

Return to the world of GUARDIANS OF GA'HOOLE

WOLVES OF THE BEYOND

STAR WOLF



KATHRYN LASKY

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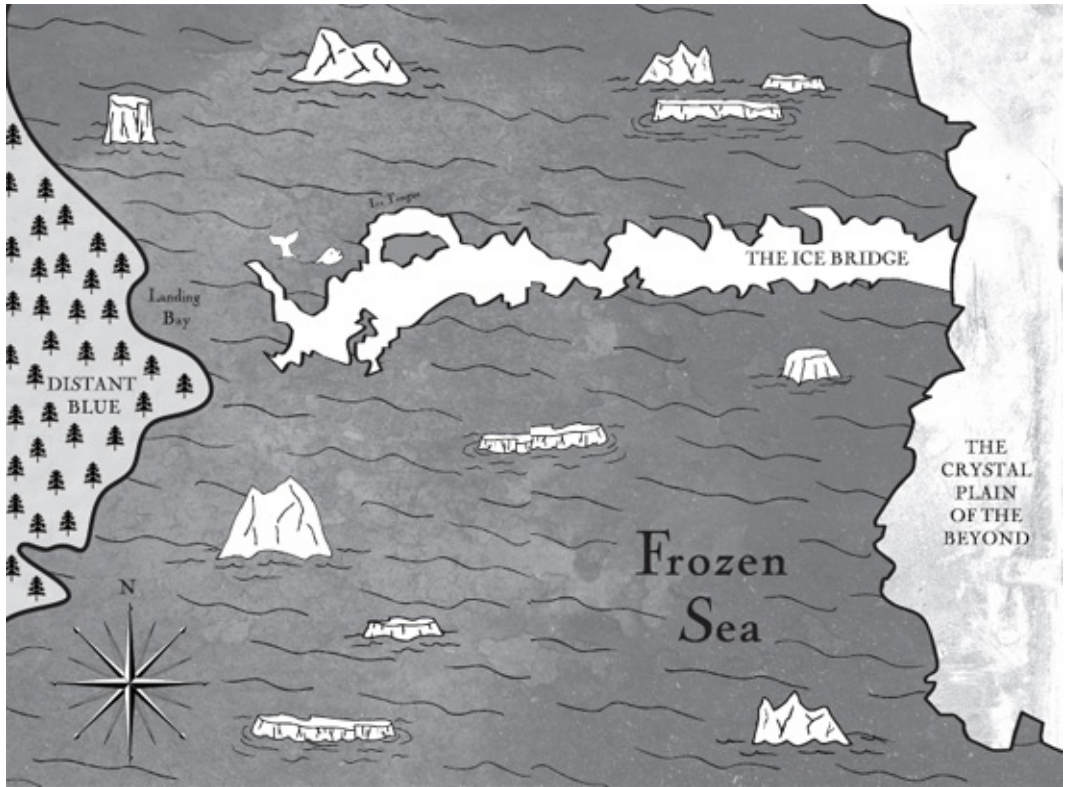


SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

A long trek comes to a close —
a journey not possible without my
editor and navigator, Rachel Griffiths

K. L.
Cambridge, MA
October 2012





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AHHOOOOO
GARROO!

AS THE SILVER WOLF TOOK HIS first step onto the Ice Bridge, he turned back to look behind him at his final den in the Beyond. He had slept there with fourteen traveling companions, who were straggling out of the den now. Eight fully grown wolves, three wolf pups, two bear cubs, and a Masked Owl. They, too, turned around to take their last look at the only continent they had ever known — the land of the Beyond. It was destroyed now. Famine struck the first blow, and then came the earthquakes. Only a very few had survived, and now this motley brigade of fifteen creatures was all that counted in Faolan's mind.

Every one of them was looking longingly in the wrong direction — east. There was nothing to the west save for an endless expanse of white, the Frozen Sea, over which a bridge of ice arced like an inverted crescent moon. Faolan tipped his head one way, then the other. The bridge appeared to be supported by thick ice pillars. Sometimes the bridge rose quite high, and the thought of slipping off it and smashing onto the ice below was terrifying. And sometimes the bridge swooped low, skimming over the dark pools in the Frozen Sea where the ice had broken to expose water.

Faolan wondered how long the bridge had been there. Would there be signs of others who had crossed before — hoofprints? Paw prints? How could anything grow on the bridge? It seemed stark and sterile, incapable of supporting life. But Gwynneth, who had passed a great deal of time with owls in the northern kingdoms, had said that the owls found rodents in the ice — lemmings, snow mice, something called rockmunks, similar to chipmunks. Rodents would sustain owls for a while, but wolves needed more.

