

The stranger arrived at midnight, carried in a black covered sleigh pulled by two ancient and mighty reindeer.

Pevra watched from her window, her calloused thumb scraping along the edge of her axe, as the stranger climbed down and crunched through the snow toward the Great House. She sighed heavily.

"Well, I'm already up," she muttered. "May as well warm your sorry ass." The cold had awakened the old ache in her leg and she knew going back to bed was no longer possible.

She dressed, but slowly, for she didn't mind making the stranger wait. Boots laced to her knees. Hood tugged up around her ears. Axe slung in its sheath across her back.

Outside, she piled the sled high with wood from the shed, tucked tinder and kindling at the front, then dragged the sled to the side door of the Great House. Ani flung open the door when Pevra knocked.

"If you tell me there's another—oh, it's you Pev. Glad I didn't have to send the kid to fetch you. Come in."

"Who's the stranger?" Pevra asked, heaving the sled through the door.

Ani shrugged. "Some watchman. On his way back from patrol."

"Alone?"

"Seems so. Could be he's not just a watchman. Maybe he's—" Ani spun suddenly, smacking her head. "The buns!" She flew to the dome-shaped brick oven in the corner of the room, wrapping her hands in cloth and kneeling to the small hole midway down. Smoke curled from the opening.

She pulled out a small tray of blackened larch buns, her shoulders sagging as she set them on the table. "I can scrape off the tops, I suppose..."

Pevra dropped the sled rope and shut the door, then peeled off her mittens. She peered down at the buns, smoke filling her nose, and then she carved out a tiny pocket of time in the space around them. The smoke vanished and the scent dissipated, but Ani didn't notice.

They never noticed.

Pevra reversed time in that little pocket. A minute was all she needed, and then the buns were a deep brown, perfectly round, tops shiny from the butter Ani had surely brushed over them before baking. Pevra released the pocket and the fresh-pine scent of larch bark filled the air.

"Oh, I've outdone myself," said Ani. "Perhaps we should host watchmen at midnight more often."

Pevra suppressed a smile. "Need any wood before I warm the hall?"

"No, no, you've stocked me well already. Thanks, Pev."

Pevra snatched a larch bun for herself on the way out, holding it gently between her teeth so as not to burn her lips and tongue.

The hall smelled of cedar and burning oil and two low voices carried up through the drafty air and into the stone ceiling to mingle with the antlers fixed to the rafters. Two men sat at the long wooden table, a lamp between them. One was Bhorolsen, the master of the Great House and Clanfather of their village, the other was the stranger.

The stranger was all corners, from his pointed chin to his square forehead, from the crisp edges of his uniform to his bony hands folded on the table in front of him. His face was ageless—clean shaven yet still rugged; smooth, yet lacking any boyishness.

Bhorolsen and the stranger both looked up and paused their conversation when Pevra entered.

“Wonderful,” said Bhorolsen, “Pevra is here to chase away the chill. This is our woodcutter. Pev, this is Lutka, First Officer of the East Edge patrol.”

“Just Lutka,” he said, and his voice too, bore a needle-like sharpness.

Pevra finished dragging the sled to the hearth and dropped the rope, then ripped a bite from the bun in her mouth, saying, “Lutka. Why are you here?” The doughy center was still piping hot and it burned all the way down. She winced.

He didn’t answer immediately, his gaze affixed to her leg. He had noticed her limp. Not surprising—it was *bad* at the moment; the ache had reached her thigh and felt like a stone hand squeezing ever tighter around her femur.

His eyes met hers and she expected snideness—especially from a watchman—or even carelessness, but instead they bore a lingering pity. *Pity.*

She huffed and bent to build the fire. *Oh, you will hate it here, First Officer Lutka. I will make sure of that.*

“Returning to the Heartland,” Lutka responded to her back. “Passing through. I appreciate the town’s hospitality, especially at such a late hour.”

“And we are honored, of course,” said Bhorolsen. Pevra could hear the frown in his voice and was sure it was directed at her and her abruptness.

She wolfed down the rest of the bun as Bhorolsen and Lutka returned to their conversation and then she began to stack her own split logs over a cradle of kindling and shaved tinder.

