

Shadow's
Heart

Kathleen Hayes

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

SHADOW'S HEART

By Kathleen Hayes

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A young elf is sneaking through a ruined castle. In his hands he holds a glowing orb. Unbeknownst to him a dragon is sneaking up behind. The dragon is about to tap the young elf on the shoulder with its tail. The ruined castle looks vaguely Nordic or Germanic.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My name is Maksimillian. I am a shifter.

See me? The one with the fangs and a tail. The one hiding between the statues, among the ruins of my ancient home.

It's not the first time I spy a thief sneaking in. None succeeded. But this little elf... he is the first one I permit to walk through the castle unharmed. Seems, he brought something with him. I can feel it, hidden under his cloak, something that was stolen from my family long ago, something that carries salvation to my brothers, to my whole species. How did he get it, where? Why is he smuggling it back instead of keeping to himself or selling for a profit?

This might be a trap, a bait to lure me out. But there is determination on the elf's face, a touch of excitement and Hope.

I wish for a Happily Ever After with this cute yet mischievous looking creature and I understand that we have to work hard for it.

Maks

Please, little to no sex.

I wouldn't mind a few funny bits, but I would love the story to be on a serious side.

Thanks,

Murmurella :)

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: elves, dragon, shifter, magic, genderfluid, sweet/no sex, family issues, bonded, captivity, hurt/comfort, interspecies, communicable illness

Word Count: 8,333

SHADOW'S HEART

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Part 1

Barlow

...is the rarest type of dragon there is. While fire, water, earth, and air dragons are each named after the element which they can manipulate, Shadow dragons have a more unique talent. They are able to manipulate light and darkness, very matter itself, in order to shift into any guise they choose. This power comes at a cost, though. For each Shadow is ruled by their Heart. One in possession of a Shadow's Heart has the ability to share in their great power either by imprisonment or...

Shit! Another parchment ruined. Barlow cursed as he tried to wipe away the moisture dripping from his face to the parchment he was transcribing. Tarija was going to kill him. She had taken his equilibrium talisman and refused to return it until he had completed copying this dusty, outdated tome on dragon lore.

Barlow sighed. He hated it here in the south. Most everyone else would consider Quedlinburg, Germania pretty far to the north. But Barlow was used to ice year round, temperatures well below freezing, and plenty of snow. Ice Elves weren't meant to live away from the tundra. However, Tarija had threatened his family and he had ended up a slave in this hideously warm place that only had snow for half the year.

Without his equilibrium talisman, Barlow couldn't keep his power in check and he literally melted all over everything. He startled briefly as the clock in the middle of town struck three. Tarija would not return for another hour. If he could just sneak into the ice house for a few minutes, he might be able to finish this section before she returned.

A few minutes later had him sighing in relief as he opened the door to the underground cellar, the back of which contained the ice house. He stole only a small chip, but as he whispered, "Kalten," the piece of ice disappeared and a wonderful chill ran through Barlow's entire body. It would only last for about an hour so Barlow hurried back upstairs.

He'd just about made it when he fell flat on his ass. Dazed for a moment, he squinted his eyes at the young girl standing over him. She had the typical looks for the locals—blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin. Her skin was smudged liberally with dirt, and the hollows of her cheeks were entirely too sunken to be healthy. However, the smile on her face outshone the bright afternoon sun.

“Barlow!” She seemed surprised, but couldn’t have been very much so seeing as she was in Tarija’s workshop, where Barlow was always to be found.

“Hi, Millie. What brings you by today?” Barlow asked with warmth. Millie loved to listen to the stories and spells from all the books Tarija had him copying and, for an eleven-year-old, was surprisingly good company.

“Could we read some more today? Pretty please!” She flashed wide eyes and a beseeching look that had more in common with a puppy begging for scraps than a young girl. Nevertheless, it worked. As it always did.

“Come along. You can have some toast while I read.” Barlow read aloud as he copied. Millie was always quiet and made sure not to knock any of Tarija’s equipment or experiments over when she visited.

Millie fairly vibrated with excitement as she asked, “What are you copying today?”

He winked at her as he replied in a dramatic voice, “*Hindleson’s Treatise on Dragon Lore Through the Ages.*”

He was surprised by the look of disappointment that flashed quickly across her face before it returned to her normal curious gaze. “Dragons, huh?” She seemed slightly uncertain. “Do you think they really exist around here?”

