

BEARS OF THE ICE

THE QUEST OF THE CUBS



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF GUARDIANS OF GA'HOOLE

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Book 1

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*The clock did not create an interest in time measurement;
the interest in time measurement led to the invention of the clock.*

— David Landes, *Revolution in Time*

Prologue

The bears' shadows slid across the snow, gobbling the jumble ice that had piled around the den. They were ragged-looking creatures, and *huge*. Across their broad chests were stripes of dark blood. Old blood, not from their own bodies. Most likely from a seal. The realization sent a strange chill through Svenna. Honorable bears did not celebrate the killing of prey. It was one of the first lessons cubs learned out on the ice. The relationship between predator and prey was sacred. One killed for hunger, nothing more. And here these two ragged bears were, strutting about, parading their slaughter.

“What do you want?” Svenna called as the two bears approached. She stepped forward to put herself between the strangers and the entrance to her den.

“We’ve come for your cubs, madam,” said one whose face was crisscrossed with fighting scars.

Svenna’s chest seemed to cave into her body, as if she were shrinking in her own pelt. *No*. The word tore through her. *Never*. Svenna had heard terrible rumors about cubnappings, that bears called Roguers were snatching cubs and killing mothers who resisted. That’s why she’d left her home and traveled to this harsh land. But evidently, she hadn’t gone far enough. The guard hairs on her neck rose and stood rigid. Her claws dug into the snow crust.

“You’re not taking my cubs,” Svenna growled.

The other one, who was only slightly smaller, replied with a smirk, “It’s an honor.”

“What’s an honor?”

“To give your cubs to the Timekeepers.”

“What authority?”

“The Timekeepers of the Ice Cap.”

“Never!” Svenna felt a sudden flash of anger and rose onto her hind legs. Her body, which only moments before seemed to shrink, now enlarged, as did her heart, which beat only for her cubs.

“You defy?” The larger bear stepped forward. He smelled foul and had the stench of dead meat, like a scavenger. This fellow did not make clean kills when he hunted. “The penalty for defying the Authority is death, madam.”

I can't fight them both off, Svenna thought as panic coursed through her. But she had to do something. "My cubs are not yet named," Svenna said desperately.

"We'll name them."

"*You'll* name them?" she gasped, staggering at the terrible thought. She had to think; think fast. "I'll go! I'll go in their place." The Roguers chuckled, but she continued. "Whatever you need, I'll do it." No matter what, she couldn't let these foul creatures take her cubs.

The scarred bear glared at her with disdain. "We require only cubs."

"I was born and reared in Ga'Hoole, so I know how to read and write. I'm sure I can make myself useful."

The Roguers turned their backs on her and began whispering. Did Svenna dare attack the smaller bear's flank? Her killing teeth could tear into that tender flesh. Would that gain her time — time to flee with her cubs? But before she could act, the Roguers turned back to face her.

"The Mystress of the Hands will be pleased with your service," the scarred bear said. "We accept your trade."

Svenna automatically bobbed her head, as this was the proper thing to do. But there was nothing at all proper about any of this. With each passing second, she loathed herself more and more.

“Are you ready, madam? You can deliver your cubs to a neighbor. We shall follow.”

She swayed on her legs as something inside her crumbled. “Give me a bit of time, please. So that I might prepare them.”

The larger bear grunted what she assumed to be a sound of agreement. “We will return for you on Tuesday.”

“What’s a Tuesday?” Svenna asked.

They laughed cruelly. “Be ready then, madam,” the smaller one said. “And do not try to escape. We will be watching.”

Svenna spun around, feeling the huge bears’ eyes drilling into her back as she crawled quickly into the den.

She slid down the slope into the area where the cubs lay sleeping. She looked at them: First, a burly little male; and Second, a slightly smaller female. They were curled up around each other, tucked in a dream perhaps. They were so peaceful, so innocent. So oblivious to the terror that flooded through her. So unconscious of the malice that swirled outside. Her only job on earth was to keep these cubs safe and fed so they could grow into powerful bears, the largest predators in this frozen universe of the Nunquivik and the Northern Kingdoms.

The two little ones twitched in their sleep. First’s hind feet kicked as if he were dreaming of ruddering through a current. She hoped it was a dream and not a nightmare about drowning, for First wasn’t as strong a swimmer as his sister. Second’s tiny

pink tongue was flicking in and out — maybe Second was caught in a halibut dream!

She pictured the cruel gleam in the Roguers' eyes, and fear began to flood through her like a great rising tide. She clamped her own eyes shut. *No matter where they take me, I must return for my cubs. I will return!*

CHAPTER 1

Ice Lessons

*“We wait for the jumble moon, the one that will drive the tide
And the wintry wind, just 'round the bend
That will bring the ice by the bye
The creaks, the groans, and the mumbles
As the ice piles up in jumbles
And beneath those icy crests
Swim seals in blubbery vests
Let my little cubs learn
before the midnight sun burns . . .”*

Svenna sang the song as she led the cubs out to the edge of the Nunqua where the sea met the frozen land, where the jumble ice would soon mass. Jumble ice was the sign that true hunting could begin.

