

A CAVERN OF BLACK ICE

J. V. JONES



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C—A—
CAVERN
OF BLACK ICE



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
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*To Paul,
who, on the far side of the Atlantic,
keeps hours every bit
as strange as mine*

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PROLOGUE

A Birth, a Death, and a Binding

TARISSA WHISPERED A HOPE out loud before looking up at the sky. “Please make it lighter than before. *Please.*” As her lips came together she looked up past the wind-twisted pines and the ridge of frost-riven granite, up toward the position of the sun. Only the sun wasn’t there. Stormheads rolled across the sky, cutting out the sunlight, massing, churning, driven by winds that snapped and circled like pack wolves around sheep. Tarissa made a small gesture with her hand. The storm wasn’t passing overhead. It had come to the mountain to stay.

Dropping her gaze, she took a steadying breath. She couldn’t afford to panic. The city lay a thousand feet below her, rising from the shadow of the mountain like a second, lesser peak. She could see the ring towers clearly now, four of them, two built hard against the wall, the tallest piercing the storm with its iron stake. It was a long way down. Hours of walk, even. And she had to be careful.

Resting her hand on her swollen stomach, she forced herself to smile. *Storms?* They were nothing.

She moved quickly. Loose scree, bird skeletons, and snags of wind-blasted wood tripped her feet. It was hard to walk, even harder to keep her balance on the ever sharpening slope. Steep draws and creases forced her sideways instead of down. The temperature was falling, and for the first time a day Tarissa noticed her breath came out white. Her left glove had been gone for days—lost somewhere on the far side of the mountain—and she stripped off her right glove, turned it inside out, and pulled it onto her left hand. The fingers there had started to grow numb.

Dead trees blocked her path. Some of their trunks were so smooth they looked polished. As she reached out to steady herself against one of the hard black limbs, she felt a sharp pain in her lower abdomen. Something shifted. Wetness spilled down her thighs. A soft sting sounded in her lower back and a wave of sickness washed up her gullet, depositing the taste of sour milk in her mouth. Tarissa closed her eyes. This time she kept her hopes to herself.

Wet snow began to fall as she pushed herself off from the dead tree. Her glove was sticky with sap and bits of pine needles were glued to the fingers. Underfoot the granite ledge was unstable; gravel spilled from deep gashes, and husks of failed saplings crumbled to nothing the instant they took her weight. Despite the cold, Tarissa started to sweat. The pain in her back chewed inward, and although she didn’t want to admit it, didn’t even want to acknowledge it, her lower abdomen began contracting in rhythmic waves.

No. No. NO. Her baby wasn’t due yet. Two weeks more—it *had* to be. She needed to make it to the city, to find shelter. She’d even held back enough coins for a midwife and a room.

Finding a lead through the rocks, she picked up her pace. A lone raven, its plumage dark and oily and a scorched liver, watched her in silence from the distorted upper branch of a blackstone pine. Spying on it, Tarissa was conscious of how ridiculous she must look: fat bellied, wild haired, scrambling down the mountainside in a race against a storm. Grimacing, she looked away from the bird. She didn’t like how it made her feel.

Contractions were coming faster now, and Tarissa found that it helped if she kept on the move. Stopping made the suffering linger, gave her seconds to count and think.

Mist rose from crevices. Snow flew in Tarissa’s face, and the wind lifted the cloak from her back. Overhead, the clouds mimicked her descent, following her down the mountain as if she were showing

them the way. Tarissa walked with her gloved hand cradling her belly. The fluid between her legs had dried to a sticky film that sucked her thighs together as she moved. Heat pumped up through the arteries in her neck, flushing her cheeks and the bridge of her nose.

Faster. She had to move faster.

Spotting a clear run between boulders, Tarissa switched her path farther to her right. Thorn snagged her skirt, and she yanked on the fabric, losing patience. As she turned back to face the path, the raven took flight. Its black wings beat against the storm current, snapping and tearing like teeth.

The instant Tarissa stepped forward, gravel and rocks began running beneath her feet. She felt herself falling, and she flung out her arms to grab at something, *anything*, to hold her. The mist hid everything at ground level, and Tarissa's hands found only loose stones and twigs. Pain exploded in her shoulder as she was thrown against a rock. Pinecones and rocks bounced overhead as she tried desperately to break her fall. Her bare hand grasped at a tussock of wolfgrass, but her body kept sliding downward and the roots pulled free in her hand. Her hip bashed against a granite ridge, something sharp shaved skin from the back of her knee, and when she opened her mouth to scream, snow flew between her lips, freezing the cry on her tongue.

She came to. There was no pain, just a fog of ragged light lying between her and the outside world. Above her, as far as her eyes could see, stretched walls of hand-polished limestone, mason cut and smooth as bone. She'd finally made it to the city with the Iron Spire.

Dimly she was aware of something pushing far below her. Minutes passed before she realized that was her body working to expel the child. She swallowed hard. Suddenly she missed all the people she had run from. Leaving home had been a mistake.

Kaaw!

Tarissa tried to shift her head toward the sound. A hot needle of pain jabbed at the vertebrae in the base of her neck. She blacked out. When she came to again she saw the raven sitting on a rock before her. Black-and-gold eyes pinned her with a look that was devoid of pity. Bobbing its head and raising its scaly yellow claws, it danced a little jig of damnation. When it was done it made a soft *clucking* noise that sounded just like a mother scolding a child and then flung itself to the mercy of the storm. Cold currents bore it swiftly away.

Pushing. Her body kept pushing.

Tarissa felt herself drifting ... she was so tired ... so very, very tired. If only she could find a way through the fog ... if only her eyes could show her more.

As her eyelids closed for the last time and her ribs pressed an unused breath from her lungs, she saw a pair of booted feet walking toward her. The tar-blackened leather melted snowflakes on contact.

THEY APPLIED THE LEECHES to him in rings of six. His body was crusted with sweat and roiled with dust and dirt, and the first man scraped the skin clean with deer tallow and a cedarwood wedge, while the second worked in his shadow with metal pincers, a pitchpine bucket, and heavy buckskin gloves.

The man who no longer knew his name strained against his bindings, testing. Thick coils of rope pressed into his neck, upper arms, wrists, thighs, and ankles. He could shudder and breathe and blink. Nothing more.

He could barely feel the leeches. One settled in the fold between his inner thigh and groin, and he tensed for a moment. Pincer took a pinch of white powder from a pouch around his neck and applied it to the leech. Salt. The leech dropped away. A fresh leech was applied, higher this time so it couldn't attach itself to skin that wasn't fit.