In minutes, the fire was roaring, its progress sped along with a slight manipulation of time. Pevra limped to the table and threw her leg over the bench beside Bhorolsen.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said. “I’m only here for the buns. And I know Ani has leftover stew she’ll want to serve to our most honored guest.”

“You are welcome to join us.” Bhorolsen’s tone told her the *welcome* was a relative term subject to change on a moment’s notice.

So she placed her chin in her hand and sat pleasantly, watching Lutka as he described the current status of the East Edge.

“A lot of groundlings lately,” he continued. “Clusters rallying on the other side of the Edge. It’s hard to pick out their dwellings in the snow, but they’re there.”

“Could they breach the Edge?” Bhorolsen asked.

“They haven’t yet, as far as we’re aware.”

The kitchen door swung open and Ani bustled to the table with a tray of steaming tin cups. “Hot arkhi,” she announced. “To warm the bones.”

Pevra used the lull to add another log to the fire. Ani squeezed her shoulder as she passed and pushed a cup into her hands.

"Apple-mulled for you, Pev, as you like it."

Pevra smiled gratefully, savoring the warm and sweet bite of the fermented milk as she sipped. She returned to her seat.

"What happened to your leg?" Lutka asked.

She glanced up, surprised by his directness. "A bear," she said. "Why? Would you like to see?"

His eyebrows climbed his forehead. "Sure."

*Oops. Who says yes to that?* She reversed the time around them both.

"What happened to your—"

"A bear."

"—leg?" His head tilted quizzically and she couldn't be sure whether it was the answer or her anticipation of the question. "A bear?"

"Yep. Dragged me by my knee from Darkglade Forest to just outside the village."

"Isn't Darkglade nearly a day's ride away?"

"Oreg found her," Ani called, entering once again, the tray of buns in her arms. "On his way home after a haul. Followed the blood streak in the snow expecting some poor, half-dead doe. Instead it was Pev."

Pevra rubbed her leg just above the knee. The words had been said so many times now, it was as though she could feel the teeth clamping down on her flesh. As though the lie had been engraved deep enough to make it true.

Oreg was the only one that knew that it was not a bear, but Pevra who dragged herself and her mangled leg through the snow from Darkglade to the village.

*What will I find, girl,* he had muttered as he strapped her to his sled, *if I trace back the blood trail?*

"Where did the bear go?" Lutka asked. "It left you there?"

Pevra shrugged, tiring of the topic. "I wasn't very tasty."

But he persisted. "How did you survive? Dragged for a day? That much blood loss?"

It would be too long, too much time, to reverse the entire conversation. A distraction, then. This pocket of time required a knife's-edge precision to chisel out, but soon enough, she had a hold of only Lutka's cup, leaving his hand completely free from her control.

"No one's as tough as our Pev," Ani said when Pevra didn't answer.

"I suppose so," he said, raising the cup to his lips. He brought his hand down and she froze the cup in time. She released it quickly but his hand was no longer wrapped around the cup and it fell to the table without support, crashing loudly and splashing them all with hot arkhi.

Lutka fumbled for the cup, righting it and swiping at the table with his sleeve. "I—my apologies—I'm not sure how..."

"Not much of a drinker, are you?" Bhorolsen said with a chuckle.

Ani disappeared and reappeared with a rag and began to sop up the mess. Lutka turned the cup in his hands. "It's as though it..." He frowned, then shook his head. "I am sorry for the spill."

"Never mind," said Ani. "You should see him when he's had more than three." She nodded to Bhorolsen. "Eat up, all of you, there's stew to come."

Lutka seemed reassured and they all grabbed for the buns at once.

Pevra ripped into her second bun of the evening and studied the First Officer intently. Had he *noticed*? No one ever noticed. Unless...could he be like her?

*Can't trust the watchmen.* A voice surfaced in Pevra's mind and she struggled to hold on to it. Who had said that? But the memory slipped away among the waves of lost time.

Perhaps something a bit more shattering.

Pevra reached around her back and withdrew her axe, then slammed the blade into the table. Directly in front of Lutka's hand.

He gasped and held up his hand where blood spurted from the end of his middle finger.