“Probably. Lots of things exist that no one really knows much about. I bet they just keep to themselves, what with every knight and squire on the continent trying to hunt them down for sport.” He sighed again. If most people knew what he was, they would probably hunt him down for sport too. Witches, like Tarija, were more commonly accepted these days. They were often useful in curing illnesses and helping communities in many other small ways.

However, other supernatural beings—such as elves and dragons—were much less welcome in society. It’s how he ended up a prisoner. Tarija had threatened to reveal the secret location of his clan’s settlement to a group of hunters that would have certainly decimated their population. He had been sold to Tarija in order to help fuel her magic—among other things—in exchange for her silence about his family’s location.

In Barlow’s spare time, he was working on a forgetting spell that would wipe the memory of his clan from Tarija’s mind. As soon as he had it completed, he would run away. It was difficult with Tarija draining his magic every other week, but he pretended to be frailer than he was and used his extra “recovery time” to work on the spell that would set him free.

Barlow was snapped out his reverie when Millie answered, a strange tone in her voice, "Yeah. You're probably right."

Barlow was about to start reading as he continued to transcribe the old text when Millie startled him by jostling close to look over his elbow at the book. His arm flung out in surprise and he knocked the text to the ground. His heart sunk when he saw that the impact had torn the old book apart. The binding was ripped across half of the back cover. Tarija was going to curse him so badly he didn't even want to think about it.

Millie must have noticed the look of resigned acceptance flash across his face because she immediately apologized, fat tears running streaks through the dirt on her face. "I'm so sorry." She bent over to pick the tattered book up off the ground, but before she could stand up again, it fell out of her hands once more.

"It's okay. I've got it." Before Barlow even finished speaking, Millie was out the door of the workshop and banging down the steps. Confused, he picked up the book and almost dropped it himself.

Hanging from the torn remains of the back cover was a necklace. The chain was made of simple silver and large enough to slip over his head. It was nothing special, but hanging delicately from the chain was a golden gemstone. It was no bigger than the first knuckle on Barlow's pinky finger. As soon as he reached out to pluck the necklace from the small pocket that had been hidden in the back cover, it began to glow. A chill that reminded him of home spread up his fingers and through his entire body.

He sighed in relief as he felt his power fall into balance in a way it hadn't since he had left his homeland with Tarija, even with the equilibrium talisman. Just for the joy of it, Barlow waved his other hand and made it snow over his head.

Barlow had barely tucked the necklace under his shirt when Tarija returned to the workshop. She boiled with anger at the sight of the ruined book. She did her best to punish him with extra duties and by withholding food, but somehow the joy Barlow had felt when he first touched the pendant didn't fade, and his balance remained with him.

It took Barlow another week of surreptitious research to figure out what the pendant really was: a Shadow's Heart. In the personal journal of a lord from over a hundred years ago, he found a drawing with the following note:

Bestowed upon me, the Shadow's Heart is mine to protect, as I am, in return, protected. Power gained through possession. Bond forged in love. Greater together than apart, better freely given than greedily stolen. My Love's is mine and mine is My Love's.

The pendant around Barlow's neck pulsed with seeming heartache as he read those words aloud. A wave of yearning beyond any he had ever felt broke through him and left him heaving for breath and fighting tears.

In that moment, Barlow knew. He had to go to the ruined castle outside of town. He had to learn everything he could about this young lord and his Love. He had to return the Shadow's Heart to its rightful owner, even if it was just to place it at a grave.

In all the excitement, Barlow completely forgot the book about dragon lore and that Millie had been the one to find the Shadow's Heart.

It was midday when Barlow reached the ruins of the wall around the old castle. Legend had it that a great tragedy had befallen the last lord to live there, and in his grief, he had pulled the stones from the walls until the castle was no longer fit to be lived in. He then died of a broken heart. The legend never said what or who had caused such great grief, but Barlow hoped there would be some record or clue to be found in the ruins.

Just before dawn, Barlow had used his recently renewed powers to cast the forgetting spell on Tarija, without having to anchor the spell in a talisman. He had taken his equilibrium talisman so that he could retain his balance even after returning the Shadow's Heart. And then he planned to go home. *Finally*. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of seeing his family again. Of the crunch of newly fallen snow beneath his boots, the smell of Ariana's stew bubbling over the fire, the feel of the icy-cold wind gusting through his hair.