That done, Pincer stripped off his gloves and spoke a word that sent Accomplice to the far side of

the cell. A moment later Accomplice returned with a tray and a soapstone lamp. A single red flame burned within the lamp, heating the contents of the crucible above. When he saw the flame, the man with no name flinched so hard that the rope binding his wrists split his skin. Flames were all he had now. Memories of flames. He hated the flames and feared them, yet he needed them, too. Familiarity bred contempt, they said. But the man with no name knew that was only half of it. Familiarity bred dependence as well.

Thoughts lost in the dance of flames, he didn't see Pincer kneading an oakum wad in his fist. He was aware only of Accomplice's hands on his jaw, repositioning his head, brushing his hair to one side, and pushing his skull hard against the bench. The man with no name felt the frayed rope and beeswax wad thrust into his left ear. Ship's caulking. They were shoring him up like a storm-battered hull. A second wad was thrust into his right ear, and then Accomplice held the nameless man's jaw wide while Pincer thrust a third wad into the back of his throat. The desire to vomit was sudden and overpowering, but Pincer slapped one large hand on the nameless man's chest and another on his belly and pressed hard against the contracting muscles, forcing them flat. A minute later the urge had passed.

Still Accomplice held on to his jaw. Pincer paid attention to the tray, his hands casting clanging shadows against the cell wall as he worked. Seconds later he turned about. A thread of animal sinew was stretched between his thumbs. Seeing it, Accomplice shifted his grip, opening the nameless man's jaws wider, pulling back lip tissue along with bone. The man with no name felt thick fingers in his mouth. He tasted urine and salt and leech water. His tongue was pressed to the base of his mouth, and then sinew was woven across his bottom teeth, binding his tongue in place.

Fear came alive in the nameless man's chest. Perhaps flames weren't the only things that could harm him.

"He's done," said Pincer, drawing back.

"What about the wax?" breathed a third voice from the shadows near the door. It was the One Who Issued Orders. "You are supposed to seal his eyes shut."

"Wax is too hot. It could blind him if we use it now."

"Use it."

The flame in the soapstone lamp wavered as Accomplice drew the crucible away. The man with no name smelled smoke given off from the impurities in the wax. When the burning came it shocked him. After everything he had been through, all the suffering he had borne, he imagined he had outlived pain. He was wrong. And as the hours wore on and his bones were broken methodically by Pincer wielding a goosedown padded mallet, Accomplice following after to ensure the splintered ends were pulled apart, and his internal organs were manipulated with needles so long and fine that they could puncture specific chambers in his lungs and heart while leaving the surrounding tissue intact, he began to realize that pain—and the ability to feel it—was the last sense to go.

When the One Who Issued Orders stepped close and began breathing words of binding older than the city he currently stood in, the man with no name no longer cared. His mind had returned to the flames. There, at least, was a pain that he knew.

ONE

The Badlands

RAIF SEVRANCE SET HIS sights on the target and *called* the ice hare to him. A moment of disorientation followed, where the world dropped out of focus like a great dark stone sinking to the bottom of a lake; then, in the shortest space that a moment could be, he perceived the animal's heart. The light, sounds, and odors of the badlands slid away, leaving nothing but the weight of blood in the ice hare's chest and the hummingbird flutter of its heart. Slowly, deliberately, Raif angled his bow away from the target. The arrow cracked the freezing air like a word spoken out loud. As its iron blade shot past the hare, the creature's head came up and it sprang for cover in a cushion of black sedge.

"Take the shot again," Drey said. "You sent that wide on purpose."

Raif lowered his bow and glanced over at his older brother. Drey's face was partially shaded by his fox hood, but the firm set of his mouth was clear. Raif paused, considered arguing, then shrugged and reset his footing on the tundra. It never felt good deceiving Drey.

Fingers smoothing down the backing of his horn-and-sinew bow, Raif looked over the windblown flats of the badlands. Panes of ice already lay thick over melt ponds. In the flattened colt grass beneath Raif's feet hoarfrost grew as silently and insidiously as mold on second-day bread. The few trees that managed to survive in the gravelly floodplain were wind-crippled blackstone pines and prostrate hemlock. Directly ahead lay a shallow draw filled with loose rocks and scrubby bushes that looked as tough and bony as moose antlers. Raif dipped his gaze a fraction lower to the brown lichen mat surrounding a pile of wet rocks. Even on a morning as cold as this, the lick was still running.

As Raif watched, another ice hare popped up its head. Cheeks puffing, ears trembling, it held its position, listening for danger. It wanted the salt in the lick. Game animals came from leagues around to drink at the trickle of salt water that bled across the rocks in the draw. Tem said the lick welled up from an underground stream.

Raif raised his bow, slid an arrow from the quiver at his waist. In one smooth motion he nocked the iron arrowhead against the plate and drew the bowstring back to his chest. The hare swiveled its head. Its dark eyes looked straight at Raif. Too late. Raif already had the creature's heart in his sight. Kissing the string, Raif let the arrow fly. Fingers of ice mist parted, a faint hiss sounded, and the arrowhead shot straight into the hare's rib cage. If the creature made a sound, Raif didn't hear it. Carried back by the force of the blow, it collapsed into the lick.

"That's three to you. None to me." Drey's voice sounded flat, resigned.

Raif pretended to check his bow for hairpin cracks.

"Come on. Let's shoot at targets. No more hares are going to show now you've sent a live one into the lick." Drey reached out and touched Raif's bow. "You could have used a smaller head on that arrow, you know. You're supposed to *kill* the hare, not disembowel it."

Raif looked up. Drey was grinning, just a bit. Relieved, Raif grinned back at him. Drey was two years older than he, better at everything an older brother should be better at. Up until this winter he had been better at shooting, too. A lot better.

Abruptly Raif tucked his bow into his belt and ran for the draw. Tem never let them shoot anything purely for sport, and the hares had to be taken back to camp, skinned, and roasted. The pelts were

Raif's. Another couple more and he'd have enough for a winter coat for Effie. Not that Effie had much use for a coat. She was the only eight-year-old in Clan Blackhail who didn't enjoy running around the snow. Frowning, Raif twisted the arrows free from the twigthin bones of the hare's rib cage, careful not to break the shafts. Timber straight enough for arrows was rare in the badlands.

As he sealed the carcass in his game pouch, Raif checked the position of the sun. Nearly noon now. A storm heading elsewhere blew eastward in the far north. Dark gray clouds rolled across the horizon like smoke from a distant fire. Raif shivered. The Great Want lay to the north. Tem said that if a storm didn't begin in the Want, then it sure as stone would end there.

