winter now. You must give Hoddle something to paralyse him, so that Ulchabhan and I can carry him back to his prison. I must go now, Winter can't see me, but I will return with a powder for you before the day is out. Say nothing of this to Hoddle, Winter mustn't know Ulchabhan and I are here."

Ears swivelling, the wolf started backing out of the hut. Neci stood up. "Once you return Winter to his prison, you will return Hoddle to me?"

The wolf made a strange sound, like a strangled howl, which Neci took as a laugh.

"I have been very clear. Your husband is gone. You help us return Winter to his prison, or his body must die. If we act fast, there is a chance for your family and friends to survive. Winter must not be allowed to spread his cruelty once more."

Neci punched the table in front of her. "If you are so certain this is the only way, why do you need my help? Why don't you grab him and carry him back to the mountain now?"

The wolf's dark eyes widened, and Neci saw that the giant animal was afraid.

"Hoddle killed Bear, which means Ulchabhan and I are not safe. It's only because he is using the last of his great strength to shield you that we have a hope of defeating Winter. Once Winter is in full control, he will kill us all. No one can stand against him."

The wolf backed out of the hut, shaking the wooden walls, and disappeared into the snow. Neci sank back onto the stool. Could it be true? Must she lose her husband or condemn all?

"How do I turn this into a blessing, Mam?"

Six



Hoddle whistled one of Arvie's mournful tunes from the wedding feast as he carried an armful of firewood into the hut. He dropped it on the floor and rushed to Neci, kneeling beside her and holding her with his ice-cold hands.

"My love, what is it? What has upset you?"

Neci wiped the tears from her eyes, and they fell to the floor as droplets of ice. She heard them tinkle and watched them skitter under the table. What could she say to Hoddle? That she loved him but had no choice but to hand him over to a monstrous owl and wolf so that he could be imprisoned in a cave?

"Is it because your parents aren't here? Don't be sad, they probably stayed with my family in the village. Shall we return to the village and find them?"

"Yes, I'd like that. Thank you." Neci was grateful for Hoddle providing her with an excuse. She couldn't lie to him, and she was anxious about her parents, so she hadn't told any untruth.

He stood and took her in his arms, carrying her back to the sled. Fidget and Arvie stood outside the hut holding more firewood, but at a barked command from Hoddle they dropped it and resumed their places in front of the sled.

Neci looked around the hut for evidence of the wolf or the owl, but she saw no footprints and she couldn't feel their dark eyes watching her.

On the journey back to the village, Neci closed her eyes and feigned sleep. She was terrified of the steep decline falling away in front of her, positive that Arvie and Fidget would slip at any moment and send them all tumbling into the frozen sea. She almost wished it, for then at least she would die with Hoddle and wouldn't have to do anything awful to harm him.

Her mind kept going over what the wolf had told her. She didn't want to believe such a fierce creature, but the tale made sense. When she got to the village she would find a way to speak to her parents privately about the matter and ask them what she should do. She knew Hoddle would want her to be brave and strong, as he was, but there had to be another way to return Winter to his prison and save her husband.

The village lay as still and silent as she had left it that morning. Twig and her parents still stood in the doorway of their home, and Neci knew they hadn't moved since she last saw them.

Fidget and Arvie pulled the sled to the home of Hoddle's parents. Neci pushed back the blanket in preparation to rise, but Hoddle leaned over her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't move, I'll call them out."

She leaned back against the backboard, curious and terrified in equal measure.

"Come out, sleepy heads, and greet the bride and groom," Hoddle said.

The door to the hut opened and Yew and Vale shuffled out, followed by Ember and Tine. Each glassy eyed, with a grey cast to their skin and icicles in their hair.

“Oh no,” Neci cried. She buried her face in the blanket, too traumatized to look at the frozen, expressionless faces of her parents. They looked like dead things, the veins standing bright as their flesh seemed to grow translucent and shiny as ice.

Hoddle laughed. “Looks like everyone had too much fun last night. It’s afternoon already, and no one is up. There’s work to be done, but perhaps I’ll give them one day off to recover.”

“I’m so cold, and so hungry. Hoddle, could you light the fire and fetch me some food.”

She couldn’t look at him, for fear of seeing her parents, but she could tell from the way he drew in his breath and held it that he was displeased with her. After a handful of heartbeats, he sighed.