During his imprisonment with Tarija, he hadn't let himself think of home. It was too painful. But now? Now there was practically a skip in his step as he made his way through the ruined courtyard and into what was once the great hall. Every twenty feet or so there were great columns of carved stones. Some spanned all the way to the ceiling high above his head and others were only about twice his height and sported carvings of ancient spirits atop them.

He was vaguely startled when he looked down and noticed the pendant hanging from his chest had begun to glow again. This time the light made it

seem three or four times its actual size. It made it easier to see in the dark gloom of the abandoned great hall. Barlow held the glowing orb in front of him and continued his exploration.

He figured he wasn't likely to find what he needed in the great hall. However, there were often storage rooms and offices at the back of a great hall, so he headed in that direction.

Moments later, he nearly leaped out of his skin and let out a less-than-dignified yelp when he felt someone tap him on the shoulder. He spun quickly, momentarily afraid that his forgetting spell hadn't taken and Tarija had followed him.

The reality of what he found standing behind him was even more startling than he would have thought possible. There was a dragon. In front of him. A freaking dragon.

He took a step back instinctively and sputtered incoherently, "Dra... You're a... Where did... Wha...?"

The dragon's ice-blue eyes seemed to be able to see into and sift through Barlow's soul with ease. The dragon's glare was intense, but didn't feel malevolent, for what that was worth. It helped Barlow feel less afraid, but no less like a bug being examined by a curious child.

Eventually the dragon sat back on its haunches and spoke. There was no little amount of awe in its voice when it said, "You have brought it back."

"Brought what back?" Barlow asked, mind still slightly muddled from the shock of all that had happened in the last few minutes.

The dragon gently reached out a clawed hand and lifted the glowing pendant a few inches from Barlow's chest. "My Heart."

"This belongs to you?"

A sad sigh, accompanied by no small amount of smoke, broke across the space between Barlow and the dragon. "Yes. I gave it to one I loved, many years ago. When the villagers found out about our relationship, he was taken from me and killed. He must have done something to protect my Heart from the unworthy because no one has found it until now. I have not been able to leave this place because I cannot be far from my Heart unless it is in the possession of someone worthy, someone chosen."

Barlow had no idea what to say. His heart broke for how alone the dragon must have been all these years after losing the one he had loved and having to

survive without his Heart. In one swift motion, Barlow removed the chain from around his neck and pressed the Shadow's Heart into the dragon's hand.

A wave of force and light immediately shot from the pendant, and Barlow was knocked to the ground. The light grew to encompass the entire dragon for a single moment until it was reduced to the size of the pendant once more as the dragon pressed the pendant against its chest. When the dragon moved his hand away from his chest, it was clear that the pendant had been somehow absorbed into its body. All that was left was a simple silver chain hanging from one of its claws.

Just as gently as before, the dragon reached out its hand and draped the chain over Barlow's head once again.

"Thank you. Not many would return such a powerful object. You are the first person to come to these ruins in many years that is not trying to take something from them. You have my gratitude."

Barlow felt the odd urge to respond with unusual formality. He bowed at the waist and spoke the traditional words of his clan. "What is given freely needs no thanks. A gift of the heart is its own reward."

Barlow was shocked once more when the dragon bowed, as much as a dragon *can* bow, and returned the traditional response. "What is freely given is freely received. May your reward equal your generosity."

They stared at each other for a moment before the odd feeling of decorum broke and they grinned widely at each other.

"I am Barlow Iranistanae of the northern Ice Clans. What is your name?"

"I have gone by many names over the years, but most commonly I am called Maksimillian," the dragon answered enigmatically. "You may call me Maks, if you like."

Barlow smiled. "It is nice to meet you, Maks."

It was a little surreal for Barlow to be having such a normal conversation with a dragon who was ten times his size. It felt like they were sitting down to tea rather standing in the midst of a ruined castle. He shook his head and chuckled when Maks spoke again.

"Do you plan to return home now that you are free?"

"Yes. I can't wait to see my family again." That skip in his heartbeat happened again, just at the thought.

“How long will this journey take?”

“Depending on the weather, about a month or so.”

“Would you care for some company and possibly some protection on your journey?”

Barlow was boggled. “Are you offering to travel with me to the northern Ice Plains?”

If he didn't know better, Barlow would have thought that Maks looked almost shy when he replied, “It was just a thought. I have been trapped here for many years. All those I know are long passed. It would be good to travel and meet new people.”

“No offense, Maks, but I don't think you are really travel sized. How will we be able to pass through populated areas?” A thought occurred to Barlow. “Can you fly?”

