

The City Under the Ice



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Dedication:

To Peg and all my family, as always.

Some say the world will end in fire

Some say in ice.

Robert Frost-Fire and Ice

The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;

There is no armor against fate;

Death lays his icy hand on kings.

James Shirley

Contention of Ajax and Ulysses (1659)



Chapter 1

The first thing I remembered was the cold. It leached into my bones with a fierce bite that had not bothered me since I'd last eaten real food, not the blood of humans or animals. Clawed at my joints with ravenous fingers and pried beneath my eyelids as it made my insides crack in brittle pain. The only point of warmth in me was the heat that pierced me through the center of my back and clear all the way to my chest. The place where the silver arrow had pierced me.

It was an agonizing effort to breathe and several times, I heard an urgent voice compelling me to keep breathing when all I wanted was to sink into the dark coldness.

My eyes refused to open and not even when a blast of warm moist air smacked me in the face did I open them. We, the thing that carried me. I dropped with a sickening lurch that I felt all the way to my belly. I heard strange voices buzzing over my head speaking in a language I had never heard before but using words that were somehow familiar. I could feel it when the fur-covered being slid me off its shoulder to lay me on a padded board of some kind and we went flying down the long hallway brilliantly lit by expansive lights. I could sense other beings around me as their hands were busy stripping off my things, rolling and hurting me worse than I thought was possible.

I fought them. In my mind I could see my hands beating them as I roared out my anger and yet I knew I was making no more than a feeble moan as I twitched my fingers. I heard a door open with a whoosh and a giant light hung over my face burning through my eyelids. I felt rather than saw something descend from the ceiling to cover my face. Two breaths of the strangely dry air and my senses left me in a swirl of violet and gray.

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Slowly, I came up out of the darkness. Fearfully, for I wasn't sure if I was dead or in the hands of enemies. I couldn't remember the last thing that had happened to me, all I could think of was being chased across the glacier on a sylph. Slowly, the memories came back. Arriving home to find that my father's hired hand had taken over the place in my absence and put flowers on my parents' graves. Eating with him and being able to stomach the food only to find that the Wizard and my grandfather had beaten me there and laid a trap. Being captured by the wizard only to escape from their magic and fleeing out onto the glacier. The hot pain as a silver arrow hit me in the back. I moaned and voices told me to hush. The race across the ice with my enemies in pursuit and finally, collapsing on the ice with the sylph guarding me with its body as it died.

I opened my eyes. Focused slowly on my surroundings as I explored first my body and then the room. I was numb. I couldn't feel my hands or feet. I couldn't feel any part of my body. I wasn't even sure if I was lying down or propped up on a plank somewhere.

I coughed and besides a shortness to my breath, couldn't even feel my chest rise. I panicked and struggled to move, to get up, and run yet all I succeeded in doing was to roll my eyes and work my mouth into a scream. A pitiful one that came out more a gasp than a yell.

"Help!" I called faintly and tears dripped down my cheeks at the utter horror in the certainty that I was paralyzed. Some time passed with my emotions raw and in absolute terror. I knew my heart was pounding because the pulse in my neck and temples told me so even when I couldn't feel it in my chest. Eventually, I became accustomed to the fear of not moving and wallowed in despair. I couldn't do anything except move my eyes, mouth and to a certain extent, my head.

So, I did. I turned my head all the way to the left and saw the wall. White walls made of stone with a smooth worked surface yet I knew it was granite by its consistency and color. Andanite granite, the hardest rock known to the Old and New lands. A monster stone to work and yet it was here, smoothed to the polish of Imperial marble.

On the wall were pictures. Not paintings or drawings but images so real they seemed as if the objects were actually mounted inside the frames. Pictures of plants, trees and animals that I had never seen before. The frames were not made of wood but some other shiny thin material with glass plates over the images.

I turned my head to the right and saw another wall but this one made my mouth gape in astonishment for it was only half a wall. The rest was a wall-length window that looked out on a busy work area where people in strange uniforms bustled back and forth. Except for the four I saw seated at a huge horseshoe-shaped desk. Most of them were women. Tall women with ice blue eyes, light hair and skin the color of old ivory. One looked up and stared at me. I saw her mouth moving and presently, a man wandered over to the desk, leaned on top of it and turned around to stare at me.

I heard a hissing noise and before I could open my mouth, I was falling asleep. I tried to fight it but I had no better luck with that than trying to move.

Chapter 2

This time, I bolted awake and found myself crouching atop the covers of the strangest bed in which I'd ever been. The mattress was a thin pad that hissed as if stuffed with air yet clearly supported me. It was on a metal frame that pivoted so the head and foot would raise and had wheels on the legs. There were railings on both sides like a child's crib to keep the occupant from falling out.

I hesitated. Ran my hands down my body and was absurdly grateful that I could feel everything again. Including an incredible soreness in my back and chest.

I looked at myself and saw that I was in a short gown and nothing else. I had a bandage wrapped around my chest and back. Under that, I saw a wound stitched neatly together with what looked like thick black hairs.

I slid off the bed and looked at where my feet pointed. I saw a door and like the wall, this had a window in it. When I tried to stand my weakness was evident. Without my hold on the bed, I would have fallen flat on my face.

Upright made my head swim. I half sat leaning against the footboard until I was confident I could reach the door. The first thing I did was try the knob and wasn't too surprised that it was

locked. I was very perplexed when I looked at the windows to find them blocked by dark screens that prevented me from looking out. They had been clear before.

That they could look in wasn't apparent until the door popped open and a trio of strangers stood there, two men and a woman.

"Hey," the man nearest to me stepped forward and pulled me back to the bed, lifting and depositing me before I could blink. "You need to take it easy. You were shot."