The end of the bridge seemed to dissolve into nothingness, as did the far edges of the sea. It was the nothingness, the gleaming nothingness of it all, that was the most unnerving.

Faolan tried to bark a command, but the sound broke in his throat. He only vaguely knew where they were heading — a place across the water where they hoped to find a new land and safety. But the way there, this bridge of ice across a vast nothingness, was uncertain. Would a bridge that glistened like the thinnest slice of the moon even reach the new continent they could see only as a blue haze? Because of its color, they had come to call the new continent the Distant Blue. Might there be rupture in the bridge? And if so, where would their journey end? The wolves could swim, but wolf pups did not learn until they were almost yearlings, and then only in the placid summer waters of rivers. The bridge was wide here at the start, but suppose it narrowed, or broke? If they were marooned in a melting sea on chunks of ice ... what then?

But the fear that consumed Faolan's waking and sleeping dreams was losing a young one. The young ones would be the marrow of life on this new continent, their most valuable asset. But there was no choice. They must go ahead, despite the danger. There was no life left for them in the Beyond, and they must proceed on faith. He finally mustered a forceful howl.

“Ahhooooo garroo!”

It was the point wolf's call to start the *byrrgis*, a hunting pack. It literally meant “Summon your marrow.”

Faolan saw each animal take one last glance behind before stepping onto the Ice Bridge. He could not help but wonder what they were each thinking.



ICE LEGS

MYRR KEPT HIS EYES TRAINED ON his paws as he followed behind Edme. Faolan had told them not to look back again, not even once. They must pay attention, for the Ice Bridge could be dangerous. They might slip or fall. They must concentrate. Myrr, of course, had no desire to look back. Behind him lay only dreadful memories. He had been weaned in the worst possible way. No, his mother had not been killed. That would have been the second-worst possible way to be torn away from her milk. The worst possible way was to have his mother and father look at him blankly, with horrible vacant eyes staring at him as if he were a rock, a piece of wood, a clump of dried grass, a clot of mud. And then they had both turned and walked away. Myrr shook off the thought and continued to walk forward, right in the footsteps of Edme.

Edme was listening carefully. She didn't need to turn around to hear that Myrr was just behind her. She, like Faolan, was consumed with worry not for what she had left behind, but for the young ones. The pup immediately behind her was the most important thing in her world. When his parents had abandoned him and Edme had picked him up and brought him to the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes, Finbar Fengo had named him Myrrglosch, which meant "bit of a miracle" in the Old Wolf language. And it was a bit of a miracle that he had survived when his parents, gripped by the Skaars madness, had abandoned him.

This madness afflicted many during the worst of the famine. Skaars wolves gave up all hope and embraced despair. It made them blind to their own mates, their pups, and their responsibilities as living wolves. It was a perversion of every code that the wolves had lived by in the Beyond. And it had blinded Myrrglosch's parents.

Edme, who had fought her whole life to survive, never understood the Skaars madness. She, like Faolan, had been a *malcadh*, a cursed wolf born deformed. According to the laws and codes governing the wolves of the Beyond, such pups were cast out of their clans at birth. If they managed to survive, they could rejoin a clan as gnaw wolves, objects of abuse. Their only hope was to succeed in the games known as the *gaddergnaw*. If they won, they would then serve as elite Watch wolves at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes. It was a noble and honorable duty.

Edme now felt a twinge that was not caused by anxiety over the young ones. A wistfulness had sneaked up on her and suddenly overwhelmed her. Would she never again see the dancing fires of the Ring, the flaming tongues from volcanoes licking the night sky? There was such beauty there, especially during the season of the She-Winds, which seemed to stir the very bowels of the volcanoes. The warm air above the craters' flames buoyed their surveillance leaps, and sometimes she felt she could soar as high as the collier owls that swept above the sparks, scavenging the darkness for the hottest embers — bonk embers they called them. Of course, the wolves' task was to guard against the

graymalkins who might skim just above the bubbling cauldron in search of the elusive ember of Hoole.

Edme knew that many of her traveling companions took these first steps onto the Ice Bridge with not just trepidation, but hearts heavy for what they were leaving and would never see again. Still, the lives in the Beyond had been far from perfect. The Whistler, like Faolan and Edme, had been a gnaw wolf, and unlike them had never advanced to serve at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes. Caila, the Milk Giver to Dearlea and Mhairie, had been seized by the Skaars dancing illness, then became the mate of a vile wolf, Heep, an outclanner. She had borne him a son, Abban, and when she had finally come to her senses, she had fled, leaving her shame behind. The bear cubs, Burney and Toby, were leaving the bones of their mother. And Gwynneth was leaving not only the wreck of her forge, but the bones of her oldest friend, the Sark of the Slough. And there was no choice. They were all desperate animals.

