

DREAMING  
THE DARK



ELANA GOMEL



# DREAMING THE DARK

BY ELANA GOMEL



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TO MY HUSBAND JIM MARTIN



## PART I. STOLEN EYES

The ballplayers dropped the walrus head and it rolled down the black dome of the sky, leaving behind a greenish smear of light. Kua looked away.

Her other-sight was getting better every day. As the Dark was encroaching upon Our Land, her people were getting by on dribbles of illumination like a family subsisting on scraps of meat after an unsuccessful hunt. Everybody but Kua. Her eyes were as sharp as her cheeks were round. She hated her body but it prospered in spite of her, sustained by the stolen power inside.

She glanced at the caches dug in the permafrost. Though empty of meat, they were already filled with a mass of silvery glitter: the webs of the ice inua. Kua knew that she would have to negotiate with the starveling, pointy-faced creature and beg her to move her webs elsewhere. Otherwise the precious meat placed in the caches would be corrupted. At least she had some leverage in this task because of her propitious name. Kua meant “Frozen Meat”.

She walked down to the beach, passing by the winter houses dug in the shallow soil. The pale sun lolled on the horizon. Soon the People would crawl into their lightless shelters and sink into the Long Dreaming. This would be Kua’s first time in the winter house after her brother Kiviak’s death and she dreaded it.

Kua scooped up some sleet from the ground and rubbed it into her ugly eyes. She willed them to see only the outer

disguise of Our Land: the lichen-splotched boulders that hid the crawl-tunnels; the scarlet carpet of the creeping willow; the silky black water speckled with glittering whiteness. But just as vividly she saw the entrail-seizers sniffing for a way to come down from the Upper Land; and the ballplayers still stupefied by the loss of the walrus head; and on the horizon, she saw the sun's inua: a lovely woman with a sickly smile and skeletal back.

Sighing, she adjusted the hood of her sealskin parka. The seal had been properly appeased with melted snow after it was killed, so its spirit would be friendly to the skin's new owner. Kua knew she could call upon the seal-spirit if she ever needed a guide to the Lower Land...but what for? The game of the dead, no matter how plentiful, was of no use to the living.

She walked toward the huddle of summer tents on the shore, soon to be disassembled as families moved into their winter dwellings. Suddenly she stopped. Something was wrong. Shaking her head to get rid of a swarm of tiny inuat, she forced herself to focus on the tents. One, two, six...there should be seven!

And then she saw that the entrance to the topmost winter house was already sealed.

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Oleg Rossochvatsky leaned over the railing of the observation deck. The inky water sloshing against the hull of the *Polar Star* was filled with berg bits—broken pieces of the massive icebergs calving off the Greenlandic ice sheet. They looked like a school of dead fish. He blinked and checked the coordinates as they showed in his field of vision.

This was supposed to be his self-reward for finally selling his technology to a Californian start-up. The glossy pictures of the cruise brochure had promised to blur Mila's face. Instead, he was seeing her everywhere in that alien landscape: the bare-bones rocks; the carpets of dwarf trees the color of fresh blood; the ghostly greenish radiance of the Northern Lights like the sky



rotting. Mila was everywhere in that mingled beauty and horror.

He watched the kayakers depart in their slinky boats, momentarily regretful he was not going with them. But their easy camaraderie put him off. The only Russian on board, surrounded by American retirees, Australian backpackers and Canadian tycoons, he felt out of place.

The cruise ship was entering a narrow fjord. Ochre-colored mountains, licked by long tongues of ice, hemmed in the *Polar Star*. A gust of wind cut his face. Oleg walked back into the Panorama lounge and almost collided with Ted, a Texan retiree, carrying a beer bottle to his seat by the window.

“No kayaking today?” Ted asked.

Oleg shook his head. “I’m giving it a break. Too much hassle. No time to see anything.”

Ted grunted. Oleg noted that his hands were trembling worse than usual. Parkinson’s.

“I ran out of memory on my phone but I don’t care,” Ted said. “The crowd at home can wait. Anyway, we can’t send a squeak out.”

The cruise ship had no Internet connection. A satellite link could be used to send an email for an exorbitant price but Oleg did not bother. Nobody was worried about his whereabouts. Not anymore.

The ship glided between the sheer black walls scraped by the retreating glacier. A roll of cloud sat on the barren plateau above.

“No birds,” he said to himself rather than to Ted. “No life at all.”

A large woman with a cup of coffee and a plateful of cookies joined them. Roberta was an Australian who shared a cabin with a taciturn Norwegian woman named Siv. Her thick wrist clinked with multiple bangles and a yellow band that said *Polar Star* and *Arctic—the Final Frontier*. Everybody had received these bands on embarkation but Oleg had chucked his into the garbage.

“Jan didn’t sign in,” she said. “You know, the Dutch guy? They’ll do a walk of shame now!”

Indeed, the ship's comm system coughed into life and declared in the dulcet tones of Harry, their expedition leader: "Cabin 302, please come down to the Zodiac launch deck to sign in!"

At every excursion, whether in kayaks or Zodiacs, each passenger had to sign out on a name sheet posted at the gate and sign in when they came back on board. Failure to do so was regarded as a major *faux pas*.

The excursion had been to Ella O—Ella Island—a stretch of tundra strewn with bones and pillows of moss. Oleg could not remember seeing the burly Dutchman but then they all looked alike in their yellow parkas.

The announcement was repeated again, this time with greater urgency. The cloud roll dipped lower, slithering upon the water like a sea-serpent.

"Could he have been left behind?" Oleg asked.

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Kua ducked through the entrance to the summer tent, lifting the flap and breathing in the familiar smell of animal fat and human bodies. Inside her mother's sister Aaja sat on the sleeping platform, chewing a square of seal skin preparatory to sewing it into a garment. Her teeth were worn down to blackened nubs. She muttered something that was not a greeting.

A proper *angakok* was supposedly capable of seeing human souls through their garments of flesh but Kua's other-sight gave her no such capacity. Perhaps it was for the best. She had a pretty good idea what she would find if she could look into her family's hearts.

"What's going on with the Three?" Kua asked after an uncomfortable pause, during which she sat down on the ledge, removed her kamiks and loosened the ties of her parka. It was almost as cold inside as outside. The soapstone lamp filled with seal oil was not lit and the accumulated heat of packed bodies that normally kept the tent warm dissipated when the housemates went out.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elana Gomel is the author of five non-fiction books published by Routledge, Macmillan and others, and of numerous articles on subjects ranging from science fiction and fantasy to posthumanism and Victorian literature. She has published more than 30 fantasy and science fiction stories, in such magazines as *New Horizons*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Timeless Tales*, *The Singularity*, *New Realm*, *Mythic*, and *The Fantasist*; and in anthologies *The Apex Book of World SF*, *People of the Book*, *Twelve Days of Christmas*, among others. Her fantasy novel *A Tale of Three Cities* was published in 2013.

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