I raised my hand to my chest. "Where am I?"

He rolled his eyes. "First question everyone always asks. I'm Cabor, this is Anye and Raylen. We found you on the ice with an arrow through your back. A silver arrow. I brought you in and Anye and I doctored you. We did a bit of surgery, cleaned you up and let you heal."

"I thought I was paralyzed," I said.

"That was the drugs. They kept you immobile so the stitches would seal and your lungs recover. It took several units of plasma too, before your pressure came back up. Who was chasing you?"

"My grandfather and a wizard," I answered. I clamped my mouth shut but whenever he asked a question, I replied even though I didn't want to. They asked my name, why I was chased and shot, and had my entire story out of me in the time it took to tell it. I finally sputtered to a halt and there was a sudden silence.

Then, the man called Cabor asked me if I had any questions. 'Where am I?' was my first one.

"In Reyjadsk. The city under the ice. Buried in the bedrock below the Glacier."

"How is that possible—technology from before the Split?"

"You know about the split?" He returned and I shrugged my shoulders only to feel the soreness deepen. I swallowed.

"What happened? Last I remember was falling off my sylph into the snow."

"Yes. I was on a... mission and stumbled across your animal. Found you buried beneath it, brought you to the city," Cabor returned.

I looked him in the eyes. "Why?"

"Why not? You think we'd leave a boy out there, wounded, to die in the snow and ice?"

"You don't know anything about me and I don't know anything about you," I returned. "And I haven't exactly seen the milk of human kindness in my own kind."

"What do they suspect you can do for them?" He seemed puzzled. "I tested your brain and I don't find you any more advanced than any of our own children your age. Do you say they expected you to bridge the technology gap between their culture and the pre-Fracture?"

"What caused the Split?" I asked.

"We call it the Fracture," he corrected. "The economy and infrastructure of the pre-Fracture world fell apart in a massive implosion. The cities could no longer maintain food, water or power services. Millions died and millions more fled to the countryside attacking for their own share of what was left. Within a hundred years, nothing was left except for small bands of hunters gathered together struggling to survive. The ice started to return and forced the survivors to retreat.

"The seas lowered. More landmasses appeared and there were incredible stresses on the plates. You know what tectonic plates are?" When I shook my head, he explained. "We live on vast plates of rock that float atop a core of molten lava and the plates move so much a year. Some over others and some under. Sometimes, they slip and this causes the earth to quake producing landslides and volcanoes erupting, these are all part of the cycle."

“Five thousand years ago, there was such a massive earthquake and it changed the surface of the continents as the ancients knew it. The old lands were smashed together into one continent called Ehrenberg and the new lands were broken into the two you call the Borderlands and the Newlands.”

“The Wall?”

“There is no wall.”

I shook my head. “There is a wall, a border that man cannot cross unless brought over by the Ellassai. To cross the wall and go through the Mist will kill any human that tries. I myself have experienced it.”

“You’re not dead,” he laughed and I stared at him.

“I am. I died as a human the moment I left without my Lyr’s permission.” I opened my mouth and bit him before he could blink.

Chapter 3

He did not attempt to stop me nor fight me. After a few seconds, I realized I was not taking any blood from him. In fact, I could not taste anything remotely alive beneath my fangs so I pushed him away and sniffed the other two. Neither of them had any blood in their bodies and for the first time, I looked into them and never saw the bright crimson of a beating heart.

“What are you?” I burst out and Cabor gripped my arms with a force that no human ever possessed. He easily held me on the bed.

“We are medical technicians sent to help you,” Cabor returned.

“Are there any live people in this place?”

“Of course. Until we learn if you were sent here to cause conflict, we were ordered to interact with you to protect our people.” He raised one hand to his neck and inspected the damage my teeth had made on it. “What is the meaning of such actions, Tobias?” He questioned. “Were you attempting to...eat me? Are you a cannibal?”

“No!” I protested but felt the cravings creeping up on me. I was going to die from hunger in the city under the ice if all the...things I saw were like him. I couldn’t tell through the windows if the rest of them were flesh and blood or like him. I whispered that I was not human anymore; that I needed blood to survive and my statement intrigued him. This prompted the three of them to examine me again, scanning me a dozen different ways and they poked me with sharp needles as the female took blood from me. I could not protest, Cabor easily held me down with one hand on my chest and the other on my belly.

“Hmmm,” he muttered to himself. “I had assumed that his physiological changes were due to the divergence of the species since the Fracture but not having a database to examine before him has limited my conclusions. His makeup also suggests that it is a recent conversion and not a genetic one.”

“What are your findings, Cabor?” A disembodied voice asked somewhere near my head.

“I do not know, Councilor Remy. His body temperature is much lower than the standard norm, his heartbeat and, respirations are almost non-existent. His blood is...peculiar to say the least. It appears to be blood but there are particles within it that do not correspond to WBCs and RBCs yet it is definitely alive when it and he should not be.”

He examined the wound after removing the bandages. Although he poked and prodded me, it did not hurt as badly as when I awoke. “The tissues are healing at an incredible rate, even faster than the tissue regenerator could perform. Councilor Remy, the arrow I removed was in his heart. By all rights, he should be dead. I have no explanation.”

“I have read of such creatures in the archives,” another younger and hesitant voice said. “Voracious, seductive beasts that lived on human blood. They were destroyed by sunlight and wooden stakes through the heart.”

“Not silver?” The tech asked.

“No. That was reserved for the man-beasts that claimed to become doglike creatures. They transformed by moonlight.”

“Shall I terminate him then, Councilor Remy?”

“Do you believe we can control this one? Make use of him if we release him back out on the green? You can wipe his memories of this place?”

