

THE BATTLE OF CHRISTMAS EVE

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Inó wiped sweat from her forehead back into her silver locks. The desert lay endlessly before her, sands stretching to each end of what earth she could see. In the distance sat snow-covered mountains, blurred through the waves of heat kicked up from the winds. Her back ached with each bounce her handsome Kiger Mustang made, but she would not — could not — tire yet. Her annual journey was only just beginning.

The horse cantered mile upon mile, his strong legs churning them forward. Inó leaned into the saddle, expertly clutching the reins as she turned to focus on the fleet of horses following. They would collect twelve in total, as they did each year; American Quarter Horses, Appaloosas, and Morgans, but none as handsome as the Mustang.

Bit by bit, the heat slipped from her shoulders. The dry desert wouldn't give up easily, though. The sun still beat down on her back, but her fingertips began to chill. They were getting closer.

In the distance, a dark storm cloud hovered above the tallest peak, dancing around the snow-capped summit as

snow poured from its center. Inó gently tugged the reins until the horse slowed. From the saddlebags came warmth in form of sweaters, blankets, mittens, and hats. She pulled on each, even though the wool made her feel heavy, slow, and sweaty. Inó preferred the heat. The heat was her friend and it would follow until it couldn't anymore.

Inó and her Mustang trudged on and as they approached the mountain base, she was pleased to see a wild herd of twelve behind her.

"Onward!" she cried, pointing towards the growing storm.

Rocky terrain slowed their climb. The cold infiltrated the warmth of the sun behind them, gripping Inó in its icy clutches with every inch they took. As they neared the summit, she brought both hands to her mouth and blew, savoring the few seconds of warmth. But even beneath her thick mittens, her numb fingers struggled to straighten.

As they approached the storm, ice and snow blew wildly around them, sticking to Inó's exposed skin like tiny magnets. She squinted. Wind roared as they neared the storm as if to tell them to turn around. But Inó and her Mustang knew the way and neither would stop no matter how relentless the weather became.

By the time they'd reached the storm's edge, the Mustang's coat had turned stark white. But they were finally on flat ground, even though it seemed impossible from the incline visible at the bottom of the mountain. Nothing was impossible at the North Pole summit. Inó brushed the snow off the horse before digging her heels into his side. He took off into a trot, canter, and finally a powerful gallop, straight into the thick of the blizzard.

The moment they crossed the threshold, the noise of the wind and snow shut out behind them. They were no longer on a mountain. The desert was long gone; the sun, a

forgotten memory. Instead, they stood on flat snow with a dark, star-spotted sky above them. Rows of squat homes, each with warm, glowing windows and smoking chimneys, lined the straight pathway they found themselves on.

Inó had been here before and though she was grateful the wind had stopped forcing its chill through her clothing, her focus was on something else entirely.

A hundred feet away, glistening even in the dark of the night, sat a red, polished wooden sleigh. *Her* sleigh. The majestic object was a full story high with thick golden runners. It was seemingly untouched, every inch of it waxed, polished, and primed. In the back sat a massive brown sack. Inó narrowed her eyes at it.

"This is our year," she told her horses as they crept up towards the sleigh. "My year."

A hearty laugh echoed across the snow. Inó's fingers tightened around the Mustang's reins. Behind the sled, coming toward her, was the very foe in question she'd prepared to challenge all year long.

The heavysset man wore a red suit and hat, cuffed with white. He rode on the back of a reindeer the size of a moose, who approached slowly. In the distance, twelve more followed from the shadows. The man's long beard hung to the tip of his belly and shook from side to side as he continued to chortle.

"So we meet again," he roared, his beady black eyes narrowing as Inó approached.

"Your time's up, old man."

"Old man?" He raised both brows. "You're no spring chicken, white goddess. We've been doing this for, oh, what is it now?"

"One thousand, seven-hundred and fifty years."

Inó remembered the first year well — how the rosy-cheeked oversized cherub had pulled out his long scroll that

spilled to the ground like some untamed thing, revealing children's names and his judgment beside them. His holier than thou attitude and speech of deserving and undeserving children.

All children deserved joy on Christmas, Inó tried to tell him. But he'd vehemently disagreed. Thus, began their Christmas Eve battle for the sleigh.

"That's right!" the old man chuckled, then narrowed his beady black eyes. "And this year will be no different."

Inó shook her head. "We'll see."