Beneath her feet, Edme detected a certain slipperiness to which she was not accustomed. She turned around.

“Myrrglosch, dear. See how I am digging my toes in?”

“Yes.”

“You must do that, too. Firm grip, you know. We must get our ice legs.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, and dug his toes in deeper.

“If you like, I could carry you in my mouth.”

“No! I’m not a whelping pup,” he replied stubbornly.

And this is no whelping den, Edme thought. Far from it! She looked ahead at the gleaming bridge. In the distance, she thought she saw a slight ridge. It looked like a bump from where they were, but it would get bigger and steeper the closer they came. *How will we ever get over that?*



Three days after the fifteen creatures had taken those first tentative steps onto the Ice Bridge, a yellow wolf, an outclanner, stood on the edge of the western sea. He pawed the ground nervously and felt his marrow begin to boil. *They were here! She was here! How dare they!* A blind rage began to surge through him.

Heep had discovered the last den of Faolan’s brigade, and in it he had teased out Caila’s scent and the scent of his son. He had found the odd footprint of Faolan with the swirled marks on it still visible, although the splayed paw had turned during the Great Mending and was no longer askew. He himself was no longer a *malcadh*. For this was the prophecy of good King Hoole, the first of the embered owl kings. The prophecy said that when the ember was released, the time of the Great Mending would come and then twisted limbs would be made straight, missing ears or eyes or tails would grow, broken windpipes would be patched. And so it had happened that within minutes of the earthquake that had destroyed the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes and freed the ember, Heep felt a quickening in the muscles of his rump and his tail began to grow.

Once Heep had been a gnaw wolf of the MacDuncan clan. He was a vicious creature, and he had been declared *crait* and driven from the Beyond to the Outermost by order of the clan chieftain. Heep

had risen to power among the lawless outclanner wolves and, during the worst of the famine, had seized upon Caila. Instead of killing her and cannibalizing her body as many outclanners did when tracking Skaars wolves, he had renamed Caila “Aliac” and taken her for his mate. But she had finally come to her senses and escaped with their young pup, Abban.

He squinted now into the darkness. Behind him the first rays of the dawn were tinting the sky, but west it was still dark and forbidding. Had Faolan and his followers really gone out on this Ice Bridge? The tracks seemed to confirm that they had. Heep felt a quiver in his marrow. He lifted his tail higher. He didn't want the others to suspect him of doubts or any trace of uncertainty or fear. His rout had grown; they had picked up half a dozen more wolves. He was their leader — would he lead them out onto this bridge? His two worst enemies were out there. Their scent seemed to taunt him. He felt a savage hunger for their blood and their flesh, and imagined his fangs tearing into their muscle.

The MacDuncan chieftain had declared him *crait*, but it was Faolan who had actually driven Heep from the Beyond. Aliac had become his mate, borne his son, then taken that son and escaped. That was the ultimate insult. It stirred a fury in his blood. Of course he would go right these wrongs. He would go to kill Faolan, reclaim his son, and yes, he would kill Aliac. He nearly spat as he thought of her name. She called herself something else now. Calla or Caila. He couldn't remember.

He would call her dead.

A SLOW HORROR

WHEN EDME HAD SPIED IT THREE days before, that first slight swelling on the bridge had looked like a bump. But when they'd approached it, they'd seen that it was steep and more like a jagged ice wall. Then there had been another and another. These ridges presented a formidable obstacle to the wolves' traveling speed. They were made by ice that had fractured into long cracks and then filled with water during the summertime, only to be refrozen. The refrozen ice buckled, and the ice on one side built up against the other, forming a pressure ridge. The greater the pressure, the higher the ridge, and these ridges had to be crossed. Flying ahead, Gwynneth could often guide the creatures around them if she found a break in the ridge. But more often than not they had to clamber over the jagged obstacles. Faolan supposed ridges were better than actual cracks through which they might fall, but the ridges slowed their pace. It was their third day on the bridge, and they had encountered four already. The wind was stiff as the little brigade followed Faolan in a straggly line. He could only hope there would not be too many pressure ridges before their next camp.

The pressure ridges did, however, offer two benefits: First, they seemed to abound with lemmings. So for the time being, finding food was not a problem. Second, the ridges offered some shelter from the wind when they made camp to sleep. Now, as the sun broke behind them, casting a pink radiance over the frozen landscape, the way ahead looked clear. Faolan tipped his head up and caught sight of Gwynneth flying.