“Sometimes,” Maks said, making no sense. However, Barlow barely registered it because standing in front of him where the dragon had been only moments before was a man. He had coloring similar to Barlow—tawny-brown hair and medium-toned skin. His ears had a similar point to Barlow's as well—just as every other Ice Elf. His eyes, however, remained that same ice-blue color.

Maks laughed at what must have been a look of extreme astonishment on Barlow's face. “Am I travel sized now?”

Barlow sputtered for a moment before he returned Maks' smile and said, “Yeah, I think you are.”

It wasn't until much later that Barlow wondered how Maks had known that he was not free to return home until just then.

A week later found the pair wet, dirty, and tired. They had been traveling through dense forests and treacherous mountain terrain. The small campfire in front of them was doing barely enough to keep them comfortable. Barlow didn't mind the cold. It was just the wet and dirty that made him miserable. They hadn't been dry in four days.

He was huddled as close to Maks as he could get, with his waterproof cloak on the ground beneath them and Maks' settled over both their heads.

With a plaintive groan, Barlow said, "I don't suppose you could shift back into your dragon form and dry our clothes? For that matter, does the wet bother you when you are covered in scales?"

Maks jerked a bit at the questions. "I thought you didn't prefer my dragon form."

Barlow craned his head so that he could look Maks in the eyes. "It's not that I dislike it. It's just easier to travel without every person we meet trying to challenge you to battle."

Maks blushed. "Oh. Well, now that I have my Heart back, I can shift into any form I want. Imagination is really my only limit."

Barlow was impressed. And curious. "Can you shift only into other creatures? Or made-up beings? Or just something living? Could you shift to something like a tree or a table? What is your real form?"

Maks waited patiently for Barlow to exhaust his questions before he answered. "I can shift into any creature that has ever walked the earth or traversed the heavens. Dragons only gain the ability to shift when they reach maturity, so I guess my real form, as you mean, would be the one I had as I was growing up. But, we don't really think of it that way. All our forms are us, and we are all our forms. There are certain ceremonies and traditions that we must be in our dragon form for."

Barlow felt his eyes widen. "Does it hurt to shift?"

Maks shook his head. "No."

Barlow leaned forward and looked Maks in the eyes. "What form is the most comfortable for you?"

Maks darted his eyes away from Barlow's and then back, nervousness radiating out in waves.

Barlow tried again. "Why did you make yourself look like an Ice Elf?"

"I didn't want you to be uncomfortable or afraid."

Barlow replied with conviction, "I could never be afraid of you." Then it was his turn to blush and look away. After a moment, he continued, "You don't have to show me. I just want you to be as comfortable as possible."

Maks stood and took a deep breath. In the time it took for Barlow to stand as well, the brown-haired Ice Elf he had been sitting next to was replaced with a creature entirely foreign.

Maks' skin and hair were the same gray color of the dragon's scales. When Maks stood, Barlow noticed he was now a good six inches shorter than Maks. Every part of Maks looked longer and leaner. But most surprising were the delicate wings that grew out of Maks' back. They looked almost like bat wings, but were as tall as Maks was. The tapered ends fell only inches above the ground, and the folded tops brushed Maks' gray hair where it fell to his shoulders.

Barlow took a step forward and reached his hand out. Tentatively, he brushed his fingers against Maks' wings. "You're beautiful," he said, almost under his breath.

A moment later, he shook himself and cleared his throat. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Maks replied. His voice sounded almost anguished. "No one has touched me in this form—" his throat seemed to clog for a moment—"Hans was killed."

Barlow stepped forward again, gathering his courage, and wrapped his arms around Maks' back, his hands fitting neatly under the joint where Maks' wings were attached. Maks held himself stiff for a moment, awkward, before Barlow found himself supporting almost two hundred pounds of dragon shifter. Maks sank into the hug like a person starving for a kind touch. Barlow's heart was beating almost out of control, and he wondered why he hadn't realized he was just as lonely as Maks was. He needed this hug just as much as Maks did.

It was long minutes before Barlow and Maks separated. And then it was only long enough for them to lie down together—their cloaks between them and the ground, and Maks' wings keeping the rain off of them.

Barlow sleepily wondered what exactly it was that Maks had shifted into before his dreams overtook him.

The next day, Barlow and Maks finally reached the outskirts of a village. Maks pulled Barlow off the trail and into the edge of the dense forest.

"Maks, what are you doing?"