The technician hesitated before he answered. “I’m not sure of anything about this one, Councilor Remy. He is totally unlike the other specimens I found or like you.”

“Put him on ice. Study him until you come to a decision and then inform the Council. We will make the final choice on your recommendations.”

“As you wish,” he bowed his head and went back to work on me. The first thing he did was inject me with something that turned my vision into a reddish fog and their voices became a drone that I could not decipher. I vaguely felt them stripping me to lie on a cold flat table of metal where my arms and legs were bolted away from my trunk. Things like metal spiders climbed up and down me, sticking thin metal arms and fingers in my nose, mouth and other places. I couldn’t move or do anything but let slow tears of humiliation drip down my cheeks. His face loomed over mine; his eyes were enormous dark pools that reflected my own image back at me.

I saw the twin streaks of red falling down the moonscape of my cheeks, saw him reach out a finger the size of a tree and touch me. Saw his crater of a mouth opening and knew he was saying, ‘tears of blood’ even though I could not hear his words. I drifted in a nightmare of knowing I would have been better off if I had died up on the glacier and not falling into the hands of these... mad men and their creatures that looked like men.

I felt nothing but the pressure against me. They were not inflicting pain on me for the sake of pain. At least, not where I could feel it. I wondered idly if I would wake up or they would... terminate me while I was unconscious and unknowing. Somehow, that seemed even worse than being tortured to death.

I wanted to live. Desperately and suddenly, I wanted to get up and run screaming from this strange place buried under the ice and to go home, to meet whatever fate had left for me there. I would rather die out under the Newland sun facing that death than to be put out unknowingly like a snuffed candle.

In my sleep, I thrashed and struggled out from under what I perceived as a spell holding me trapped. I tapped into the magic force that I knew ran through this land, that I knew powered the Border Wall and created the Mist. I found it here too, buried along with the city, buried under the ice as if they too used it to power their culture even though they called it something different. I opened my eyes in the dark and saw the room as if it were bright daylight.

Chapter 4

My sleep was so regulated, I had no idea what time of the day or night it was or even what day. I knew they were feeding me because my hunger and thirst were kept at bay. I could only assume they were giving me food through the needles and lines that I could feel in both arms. They kept me in a twilight state so that I was vaguely aware of things going on around me but couldn’t participate.

I spent most of my time in dreams. Dreams where my parents were still alive. Where both Beau and Diomed were underneath me running, not because we were hunted but because it felt good. I saved the dreams of Arianell for those times that I was at my darkest depths of despair and the memories of her satiny skin, remarkable scent, and endless passion kept me sane. We weren't always in bed, sometimes she showed me a workshop where she conjured spells and potions that my subconscious mind remembered. Things that I could use to help me escape, to remain hidden and change my appearance.

I looked up at the white stone ceiling from which a light fixture hung and stared at the dim globe. Turned low in my cell, they had dimmed it in an attempt to simulate nighttime and I was supposed to be sleeping. For some reason, I was growing clearer headed and waking up. I was still manacled to the gurney cot and their liquids were still feeding into my veins.

No one was in the room but all their scanners and monitors were running. The main one that recorded my blood pressure, pulse and respirations was chiming a soft alarm. I heard rather than saw the door opening and the technician named Cabor entered quietly. He wore a white coat over his jumpsuit and his face bore an expression of unease. I cleared my throat and attempted to speak. My voice came out hoarse and squeaky until he offered me a glass of liquid that had an iron taste but was clearly not blood.

"Let me guess," I finally managed. "Your Council wants to put me to death."

"Oh, no," he shook his head. "No, I told them that would be a scientific blunder of the worst sort. We need your data in our database. I can already see you contributing cures to several blood disorders from which the people here are suffering."

"Why the long face then?"

"There have been several attempts of local indigenous trying to find a way inside the city. They have attacked the Gates and destroyed two Sentinels."

"Sentinels?"

"Technicians programmed to patrol and protect the gates to the tunnel that leads to the City."

"What's this place called, anyway?" I tried to sit up but my muscles felt like limp fish. Besides, I was still bound.

"Reyjadsk. One of the last cities to be settled before the ice. The northern hemisphere," he answered.

"How many humans live here?"

He hesitated before answering me. "There are over one hundred thousand citizens in Reyjadsk and ten thousand technicians like me."

"Like you?"

"Some are med-techs; others are sani-techs, servo-techs, mech-techs and Sentinels. There are science-techs, also."

"So, pretty much what a... human can do, you can do," I cut in.

"Yes."

"And how do the humans feel about that?"

"We are programmed to obey and to protect the humans at all costs," he answered easily.

"But you would have killed me if they told you to," I pointed out acidly.

"But, Tobias, you aren't human," he said softly.

"What am I, then? Did I come from some other kind of creature not born of this earth? No, I came from human stock as all of us did before the Split, fracture or whatever you call it. As for a curse I'm living under—I didn't ask for this, it was forced on me and if I could take it back, I

would. But I can't so I have to live with it. It has already cost me my family, my horses and my friends. My life is worth nothing!" I was shouting by that time and he let me rant until I finally stopped with angry tears running down my cheeks to pool under my neck.

"Do you know you cry bloody tears?"

"Yeah. It's part of the curse my great-grandfather hit me with."

"Tell me about it," he came around, and untied me from the cuffs and I rubbed my wrists. Even though cushioned with a wool-like fabric, I had still abraded them in my struggles. He helped me to sit up.

"Aren't you afraid I'll attack you?" I asked as he undid my ankles as well.

"No. You are too weak to injure me. I have fed a compound to you that will sustain your metabolism for several weeks as long as you continue to receive the iron supplements. Also, I have given you a formulation that will protect your skin from UV rays as you are extremely photosensitive."