"Hey! Rough Jaw! Get your bow over here and let's shred some wood." Drey sent an expertly pitched stone skittering off rocks and hummocks, to land with a devilish skip precisely at Raif's feet. "Or are you scared your lucky streak just ended?"

Almost against his will, Raif's hand rose to his chin. His skin felt as bristly as a frozen pinecone. He was Rough Jaw all right. No argument there. "Paint the target, Sevrance Cur. Then I'll let you take your hand's worth of practice shots while I restring my bow for wood."

Even a hundred paces in the distance, Raif saw Drey's jaw drop. *Restring my bow for wood* was exactly the sort of highblown thing a master Bowman would say. Raif could hardly keep from laughing out loud. Ignoring the insult and the boasting, Drey snorted loudly and began plucking fistfuls of grass from the tundra. By the time Raif caught up with him, Drey had smeared the grass over the trunk of a frost-killed pine, forming a roughly circular target, wet with snowmelt and grass sap.

Drey shot first. Stepping back one hundred and fifty paces, he held his bow at arm's length. Drey's bow was a recurve made of winter-cut yew, dried over two full years, and hand-tillered to reduce shock. Raif envied him for it. His own bow was a clan hand-down, used by anyone who had the string to brace it.

Drey took his time sighting his bow. He had a sure, unshakable grip and the strength to hold the string for as long as his ungloved fingers could bear. Just when Raif was set to call "Shot due," his brother released the string. The arrow landed with a dull *thunk*, dead center of the smeared-on target. Turning, Drey inclined his head at his younger brother. He did not smile.

Raif's bow was already in hand, his arrow already chosen. With Drey's arrow shaft still quivering against the target, Raif sighted his bow. The pine was long dead. Cold. When Raif tried to *call* it to him as he had with the ice hare, it wouldn't come. The wood stood its distance. Raif felt nothing: no quickening of his pulse, no dull pain behind his eyes, no metal tang in his mouth. Nothing. The target was just a target. Unsettled, Raif centered his bow and searched for the still line that would lead his arrow home. Seeing nothing but a faraway tree, Raif released his string. Straightaway he knew the shot was bad. He'd been gripping the handle too tightly, and his fingertips had grazed the string on release. The bow shot back with a *thwack*, and Raif's shoulder took a bad recoil. The arrow landed a good two handspans lower than the target.

"Shoot again." Drey's voice was cold.

Raif massaged his shoulder, then selected a second arrow. For luck, he brushed the fletching against the raven lore he wore on a cord around his neck. The second shot was better, but it still hit his thumb's length short of dead center. Raif turned to look at his brother. It was his shot.

Drey made a small motion with his bow. "Again."

Raif shook his head. "No. It's your turn."

Drey shook his own head right back. "You sent those two wide on purpose. Now shoot."

"No, I didn't. It was a true shot. I—"

"No one heart-kills three hares on the run, then misses a target as big as a man's chest. No one." Drey pushed back his fox hood. His eyes were dark. He spat out the wad of black curd he'd been chewing. "I don't need mercy shots. Either shoot with me fair, or not at all."

Looking at his brother, seeing his big hands pressing hard into the wood of his bow and the whiteness of his thumbs as he worked on an imagined imperfection, Raif knew words would get him nowhere. Drey Sevrance was eighteen years old, a yearman in the clan. This past summer he'd taken to braiding his hair with black leather strips and wearing a silver earring in his ear. Last night around the firepit, when Dagro Blackhail had burned the scum off an old malt and dropped his earring into the clear liquor remaining, Drey had done the same. All the sworn clansmen had. Metal next to the skin attracted frostbite. And everyone in the clan had seen the black nubs of unidentifiable flesh that the 'bite left behind. You could find many willing to tell the story of how Jon Marrow's member had frozen solid when he was jumped by Dhooesmen while he was relieving himself in the brack. By that time he had seen the Dhooesmen off and pulled himself up from the nail-hard tundra, his manhood was frozen like a cache of winter meat. By all accounts he hadn't felt a thing until he was brought in the warmth of the roundhouse and the stretched and shiny flesh began to thaw. His screams had kept the clan awake all night.

Raif ran his hand along his bowstring, warming the wax. If Drey needed to see him take a third shot to prove he wasn't shamming, then take another shot he would. He'd lost the desire to fight.

Again Raif tried to call the dead tree to him, searching for the still line that would guide his arrow to the heart. Although the blackstone pine had perished ten hunting seasons earlier, it had hardly withered at all. Only the needles were missing. The pitch in the trunk preserved the crown, and the cold dryness of the badlands hindered the growth of fungus beneath the bark. Tem said that in the Great Want trees took hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years to decay.

Seconds passed as Raif concentrated on the target. The longer he held his sights, the deader the target seemed. Something was missing. Ice hares were real living things. Raif felt their warmth in the space between his eyes. He imagined the lode of hot pulsing blood in their hearts and saw the still line that linked those hearts to his arrowhead as clearly as a dog sees his leash. Slowly Raif was coming to realize that still line meant death.

Frustration finally got the better of him, and he stopped searching for the inner heart of the target and centered his sights on the *visual* heart instead. With the fletchings of Drey's arrow in his eyeliner, Raif released the shot.

The moment his thumb lifted from the string, a raven *kaawed* High and shrill, the carrion feeder's cry seemed to split the very substance of time. Raif felt a finger of ice tap his spine. His vision blurred. Saliva jetted into his mouth, thick and hot and tasting of metal. Stumbling back, he lost his grip on the bow and it fell to the ground point first. A crack sounded as it landed. The arrow hit the tree with a dull thud, placing a knuckle short of Drey's own shot. Raif didn't care. Black points raced across his vision, scorching like soot belched from a fire.

"Raif! Raif!"

Raif felt Drey's huge, muscular arms clamp around his shoulders, smelled his brother's scent of neat's-foot oil, tanned leather, horses, and sweat. Glancing up, Raif saw Drey's brown eyes staring into his. He looked worried. His prized yewbow lay flat on the ground.

"Here, sit." Not waiting for any compliance on Raif's part, Drey forced his younger brother onto the tundra floor. The frozen earth bit into Raif's buckskin pants. Turning away from his brother, Raif cleared his mouth of the metaltasting saliva. His eyes stung. A sickening pain in his forehead made him retch. He clenched his jaw until bone clicked.

