

DREAMING THE DARK

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TO MY HUSBAND JIM MARTIN

PART 1. 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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

Aaja shrugged and absent-mindedly scratched her neck under her lice-infested parka. Kua looked away. Her parka was new and elaborately embroidered, her kamiks softened by her mother's tireless rubbing, and her body free of the parasites that plagued the rest of the People. She accepted these reluctant tributes in the spirit in which they were given: as part of a calculated exchange, trading their need for her comfort.

"They have gone into the winter house," Aaja said.

"But why?" Kua asked. "The sun is still up, seals and belugas are still coming, and big whales may pass by our shore before the Dark. What are they going to eat while dreaming? Fish bones? The Three are not stupid."

The Three were nine, in fact: three brothers, their wives and their children. The three brothers, Exitagak, Ekuak and Ere, were triplets: an uncommon and ill-omened event among the People. The then-angakok had wanted to kill the babies. But the parents demurred, afraid of the wrath of Sedna, Mistress of the Sea. Aborted fetuses and exposed babies developed into parasites that infested her kelp hair, and she was likely to take out her itch on fishermen and seal-hunters. The rest of the band had sided with the parents and the brothers had been allowed to live. The People seldom regretted this, for despite their explosive tempers and sullen dispositions, the triplets were excellent hunters.

Unfortunately hunting had been so bad this summer that even the skills of the Three could not fill the caches. Tempers flared; and the triplets' chronic anger was stoked by their wives, brought from the South. Ineko, Pamiak and Taala were silent, morose, secretive women who were suspected of practicing ilisinek, sorcery. Each of the women had given birth to one pudgy son. The boys were even less liked than their mothers.

"Did they hoard meat?" Kua asked herself rather than Aaja who responded with a contemptuous snort. There was no meat to be hoarded.

Putting her kamiks back on, Kua stepped outside. The ballplayers were gone and the sky was softening into gentle grayness. The top of the White Sleeper, a dog-shaped iceberg off the shore, lit

up with orange flame as the sun reluctantly rose. The White Sleeper had once been a powerful turgat, a master-spirit. But he had been wandering in the dreamlands for so long that he had forgotten his way back to Nunaat.

Kua looked around for the ice inua but could not see her. The tiny spirit did not like daytime. But there were others around. “Inua” meant “owner”, and that name was the People’s wry acknowledgement that Nunaat, Our Land, did not belong to them. They were just blind tenants, stumbling through the maze of the owners’ many mansions. Relying on angakut as their guides.

Blind men guided by a girl who hated her sight.

Kua walked away from the beach toward a ridge cluttered with boulders layered in cream and dark red. They looked like fat-marbled meat and it was exactly what they were. The boulders were petrified pieces of the ice giants who had occupied Nunaat before the People’s arrival. They had been murdered and dismembered by the Tupilak, the ghastly owner of the Upper Land.

Kua clambered onto a striated outcrop and knocked. A jointed limb as long as Kua’s entire body poked up from within the rock, followed by a round face with faceted eyes and a curving mouth. The rest of the body remained hidden and Kua had no idea what it looked like. The tunek lived inside the remnants of the giants and boasted of being their descendant, even though Kua suspected it had been their parasite.

Speaking slowly, so that the dim-witted creature understood, Kua explained what she wanted. The tunek’s wide mouth gaped at her until she dropped a tiny marsh wren into it. The bird was a congealed lump of her power, her angakunek, which she used to feed inuat in return for favors. Hunger was the one language that all creatures of Nunaat, visible and invisible, understood. Unfortunately, the great turgats, powerful spirits who commanded game animals, would not be sated by her paltry offerings. She could only plead with them; and so far, they had been unresponsive.

The tunek dove into the rock, and Kua pulled the hood of her parka over her face and closed her eyes. Even this common gesture was a jarring reminder of her special status. Her hood was small and tight as if she were a man, not large and loose, with room for a baby. She would never have a family. Angakut never married.

She dozed off and woke up when the rock trembled.

“They sleep,” the tunek said.

In the depth of the winter Dark, the People, sealed in their underground shelters, would fall into a long sleep, waking up infrequently to eat, drink and relieve themselves. But to sleep when the sun was still above the horizon and hunting was still possible! It made no sense.

“Are you sure?” she asked doubtfully.

“Yes!” the tunek sounded offended, for dumb as it was, it was still an inua, a spirit owner of the world, and it did not like being questioned by a mere human. “They are all asleep! All eight of them!”

* * *

Jan had not been left behind.