"You're letting me loose?" I swung my legs over the side and sat there until I was sure I could stand without falling over.

"Yes. I see no reason to keep you contained to the bed." He gave me a bundle of folded clothing, footwear and underthings. Asked me if I required assistance in dressing but remained in the room as I pulled on the outfit. Underwear, a jumpsuit like his in royal blue and flat sandals that hugged my big toe and were thin-soled. The jumper closed not with buttons or a zipper but a thin strip that hugged the cloth underneath. It fit snugly from my ankles to my neck and wrists but was warm, flexible and comfortable.

"We will tour the science levels, they are particularly interested in meeting you," he stated. "And if you are up to it, we will meet the Council. They are troubled about your account of this border and the war between the old lands and the Ellassai." He stepped back and held the door open so that I could precede him into the vast room I had seen beyond my windows.

Chapter 5

People crowded around us and asked both of us a myriad of questions that Cabor answered. He urged me through the crowds towards the elevators that I could see on the farthest wall. Once inside with the doors closed, the silence was deafening.

I didn't feel anything. No movement up or down and no sudden starts or stops. I hadn't realized we even moved until the doors slid open on a corridor with several open doorways into larger rooms that held machinery and no more than 2 to 3 people, all dressed in white coats over colored jumpsuits like what we wore. He hurried past them down the white hallway towards a blue set of doors that opened as we approached and we stood at the top of the huge amphitheater that went down nearly 75 feet. There were tiers of benches and only about half of them occupied. At the bottom was a stand with a podium and a huge flat wall behind that. Like a screen and there were equations glowing on it. It meant nothing to me except that it was very complex.

Standing at the podium was a tall man with sparse hair, pale skin and a high brow. His head was almost too large for his body and his limbs long and slender so that it gave him the appearance of a walking stick.

He wore gold colored coveralls and greeted Cabor as he gently ushered me down the ramp. Everyone turned to watch me and I lost the arrogance of my changed nature as I descended. It was nerve-wracking to be observed by so many pairs of intent eyes.

"Cabor," the older man greeted. "Tobias Spencer."

"How do you know my name?" I asked facing him and not the crowd.

“You told us when we questioned you. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Head Council Janic Ricbom. Director of Reyjask. Welcome.”

“Are you one of those that wanted me dead?”

“What would you think if some strange being dropped into your home? Wouldn't you be a bit suspicious especially if you saw this person hunted?” He returned. “Also, there is the matter of your strange medical condition. We have vampires and legends in our database but we were under the assumption that they were only myths.”

“I'd never heard of them before, either. Or the Ellassai or curses or magic. Surprise, I met all three,” I retorted. “So, now what?”

“This is the Council and the assembled Heads of our Science Departments. They wanted to meet you and perhaps do some tests with you,” he explained.

“Do I have a choice?” I asked.

“Of course,” he seemed shocked. “We're not barbarians. May I introduce you?”

I shrugged and he turned me around gently telling everyone my name, where I'd come from and how I'd arrived in their city. He explained how I had become what he called a 'vampire' and that my bloodlust was controlled by the health medications and metered feedings of artificial blood. He went into a long technical explanation of my altered genetics and then opened the floor up to questions. And ask them they did. From everything on how I peed and to whether I had normal relations.

“Relations to what?” I asked and they burst into laughter and a few giggles. Serious faced, Cabor explained and I could feel the blush travel up my cheeks, which prompted a whole other range of questions.

“None of your blasted business!” I said with gritted teeth. Cabor told them as far as his testing; my reproductive system was just like any other sixteen-year-old male human. The comments on that were funny with most of them wishing they were sixteen once more. I was totally embarrassed, especially when I noticed that half of the audience were women.

Cabor changed the screen to display other charts and graphs. Some I could understand like the images of my bones and organs. Others like the peaked graphs and blue lines with darker dots, I hadn't a clue except that it rather looked like a blueprint. There were reams of stuff; it took the med-tech nearly an hour to go through it all. By that time, I had found an empty seat in the first row and was resting. His voice put me to sleep, especially after the unaccustomed exercise. I just let it all flow over my head trying to make plans on escaping this place although I wasn't sure where I would go once I got out.

From what Cabor had told me, my grandfather and Blackfin were trying to break into the city. That would be a coup like striking the mother lode for technology. “Do you have the knowledge of the ancients?” I interrupted and he looked down at me.

“Yes.”

“All of it? The power to destroy a city with one button? Fly through the air inside a carriage or ride a carriage on those cement straightaways. Because that's what the people want who shot me. They're going to invade the Borderlands, steal the lost technology from the ruined cities and bring back those days pre-fracture,” I said and everyone in the room quieted so they heard every word. I swallowed. “I won't let that happen. Would you help me stop them?”

“Why you?” Janic asked spreading his hands.

“I don't know. Both my grandfather, the wizard and Lyr Averno said I was some kind of catalyst they needed to start the war. Both sides want me but I don't want this. I don't want war.”

The Ellassai are no more vicious than the Oldlanders. Too many people have died over this bloody land and I won't be a part of more deaths."

"Do you know what a catalyst is, Tobias?" Cabor asked and I nodded.

"Something that causes an important event to happen," I answered. He didn't say anything else and their questions were answered by the med-tech. He brought me on a tour of the city, I was amazed at the size and variety of all that existed built under the glacier. There were gardens and fields where food was grown and vast caverns covered with dwarf trees in forests thick enough in which to get lost and vast lakes where people boated and fished.

In fact, they had everything under the ice that we had above the ice. The only thing missing was the blue sky for they even had artificial sunlight.

When he brought me back to my room, I collapsed on the bed and was asleep in seconds.