“Of course, anything for my love.”

She crouched in the sled, afraid to look, and listened to the crunch of feet as her friends and family silently set about Hoddle’s bidding. She didn’t hear him command them, as he had earlier with Fidget and Arvie, so she assumed that meant Winter’s powers grew and Hoddle’s strength diminished.

What was she to do? She couldn’t condemn her parents to servitude as living ice, but she wouldn’t betray Hoddle. He still fought the sorcerer, so she would fight for him. There had to be another way.

Soon she heard the crackling of fire and the sled moved again. She raised her head, careful to keep her eyes upon the ground and the feet of any people who might surround her. A small fire struggled in a hole that had been dug out over the firepit. Fidget and Arvie positioned the sled beside the fire and then stepped back. They seemed afraid of the flames. The rest of the village stood in a circle around the sled, but after glancing at a dozen discoloured, frosty toes, Neci concentrated on the fire. Their suffering was too much.

Hoddle brought her a plate with some leftovers and a cup of ale. He seemed to find the fire difficult, but he crouched beside her with the sled between him and the hearth.

“Perhaps they would rather rest in their homes?” Neci said softly. She tried to nibble at a piece of cold pork, but it made her jaw ache and gave her a sore head.

“I like them with us,” Hoddle said.

“Please, Hoddle, I’d rather they went back inside.”

Perhaps they wouldn’t suffer so much if they stood in the huts rather than on the snow, but she knew Winter wouldn’t let them rest even when they were out of sight.

“As you wish, my love.”

Hoddle sounded disappointed. He waved his hand, and all save Fidget and Arvie left.

“Do you love me, Hoddle?”

“Of course. More than anything. Why do you ask? Haven’t you seen the bear I fought for you, and the castle I built? Are they not enough to convince you that my love is true?”

Neci smiled at him. She placed her hand against his face, and his flesh felt no different from the snow. She ran her hand through his white hair and found it as silky as she remembered.

“If you had to send me away and never see me again, would you do it? If it were the only way to save many from harm?”

Hoddle frowned, and Neci saw the dark shadow grow in his eyes. “What makes you say that?”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It felt like kissing a boulder, but she tried to pour all her heat and passion into it, as if she could fill Hoddle with her love and banish Winter. For a moment, she thought it was working, because Hoddle’s lips softened and he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her against him.

“Do it. Send me away. Whatever you must do to save them. I can’t hold him back for much longer.”

His breath felt warm against her ear, and she knew it was Hoddle speaking to her. Not Winter, or Hoddle fighting for control with Winter, but her Hoddle. Her love.

The fact that he wanted to sacrifice himself convinced her that she had to find another way to save him.

Seven



Neci waited all day for the wolf to return. Perhaps it was because Hoddle never left her side, but she neither saw nor heard from the wolf.

In the evening, Fidget and Arvie dragged the sled back up to the ice castle at the top of the cliff. Neci insisted she brought her staff, a change of clothes and more blankets. Hoddle carried her through the hall and up the stairs to the top room of the tower. The sunset flooded the room and turned the ice walls pink and gold. Neci found it beautiful.

“I need my stick,” Neci said.

Hoddle set her on the white bearskin. “I’ll tell Fidget to bring it up.”

“No, you get it for me. I don’t trust Fidget or Arvie with it. It’s too precious.”

“Of course.” He bowed before her, a smile quirking his lips, and hurried out of the room.

As soon as he was gone, Neci felt a cool breeze blow through the north window and the huge owl landed on the sill.

“I thought he’d never leave. Mac Tire has been trying all day to give you the powders, but he never left you alone. Here, give him this, but

be sure to do it soon, before the last rays of the sun dip below the horizon.”

The owl sounded exactly as Neci expected, his rich, deep voice slightly annoyed. He held out a vial full of cream coloured powder. Narrow as an icicle and no thicker than Neci’s finger, it clinked against the owl’s sharp talons.

“How am I supposed to give him that?” Neci struggled over to the owl, the cold walls hurting her palms and the floor threatening to steal her feet from under her with every step.

“I don’t know. Say you want some warm cider to help you sleep. The vial is made of ice and will melt away to nothing when you slip it in his cup.”

“He won’t drink anything warm,” Neci said. She took the vial from the owl and held it up. The powder stole the shine from the icicle and made it look dead.