Seconds passed. Drey said nothing, just held his brother as tightly as he could. Part of Raif wanted to smile; the last time Drey had crushed him like this was after he fell twenty feet from a foxtail pine three springs back. The fall only broke an ankle. Drey's subsequent bear hug had succeeded in breaking two ribs.

Strangely, the memory had a calming effect on Raif, and the pain slowly subsided. Raif's vision

blurred sharply and then reset itself. A feeling of badness grew in him. Swiveling around in his brother's grip, Raif looked in the direction of the camp. The stench of metal washed over him, as thick as grease smoke from the rendering pits.

Drey followed his gaze. "What's the matter?" His voice was tight, strained.

"Don't you feel it?"

Drey shook his head.

The camp was five leagues to the south, hidden in the shelter of the flood basin. All Raif could see was the rapidly darkening sky and the low ridges and rocky flats of the badlands. Yet he felt something. Something unspeakable, as when nightmares jolted him awake in pitch darkness or when he thought back to the day Tern had shut him in the guidehouse with his mother's corpse. He had been eight at the time, old enough to pay due respect to the dead. The guidehouse was dark and filled with smoke. The hollowed-out basswood where his mother lay smelled of wet earth and rotten things. Sulfur had been rubbed into the carved inner trunk to keep insects and carrion feeders away from the body when it was laid upon the ground.

Raif smelled badness now. He smelled stinking metal and sulfur and death. Fighting against Drey's grip, he cried, "We have to go back."

Drey released his grip on Raif and pulled himself to his feet. He plucked his dogskin gloves from his belt and pulled them on with two violent movements. "Why?"

Raif shook his head. The pain and nausea had gone, but something else had come in its place. A tight shivering fear. "The camp."

Drey nodded. He took a deep breath and looked set to speak, then abruptly stopped himself. Offering Raif his hand, he heaved his brother off the ground with a single tug. By the time Raif had brushed the frost from his buckskins, Drey had collected both bows and was pulling the arrow shaft from the dead tree. As he turned away from the blackstone pine, Raif noticed the fletchings in Drey's grip were shaking. This one small sign of his brother's fear worried Raif more than anything else. Drey was his older brother by two years. Drey was afraid of nothing.

They had left the camp before dawn, before even the embers on the firepit had burned cold. No one except Tem knew they had gone. It was their last chance to shoot game before they broke camp and returned to the roundhouse for winter. The previous night Tem had warned them about going off on their own in the badlands, though he knew well enough that nothing he said would stop them.

"Sons!" he had said, shaking his large, grizzled head. "I might as well spend my days picking ticks from the dogs as tell you two what you should and shouldn't do. At least come sundown I'd have a deloused pup to show for my trouble." Tem would glower as he spoke, and the skin above his eyebrows would bunch into knots, yet his eyes always gave him away.

Just this morning as Raif pulled back the hide fastening on the tent he shared with his father and brother, he noticed a small bundle set upon the warming stone. It was food. Hunters' food. Tem had packed two whole smoke-cured ptarmigan, a brace of hard-boiled eggs, and enough strips of hunted mutton to mend an elk-size hole in a tent. All this for his sons to eat on a hunting trip he had expressly forbidden them to take.

Raif smiled. Tem Sevrance knew his sons well.

"Put on your gloves." It was Drey, acting just like an older brother. "And pull up your hood. Temperature's dropping fast."

Raif did what he was told, struggling to put on gloves with hands that felt big and slow. Drey was right: It was getting colder. Another shiver worked its way up Raif's spine, making his shoulders jerk awkwardly. "Let's go." Drey's thoroughness was beginning to nettle him. They had to get back to the camp. Now. Something wasn't right.

Although Tem warned them constantly about the danger of using up all their energy by running

the cold, Raif couldn't stop himself. Despite spitting profusely, he couldn't remove the taste of metal from his mouth. The air smelled bad, and the clouds overhead seemed darker, lower, *closer*. To the south lay a line of bald, featureless hills, and west of them lay the Coastal Ranges. Tem said that the Ranges were the reason why the Want and the badlands were so dry. He said their peaks milked even the last drop of moisture from passing storms.

The three hares Raif had shot earlier thumped up and down in his pack as he ran. Raif hated the warmth against his thigh, was sickened by their fresh-kill smell. When the two brothers came upon Old Hoopers Lake, Raif tore the pack from his belt and threw it into the center of the dull black water. Old Hoopers wasn't frozen yet. River fed, it would take a full week of frost before its current-driven waters plated. Still, the lake had the greasy look of imminent ice about it. As Raif's pack sank to the bottom, swirls of vegetable oils and tufts of elk hair bobbed up and down on the surface.

Drey swore. Raif didn't catch what he said, but he imagined the words *waste of fine game* in the place.

As the brothers ran south, the landscape gradually changed. Trees grew straighter and taller, and there were more of them. Beds of lichen were replaced by long grasses, bushes, and sedge. Horse and game tracks formed paths through the frozen foliage, and fat grouse flew up from the undergrowth, and flying feathers and spitting beaks.

Raif barely noticed. Close to the camp perimeter now, they should have been able to see smoke, hear the sound of metal rasping against metal, raised voices, laughter. Dagro Blackhail's foster son, Mace, should be riding to greet them on his fat-necked cob.

Drey swore again. Quietly, to himself.

Raif resisted the urge to glance over at his brother's face. He was frightened of what he might see.

A powerful horseman, archer, and hammerman, Drey pulled ahead of Raif as he charged down the slope to the camp. Raif pushed himself harder, balling his fists and thrusting out his chin. He didn't want to lose sight of his brother, hated the thought of Drey arriving at the tent circle alone.

Fear stretched over Raif's body like a drying hide, pulling at his skin and gut. They had left thirteen men standing by at the camp: Dagro Blackhail and his son, Mace; Tem; Chad and Jorry Shank; Mallo Clayhorn and his son, Darri, whom everyone called Halfmast ...

Raif shook his head softly. Thirteen men alone on the badlands plains suddenly seemed unbelievably easy prey. Dhooesmen, Bluddsmen, and Maimed Men were out there. Raif's stomach clenched. And the Sull. The Sull were out there, too.

The dark, weather-stained tents came into view. All was quiet. There were no horses or dogs in sight. The firepit was a dark gaping hole in the center of the cleared space. Loose tent flaps ripped by the wind like banners at battle's end. Drey had broken ahead, but now he stopped and waited for Raif to join him. His breath came hard and fast, and spent air vented from his nose and mouth in great white streams. He did not look round as Raif approached.

"Draw your weapon," he hissed.

Raif already had, but he scored the blade of his halfsword against its boiled-leather scabbard, mimicking the noise of drawing. Drey moved forward when he heard it.