"How does it look?" he howled. Gwynneth squinted into the paling sky ahead.

"I ... I ..." She hesitated before answering. "I think it looks fairly smooth." Her gizzard clenched slightly.

"Just fairly?" Faolan asked.

"Uh ..."

There was a blast of wind that cut through the air like a scimitar. Never had Faolan felt such force: It was as if the fur were being peeled from his back. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of a small furry pup staggering against the wind. It was Abban! The wind had pushed him to the rim of the Ice Bridge, where he teetered and clung with all his might. And still his paws were slipping.

Faolan's worst anxiety had caught up with him, and a real, living nightmare was unfolding before his eyes. Faolan tried to claw his way toward Abban, but the wind felt like a boulder crushing against him. A terrible squeal unfurled over the Frozen Sea, searing the air, and the little pup spiraled down toward a dark pool in the ice below the bridge.

"ABBAN!" his mother howled.

Gwynneth hurled herself into a steep banking turn, trying to intercept the falling pup.

Great Glaux. She spied the pup just as he dropped into the dark pool of water.

“He’s gone!” Gwynneth shrieked. The Masked Owl was so shocked that her own wings began to lock.

You can’t go yeep! You can’t go yeep! You old fool. Faolan silently cursed his oldest friend. *Not now. But what is she to do?* He felt his own marrow seize up. They stood at the edge of the bridge, locked with fear as they peered down into the channel of water that had been pried open by the sea and widened into a pool. The green water glinted darkly, like a liquid eye in the middle of the ice. A howl withered in Caila’s throat. She seemed to be gasping for the air that her drowning son could not breathe. Gwynneth had recovered and was skimming close to the surface, looking for any sign of the pup.

How long can he last underwater? Faolan felt his own lungs squeeze together. He had clamped his mouth shut and forgotten to breathe.

“No, Caila!” he screamed with his first breath as he realized that she was about to leap in. Dearlea and Mhairie must have seen it a second before he did, because they both pounced on her and wrestled her to the ground and held her so she would not leap into the sea after her son. The wind had carried Abban directly into the sea, but it had shifted. If Caila leaped, she would be smashed onto the ice below. From this height, on the steepest section of the bridge, every bone in her body would be broken.

Caila howled in despair. Too much time had passed with Abban under the water. Her pup could not be alive.



Abban could never be sure what had made him take a huge breath as he was falling from the bridge. He thought he had opened his mouth to scream. But instead he had swallowed an immense gulp of air, and now he was tumbling softly through the water. A fierce cold penetrated his fur to touch his skin, and his claws curled up tightly. *My eyeballs are freezing,* he thought. *I cannot shut my eyes. My hearing will freeze, and then my blood.*

Since he could not shut his eyes, he opened them wider. It seemed to him that the water was like a new kind of sky, a liquid sky with silvery bubbles instead of clouds. Small fish swam by, silent and ghostly. Next came a strange underwater bird with a bright chunky orange beak. The bird swam up close to him, and Abban reached out and gently touched its clownish face. The bird winked, and Abban wanted to wink back. He was starting to starve for air, but as his lungs pressed in on him, an enormous fish swam up. It had a fearsome-looking sword growing out of one side of its head, but Abban was too desperate for air to be afraid.

He felt something nudge against him, and then he was rising to the surface. His head broke through the water, and there was air!

Air, he thought. *Do I dare ... or do I care?*

There was a pull on his hackles, and he felt himself lifted out of the water. Gwynneth was carrying him by the fur on his neck, higher and higher, but all he could think was that she was taking

him away from the liquid sky into the airy one. *I am soaring, and air is boring!*

The wolves on the bridge had gasped when Gwynneth had suddenly folded her wings tightly against her sides and plunged toward the crack. She wasn't going yeep, she was in the pitch of a kill spiral. Except in this case, she was diving for life and not death. She emerged, and in her claws was a sodden mass. It could have been seaweed, it could have been a fish, but it was not. It was Abban the wolf pup, son of Caila.



GO FORTH!

“ABBAN!” CAILA BARKED AS Gwynneth set the pup down at her paws. He looked up at her, shivering so hard it seemed as if his limbs might shake loose. Water dripped from him, and he appeared half his size, for his fur was plastered to his body. He hardly looked like a wolf pup at all. He blinked a couple of times, as if he was trying out his eyelids to see if they actually worked, and his expression was vague. “Abban?” His mother crouched down beside him and whispered, “You’ve had a bad fall, dear. But you’re fine.” There was an inflection that made Caila’s last words more of a question than a statement. “I’ll warm you up in no time.” She began to lick him ferociously, and Mhairie and Dearlea rushed to help her. After a minute, his shivering lessened.