“Think of something then. Another night will increase Winter’s power, and Hoddle may not rise to restrain him come morning.”

Neci shook her head. “I’m not going to do it. There has to be a way to save Hoddle and imprison Winter.”

The owl clacked his beak sharply. “I thought Mac Tire went over this with you. You either drug him or kill him. I can give you a dagger if you prefer.”

He seemed excited by the prospect of her killing Hoddle. “Hoddle is still strong. He is fighting Winter. What’s in the glass box with the gold and copper binding?”

“Winter’s heart. He put it in the trinket box when he was a lad. Said it would get in the way of things. It must have been the vessel that allowed him exit his prison with Hoddle. It’s a pretty thing, and I think your husband sought to give it to you as a gift. Bear tried to

stop him, and they fought.” The owl looked over Neci’s shoulder to the bed, saw the bear skin and shuddered.

Hope flooded through Neci. “If I find the box, can you draw Winter back into it? Wouldn’t that save Hoddle and leave you to return Winter to his prison.”

The owl slowly blinked his big, round eyes. “No, it wouldn’t work. The heart is a dead thing now, the last of Winter’s original flesh. Once released, he can’t be put back into the box.”

Neci clenched her fist. She heard Hoddle’s footsteps running up the stairs. The owl heard them too, for he drew back from the window.

“Give him the powder as soon as he joins you. We will come to claim him once Winter has been subdued,” the owl said. He opened his wings, their breadth making Neci gasp, and dropped out of the window, disappearing into the snow and ice.

Once he was out of sight, Neci thrust her hand out the window and uncurled her fingers, letting the vial of powder fall onto the distant rocks.

“Are you all right, my heart?” Hoddle bounded into the room and crossed the icy floor in two steps. He took Neci in his arms and swung her away from the window.

“Yes, now that you’re here.” She reached up to kiss him.

“That’s good, I was afraid you wanted to see if you could fly.”

Eight



Neci longed to climb into bed and hold Hoddle, warm him with her love, but as soon as the last rays of the sun sank below the horizon, she found him on his side, asleep, and she was unable to wake him.

She didn't want to sleep on Bear, but there was no where else to rest, so she climbed into bed and covered herself in blankets and furs. Despite her best attempts to stay awake and watch Hoddle, she grew warm in her cosy nest and fell asleep.

She woke after moon rise, her teeth chattering with the cold. She felt for Hoddle, but he was no longer beside her. Wriggling to the side of the bed, she pulled on her fur boots and fastened them tightly. Gripping her staff, she slid across the room and onto the stairs.

Night turned the ice walls into a dark mirror. As she descended the curving tower staircase carefully on her bottom, she couldn't see her reflection in the shining walls, only movement. She imagined the dark walls a gaping portal to another world, and the movement the hungry shadows climbing out of that cold world to devour her. Even though she knew that wasn't true, she was still terrified and expected to be pulled into the inky pools of the walls at any moment.

Hoddle navigated the stairs so swiftly that Neci had almost convinced herself that she had fallen into a tower where the steps were unending, when she slid breathless and red cheeked into the great dining hall.

The moonlight reflected off the snow and shone as brightly as daylight into the dining hall, although with a cold silver hue that provided light but little illumination. Shuffling at the door alerted Neci to the fact she was not alone. Using her staff to hook the bench beside the dining table, she pulled herself along the slippery floor and slowly towards the doorway.

The villagers wound in a long line up the cliff path to the castle. Those at the door, Neci could make out clearly, but a few steps away and they became faceless shadow. She was glad of that.

A colossal dragon crouched in the doorway. It dwarfed the massive dining hall, its haunches stuffed into the hearth, its shoulders crushed against the high arched ceiling. It seemed to be made of ice, like the castle, and similarly turned into an opaque mirror by the night. The moonlight shot beams of silver into the curved neck and taloned paws, moving like ghosts at the bottom of a deep and dangerous lake.

Neci would rather have drowned in that lake than see what the dragon was doing. Its head filled the doorway, its open jaws another entrance, and as each villager walked up they punctured their arm or their neck on one of the serrated teeth of the dragon. Blood, dark as treacle, flowed down grooves in the dragon's teeth and into its mouth. As the blood left the victim, their flesh became more like ice, just as the dragon appeared to grow more solid with every draught.