There was no time to waste. That terrible thing called a Tuesday was coming. She glanced back at her two cubs as they scrambled over the piles of ice. They were always looking for the perfect ice slide for skeeters, a game her cubs loved to play. But, sadly, there was no time for that anymore. First and Second had to learn all they could from their mum before those dreadful bears came back.

Svenna had arranged to leave her cubs with a distant cousin, Taaka, in exchange for a rare, valuable filing stone Svenna had brought all the way from Ga'Hoole. It was quite useful for keeping claws sharp enough to slice seal blubber, and Taaka had seemed pleased with the offering. But that was no guarantee Taaka would care for the cubs as her own, so it was essential that Svenna teach them to hunt for themselves.

If Svenna's cubs had been born to the south in the Northern Kingdoms of Ga'Hoole, they would have been named three months after their birth. But here in Nunquivik, the custom was different. It was a harsher land. Many cubs died young; therefore they weren't named until their second season on the ice. So for now, Svenna's cubs would continue to be called First and Second, the order of their birth.

The cubs were squealing with delight over a newly discovered ice slide.

"This one's great! Look how it curves!" First called to his sister.

“Yeah, but I can make it even better!” Second said, bounding over to dig into the ice. “I can make it steeper, faster.”

And she would, Svenna thought. Her younger cub had an uncanny gift for building with snow and ice. It was as if Second could see exactly how the crystals locked together. She was what some used to call an ice gazer, though Svenna hadn’t heard anyone use that term in a very long time.

“You’d better grip a bit with your hind claws. You might crash,” First cautioned his sister, sounding wary.

“Nonsense! I know ice.”

“I know you know ice, but be careful,” Svenna interjected. “Don’t be reckless, Second!”

Second scowled at her mother’s reprimand. She wasn’t reckless. She was *brave*. Like her father, a great hunter. He wouldn’t scold her for being daring. He’d trust her!

First had his unique skills as well. There were occasions when Svenna sensed that her firstborn could pick up the scent of other creatures’ thoughts. Some called bears with this particular gift riddlers, for they could riddle another creature’s mind.

Just the evening before, Svenna and her cubs had spotted a tern high above their den, and First had said, “She won’t nest here.”

“Now, how would you know that, First?” Svenna had asked.

“I can’t explain. She just won’t.” He’d shrugged his furry shoulders.

“Why?” Second had asked.

“Something bad happened to her here.”

“Okay, but *what?*” Second had prodded, growing irritated.

A troubled look had crossed First’s face. “I don’t know. But look at her flight pattern. She keeps coming back in at the exact same slant. Then she swivels at the last moment, as if she can’t bear to come too close.” The guard hairs of Svenna’s neck had bristled. First’s words had left her with an uneasy feeling.

Watching her cubs play, Svenna had a different sickening sensation. She had not yet told them that she was leaving, and that they’d have to stay with their cousin Taaka, whom they had never met.

“I dare you to do a *gludderwump!*” Second shouted as she scampered toward the ice slide. Second was the most competitive little cub imaginable and was always challenging her brother.

“Of course I can do a *gludderwump*,” First replied evenly. “I taught you how to do it. I showed you exactly how to curl so you roll while you slide.”

“So what? I do it better. My rolls are perfect. Tuck my knees, tuck my chin, and off I go.”

“Who taught you that knee trick, Second? Me!” First said.

Oh great Ursus, Svenna thought sadly. How she would miss their bickering. But when she called to them, her voice was stern. “Come over here right now, cubs. You’re both almost yearlings, and there is much to learn.” She stopped herself from saying, “Before I leave.”

She had considered running off with the cubs, but the Roguers would find her. Taaka had assured her of this when Svenna sneaked off while the cubs were sleeping. Taaka had not seemed surprised at all about the Roguers. “Happens a lot around here,” she’d said brusquely. “There’s nothing you can do about it. And don’t even think of running away.”

“The cubs are still young. They couldn’t run far.”

“Exactly, and the Roguers are very good trackers. You know of course what they’ll do if they catch you?”

Svenna had shaken her head.

“They murder you in front of your own cubs and take them anyway.”

Svenna shuddered as she recalled those chilling words and tried to focus on watching the cubs play. It was hard to imagine them hunting yet. They were barely a year old, born on the longest night of the year, the night when the first of the Jumble Roarings Ice begin. But they would have to learn to hunt, young as they were. Taaka had three cubs of her own to nurse. She would have no milk for First and Second.