Chapter 6

Cabor woke me in the afternoon by shaking my shoulder. I didn't want to wake up and even pulled the covers over my head but he was persistent and finally tugged the whole mess down to my feet. The cold air didn't wake me but the feeling of being exposed and naked in front of stranger's eyes made me sit upright in a flash.

"I thought you might like to attend a meal and perhaps tour the upper levels of the city complex. Where there are viewing stations on the ice."

"Viewing stations?" I asked as I slipped out of the bed and onto my feet. Cabor handed me a new set of clothes and closed-toed boots. A heavy parka with fur around the hood and cuffs was the last thing he held out.

"You change your clothes every day?" I asked in disbelief. His answer was equally disbelieving when I told him I had owned one good suit and three everyday changes for the rest of the year. He asked how often I bathed and was astonished at my answer of 'whenever I can or when I can find hot water'. He asked if I could swim and I asked him how often he took a bath.

"I don't," he shrugged. "I do not sweat so I do not acquire an unpleasant odor."

"Hmm. Do you ever need oiling?" I asked as I pulled on wool socks, long underwear and held the jacket over my arm.

"No. I am a sealed unit that requires servicing every 75 years," he replied. I stopped and stared at his eyes; they were a clear brown and lacked the depth of a human's.

"How old are you?"

"I am a series 2200. Head Council and Science Master Technician Teslin activated me 152 years ago in the year 2502. That would be your year 1154 EA."

I shook my head. I couldn't conceive of any machine let alone a human living that long but I remembered that my great-grandfather Lyr Averon had claimed to be over 2000 years old.

He opened my door and I followed him out to the elevators at the far end of the observation room. He had explained that my room was one of hundreds in the medical wing and the center desk was where all the nurses, med-techs and doctors watched over the patients from the central desk that monitored every patient. Each nurse was assigned to five patients, responsible for blood pressure, pulse, temperature, respirations, dispensing of medicines, wound changes, surgeries and general care such as feeding, turning and bathing.

"You mean someone did all that for me when I was unconscious?"

He nodded. "Myself and Anye, and Raylen. We three were your med-techs until I established that you were not contagious or ill with some dangerous viruses. We kept you in an

induced coma until I was sure that you would not feel any pain and your lungs could recover. I have not treated an arrow wound in many years.”

“I hope you never have to do so again,” I said grimly. I didn’t like the box, the elevator. I hated when it closed on me and even though I couldn’t feel it going up or down, I knew it was, just as I knew I didn’t like heights or closed-in places.

We were inside the lift longer this time and I could feel a difference in the temperature of the air, which prompted me to ask more questions. “How do you provide fresh air for this facility? I’ve been inside the salt mines and they were ventilated by air shafts the mining engineers dug.”

“Same principle here except that we force the air through with giant fans and recycle it through the hydroponic rooms.”

“Hydro-?” I was cold so pulled on the fur-trimmed parka.

“Mass production of organic plants grown in nutrient solutions. They produce food, oxygen and recycle carbon dioxide. Besides the forests and parks, of course. They are a major source of our breathing environment. We actually import very little outside air.”

The doors opened on a circular room that was dark, surrounded on all sides with glass and looked out over the vast expanse of a flat icy plain. Or so it seemed until my eyes picked out crevasses and cracks in the surface of the ice. Giant hummocks that appeared suddenly and just as suddenly disappeared as the dim moonlight hid them.

In the distance, I could see the tops of the mountains from which the Caladienne glacier grew. I put my face and hands on the glass, felt the bone chilling cold through the thick plate and saw the billions of stars burning down on the blue gray ice. I could almost hear its groaning, crackling heartbeat as it oozed ponderously down towards the loess of the valleys.

“How cold out there is it?” I asked.

“-45°. Below zero. The glacier moves through this valley at about a quarter inch a year. We are standing on a spur of rock that makes the glacier deviate around it or otherwise, this tower and the observation window would be crushed beneath the weight of the ice.”

“And the rovers haven’t found this place?”

“When we descend, the tower lowers into the ground leaving only the flat rooftop that they cannot penetrate. Many have stumbled upon us but you are the only one the Council has allowed to enter.”

“So what do you do up here?” I looked around but all I saw were a few machines, monitors and ice-climbing gear.

“I record the temperature. Wind gusts and direction. Barometric readings and distortions. Annual snowfall and the movement of the ice. The stars progressions, latitude and longitude. Their brightness and planetary rotations. Sometimes, I am asked to go outside and take samples.”

I heard his ear-mic beep and slowed, expecting him to tell me that we were going back in but he asked me instead if I wanted to go out on the ice. “The light?” I questioned not wanting to risk burning by sunlight or moonlight.

“I gave you medication that will protect you from the sun’s more powerful rays but in any case, we are only in moonlight which reflects more of the UV than is absorbed. You will be fine. You said that your great-grandfather is the King of the Ellassai and that he cursed you. He did not use a virus or medical protocol to change your metabolism?”

“No. I was fine, normal until I crossed the Border. Even in the Mist. Nothing changed until I was back on the Newlander side.”

“I will study on this. Perhaps our gene-techs can find a reversal or solution.” He spoke and the solid walls turned around and opened to the night sky with a dramatic whoosh and blast of frigid air. I pulled my hood up.

Chapter 7

The view was incredible. I could see for miles on the nearly flat plain even when I knew it wasn't. The crevasses and moraines were invisible to my eyes and in the moon light, the ice took on a bluish-green glow that was eerie, magnificent and imaginative. Shifting shadows raced the thin mare's tails above and the stars harried the black moleskin of the night's bowl. The moon looked as large as the sun and I saw the craters on its surface with perfect clarity. I laughed remembering as a child thinking that they were the giant fingerprints of the gods as they threw the moon into the heavens.