They came upon Jorry Shank's body first. It was lying in a feed ditch close to the horse posts. Drey had to turn the body to find the deathwound. The portion of Jorry's face that had been lying against the earth had taken on the yellow bloom of frozen flesh. The wound was as big as a fist, heart deep, made with a greatsword, and for some reason there was hardly any blood.

"Maybe the blood froze as it left him," Drey murmured, settling the body back in place. The words sounded like a prayer.

"He never got chance to draw his weapon. Look." Raif was surprised at how calm his voice sounded.

Drey nodded. He patted Jorry's shoulder and then stood away.

"There's horse tracks. See." Raif kicked the ground near the first post. He found it easier to concentrate on what he could see here, on the camp perimeter, than turn his sights toward the tent circle and the one shabby, oft repaired, hide-and-moose-felt tent that belonged to Tem Sevrance. "Those shoemarks weren't made by Blackhail horses."

"Bluddsmen use a grooved shoe."

So did other clans and even some city men, yet Raif had no desire to contradict his brother. Clan Bludd's numbers were swelling, and border and cattle raids had become more frequent. Vaylo Bludd had seven sons, and it was rumored he wanted a separate clanhold for each of them. Mace Blackhail said that Vaylo Bludd killed and ate his own dogs, even when he had elk and bear meat turning on the spit above his fire. Raif didn't believe the story for a moment—to eat one's own dogs was considered a kind of cannibalism to a clansman, justifiable only in the event of ice-bound starvation and imminent death—but others, including Drey, did. Mace Blackhail was three years older than Drey, when he spoke, Drey took heed.

As Drey and Raif approached the tent circle, their pace slowed. Dead dogs lay in the dirt, saliva frozen around their blunted fangs, their coats shaggy with ice. Fixed yellow eyes stared from massive gray heads. Glacial winds had set rising hackles in place, giving the dogs' corpses the bunched-neck look of buffalo. As with Jorry Shank's body, there was little blood.

Raif smelled stinking, smelted metal everywhere. The air around the camp seemed different, yet he didn't have the words to describe it. It reminded him of the slowly congealing surface water on On Hoopers Lake. Something had caused the very air to thicken and change. Something with the force of winter itself.

"Raif! Here!"

Drey had crossed into the tent circle and was kneeling close to the firepit. Raif saw the usual line of pots and drying hides suspended on spruce branches over the pit, and the load of timber waiting to be quartered for firewood. He even saw the partially butchered black bear carcass that Dagro Blackhail had brought down yesterday in the sedge meadow to the east. The bearskin, which he had been so proud of, had been set to dry on a nearby rack. Dagro had planned to present it as a gift to his wife Raina, when the hunt party returned to the roundhouse.

But Dagro Blackhail, chief of Clan Blackhail, would never return home.

Drey knelt over his partially frozen corpse. Dagro had taken a massive broadsword stroke from behind. His hands were speckled with blood, and the thick-bladed cleaver he still held in his grip was similarly marked. The blood was neither his nor his attackers'. It came from the skinned and eviscerated bear carcass lying at his feet; Dagro must have been finishing the butchering when he was jumped from behind.

Raif took a quick unsteady breath and sank down by his brother's side. Something was blocking his throat. Dagro Blackhail's great bear of a face looked up at him. The clan chief did not look at peace. Fury was frozen in his eyes. Glaciated ice in his beard and mustache framed a mouth pressed hard with anger. Raif thanked the Stone Gods that his brother wasn't the kind of man to speak needlessly, and the two sat in silence, shoulders touching, as they paid due respect to the man who had led Clan Blackhail for twenty-nine years and was loved and honored by all in the clan.

"He's a fair man," Tem had said once about the clan chief in a rare moment when he was inclined to speak about matters other than hunting and dogs. "It may seem like small purchase, and you'll find others in the clan willing to heap all manner of praise upon Dagro Blackhail's head, but fairness is the hardest thing for a man to practice day to day. A chief can find himself having to speak up against his sworn brothers and his kin. And that's not easy for anyone to do."

It was, Raif thought, one of the longest speeches he'd ever heard his father make.

“It’s not right, Raif.” Drey said only that as he raised himself clear of Dagro Blackhail’s body, but Raif knew what he meant. It *wasn’t* right.

Mounted men had been here; broadswords and greatswords had been used; clan horses were gone, stolen. Dogs were slaughtered. The camp lay in open ground, Mace Blackhail was standing dogwatch, a raiding party should not have been able to approach unheeded. Mounted men made noise, especially here in the badlands, where the bone-hard tundra dealt harshly with anything traveling upon it. And then there was the lack of blood ...

Raif pushed back his hood and ran a gloved hand through the tangle of his dark hair. Drey was making his way toward Tem’s tent. Raif wanted to call him back, to tell him that they should check the other tents first, the rendering pits, the stream bank, the far perimeter, *anywhere* except that tent. Drey, as if sensing some small portion of his younger brother’s thoughts, turned. He made a small beckoning gesture with his hand and then waited. Two bright points of pain prickled directly behind Raif’s eyes. Drey always waited.

Together the sons of Tem Sevrance entered their father’s tent. The body was just a few paces short of the entrance. Tem looked as if he had been on his way out when the broadsword cracked his sternum and clavicle, sending splinters of bone into his windpipe, lungs, and heart. He had fallen with his halfsword in his hand, but as with Jorry Shank, the weapon was unbloodied.

“Broadsword again,” Drey said, his voice high and then rough as he sought to control it. “Blood favors them.”

Raif didn’t acknowledge the words. It took all he had just to stand and look upon his father’s body. Suddenly there was too much hollow space in his chest. Tem didn’t seem as stiff as the others, and Raif stripped off his right glove and bent to touch what was visible of his father’s cheek. Cold, dead flesh. Not frozen, but utterly cold, absent.

Pulling back as if he had touched something scorching hot rather than just plain cold, Raif rubbed his hand on his buckskins, wiping off whatever he imagined to be upon it.

Tem was gone.

Gone.

Without waiting for Drey, Raif pushed aside the tent flap and struck out into the rapidly darkening camp. His heart was beating in wild, irregular beats, and taking action seemed the only way to stop it.

WHEN DREY FOUND HIM a quarter later, Raif’s right arm was stripped to the shoulder and blood from three separate cuts was pouring along his forearm and down to his wrist. Drey understood immediately. Tearing at his own sleeve, he joined his brother as he went among the slain men. All had died without blood on their weapons. To a clansman there was no honor in dying with a clean blade, so Raif was taking up their weapons one by one, drawing their blades across his skin, and spilling his own blood as a substitute. It was the one thing the two brothers could give to their clan. When they returned home to the roundhouse and someone asked, as someone always did, if the men had died fighting, Raif and Drey could now reply, “Their weapons ran with blood.”