Maks didn't answer, just kept walking. After about five minutes of walking into the woods, Maks stopped. Barlow just about brained himself on the back of Maks' head because he wasn't paying close enough attention.

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

Maks look sheepish. "I just wanted someplace safe to change into a different form. I don't think the villagers would appreciate me showing up like this. We'll be much more likely to get supplies and a place to stay if I am more approachable."

Barlow nodded. "Ok. Well what form were you thinking of?"

Maks hedged, "The one I usually take when wandering around mostly human villages."

Barlow sighed in aggravation. "And what form would that be?"

Maks replied, somewhat cryptically, "I'm sorry," before Maks' winged form disappeared and Millie was standing in front of him.

Barlow gasped. "You're Millie?"

Maks' nervousness fairly vibrated through the small clearing as he answered, "Um, yeah. She's always who I am to go into town. She's unthreatening and blends in. And then I met you and I just loved hearing you read, so I kept coming back as her."

Barlow shook his head, trying clear it out a bit. He liked Millie. She was fun to spend time with. He also liked Maks. He was starting to think in a way that would be totally inappropriate, seeing as Millie and Maks were the same person.

"So are you more Millie or Maks? 'Cause I gotta say, I like both, but in totally different ways. And I am really trying not to feel creepy right now."

Maks snapped his head toward Barlow at that. "I am equally both. The only difference is the form I wear."

"Let me rephrase that. How old are you?"

"Four hundred and seventy-two."

"Wow. Okay. One more question. For now. Are you a man or a woman?"

"In my dragon form, I am both. When I am in the form of another species, I am whatever gender the form I choose to take is."

It was kind of surreal having this conversation with someone who looked eleven years old. "Okay, but that's what your body is. I'm asking what gender you feel like, just you."

Maks looked confused. "Oh. Um. I guess I usually choose a body based on how I feel. Unless I need a specific form for a particular reason, like being Millie to get supplies."

Barlow started to pace as much as possible in the small clearing they were in. "Do you have any attachment to Millie or is it just a useful form?"

Maks shrugged. "I used her a lot because she is who you knew. But I never really feel like me in her. She's too young."

Barlow breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay then. Can you maybe stay adult when we're together?" He continued in a mutter under his breath, "Less confusing and creepy that way."

Maks shrugged again. "I guess." In a blink of the eye, the Ice Elf form from before was back.

Barlow stopped pacing. "Do you have a name you prefer in this form? Or do you always use Maks when you are male and Millie when you are female?"

"You can use Maks all the time. I prefer it." Maks nodded with emphasis, like maybe he was realizing that for the first time because no one had ever asked him about it before.

"Okay, Maks." Barlow smiled, then thought of something else. "Oh, what gender is your favorite form? The one with the wings?"

"The Angeli don't really do gender like humans do either, but I guess I feel more masculine than feminine when I take that form." Maks shrugged.

"I'm sorry for asking so many questions. I just want..." Barlow wasn't really sure what to say next. "I want to make sure I don't make you uncomfortable, I guess." That's not really what he was trying say, but he guessed it would do.

Maks stepped closer and took Barlow's hand. "It's okay. It's nice someone is trying to be nice to me. How about this? If you call me the wrong thing or say something that's not quite right, I'll tell you."

Barlow looked into Maks' eyes. He was kind of breathless at how close they were. "Okay." He blindly reached out to grab Maks' other hand. At the same time, Maks moved his head so that his chin rested on Barlow's shoulder. Barlow did the same.

Barlow felt safer and more cared for than he had in a long time. Eventually, he squeezed Maks' hands, let go, and stepped back.

"We should get going if we want to buy supplies and find a place to stay before nightfall."

Maks nodded, but didn't move. His eyes were closed and tears were silently streaming down his cheeks.

"Are you all right?" Barlow asked, chest tightening in concern.

Maks nodded slightly again. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. "It's been so long since I felt like this."

Barlow leaned forward and kissed the tears off Maks' cheeks. "Me too." The words felt like they were ripped from a part of Barlow's soul that he didn't even realize existed. He didn't understand how he could feel so connected to Maks in such little time. However, since Maks was Millie, he guessed they had known each other longer than he had realized.

This time it was Maks who moved away first. He let out an embarrassed little huff and said, "You're right. Let's go."

Part 2

Maksimillian

The farther north they traveled, the more the terrain changed. Maks had lived in northern Europe for the last two hundred and fifty years. He had never really been this far north before, but he had heard tales of times when dragon kind had been allied with elven kind.

