

DELETED SCENE: SNOWBALL FIGHT

Winter shouldn't have been able to nestle so easily into the inn's landscape. Snow blew against the arched window in Avalon's room, and while the sound was soothing, she was not looking forward to an early freeze. Every part of her body, the appendages she could still feel, were half-frozen. Avalon blamed Elden.

It was easy to accuse the aggravatingly handsome innkeeper of causing everything going wrong in her life. He was responsible for the vast majority of it.

Perhaps, this time, someone else was just as guilty.

Avalon shivered where she lay, squinting at her sister as Odele stumbled from their small bed to the window while wearing the comforter they were supposed to be sharing as a cape.

"It's snowing," Odele observed, wiping at the glass as she peered outside the inn. "And someone is towing your car."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Cursing the frozen wooden floor as she sprinted across it, barefoot, Avalon stopped at the arched window. The scene she discovered made her slam her fist on the pane. "What idiot is towing my car?"

Avalon pulled on a few more layers and her thickest socks,

struggling to pull her boots on over them. Only one man would be insane enough to be towing her car in a blizzard. “I’m going to kill him!”

Odele returned to bed, the blanket coiled around her like a snake. “Let me know if you need help, but I think we both know your answer to that.”

Avalon ignored her—there was no time for delving into her own flaws now. As politely as she could, Avalon raced out of her room and down two flights of stairs, dodged the inn’s early breakfast rush, and broke out into the cold outdoors.

For a moment, the muffled white noise and brisk air were bracing, raising the hair on her arms. And then the wind hit her.

The inn’s parking lot was covered in a foot of snow, but her car had been dug out, and Elden’s truck was currently dragging it away. Avalon trudged through the snow, praying her socks remained dry, and pounded her palm on Elden’s driver’s side window.

He rolled his window down, scowling at her. “I already have your car keys.”

What! How! Avalon stepped on the truck’s running board so she’d be eye level with the man. “What do you think you’re doing?!”

“That vehicle is barely running—”

“You’re one to talk!” Avalon thumped on the top of his aged truck for emphasis, earning herself a scowl.

“—and it needs maintenance,” Elden finished, speaking over her interruption. “If I can ever get rid of you, I know

you'd hate for this bucket of bolts to hold you back from leaving us immediately."

Avalon squinted back at her car, whirling back to fix her glare back on him again. "I'm not letting a feyrie work on my car! I've seen you struggle with your cell phone. And don't get me started on the computer—"

"Those are different," Elden argued. He opened his door, forcing her to hop down from her perch. Elden stepped out into the cold alongside her. Marching back to her car, Elden began pointing out everything that was wrong with it—the worn tires, the cracked wiper blades, and the list went on.

She knew what would come next. The man—feyrie—would start mimicking the awful, ear-splitting noises her engine made. Wanting to spare her tinnitus from being triggered, Avalon abandoned all logic. In her panic to stop him, she scooped up a handful of snow, molded it into something vaguely round, and whipped it at Elden's back.

Before she'd been kicked off her high school softball team for charging their own pitcher during practice, after that girl had purposely beamed Avalon three times in a row, Avalon had been a decent player.

Her snowball hit the middle of Elden's back, which was an annoyingly large target, and caused the man to still.

He half-turned, narrowing those startling eyes back on her. "Did—did you just throw a snowball at *me*?"

This tactic was ill-advised, but Avalon brushed away Elden's indignation and formed another ball.

"Don't you dare—"

This time, her projectile hit him square in the chest.

Elden only froze for a minute, stunned by her idiotic weapon of choice, before he ran after her. Her boots slipping, Avalon fled towards the lake while a small squeak escaped her.

Her logic told her Elden wouldn't do anything to her once he caught her, but the caveman part of her brain that craved survival above all else told her to run.



Elden's last conversation with Kenan replayed in his head as he chased down his prey.

"That girl makes you do stupid things, Elden."