He was discovered in his cabin, hiding under a pile of clothes, his face red and sweaty. But his teeth were chattering when Francine, the ship’s doctor, removed the frowzy layers. He flailed blindly and answered no questions. Curled up in the sickbay, he shuddered and sobbed until he was buried under several thick blankets. Then he calmed down and went to sleep.

This is what Oleg learned from Ling, the Arctic Shop clerk. The luxurious cruise ship had a relatively large crew. But every crewmember still had to do several jobs, and Ling, who ran the shop with the exuberance learned in the chaos of Beijing street markets, was also trained as a nurse. She liked Oleg and he liked her as much as any woman other than Mila—which is to say, enough for an occasional friendly chat.

The ship was anchored in King Oscar Fjord. It was almost nine o’clock in the evening and the sun had finally dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with thin strawberry stripes. The edge of the ice sheet that covered the interior of Greenland like a huge amoeba drooped over the edge of the plateau. A couple of bergs reared their toothy crowns into the brittle air. One of them resembled a sphinx with a sloping back and large doglike head.

“What does Francine say?”

“She thought it was a stroke at first.”

Would they have to interrupt the cruise and go back to the tiny town of Ittoqqortoormiit where medical help could be summoned? He could imagine the passengers’ rebellion. Surely the company would do anything to avoid lawsuits!

“At first?”

“Yes. She says there are no symptoms...no physical symptoms. It’s as if he had a...what do you call it?...psychic something...”

“Psychotic breakdown?”

“Yes.”

Oleg had seen no familiar signs but he had not spent much time with Jan. He asked whether the Dutchman was on medication but Ling did not know.

They stood together in the twilight that wrapped around the cold like a silk shawl around a steel blade.

* * *

Kua prowled around the winter houses. The rest of the People were fishing in a marshy inlet which usually brimmed with salmon trout and char. This year, the fish was sparse and she knew they blamed her for not negotiating properly with Sedna, the Mistress of the Sea. And they were right, of course.

Her other-sight revealed to her the world as it really was. She could see the owners, the powers that were invisible to the rest of the People. But while Kiviak had apparently found it easy to talk to these inscrutable creatures, she was tongue-tied and awkward. She hated the responsibility that had been laid upon her by his unwanted gift. Rather than seeking out friendly inuat, she would often be mesmerized by the atrocious wonders revealed to her. She could spend hours watching erkileks, dogs with the upper body of a man, snarl and bite as they chased each other across the fresh snow; or tuneks breach rock like surfacing whales; or an eight-legged kukoriak trying to gnaw off its misshapen limbs that sprouted back twofold out of the bloody stumps. And then there were glimpses of the abodes of the dead that flanked Nunaat above and below: the frozen horror of the Upper Land and the teeming plenty of the Lower Land. And beyond all of these, encircling the world in their impenetrable obscurity, lay the dreamlands, separating the realm of the People from other worlds. And then Kua would come back to her duties and feel like clawing her eyes out.

Fortunately what she was looking for now belonged in the visible world.

A small arctic hare hopped out from a tangle of crowberries, its hide glistening with a carapace of ice. Kua pulled off her fox-fur mitten and grasped the blade of her ullo, her woman’s knife. Physical pain could sometimes dull her other-sight. The icy hare dissolved into a puff of haze. Kua knelt down, rooting in the powdery soil.

A small femur bone, dotted with fresh toothmarks, landed in her hand.

* * *

Going back to his cabin, Oleg collided with Roberta.

The *Polar Star* had three decks. Most cabins were on deck 2 and 3, with the bridge, the Panorama lounge and the library occupying deck 1. The dining room was on deck 3, just below Oleg's cabin, so he often ran into hungry passengers surging toward its welcoming doors that opened three times a day for breakfast, lunch and dinner. But the Australian, barreling down the narrow passageway, was not on her way to a meal.

She grasped his arm. "Siv!" she screeched.

Oleg recalled that Siv was her roommate.

"What?" he asked. Roberta did not answer but clung to him with a desperation that made him reassess his initial hunch that she was drunk. She dragged him to her cabin.

The heavy-duty doors on the ship latched automatically and could only be opened with magnetic cards. But the door to Roberta's cabin was ajar. What looked like a bundle of clothes was wedged into the gap.

Oleg knelt down and recoiled with a sharp intake of breath. Siv was tall but she appeared smaller now, huddled in upon herself in a loose boneless way, her face down. The flickering light fixture above their heads threw a web of shadows over her silvery-blond hair.

Knowing it was a wrong thing to do, Oleg rolled Siv over. Her eyes were open, he thought with relief, and then realized they would always be open: ragged holes in a pale, red-washed face.

Her eyes were missing.

* * *