To a clansman those words mattered dear.

So the two brothers moved around the camp, discovering bodies in and out of tents, some with patches of urine frozen to their legs, others with hair set in spiky mats where they had been caught bathing, a few with frozen wads of black curds still in their mouths, and one man—Meth Ganlow—with his beefy arms fixed around his favorite dog, protecting the wolfing even in death. A single swordstroke had killed both man and beast.

It was only later, when moonlight formed silver pools in the hard earth, and Tem’s body was lying beside the firepit, close to the others but set apart, that Raif suddenly stopped in his tracks. “We never

found Mace Blackhail,” he said.

TWO

Days Darker Than Night

ASH MARCH SHOT AWAKE. Sitting up in bed, she dragged the heavy silk sheets up over her arms and shoulders and clutched them tight. She had been dreaming of ice again.

Taking deep breaths to calm herself, she looked around her chamber, checking. Of the two ambient lamps on the mantel, only one was still burning. Good. That meant Katia had not been in to refuel. The small ball of Ash's silver blond hair that she had pulled from her hairbrush before she slept still lay fast against the door. So no one else had entered her chamber, either.

Ash relaxed just a little. Her toes formed two knobby lumps beneath the covers, and as they looked a ridiculously long distance from her body, she wiggled them just to check that they were hers. She smiled when they wiggled right back at her. Toes were funny things.

The smile didn't quite take. As soon as Ash's face muscles relaxed, the *fact* of her dream came back to her. The sheets were twisted around her waist and they were sticky with sweat, and the yeasty smell of fear was upon them. She'd had another bad dream and another bad night, and it was the second in less than a week.

Without thinking Ash brought her hand to her mouth, almost as if she were trying to hold something in. Despite the warmth of the chamber—the charcoal smoking in the brazier beneath a layer of oil-soaked felt, and the hot water pipes so diligently tended by a furnaceman and his team working three stories below—her fingers felt icy cold. Against her will and her very best efforts, images from the dream came back to her. She saw a cavern with walls of black ice. A burned hand reaching toward her, cracks between its fingers oozing blood. Dark eyes watching, waiting ...

Ash shivered. Swinging her hand down onto the bed, she beat the images back by pummeling the mattress as hard as she could. She wouldn't think about the dream. Didn't want to know what those cold eyes wanted.

Thht. Thht. Thht. Three knocks rang lightly against the fossilwood door.

Something deep inside Ash's chest, a band of muscle connecting her lungs to her heart, stiffened. Although breathless from beating the pillow, she didn't take a breath or even blink. Silent as settling dust, she told herself as her eyes focused on the door.

Finely grained and hard as nails, the door's perfect gray surface was marred by three black thumb-size pits: bolt holes. Six months earlier Ash had paid her maidservant, Katia, four halvesilvers to go down to the metalworkers' market near Almsgate and purchase a bolt and socket for the chamber door. Katia had done her bidding, returning with an iron bar big enough to secure a fort. Ash had fixed the metal plate and socket in place herself. She had blackened a fingernail in the process and broken the backs of two silver brushes, but the bolt pins had gone in and the fastening mechanism had worked smoothly, and for a week Ash had slept more soundly than she could ever remember sleeping.

Until ...

Thht. Thht. Thht.

Ash stared at the empty bolt holes. She made no motion to answer the second round of knocking.

“Asarhia.” A pause. “Almost-daughter, I will have no games played with me.”

Tilting her body minutely, Ash slid down amid the covers. One hand stole beneath her head to turn

the sweat-stained pillow facedown upon mattress, while her other hand smoothed her hair. Just as she closed her eyes, the door creaked open.

Penthero Iss had brought his own lamp, and the fierce blue glow of burning kerosene put Ash's own resin lamp in the shade. Iss stood in the doorway and looked at Ash. Even with her eyes closed she knew what he was about.

He made her wait before he spoke. "Almost-daughter, don't you think I know when I'm being deceived?"

Ash kept her eyelids closed, but not tightly—he had caught her on that in the past. In no way did she respond to his words, simply concentrated on keeping her breathing low and metered.

"*Asarhia!*"

It was hard not to flinch. Mimicking a kind of dazed surprise, she opened her eyes and rubbed them vigorously. "Oh," she said. "It's you."

Ignoring her show of bafflement, Penthero Iss walked into the room proper, set his lamp on the rootwood prayer ledge next to the offering bowls of dried fruits and pieces of myrrh, brought his long-fingered hands together, and shook his head. "The cushions, almost-daughter." The index finger on his left hand circled, indicating the foot of the bed. "A sound night's sleep seldom includes kicking cushions so hard that the impression of one's foot stays upon them till dawn."

Ash cursed all the cushions in Mask Fortress. She cursed Katia for piling the silly, fluffy, useless bags of goosedown high on her bed each night.

Penthero Iss crossed over to Ash's bed. Fine gold chains woven into the fabric of his heavy silk coat chinked softly as he moved. Although not muscular, he carried something hard within him, as if his skeleton were made out of stone. His face had the shape and smoothness of a skinned hare. Holding out a long, carefully manicured, completely hairless hand, he asked, "How much do I love you, almost-daughter?" Untaken, the hand moved away to carve a circle in the air. "Look at all I give you: dresses, silver brushes, perfumed oils—"

"You are my father who loves me more than any real father ever could." Ash spoke Iss' own words back to him. She had lost count of how many times he had said them to her over the past sixteen years.

Penthero Iss, Surlord of Spire Vanis, Lord Commander of the Rive Watch, Keeper of Mask Fortress, and Master of the Four Gates, shook his head with disappointment. "You would mock me, almost-daughter?"

Feeling a bite of guilt, Ash slid her hand over his. She owed love and respect to the man who was her foster father and surlord.

Sixteen years ago, before he took the title of surlord for his own, Penthero Iss had found her outside Vaingate. She was a newborn, a foundling abandoned within ten paces of the city gate. All such foundlings were considered Protector's Trove. Iss had been Protector General at the time, in charge of city security and defenses. He had patrolled the Four Gates, led his red-bladed brothers-in-the-watch, and commanded the forces that manned the walls.