The wind was blowing at a gentle zephyr yet it carried a bite that snaked into my clothing with sly insistence. Chilled but not as badly as I should have been, I looked down to the ground from this observation deck and judged the distance to be thirty feet but in the moon light and the shadow I could have been off by twice that. Before he could stop me, I leaped over the waist-high rail and spread my arms. I fell, not caring one way or the other if I survived or died.

To my surprise, I floated down as if I weighed next to nothing and landed with only a slight tingle. I did leave a deep impression nearly to my knees in the snowbank from my landing. When I looked up, I saw Cabor leaning over the railing from at least fifty feet up. He did not look surprised to see me upright and unhurt. I waved at him and set off at a sharp walk following not any path for there were none but following my nose which told me that there was a source of blood directly in front of me.

When I looked back, Cabor was descending the tower by a metal staircase that circled it and was rapidly catching up to me. I ignored him and kept my concentration on the way in front of me. I had no desire to fall into a crevasse, freeze to death if such was even possible for me, or crushed between two moving rivers of ice.

“Frostbite,” Cabor said and attempted to grab my arm. He could not hold me and stepped back in surprise as I peeled his fingers off my sleeve. “You will be frostbitten, perhaps suffer the loss of fingers, nose or toes if you don't cover up,” he warned.

“I'm not cold,” I said. “Not as cold as a real human would be.” I exposed my hands and he touched them. Cold but not frozen as they should have been.

“Your skin temperature is the same as it was in the lab. 89°. Normal is 98.6° give or take a degree. I thought it was because I found you in the snow and you were hypothermic.”

I shook my head. “It's part of this curse. I can feel cold but not like it used to bother me. Nor heat. Fire doesn't warm me either. I think because this body died when he cursed me and I went over the Border wall. Even on the other side, I'm still like this. Only less so, I can eat food there and not throw it back up.”

“We were feeding you artificial blood and minerals with iron supplements once we realized your makeup. We tried fluids orally but you did void them,” he grimaced. “Nearly aspirated on me. Once Anye removed the silver arrow, you healed quickly.”

“Speaking of which,” I opened my jacket, pulled apart the front of the jumpsuit to show him the smooth surface of my chest. Even the scar was gone.

“The tissue regenerator works well,” he agreed. “But this is not possible. There should be a surgical scar where the incision was.” He made me turn around and checked my back. The sensation of his hand beneath my shoulder blades was odd---he had no warmth to his skin at all. I

put my fingers on his throat and felt nothing. No pulse, no body temperature, nothing but rubbery skin and muscles beneath my fingertips.

“We are created to appear human in every way,” he said.

“Except that you don’t breathe, sweat or produce heat,” I returned.

“I do produce heat,” he said. “The servo-motors in my skeletal structure produces heat that I discharge as warmth from my mouth.”

“So don’t breathe on me.”

“Where are you going? Are you escaping? There is nothing this way for seventy-five miles. How are you are not injured? You survived a fall of fifty-two feet.”

I kept walking, my jacket open and his snugly closed. “If you’re not a real human, how come you’re dressed like the cold can bother you?”

“I am real,” he protested. “The cold can damage my circuitry should it access the chips that lie under my dermal layers. Besides, if I did not wear appropriate attire, any survivors would ask too many questions about me.”

“That’s interesting. How many other people have you picked up?”

“You were the first one I have found alive in 60 years,” he said soberly. “All the others had succumbed to hypothermia.”

“I’m heading for the scent of blood,” I answered bending into the wind, which had now picked up to a stiff breeze. I could hear the sounds of ice crystals grating as they rolled along the broken surface of the ice.

“You can smell it?” His strides were effortless as he paralleled me.

“Yes. There are humans somewhere out there.” I pointed to the plain in front of me yet saw nothing. Nothing moved, and nothing broke the sameness of ice and shadow. We walked for a half hour and the distance seemed the same no matter how long we walked yet the smell of blood became stronger.

We came upon footprints in the snow. I ran my fingers over the four-toed holes and broad dip of the central pad recognizing that this was a bear’s print. “Arctic bear,” he said. “White, camouflaged and very dangerous.”

“These are fresh, too.” I stood up and scanned 360° but saw nothing. “I can’t see him. I can’t see anything, yet I can smell them.” We topped a small rise and to the right hidden behind a low wall of mist, I saw an army of domelike tents and an army of men.

Chapter 8

“Can they see us?” He asked and I looked at both of us. Dressed in dark gray/white parkas with gray fur, we shouldn’t stand out in the moonlight and shadows.

“You were wearing white when you found me,” I stated.

« Yes. Long-range reconnaissance gear. Might I remind you, we have neither weapons nor communication devices on us and I am too far from the observation tower to access Security Command.”

“Surely you have some kind of perimeter warning that notifies you when strangers approach?” I was sure they must have, it was number one on any defensive position no matter how strong your holding.

“Alarms will have been triggered by our descent from the observation deck and the techs will read it as normal,” he said. “How many can you see? Do you know who they are?”

From the distance, I couldn’t see colors or standards and their tents were white to blend in with the ice. I didn’t see any horses or sylphs— there was nothing up here to feed either animal

for melting enough water for livestock would be a time-consuming chore. I did see however, a tall black-cloaked figure standing on a hummock of ice that put him above the surrounding army. I could even see the folds of Blackfin's cloak ripple in the wind.

He raised a fist and a ball of blue shot up to explode like a meteor shower lighting everything over our heads to near daylight. "Don't move," I hissed as Cabor started.

"What was that? Pyrotechnics? Explosives? I was not aware that the lowland cultures had explosive capabilities."