It was hard to argue with his friend now. Avalon took a turn away from the lake and towards the woods, leaping over drifts of snow until Elden called down a clump of snow from a tree branch to fall right in front of her.

She tried skidding to a stop and failed. Instead, Avalon's arms pinwheeled, and she fell hard on her ass with a shout.

That wasn't enough punishment for Elden—he raised her from the ground and, lifting her under her arms, tossed her into the enormous pile of snow he had just created. The drift swallowed her whole, and Avalon's arms flailed as she tried to dig herself out.

"Explain to me," Elden hissed, "the logic of fighting a *prince* of the *Winterlands* with *snow*."

Her answer was as he expected—another snowball

whipped towards him, though this time Elden deflected it with a wave of his hand. Avalon hurried, forming another projectile in her gloved hands as Elden leapt forward to prevent her from finishing.

He landed on his knees, straddling her legs, and knocked away the ice-ball she attempted to pelt him with. Without thinking his plan through, Elden pinned Avalon's wrists above her head to prevent her from forming more snow weapons.

Her breath came out in a huff of air, angry and warm. "Well, what now? You've caught me—now, *let me go!*"

Yes, what now? He couldn't hold her there forever. This was such childish behavior—what was he going to do next? Pull her hair?

Unbidden, an image came to mind, one of him pulling Avalon's hair from behind as he held her hip with his free hand, keeping her against him as he—

Arawn, he could not finish that thought. Not when he was on top of her, pinning her wrists to the ground.

She squirmed, trying to buck him off. "I apologize for the second snowball, okay?"

"Only the second?"

"You *deserved* the first, and I won't take that one back."

"You are maddening," he cursed, applying greater pressure to her wrists. "I was trying to help you. That car of yours is barely hanging on."

"Yes," Avalon growled. "You are the picture of a saint. Now, I know you aren't going to do anything else to me, so

back off and let me go. This is getting boring.”

Boring? “How do you suggest I entertain you?”

She blinked, large golden eyes filled with confusion. Avalon sniffed from the cold. “It doesn’t matter what I say. You’re not going to do a damn thing, and there’s no use chattering about it when my ass is freezing.”

That little hothead. Elden wondered if her mouth held as much heat as her words did. He imagined she felt like fire—he felt as if she would burn. He missed that feeling.

Elden wanted to try something. “What would you say if I were someone else?”

His question made her crinkle her nose. “Someone else? The same—get the hell off me, but not as sweet as I’m asking you.”

“Sweet?” Perhaps you may taste sweet, but you’ve never spoken sweetly to me.”



Damn him. Elden looked good like this, hovering over Avalon with his fingers digging lightly into her skin. Running from him had been its own thrill, and the warmth from her sprint had lingered until it was replaced by a different fire, this one flaming from her core.

Physically Elden was cold, but Avalon had rarely felt winter’s bite when she was around him. He inspired inside Avalon her own heat, once a pit of cooled embers, now a

roaring forest fire.

The words he had spoken caused a blush to creep across his sharp cheekbones and over the bridge of his nose. It was...cute.

As cute as a shark-toothed giant could be, Avalon supposed.

She tried to appear as if the weight of his body did not affect her. That some part of her didn't mind that she was trapped underneath him. "If you're going to do *something*, warden, make it quick."

What now? She'd asked it so many times. What was Elden about to do? What did she *want* him to do? There were too many answers to that.

But Avalon wasn't able to find out. A black mass came bounding toward them, a hurricane of slobber and excitement. Hob tackled Elden, knocking the fey off her legs and into his own snowdrift. As Elden protested Hob's insistent, open-mouthed kisses, Avalon jumped to her feet and ran back to the inn.

Elden was too dangerous now. He was no longer completely dodging her attempts to distract him or silence him. If her flirtations were no longer dismissed, Avalon might end up in his bed or worse—she could actually develop true feelings for the man.

She shuddered—half from the cold and half from terrifying anticipation.