Clinking slightly on their new icy joints, the person detached and walked out of the castle, circling around in a line back down to the village.

Twig stood next in line, her snow-covered hair a mound on top of her head, her nose and fingers blackened by cold. Neci covered her eyes. She couldn't watch any more. What had she done? How could she have condemned them all to this? She thought it was strength that made her fight for Hoddle, but now she realised it was weakness. Her weakness to take responsibility for taking the life of another to save the village.

Where was Hoddle? Had he transformed into the dragon? Neci dragged herself into the shadows at the end of the hall, near the stairs. At first, she thought the movement was simply her reflection in the walls, but she recognised Hoddle's snow mane shining with a light all its own as he whirled and danced in continuous graceful motion, a smile fixed upon his lips.

Surprised that her first thought was jealousy, Neci peered into the darkness to see who her husband danced with so beautifully. Who brought him such joy? Scooting closer, she saw he held a shadow in his arms. A short, twisted thing with powerful arms and wasted legs. It was her, or a shadow version of her. A string led from the shadow, growing thicker as it extended towards the fireplace. A tail. The dragon's tail formed into the shadow to the woman Hoddle loved to keep him quiet while Winter drank his fill.

Anger replaced the greasy fire of Neci's jealousy. Righteous anger that propelled her to her feet and caused her to swing her staff at her shadow self before she even knew what she was doing.

The staff connected with the head of the shadow Neci, knocking her off balance. She fell from Hoddle's arms and he stopped dancing. He stood blinking into the darkness, looking so like the giant white owl that Neci wanted to scream.

"Hoddle, it's me. Neci. The real one, your wife. Come, we have to leave here."

She stumbled into his arms and he grabbed her, looking at her with a strange expression as if he had just woken from sleep and didn't know where he was.

"Neci?"

She squeezed his arm and reached up to touch his face. He felt warm, alive.

"Yes, my love. It's me. I'm here."

He leaned down to kiss her, but his face cleared of confusion before their lips met, and his hands tightened around her waist. "Neci, where is he? The dragon? I can barely feel him. You can't be here when he returns, he will drain you like the others and I won't be able to stop him. You must kill me when he is with me once again in the morning. It is the only way to stop him. I would do it myself, but he's too strong. I can barely hold him back. I'm so sorry to lay this burden on your shoulders, my heart."

Hoddle tried to push her away, towards the stairs back to the bedroom, but she gripped on to him. She shook her head, unwilling to leave him now that she had him back again.

"No, I won't kill you. I'll find another way."

"There's no other way. Quick, go, before he knows that you're here."

The shadow Neci rose and moved towards Hoddle, its arms outstretched.

"I must dance with it, or he will know. I'm sorry."

He leaned down and pressed his lips against hers, and she knew he was going to push her away once he had kissed her. She knew he was so much stronger than her, and she wouldn't be able to resist. She raised her arms and hooked them around his neck. Her grip was strong, her arms corded with granite after years of lifting her about. He wouldn't

be able to pull her free. She would be a limpet and dig in deeper if he tried to cast her away.

The shadow Neci tried to dance with Hoddle but found his arms full of the real thing. The ice castle shook as the great dragon Winter turned its head from the doorway and looked down the length of the hall to where Neci clung to Hoddle.

The roar of a storm blasted her with ice and fury.

“He comes,” Hoddle said.

Neci pressed against Hoddle and buried her face in his neck. His snow mane covered her. Peeking down at his chest, she saw a worm of black ice curling and twisting into Hoddle above his heart. The thought of the dragon eating into Hoddle’s heart, destroying it with rot and decay, filled her with fury. Gripping Hoddle’s neck with one hand, she reached with the other for the coil of shadow.

“I am his heart. It belongs to me.”

Her roar rivalled Winter’s. In the walls of the castle flames leaped high, filling the room with golden light. In the sudden brightness, Neci’s hand found the little glass box with gold and copper binding resting in a pocket next to Hoddle’s chest. She tore the box open and pulled out a shard of cut obsidian, no bigger than her palm. A dark, desiccated crystal with sharp edges that cut Neci’s flesh open. A cold void of an organ that sucked at her warmth and became slippery with her blood.

Winter crashed down the hall towards them, his great bulk destroying the walls of the ice castle as he came.