"That was magic," I said flatly, each shooting sparks that remained bright and viable long after a torch would have gone out. When the flares finally drifted to the ground and faded out, only then did I move. Towards the camp. Cabor tried to urge me to return to the safety of the city but I shook my head.

"We need to see how many and in what composition his forces. He means to invade your city and you and your guards are not prepared for his magics," I argued quietly. "He's here after me too."

"He knows you're alive? How? No one has ever survived the glacier for more than two days and you've been gone months."

"He can sense me, somehow. Like I can smell their blood. Human blood. Now, be quiet or they'll hear us." I slid down into a narrow cleft that looked solid, almost like a deer path in a ravine and followed it towards the camp. We slid close enough to count the huts constructed of shiny material that was white, thick yet smooth to the touch. Poles hold them up in a rigid boxlike construction, complete with chimneys and stoves.

There weren't any sylphs or horses but strange four-legged white-furred creatures that looked like dogs but four times the size with jaws that slobbered. Drool hung in icicles from their dewlaps and they watched me with curious red eyes they as I slipped silently around the camp.

Men were not huddled outside guarding their perimeter, it was too cold for a human to endure but I soon realized they were not unguarded. Blackfin had brought ice thralls—demons I had only heard about in story tales but here they were in the flesh. Five-foot tall, covered in white skin as pale as marble, they were ferocious fighters who did not fear the snow and ice but only fire and heat. If he'd conjured them, he had become more powerful than any human magician I had ever heard of in the New or Oldlands rivaling only Lyr Averon.

They ignored Cabor as if they knew he wasn't human either and I stepped quietly through their ranks, even pushing them aside when they crowded too close. "They seem to like you," Cabor grinned as one stuck his black nose in my armpit. I grunted. It was like being hit with a very large sledgehammer.

"I wish I could see what kind of weapons they're carrying," I said frustrated and then brightened as a thought came to me. I stared at the tents with my other sense, saw those occupied with live bodies and stoves glowed red-hot where the others remained cold. There were many cold ones towards the center of the encampment and I headed for them.

The fabric wouldn't tear or lift under my fingers so I was forced to use the front flap. It unsealed like a zipper and the two of us squeezed inside the boxlike tent. It was dark but my eyes could make out the details. Boxes lay stacked neatly and I used my fingers to pry open their covers. Rifles loaded with silver, crossbows, swords and strange tube-like things that I didn't understand. But Cabor did.

"Laser wands. High technology," he mused. "These are strong enough to cause severe damage to the city doors, maybe even to open them. Your culture should not be able to develop this type of weapon."

“Well, they did,” I said grimly and tucked one into my pocket along with crossbow, rifle, ammo and a sharp knife. “Now I don’t feel so naked. Let’s check out the rest.”

By the time I had satisfied my curiosity, we had found conventional weapons and a few new ones that had the security and med-tech worried. Battering rams, explosives and cannons, all-powerful enough to crack the massive door into their city or so he said.

I led the way back towards the tower but before we turned for the city, I stopped. “You go, Cabor. Warn them. I’m going to try and kill the wizard.”

He argued with me but I was adamant. “If I die, he might just give up and leave. If I win, well, then he’s dead. Go on and warn them.” He left me finally and just a few minutes later, he was out of sight.

Chapter 9

I could smell Blackfin among all the other people—his was a scent of male/female, power and magic. A sharp taint in his blood that I recognized as part of mine from when I had bitten him just as a tiny part of me was in his blood. I wasn’t sure if he could sense me, I was hoping not or the surprise would be on me.

My other sense led me to a tent in the center of the camp surrounded by more of the dome tents and packed with moving bodies. These soldiers were not sleeping but sitting up, bending and walking about the confines of the tent. Obviously, they were guarding something or someone and had remained awake. I stood just outside the one that my sense told me held my prey and saw his heart beating slowly in his chest as if he were supine and sleeping.

I pulled out the wand that Cabor had called a laser, pointed the open end at the bottom of the tent and pushed the red button. A beam of red light emerged and literally melted through the outer wall as if it were only paper. No hissing, no smoke just the two sides peeling back from each other to show me the interior of the room.

Dark. A cot with a figure sleeping under covers but I had been fooled by that before. I swept the room and didn’t see anyone else. Entering, I pulled the covers down to stare at a globe the pulsed just like a heartbeat and gave off the same heat but was clearly not a body.

“So, you’re not dead.” I heard his voice right over my shoulder and spun around to confront both Blackfin and guards shielded from my sense. I raised the laser but he gestured and a field of blue fire enveloped me. I could feel my neck tendons straining as I tried to scream yet nothing moved. The soldiers entered all around me and to his directions, had me shackled and cuffed to a post near the doorway. “Where is the entrance to the place you were kept, Tobias?” He asked softly and I could speak.

“Fuck you,” I managed between gasps.

“Oh, we’ll get to that. Hudson, remove his clothing,” the wizard ordered. A young woman stepped forward with a knife. She cut off my jacket, the front of the jumpsuit and my underwear until I had only the bottoms hanging from my waist.

Blackfin studied me, running his hands across my chest and shoulders. “Even the scar is gone. How did you survive a silver arrow through your heart, Tobias? I know I didn’t miss and even if I had, the silver should’ve incapacitated and poisoned you. Where’s the sylph? Did you eat it to survive?”

“Go fuck yourself, you perverted jimsey,” I spat and that incensed him. He hit me in the face and then jumped backwards, crying out in pain as he broke his knuckles on my nose. I saw stars as my head went back, my nose gushed blood and I bit my tongue. Sagged against the bindings and would have fallen if I hadn’t been tied with my hands over my head.

Blackfin said, "Hudson, get me some answers. I need to see the healer."