Ever since Thomas Mar had forged the first Rive Sword with the steel and rendered blood of the men who had betrayed him at Hove Hill, no protector general had ever been paid for his work. For centuries protector generals lived off income from their grangeholds, inheritances, and land grants. Today there was no land left to grant, and more and more baseborn men were joining the Watch, and protector generals now gained income by other, less noble means. Contraband goods; swords of illegal length or blade curvature, arrows with barbed tips; prohibited substances such as sulfur, resins, and saltpeter that could be used in making siege powders; unlawfully produced liquor, poisons, sleeping drafts and pain dullers; ill-gotten gains; anything found in the possession of known criminals; and all goods abandoned within the city—whether they be crates of rotting cabbages, fat pigs broken loose from their tethers, or newborns left to die in the snow—were the protector general's to do with as he

saw fit.

Protector's Trove had made Penthero Iss a rich man.

As if guessing her thoughts, Iss brought his lips close to Ash's ear. "Never forget, almost-daughter, that during my commission I came upon dozens of foundling babies, yet you were the only one I chose to raise as my own."

Ash tried, but she couldn't quite stifle the shiver that worked its way down her spine. He had sold the other babies to the dark-skinned priests in the Bone Temple.

"You are cold, almost-daughter." Penthero Iss' hand, with its hairless knuckles that never cracked, glided up Ash's arm and along her shoulder. His fingers prodded the flesh of Ash's neck, testing for warmth, blood pulse, and swollen glands.

The urge to shrink away from his touch was overwhelming, but Ash fought it. She didn't want to provoke Iss in any way. If she needed any proof of that, all she had to do was look at the three blind bolt holes in the fossilwood door.

"Your blood is racing, Asarhia." Iss' hand moved lower. "And your heart ..."

Unable to stand it any longer, Ash jerked back. Iss grabbed hold of her nightgown and twisted the fabric in his fist. "You've been having the dream again, haven't you?" She didn't answer. Threads of muslin in her nightgown were laddering under the pressure of his grip. "I said *haven't you?*"

Still Ash made no reply, but she knew, she just *knew*, that her face gave her away. Her skin flushed with every lie.

"What did you see? Was it the gray land? The cavern? Where were you? Think. *Think.*"

Shaking her head, Ash cried, "I don't know. I don't know. There was a cavern lined with ice ... it could be anywhere."

"Did you see what lay beyond?" The words left Iss' mouth like frost smoke, sparkling blue and utterly cold. They hung in the air, cooling the space between Ash and her foster father, making it difficult for Ash to breathe. Ash saw Iss' lower jaw come to rest. She heard saliva smack inside his mouth.

"Father, I don't understand what you mean. The dream was over so quickly; I hardly remember what I saw."

Penthero Iss blinked at Ash's use of the word *Father*. Sadness flitted across his face so quickly, she doubted she'd seen it at all. Slowly, intentionally, he showed his gray-cast teeth. "So it has come to this? Lies from the foundling I raised as my own."

Rare were the times when Iss showed his teeth. They were small and positioned well above his lip line. Rumor had it that a sorcerous healing practiced upon him when he was just a boy had burned the enamel from them. Whatever the cause, Iss made it his habit to speak, smile, eat, and drink without ever drawing back his lips.

With one quick movement Iss found and pressed the curve of Ash's left breast. He weighed the small globe of flesh and then pinched it. "You can't stay a child forever, Asarhia. The old blood will show soon enough."

Ash felt her cheeks burn. She didn't understand what he meant.

Iss regarded Ash for a long moment, his green silk robe switching colors in the fierce light of burning kerosene, before releasing his hold on her nightgown and standing. "Tidy yourself up, child. Do not force me to lay hands on you again."

Ash kept her breath steady and tried not to let her fear show. Questions piled on her tongue, but she knew better than to ask them. Iss had a way with answers. He gave them, they sounded perfectly logical, but then later when you were alone and had time to think, you realized he had told you nothing at all.

As Iss moved away, Ash got a whiff of the smell that sometimes clung to her foster father. The

smell of old, old things locked away so tightly that they dried to brittle husks. Something shifted at the edge of Ash's vision. All the hairs on her body bristled, and against her will she was drawn back to her dream ...

Reaching, she was reaching in the darkness.

“Asarhia?”

Ash snapped back. Penthero Iss was looking at her, his long, skinned-man's face showing the faintest sheen of excitement. Light from his lamp sent his shadow flickering across the watered-silk panels on the walls. Ash could still remember the soft marten and sable furs that had once hung on their stead. Iss had sent a brother-in-the-watch to tear them down and replace them with smooth, bloodless silk. Furs and animal hides were distasteful to him; he called them barbaric and would have none hung in any chamber he might chance to enter in the massive, sprawling, four-towered fortress that formed the heart of Spire Vanis.

Ash missed the furs. Her chamber seemed cold and bare without them.

“You are not well, almost-daughter.” As Iss spoke, his hands came together in a smooth knot of knuckle and flesh that was peculiar to him alone. “I will sit with you through the last hour of night.”

“Please. I need to rest.” Ash rubbed her forehead, struggling to keep her mind in the now. What was wrong with her? Raising her voice, she said, “Go. Just go. I have to use the chamber pot. I drank too much wine at dinner.”

Iss remained calm. “Yes, wine ... and to think Katia informed me that you refused both the pewter containing the red and the silver she brought later with the white.” A dull metal tap sounded: Iss kicking the empty chamber pot that lay at the foot of Ash's bed in the center of a hill of cushions. “And somehow you managed to wait until now to relieve yourself.”

Katia. Always Katia. Ash scowled. Her head ached, and her body felt as tired and shaky as if she'd spent the night running uphill rather than sleeping in her bed. She desperately wanted to be alone.

Surprisingly, Iss crossed over to the door. Fingers slipping into the vacant bolt holes, he turned his face Ash and said, “I will have my Knife stay outside your door tonight. You are not well, almost-daughter. I worry.”

The idea of having the Knife camped outside her chamber frightened Ash nearly as much as her dream. Marafice Eye scared her—he scared a lot of people in Mask Fortress. That was, she supposed, the main reason her foster father kept him around. “Can't we call Katia instead?”

Iss began shaking his head before Ash finished speaking. “I think our little Katia might not be wholly reliable guardian. Take tonight: *You* said you drank wine, yet she swore you didn't, and of course I must take my daughter's word over that of a common servant. So I have no choice but to conclude the girl reported wrongly and might easily do so again.” A cold smile. “You are not well, Asarhia. Ill dreams trouble you, headaches plague you. What sort of a father could I call myself if I did not watch my daughter closely?”