The pair dismounted their animals in silence. Inó focused on her task at hand, pulling her secret weapon from the Mustang's saddlebags and slipping it into her back pocket. Though she'd worked all year on her new plan, her hands fumbled from nerves. Her methods had always been the same. She'd tried, year after year, to warm herself up enough to fight with fire. In the desert, she was a warrior, able to manipulate heat waves, fire, and the desert sands. Here, she'd warmed herself up as best she could, but her powers were still feeble in the eye of the storm.

The man's footsteps echoed across the packed snow as he took his stance from behind the sleigh. His mighty reindeer whined and pawed, rotating their necks from side to side so that their antlers scraped up the snow. Inó's horses mimicked them, shaking their manes from side to side, kicking up snow dust so that it sparkled in the air.

Kringle took his stance, thrusting open his jacket to reveal his belt of candy-cane bullets that had ended Inó's journey before. But Inó had seen it all. By now, their fight was ritualistic. And so, she got into position too, hands outstretched at her sides, eyes narrowed in on her subject.

With one subtle movement, Inó swept up snow dust with her hands. It hovered at her sides, collecting into snowballs. She clenched her fists and in a split second, the snowballs

became fireballs, crackling and sparking as they swirled. Kringle grinned as he watched her, making no move of his own. With one big, sweeping motion, Inó sent the meager fireballs his way.

They popped like bubbles in the air, some making it past the sleigh and even fewer smashing into his coat. He didn't bother dusting himself off as his hand twitched, creating small ice pellets that he collected in the air.

"You're getting lazy," Kringle chuckled. His open palm bounced and the ice pellets followed, getting bigger with each bounce. By the time he swung and forced them toward Inó and her horses, they were the size of small daggers.

Inó grit her teeth and brought her palms up above her head, prompting heat waves to rise from her fingertips, straight up into the air, in an effort to melt the ice before it could reach the other side.

From the tremors in her forearms, Inó knew it was now or never. The white goddess shrugged off her sweater, revealing sunkissed shoulders, and then removed her hat, mittens, and scarf. Her toes curled from the cold the instant her skin hit the frigid air, but she grit her teeth, closed her eyes, and tried to focus.

"Won't you get cold?" Kringle laughed.

"That's what I'm hoping," Inó answered, straightening, as she reached into her back pocket.

Kringle narrowed his eyes and adjusted his shoulders, wiping his hands on his pants. But Inó was too quick. From her back pocket came a small glass bottle. It glistened between her fingers, but she wasted no time uncorking it. The element of surprise was of utmost importance.

"Now," she whispered.

Water dribbled from the rim of the bottle before it bubbled and rushed, spilling over the edges before it erupted completely. The force of the water burst the bottle from Inó's

very hand and it sputtered and spat on the snow-covered ground. The water rose before her, eating up the bottle, the snow, and the view of Kringle and his reindeer.

Kringle chortled from behind the tidal wave of water, but Inó would not be deterred. In her final act of building up her chill, she removed her boots and socks. The cold snow burned her soles, but she dug her heels in. It was now or never.

From her shivering hands, Inó released a wave of wind, one cold enough to freeze the water in the frozen climate. In seconds, she'd created a solid block of ice, but Inó wasn't done yet. With the last of her fire energy, she carved into the side, creating massive beasts that came to life as they stepped out onto the snow.

"Go forth!" she commanded. "Protect the sleigh!"

Kringle sent over another rain of daggers, but the ice creatures blocked the attack effortlessly. And as the last of the ice broke away, Inó finally saw Kringle's face fall. Fear swept over his plump face, the rosy color draining from both cheeks.

"You see, Kringle," Inó bellowed, "*all* children are worthy of gifts on Christmas. When you decided against that, you left a lot of unhappy kids behind. After last Christmas, I spent the whole year collecting their tears."

The frozen monsters marched forward. Kringle's attacks shifted from Inó and her horses to try and defeat Inó's creations, but with each attack of snow and ice, the monsters grew larger and more menacing.

Finally, the beasts crossed the middle point of their battleground, leaving the shimmering sleigh unguarded. Inó ran as she'd never run before, her horses following in wide strides as they took their place at the front of the magic sleigh. Chestnut reins appeared around her fleet, and Inó

grasped them tightly in her now gloved hand as she took her rightful place upon the red sleigh.

“Ho ho ho,” she roared as she flicked the reins. Her horses took off from trot to gallop in seconds.

“No!” Kringle cried as the beasts overwhelmed him and his reindeer. “No!”

Inó grinned as she took off into the night.