"Yes, my Lord." The woman was young and pretty, but her eyes were hard with no empathy. A soldier behind handed something to her as Blackfin disappeared from my view and I heard him leave the room. When she brought it out, my eyes widened in alarm. She held a flagellum, an instrument of torture outlawed by the Emperor himself.

"I see you know what this is," she grinned. "I have Lord Blake's permission to use whatever means at my disposal to persuade you to talk."

I opened my mouth but before I could utter a word, she struck me on the back. Nine barbs and metal hooks tore into my flesh with the force of a battering ram. My knees went and I was hanging from my wrists. Fire raced down my back into my waistband in trails of little cold fingers. Blood. She giggled. "You do have blood in your veins," she said. "I had my doubts."

"Come closer, girl," I managed but the pain made it hard to use my glamour on her. She shook her finger in my face.

"No, no, naughty boy. Lord Blake warned us about your daemon allure. For even trying, you get five extra lashes."

With gleeful enthusiasm, she laid into me and I thought that it couldn't get any worse. I was wrong. The pain was a devouring monster that ate my mind, which allowed me nowhere to run from and nowhere to hide. I prayed to faint but she would not let me. I begged her to stop as the blood ran down my legs to pool at my feet. The smell was sickening, rich and thick but could not mask the odor of fear-tainted sweat.

She threw water on me when I was close to passing out and it revived me as it froze to my skin. She asked me the same questions repeatedly until I begged her to stop, promising to take them to the Gates if she would only stop.

"Tell me where," she insisted.

"I can't, I can't. I can only show you," I gasped crying. "I can't tell you where, I can't find it except by smell."

After an hour's beating, she left me hanging under four guards' watchful eyes and went in search of her commander.

I hung in the chains, battered, bloody and broken, ready to do whatever they demanded of me if she would only leave me alone.

Chapter 10

Blackfin appeared out of the rising sun dressed in heavy cloak trimmed in fur. His hand was bandaged and covered in mittens, the bandaged one twice as large as the other cover. He gave his orders in a flat voice and camp was swiftly broken down, the tents folded up into small crates packed onto the doglike creatures. Even odder, they left the things inside the tents when they were packed, seeming to cause no problems as the box folded smaller and smaller.

The thousands of soldiers formed up in squads, well covered in Arctic wear that was lightweight yet warm. The only thing I saw from them was the plume of their warm breath in the cold air. I realized that magic encased the whole group, raising the temperature of the space around them to nearly 40°.

I stood on wobbly legs with dried blood on my back, legs and chest. No one had cleaned or treated me, given me food, water or clothing. In fact, they completely ignored me until the woman snatched at my chains and pulled me to my feet. She had attached chains to my wrist shackles leading me like a dog on a leash.

Only the officers rode the creatures and Blackfin had something that looked like a demon. It was over 6 foot at the shoulders, gray with long hair that twisted and curled in dreadlocks. A horrible and ugly face like a mad ape. It ran on four legs with the front ones touching the ground with its knuckles. I had heard of them—creatures from the far north of the glaciers called snow apes. Violent, dangerous and extremely hard to control. As likely to turn on its rider as its enemies. Not that it had any, it preyed on man, animal and demon.

The soldiers marched and I with them although I was dragged more than I walked until finally, the wizard told them to put me atop one of the doglike creatures out front where I could direct the army towards the gate. It took them twice as long to march towards the tower as Cabor and I had, yet when we reached the spot where I knew it had been, all we saw was a flat area of ice and a knob of rock sticking up as the ice flowed around.

I didn't tell them it was there buried under our feet. Instead, I took them deeper onto the glacier towards the massive gates that I knew was the main entrance into the city. I knew that they knew where it was, too. Cabor had told me that Blackfin and the Warlord's Army had attempted to batter it down before. What they didn't know was the way that I was leading them went right through a major field of crevasses and would slow the army down. Maybe even swallow their ranks if I was lucky.

The dog creatures (called ice thralls) snuggled up close to me and several even licked my face. Besides being cold and slimy, they smelled like yaks. I gagged and tried to find a seat on its back that didn't cause the pain in mine to flare. At least the biting cold had numbed me to the point that I wasn't even shivering.

We marched for four hours before the major in charge ordered a halt. Within mere minutes, the soldiers had another camp set up and the tents unfolded to create a compound with Blackfin and their weapons in the center, food in the next ring and men on the outside.

I watched them set up the battering rams and wagons on skis to transport them. They were making a base camp from which to operate, knowing that they were close to the entrance to the city.

The thrall sat down and I slid with it. Standing over me was the female soldier who had tortured me. With a sharp knife, she cut the lines that held me to the thrall, tucked the toe of her snow boots in my ribs and rolled me over where I lay in the snow and ice until someone made time for me.

I was vaguely aware as I was dragged by my wrist chains into a warm hut, hoisted into a chair and tied to a sitting position. People moved around me. I smelled food cooking, the noise of people eating, conversations and general military mayhem going on around me. Yet no one tended to me or offered to feed me. I wasn't sure if I could stomach food anyway.

The head soldier in charge came in and one of my guards offered the officer hot tea, which the major declined. He stood in front of me and used the end of his baton to lift my head off my chest.

"Can you hear me, half-blood?" His voice was cold and supercilious. I didn't answer him. I had not the breath or the courage. "I was told you can't eat food only blood. Open your mouth."

My jaw had swollen from Blackfin's blow and my nose felt crooked, stuffed with blood clots and worse. He raised my battered lips and poked at my teeth, the fangs extended as he cursed softly. His thumb rubbed against the point breaking the skin. I tasted his blood and wanted more. Stared into his eyes and made promises that if he would help me, I would reward him with ecstasy. He remained steadfast against my magic and the others in the tent stirred uneasily as the force of my allure touched them.

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