Ash bent her head. She wanted to sleep, close her eyes, and not have to dream. Her foster father was too clever for her. Lies, even small ones, were as silken rope in his hands. He could pull and distort them, use them to tie their speaker up in knots. She had gotten herself into enough trouble tonight. The best thing to do would be to say nothing more, nod her head meekly, and let her foster father bid her good night. He was already making his way toward the door; another minute and he would be gone.

Yet ...

She was Ash March, Foundling, left outside Vaingate to die. She had been abandoned in two feet of snow, wrapped in a blanket stiff with womb blood, beneath a sky as dark as night in the twelfth storm of winter. She had been forsaken, yet somehow she had lived. She had been weak, yet some tiny spark of life within her had proven strong. Straightening her spine, she looked her foster father straight in the eyes and said, “I want to know what's happening to me.”

Holding her gaze, Iss reached for the kerosene lamp. The iron base was stamped with the Surlord seal: the Killhound rampant, the great smoke gray bird of prey sinking claws the size of meat hoo into the tip of the Iron Spire. Ash remembered her foster father telling her that although killhounds fed on spring lambs, bear cubs, and elk calves, they were known for killing hunting dogs that ranged too close to their aeries. "They never feed upon the hounds they kill," Iss had said, a gleam of fascination firing his normally cold eyes. "Though they do make sport with the carcasses."

Ash shivered.

Iss closed the spillhole, snuffing the lamp. Holding open the fossilwood door, he stepped into the column of cold air that rushed in from the corridor beyond. "There's nothing for you to be worried about, almost-daughter. You're just catching up, that's all. Surely Katia must have told you that most girls your age are women in *all* senses of the word? Your body is simply doing those things that their mothers have already done. One would hardly expect such changes to occur without some small measure of pain."

With that he moved into the shadows of the corridor, swiftly becoming one himself. The metal chains sewn into his coat chimed softly like faraway bells, and then the door clicked shut and there was silence.

Ash fell back onto the bed. Shaking and strangely excited, she pulled the covers over her chest and set her mind to thinking of ways she could find answers for herself. Her foster father's words on that night *sounded* like the truth. She knew she wouldn't sleep, could absolutely *swear* she wouldn't sleep, yet somehow, unbelievably, she did.

Her dreams, when they came, were all of ice.

THE LISTENER COULD NOT sleep. His ears—what were left of them—pained him like two rotting teeth. Nolo had brought him fresh bear tallow from the rendering pit, and it was good and white and looked creamy enough to eat, so the Listener had done just that. Waste of good tallow—using it to plug up two old black holes that had once been ears. Waste of good muskox hair to warm them, too. But there was little to be done about that: Nothing needed warming as much as an old scar.

Nolo's footprints formed a visible line to and from the rendering pit and then over to the meat rack in the center of the cleared space. Looking at them, the Listener made a mental note to have a talk with Nolo's wife, Sila: She wasn't filling her husband's mukluks with enough dried grass. Nolo's booted feet had melted snow! Sila would have to get chewing.

The Listener spent an idle moment imagining Sila's plump lips chewing on a tuft of colt grass to make it soft enough for stuffing into the space between her husband's outer and inner boots. It was a very pleasant moment. Sila had unusually fine lips.

Still, he was old and had no ears, and Sila was young and had a husband, and together they had no good ears between them, so the Listener nudged aside the image of Sila and turned to the matter at hand: his dream.

Sitting on a stool carved out of whalebone, with his old brain-tanned bear's hide around his shoulders, the Listener sat at the entrance to his ground and looked out at the night. Heat from his two soapstone lamps warmed his back, and cold from the still, freezing air chilled his front: that was the way he liked it when he was listening to his dreams.

Lootavek, the one who listened before him, swore that a man could only hear his dreams *as* he was having them, yet the Listener thought him mistaken. Much like Nolo's boot lining, dreams needed to be chewed on.

The Listener listened. In his lap he held the hollow tip of a narwhal's tusk, a little silver knife that

had once been used to kill a starving child, and a chunk of sea salt-hardened driftwood from a wrecked ship that had been beset then stowed in by the cold blue ice of Endsea. Like all good talismans, they felt right in the hand, and as the Listener's body heat warmed them in varying degrees, they released his mind into the halfworld that was part darkness and part light.

Fear gripped at the Listener's belly as he fell into his dreams.

Hands reached. Loss wept. A man with an impossible choice made the best decision he could ...

"Sadaluk! Sadaluk! You must awaken before the cold burns your skin."

The Listener opened his eyes. Nolo was standing above him. The small, dark-skinned man had his prized squirrel coat tucked under his arm and a bowl of something hot and steaming in his hand.

The Listener shifted his gaze from Nolo to the night sky. The pale glow of dawn could clearly be seen across the Bay of Auks. Stars faded even as the Listener looked away. He had been listening to his dream for half the night.

Nolo tucked the squirrel coat around the Listener's shoulders and then held out the steaming bowl. "Bear soup, Sadaluk. Sila made me swear to watch you drink it."

The Listener nodded gruffly, though in truth he was quite pleased—not about the bear soup, which he could get from any fire around the rendering pit, but for the fact of Sila's attention.

The bear soup was hot, dark, and strong, and bits of sinew, bear fat, and marrow bobbed upon the surface. The Listener enjoyed the feel of steam on his face as he drank. The warmth of the bone broth soothed the joints in his black, hard-as-wood hands. When he had finished he held out the empty bowl for Nolo to take. "Go now. I will return the squirrel coat to you when I am rested."

Nolo took the bowl with all the usual carefulness of a husband handling one of his wife's best dishes and made his way back to his ground.

The Listener envied him.

After what his dreams had shown him this night, the Listener knew that such a base and mortal emotion should be beneath him. But it wasn't, and that was the way of the world.

The Listener had seen the One with Reaching Arms reach out and beckon the darkness. And that meant only one thing.

Days darker than night lay ahead.

Pulling hides across his doorway, the Listener retreated into the warmth and golden light of his ground. His bench was thick with animal skins heaped high with fresh white heather, and he lay down upon it and closed his eyes. He had no wish to dream and sleep, so he turned his thoughts to Sila and imagined her and Nolo sledding across the frozen margins of Endsea. He imagined the rime of ice beneath the sled runners wearing thin and Nolo calling a halt so that his wife could make new ice by the quickest way she could.

This pleasant image held the Listener's attention for only a short spell. There was work to be done. Messages had to be sent. Days darker than night lay ahead, and those who lived to know such things needed to be told. Let no one say that Sadaluk, Listener of the Ice Trapper tribe, was not the first to know.

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