His mother's mother had given her Heart to one of the Wood Elves in her childhood. However, both had been slain during the time of the Roman Empire, and their story was merely a tale told to children by the time Maks was alive.

Now that he and Barlow were past where humans usually lived, he stayed in his Angeli form most often. Maks wasn't sure why, but it made him feel free, like anything was possible. He had only taken flight once since they reached the snow lands. Barlow had laughed with joy watching it, and Maks had been so drawn to the sound that he hadn't been able to stay away for very long.

He had loved Hans. He missed Hans even to this day. But his and Hans's relationship had been clouded over by fear of discovery and constant tension that one of them might die. He had never known someone who made him so *happy* before. They hadn't even kissed for real yet, and Maks wanted to dance for joy in the snow and never stop hearing Barlow laugh.

Of course that meant, now was when it all would go to hell.

As they crested the hill, Barlow had been telling a story of his brother's promised, Ariana, as she was learning to hunt. She had wanted so badly to learn to shoot her bow and arrow that, for a while, she shot anything that moved. Eventually, her parents had to give her arrows with no point so she didn't hurt anyone. Good thing, too, because the very next day she had been startled as she was about to shoot and had ended up shooting his brother, Barton, in the butt.

The smile that seemed almost a permanent fixture on Barlow's face after the end of their first week traveling together slipped off and was replaced with something akin to horror and heartbreak. Maks was so focused on watching Barlow tell his story that he didn't immediately see what caused the sudden shift in emotion.

As he looked in the direction Barlow was, he saw. There was a village of snow huts. It looked run down and practically abandoned, if not for the smoke coming out of two of the roof openings. Wooden racks usually used for

smoking fish were broken into splinters, and the fires near them had died down to ash. Of the two dozen or so huts, at least half of them were in disrepair. And worst of all, in the expanse of ice to the east of the small village were a dozen piles of stone, large enough that Maks knew they had to be grave markers. Beside the dozen adult-sized cairns were two child-sized cairns.

Barlow sank to his knees, tears streaming down his face. Without a thought, Maks sank into the snow beside him and pulled him into his arms.

Barlow sobbed his heart out for a mere minute before he shot up, almost knocking Maks onto his back. His voice was broken and panicked when he spoke. "I have to go see who is still alive. Oh gods. Please let Barton and Ariana still be there."

Before he had finished speaking, he was running down the icy slope of the hill with a sure-footedness that only an Ice Elf could possess. Thankfully, Maks had the aid of wings and just sort of leaped to the bottom of the hill so that he could be by Barlow's side as he entered his village.

Without looking at him or speaking, Barlow grabbed his hand, and together they strode toward to closest hut that had smoke coming out of its roof hole.

They got no closer than twenty paces away before a heavily pregnant woman with dark hair opened the door and aimed a bow and arrow at his chest.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" she asked with authority.

Barlow stared in shock before he spoke uncertainly. "Ariana? It's Barlow."

Her face hardened. "Don't lie to me. Barlow died. Ten years ago."

Barlow shook his head, and his eyes went a little crazy. "No, I didn't," he cried out. "Mother and Father sold me to the witch, Tarija, so she would not give away the location of our village to those who would hunt us down and kill us. I have finally escaped, with Maks' help, and returned home. You have to believe me."

The look on Ariana's face faltered briefly, but the aim of her weapon did not. "How do I know you're not lying to me?"

Barlow gave a wet chuckle that was more despair than humor. "Besides the fact that I am the spitting image of Barton? Have you told anyone else that birchwine tea is the secret ingredient you use when you make your stew?"

At last the woman sagged as if the strength had left her all in one swift motion. Tears ran down her face as she opened her arms to Barlow. "It really is you. I can't believe you're still alive."

After a moment, Barlow stepped back, grief written in the lines of his body. "Ariana, what has happened here?"

She motioned to the door behind as she spoke. "Come inside, both of you, and I will tell you."

The small hut was dark and stuffy. There were two cots, each with a person sleeping on them. In the center of the room was a fire, and near the fire was a small table with four chairs around it. Along the opposite wall, between the two cots, was a large cabinet filled with books and food and what looked like medicines or spells.

Ariana took a moment to pour tea for all three of them and took a stale-looking loaf of bread from the cabinet. She served the bread with dried fish and salted oil. Once there was nothing more for Ariana to do with her hands, she eased herself into one of the chairs on the opposite side of the table from Barlow and Maks.