"Pevra!" Bhorolsen roared.

Ani screamed.

"My—" Lutka began.

"Relax it's only a fingertip!" she hissed, and then began to carve out a bubble large enough to encompass Lutka and the shaved skin and nail on the table, as well as her axe.

Definitely not like her. If he had her ability, he would have known already. He would have moved his hand.

The scene returned to normal, her axe stowed on her back, Lutka's fingertip firmly attached, and all horror abated. As though nothing had happened.

"Where did you come from?" Ani asked. "Before you were a watchman?"

"The heart of the Heartland."

"Really? The crystal city itself? Doesn't your cousin still live there, Boro?"

"He does, last I checked. I actually visited him—what was it—nearly fifteen years ago, now. The spires were really something..."

*Tap. Tap. Tap.* Lutka drummed his fingers on the table, one-by-one. His expression was cool as he listened to Bhorolsen and chewed his food, but he paused his tapping and his eyes flicked to his hand.

His thumb swiped his middle fingertip.

Pevra shot to her feet.

Silence fell and all eyes turned to her.

"Everything alright, Pev?" Ani asked.

"Fine, fine," she said. "Stomach troubles." She clutched her middle. "Enjoy the fire—I'll retrieve my sled tomorrow."

A stinging heat arced from the sole of her foot to her knee as she limped from the hall. She ignored it and reached the kitchen, grabbing her mittens and pulling her hood over her head. Her hands shook as she shoved them into the fur-lined mitts and the door slammed behind her.

Snowflakes swirled lazily in the gloom and she blinked them away, half-running, half-trotting toward her cabin. She cursed her leg as it dragged through the snow and pulsed with pain.

He wasn't *exactly* like her if he couldn't carve out a pocket, but he had *something*. She had no idea how he could be aware of a time change without the ability to change it himself.

Shit. She should not have left so suddenly. If he wasn't already sure who it had been, it was certainly obvious now.

*You never thought you'd last this long here anyway.*

She never meant to stay after Oreg had died. But it was as though the old man's absence left an open pit in the village, and she was the perfect size and shape to fill it. Nestled in, tucked away. His cabin became hers, his sled, his axe. In fact, the only thing that likely kept the rest of the village from calling her Oreg was the lack of a twitching gray mustache on her face.

Too comfortable.

She reached the cabin and pulled up short. The door was cracked, but she was sure it had not been seconds ago. Light flickered from within and spilled across the snow. Something clattered.

She yanked her axe from its sheath and shouldered through the door.

The room had been torn apart. The meager furniture upturned, buckskin rugs ripped aside, floorboards pulled up and splintered. A lamp perched among the clothes strewn across the floor and it sputtered with the last of its oil.

First Officer Lutka turned to face her, his arms full of Oreg's carved figurines.

"*You!*" she said. He had been here for some time now, which meant he was like her. But how could he have reversed so far back to make this chaos?

She lunged for him. Her axe cleaved through the air.

But he was no longer there.

The figurines clattered to the floor, spinning away in all directions. Lutka was a pace away, his arms open, a frown fixed to his face.

*Back. Go back.*

Pevra carved a hole in time, one large enough to envelop herself and the space around her.

"There it is," Lutka whispered.

She pulled at the hole. But nothing happened.

"It won't work," he said. He stepped toward her.

She tried again, but it was as though the pocket had been turned to stone. Him, then—he could be reversed to the time before he had set foot in her cabin. Could she stretch time far enough?

The oil lamp sputtered again and dimmed to a tiny flame, bathing the room in deep shadow.

But Pevra could not create a pocket. It was like trying to chip away at water—when she scooped out a space, the time around it flowed right back, melding in place.

"That won't work either," he said. Another step. "But this will."

And Pevra's body froze. She knew what it was—the trick she had done minutes ago with the cup. But she had never done it with a human. Like a great invisible hand, time gripped her legs, chest, arms, and it squeezed. Her lungs failed to take in air, for they could not move. Panic bubbled to her throat but turned to sludge as her mind slowed to a crawl.

The lamp's last flame sizzled out.

"So," said Lutka, his voice slicing through the darkness. "You're a thief."