“My heart,” he roared.

Neci pressed her hand to her chest, Winter’s heart nestled within it. Hoddle wrapped his arms around her, protecting her from the shards of ice that rained down about them.

“I love you, wife.”

“I love you, husband.”

Neci felt the warmth of her hand chipping away at the ice of Winter’s heart. Pressed between her body and Hoddle’s, no longer protected by its box, the flesh thawed and gave way to decay. She felt it softening, melding with her blood. A terrible smell assaulted her nostrils.

The dragon froze, his open mouth about to descend and destroy them. Neci peeked up through Hoddle’s snow mane and watched as the dragon faded, melted away and dissolved into mist. She pulled away from Hoddle and opened her hand, wrinkling her nose at the foul stench that rose from the brown sludge on her palm.

“Where’s the box?”

Hoddle picked it up and held it out to her. She shook the vile liquid into the beautiful box, wiped her hand on the edge and closed the lid.

“I think we should leave before the castle crushes us,” Hoddle said.

“I agree,” Neci said.

Hoddle picked up her staff and swept her into his arms, rushing her out of the rapidly melting building.

Nine



Neci leaned on her staff and looked out over the sea towards the mainland. Already most of the snow had melted, leaving the streams overflowing and the ground mucky. From the sounds of ice cracking, the sea would soon be restored.

The wolf could no longer hide in the snow drifts and stood out in stark contrast to the browns and greens of the returning earth.

“I believe this belongs to you.” Hoddle held out the glass box bound with gold and copper.

The wolf’s nose twitched, and she gagged. Neci shivered at the size of the wolf’s teeth so close to Hoddle.

“I’m sorry I stole it and I’m sorry that I killed your friend. Tell me what I need to do in recompense,” Hoddle said.

“I think you’ve been through enough, but don’t steal anything else, even if it doesn’t appear to belong to someone and you don’t think it’s stealing,” the wolf said. She turned to Neci and bowed.

“I knew there was another way,” Neci said.

The wolf tilted her head side to side. “When we divided Winter’s corpse and scattered his bones, I never thought to take his heart. It hadn’t been part of his body for so long, I didn’t think it could still be a tether for his spirit. However, if he had spent another few night’s

feeding, he would have grown strong enough to make Hoddle's body his own and would have no longer needed his heart. You got lucky."

Neci shrugged. "Perhaps."

The wolf licked her nose. "Your island will return to normal, and your friends and family too, although it might take a bit longer for them to heal."

"No, they will grow stronger. There is no going back. We will take this as a blessing," Neci said.

The wolf started panting. "It is too hot for me here. You are right, there is no going back, only forward. It appears that Winter is truly gone but be careful. Perhaps he has taken this change as a blessing also."

She snapped the box from Hoddle's hand and bounded away, leaping off the cliff. Neci turned in time to see the owl swoop down and catch the wolf by the shoulders, and then the two huge animals disappeared.

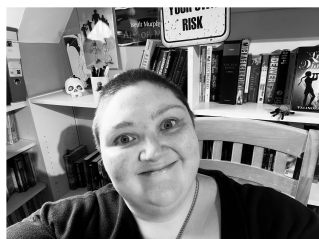
Hoddle drew her to him and kissed her. She sank into his arms, running her hand through his silky white hair.

"Do you think the wolf is right, that Winter will return?" Hoddle said.

Neci shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm a married woman and if marriage is hard work, I intend to excel at it."

"I've no doubt you will," he said, and returned to kissing her.

About the Author



Iseult Murphy is an award-winning speculative fiction author. Her short stories have appeared in numerous publications, and some of her horror short stories have been published in the collection ***Zoo of the Dead and Other Horrific Tales***, while a wider variety of her speculative fiction has been published in the collection ***Return to Hades and Other Adventures***. Her debut horror novel, ***7 Days in Hell***, was an Independent Author Network Book of the Year finalist, and a Speak Up Talk Radio Firebird Award winner, both in 2020. Most recently, her body horror fairytale, ***All of Me***, won a Speak Up Talk Radio Firebird Book Award.

Iseult is drawn to horror, fantasy and science fiction, as she feels that the most difficult aspects of life can be best explored through the lens of speculative fiction.

She currently resides on the east coast of Ireland. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, art and spending time with her animals.