Maks politely sipped the tea and took a bite of the fish and bread. Barlow left his untouched and stared at Ariana in expectation.

She didn't speak.

Finally, Barlow broke the silence with a neutral question. "Did you end up marrying Barton?"

Tears began to flow anew as she nodded. "Our firstborn, Barry, is one of those outside to the east." She looked up briefly and met Barlow's eyes. "We named him after you."

Barlow looked like he had been punched in the gut. He reached the hand that wasn't clutched to Maks' across the table to take his sister-in-law's hand.

"What happened, Ana?" His voice was quiet, barely audible, and so careful, it made Maks' heart break all over again.

She took a deep breath and began to speak. "We were about to take the last haul from the summer camp to the winter village. I had sprained my ankle or I wouldn't have still been here. Barton wanted me safe and sound at the winter village in case something happened with the baby." She motioned toward her midsection as she said this. "Barry begged to stay with me, so he could protect me. Since it was just for a haul from summer to winter with two dozen other clan members, Barton agreed. The day before we were meant to set out, Zani fell sick. At first we thought it just summer sickness and delayed our start for a few days until she would feel up to the trip.

“She didn’t get better. She just kept getting worse. After a few days, Barry fell ill, and then Soren. After that nearly half of us got sick. There was nothing to do. No way to prevent the spread, no way to make any one better. I tried. Gods did I try. I tried medicines and magic and meditation, but nothing worked. Zani, Barry, Soren, Aler, Charis, Little Jesti, Degan, Rari, Wentol, Sela, Avey, Hawi, Gille, and Fruta are all to the east of us now.”

After that litany of names, Ariana was not able to speak again for a long while. Barlow turned his head into Maks’ shoulder as he sobbed his grief out.

When they seemed to have cried themselves out for the time being, Maks spoke. “Are there any still sick, here in the summer camp?”

Ariana’s head snapped up at hearing him speak for the first time. “Yes. The two in here, Ceili and Praven, and four more in the other hut. There are five of us who are still well. Breka is taking care of those in the other hut, and the other three are out hunting. I have spoken with Barton via our magic and forbidden him to send any further aid lest the plague spread to the winter village.”

Maks nodded, a little unsure, but wanting to do anything he could to help. “My people have some knowledge of healing. May I take a look at Ceili or Praven? See if there is any help I can give?”

Despair flashed across Ariana’s face. “I don’t see what help you can give. But you probably can’t make it any worse.”

Taking that for as much permission as he was going to get, Maks stood and walked to the cot on the right. The woman lying on it looked like she had a high fever, but was not asleep or unconscious.

Maks took her hand and spoke. “Hello. I am Maks. I am going to try to help you. Are you Ceili or Praven?”

She rasped, “Ceili.”

“Hello, Ceili. If it’s all right with you, I am going to put my hands on either side of your head. Is that okay?”

She nodded slightly.

Maks took a moment to clear his mind. He placed his hands on either side of her head. He thought about what he would need to do to take her form. What a female Ice Elf form felt like at its very base. What it *should* feel like. Then he sent his mind out to examine her inner workings, to see where her base was different from what it should be.

It took him a few minutes, but he found a foreign base hiding amongst that which should have been there. It was slowly knocking against her base and making it fall apart. Maks flickered his form a bit, becoming the part of Ceili that was destroying itself and then allowing his natural healing to make it better so he could see how it worked.

After a few tries, he was able to replicate the process in Ceili, manipulating her matter as he would his own. It was more difficult and would drain his power faster than shifting his form would, but all in all not that complicated.

When he was done, Maks fell back on the floor from where he had been crouched by Ceili's cot. Barlow rushed to his side, and before he even had a chance to right himself, he felt Barlow's arms reach around him and raise him up. Maks let himself be led back to his chair at the table and gratefully accepted the tea Barlow shoved into his hands.

By the time Maks had recovered, Ceili was sitting up and drinking her own cup of tea. Ariana was looking at him with wonder and gratitude. Before she could speak, Maks bowed his head in her direction and said, "What is given freely needs no thanks. A gift of the heart is its own reward."

It's a phrase he learned from Barlow when he had been Millie. The first time Barlow had given her toast and jam and then read to her, Millie had tried to thank him. She had asked him what it meant and where it came from. A clan, a family, owed no repayment when a favor was done out of love and freely given. All supported each other, and no gratitude was needed.