Svenna felt a twinge in her heart. So much to teach them and so little time! She suppressed a sigh and forced herself to concentrate. There was a chance that beyond the jumble ice some seals might be lurking.

“Come, cubs, it’s time to go out a bit and try for seals.” The cubs abandoned their slide and bounded over to her, following close behind their mum on their short little legs. “Now what do you remember from the lessons last season?” she asked, trying to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“Be very quiet,” First said.

“No talking,” Second added.

“No fidgeting,” First said, shooting his sister a look. He knew this would be hard for her. She was so excited. He was too, but he prided himself on being able to hold it back better. Second was not a hold-back kind of cub. “Impulsive,” their mum often called her.

The cubs followed their mum, scrambling over the jagged ridge of jumble ice out onto the new ice that stretched before them. It was flat and flawless. This was not the vast Frozen Sea but a bay, and Svenna knew that bays froze sooner. If they were lucky, seals would be swimming below, and her cubs could get some much-needed practice.

“Cubs, look ahead for a shadowy spot in the ice. That’s a sign of a breathing hole.”

First and Second opened their eyes wide and scanned the ice. Each wanted to be the first to spy a hole.

“There’s one!” Second shouted, sprinting ahead. She skidded to a stop and looked down. “No,” she said with a sigh. “I was so sure it was a breathing hole.”

This happened again and again. Each time Second seemed certain, but each time, she was disappointed.

“Don’t worry,” Svenna said, trying to sound optimistic. “It takes some time and practice.” *But we don’t have time*, she thought. If the cubs didn’t learn how to feed themselves, they’d never survive without her.

It was shortly after Second’s fourth false alarm that First thought he spotted one. He wasn’t sure, however, and walked ahead quietly so as not to attract attention. He stopped and looked down, feeling a sudden thrill of accomplishment. A seal breathing hole! He’d found one!

First raised his paw and silently beckoned his mother and sister over.

“Darn!” Second muttered under her breath. She’d so wanted to be first.

Svenna glanced at Second as they walked toward First. “Quiet, dear, and don’t look grumpy. Your turn will come. Now, do you remember what do to if you catch a seal?”

“Yes,” Second said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Drag and roll!”

“Good cub,” Svenna said, pleased.

When they reached the hole, Svenna signaled with one paw. The cubs immediately went flat on the ice downwind from

the hole so the seal would not catch their scent. *Good! They remembered*, she thought, relieved.

It wasn't long before a shiny black nose poked up through the hole.

"I got it!" Second shouted, and pounced. She was quick enough to catch the seal by surprise.

"I'll drag!" First bounded toward the seal, which was flopping on the ice.

"Excellent, cubs! Good teamwork!" Svenna called as she stood by ready to roll the seal and slash its neck.

First had just started to drag the seal from the hole when a shadow engulfed the three of them, bringing a foul smell with it. A shiver coursed through Svenna — that smell! It was the odor of a carrion eater. A creature that stalked true hunters and stole their prey.

Before she could warn the cubs, a voice roared, "MINE!" An immense paw swatted Second, sending her flying through the air, then snatched their plump seal. It was a huge bear with a stripe of blood across his chest and shoulders covered with battle scars.

But Second was not fazed. "NO!" she shouted, outraged, as she scrambled to her feet. *She* had pounced on that seal. Her brother had dragged it from the hole. How could this beast take what was theirs? "Give it back! Give it back. It's ours!" She charged, then, leaping high into the air, smacked down on the bear's head.

“Second, stop!” Svenna roared. One swipe of the stranger’s paw could split her daughter’s skull wide open. “Let go, Second. Let go!”

But Second clung to the bear and, sinking her claws into his head fur, bit his ear. The bear yowled and shook himself so violently that Second fell off and landed with a crack on the ice.

First felt his stomach drop as the enormous bear rose onto his back legs, baring his teeth. “No!” First shouted, sprinting toward his sister, who lay still. “Leave her alone!”

But Svenna was already charging toward the bear, making a fearsome noise First had never heard before. Before she could reach him, the bear lowered himself back onto four legs, snatched the seal, and lumbered away.

“Second, Second . . . are you all right?” First cried as he skidded to a stop next to his sister. Had the horrible bear knocked her senseless? “Say something!” But she merely blinked and stared at him.

Svenna began gently rubbing snow in her cub’s face. “Dear Second, how could you do such a foolish thing?”

A fire suddenly kindled in Second’s eyes. “I’m not foolish. I’m mad,” she said through gritted teeth. First felt relief sweep through him.

Slowly, Second rose to her feet. “Why’d you say I was foolish? It wasn’t fair, Mum. That was our seal!”

“Nothing seems to be fair here,” Svenna murmured. Who could have ever imagined that a bear would attack a mother and her cubs? Something had changed in their world. A poison had seeped in. *We are in a lawless place*, Svenna thought. A place swept by winds of violence that could destroy them all.