“Abban, can you talk to me?” Caila asked. “Say something.” He looked at her, but there was still a vagueness in his green eyes. Mhairie stopped licking and crouched down directly in front of him.

“Abban. It’s me — Mhairie. Your sister.”

Still he said nothing. But the light in his eyes had grown brighter, and his shivering had stopped completely. And then he opened his mouth, and the words squeaked out. “You licked the sea right off of me.”

“He spoke!” Caila said jubilantly, but she did not notice the wistfulness in Abban’s voice.

He whispered, “I spoke, I spoke, but it was the tooth that gave the poke and then the water around me broke.”

“What’s he saying?” Mhairie asked.

“I don’t know,” Dearlea replied. “But he sounds a little ... a little strange.”

“Not at all!” Caila snapped. “My pup is fine. Perfectly fine!”

Dearlea brought Abban a lemming that he consumed with gusto. Then Edme gently approached him and asked if he was ready to go on. The little pup looked at her in the most curious way. His eyes grew larger and seemed to have taken on the watery greenness of the depths to which he had plunged.

“Are you all right? Do you think you’re ready to travel again?” Edme repeated.

“Am I ready?” He paused as if to consider Edme’s question further, and then replied in a rather singsongy voice, “Go forth we must or turn to dust.”

Caila blinked at her son. “Say again, Abban?”

“Say again? Again I say. But heed it not be gainsay.”

The creatures looked at one another, each wondering why Abban was speaking in this odd manner. Finally, Katria stepped forward.

“I think Abban is ready to go. Aren’t you, Abban?” And this time the little wolf nodded solemnly and did not utter a single word.



Twilight was falling. Faolan glanced up at the sky, looking for any sign of Molgith, the first star in the star ladder that led to spirit trail, and finally to the constellation of the Cave of Souls. But things were slightly different or rearranged in this part of the world. The stars that had risen with such predictability in the Beyond, shifting in expected increments as the seasons changed, did not behave the same way here at all. Although he knew it was implausible, Faolan sometimes wondered if the terrible quakes that had convulsed the earth had shaken the very pillars of the sky, jiggled loose the familiar constellations they had known. Strangest of all, Beezar, the blind and staggering old wolf constellation that never appeared at this time of year, had followed the travelers west. It seemed ominous that this stumbling old wolf had been the only constellation to accompany them.

“Mind the pups and the cubs,” Faolan barked. “Keep them close.”

Caila picked up Abban in her mouth and began to carry him as one would a milking pup just out of the whelping den. Myrrglosch pressed in close to Edme. The bear cubs were much larger than the pups, but still the Whistler noticed how they crowded close between Airmead and Katria, the large, strong she-wolves of the once great MacNamara clan. And Banja, like Caila, picked up her pup, Maudie, in her mouth.

Maudie squirmed and protested, “Mum, I’m not a baby anymore!”

But Banja, her mouth firmly clamped on her pup’s nape, merely snorted.

A snort could speak volumes, especially one coming from Banja, Edme thought. Who would have ever imagined that the cantankerous red wolf who had taken such delight in berating the new gnaw wolves at the Ring of Sacred Volcanoes would have been capable of the deep and tender love she had for her pup? It seemed to Edme that it was not simply a pup that had been born, but a whole new Banja as well.

The little brigade trudged on. Faolan looked back nervously every few steps to make sure they were safe. At the first sign of the wind strengthening, he barked the command *Vrychtong!* This was Old Wolf for “hunker down.” The creatures wondered a bit as to why he was speaking in such an ancient dialect. It really was not a spoken language any longer and was rarely encountered except in the legal language of the complex codes and laws of the Beyond that ordered all aspects of the wolve lives, and that had been gnawed into bones from times long past.

But for Edme, suddenly Old Wolf had a new resonance. *Or is it an old one?* she wondered. She felt again the deep pain in her hip. She gripped harder the bone she always carried. This, too — the pain in her hip and in her jaws — seemed to be echoes from a long ago past. What was it? She swung her head around to look at Faolan. Their eyes locked.

She senses it, he thought. *She teeters on the edges of my gyres. But how?* How could she ever know, Faolan wondered, that there were lives within him that were almost as old as time? He was, after all, not simply a silver wolf, a wolf of the Beyond, but a *gyre* wolf. The splayed paw had marked Faolan as a *malcadh*, but the swirling lines marked him as a *gyre* soul.

Before he was Faolan, he had lived as Eo, a grizzly bear. And before Eo, he had been Fionula, a Snowy Owl, and not a male but a female. However, his very first life, his very first soul, had been the

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