Ariana gave the traditional reply. "What is freely given is freely received. May your reward equal your generosity."

Maks was momentarily shocked to find his lap full of a largely pregnant Ice Elf hugging the stuffing out him, but then just returned the hug with all his might.

When she finally let go of him, Maks spoke again. "I can heal the others, but I will need some time to rest between each healing, perhaps a day."

Ariana nodded, almost frantically. "That would be great. It is another month before the trails become impassable for the winter. The journey home is only an easy week of travel. We will prepare to leave this place in one week's time."

Barlow stood behind Maks and placed his hands on Maks' shoulders. He slowly began to rub and massage the tension from them. Maks closed his eyes and reveled in the contact. Barlow pushed particularly hard, and Maks was hard-pressed to not let out an embarrassingly loud groan.

When he heard Barlow's chuckle from behind him, he realized he probably hadn't been all that successful.

Barlow stopped massaging his shoulders and pulled out a chair to sit in front of Maks. "If you need to recover your power faster, you can pull from mine. It's the whole reason Tarija wanted me in the first place. I am a good power draw."

Maks was horrified. "I would never do that to you."

Barlow smiled sadly. "It wouldn't be like when she did it. If it is given freely, it doesn't hurt and I don't really need my power for much of anything now that I am back in my clan's lands. I've gotten used to not using it after all these years."

Maks felt his chest tighten. He still shook his head though. "I am honored that you would trust me like this, but I won't take your power." It wouldn't work anyway. The only way a Shadow Dragon could share power was with the one who possessed their Heart. Something of his thoughts must have passed over his face, because when Barlow spoke again, it was to question him.

"What? There is a way I can help, isn't there? It's just not power drawing?"

"No. I can't make you do that either."

Barlow responded, stubbornly, "How do you know I wouldn't be willing if you don't tell me what it is?"

Hope flared through Maks before he tamped it down. Was he really considering giving his Heart to someone new? Giving it to Barlow? He thought back to the Ice Elf he had first met as Millie, who always had time for her and would feed someone he thought needed it, even though it probably came from the limited food Tarija gave to him. He thought back to the Barlow who had gone looking to return the Shadow's Heart to its rightful owner, whoever that might be. He remembered the hug and then the gentle kisses that Barlow had given him that day in the clearing. And he realized he had already given his heart to Barlow.

Maks took a deep breath before speaking again. "If I give you my Heart, we will share each other's power. It is different for every pairing. Hans didn't have any power of his own, so it mainly acted as a bond between us, allowing us to communicate and sense each other. Since you have your own powers, I don't exactly know how it would manifest, but most likely you would gain some of my abilities and I would gain some of yours. We would be able to give strength to one another and help each other recover more quickly."

Maks couldn't look at Barlow. He couldn't bear it if Barlow refused. So as he continued, he stared at his feet. "But please don't do this just to help me heal your clan. I can do that no matter what. It'll just take a few days. Giving you my Heart is so much bigger than that. Somewhere along the way, I fell in love with you. I couldn't bear it if you had my Heart and didn't feel the same."

Barlow leaned forward and lifted Maks' chin with his fingers so that Maks had to either force his head from Barlow's grip or meet Barlow's eyes.

Hope and joy were shining from Barlow's eyes as he spoke. "I've never felt this way in my life, about anyone. But I do know that I want to figure out if we can feel this way together for the rest of our lives. If you give me your Heart, it's only right that I give you mine."

With that, Barlow leaned forward and kissed him. Without a thought, Maks pulled Barlow into his lap and wrapped his arms around him. Barlow put up no resistance whatsoever. Once Barlow was settled he opened his mouth and deepened the kiss. Barlow's arms wrapped around his back and tucked under his wings. It was everything he hoped for. Warmth spread through his entire being, and he lost control of himself as Barlow ravaged his mouth. His breaths quickened and his wings unfurled, wrapping the two of them in a cocoon.

Unbeknownst to both Maks and Barlow, a bright light flashed from where their chests were pressed against each other. When they finally broke apart, the small pendant was once more hanging on the silver chain around Barlow's neck.

What Maks wouldn't realize until later was that an identical pendant was also hanging around his own neck.

The End

Author Bio

Kathleen Hayes is a bit of an all-around geek. She has mastered the art of procrastination, is owned by two crazy cats, and is excited to have just added a fellow super geek to her clan. Kathleen loves to explore worlds—whether in her head or on page. She welcomes you into her worlds and hopes you have as much fun there as she does!

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