

Ice Yearning

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Chapter One

Maalioh looked around the vault of the sky, its deep blue paling only a little around the crescent sun rising over the eastern hills. A single comet was visible, but there wasn't a cloud in sight. Sighing, he looked down again; the disturbed surface confirmed that there had been no snowfall in the night. Pulling his hood tighter, Maalioh hefted the bucket, and resigned himself to climbing the hills to find undisturbed snow.

The metallic clamour of the bell stopped him in his tracks when his climb had barely begun. He spun round to look across the village to the shrine, but nothing looked out of place. The narrow lake sparkled in the morning sun, and the houses set around the shore showed no sign of problems. At the far end of the lake stood the hill, topped by the red stone bulk of the shrine. The bell continued to ring out its warning, and Maalioh hurried back to the house.

By the time he reached the land door, a stiff breeze had picked up in the previously-still air, and the alarm bell was still ringing from the shrine. It must be something really urgent, Maalioh concluded, as he ducked his head and dodged through the passage's dogleg with the ease of long practice. He dropped the bucket in the porch, and then swept aside the curtains and went into the main room, quickly letting them drop behind him.

"Master?" The sound of the bell was muted, but clearly audible. Tohflair's voice came from the infirmary, off to the right.

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"Maalioh? Excellent. Just take your gloves off and come here to help me with Fiitan." Maalioh dropped his gloves on the table, as he began sweating in the warmth of the interior. Behind the curtain, Tohflair had already got Fiitan onto a stretcher, and had started binding furs around his legs. The fisherman, sitting up, was pulling on a tunic, and when his face appeared it was set against the pain.

"What should I do, master?" Even before Tohflair spoke, Maalioh was moving towards the stretcher.

"Finish binding Fiitan on, while I get dressed." Maalioh nodded, and wrapped a thong around Fiitan's waist, trying to avoid putting any pressure on the broken thigh. In the background the bell was still ringing.

"Do you have any idea what it is?" Tohflair's voice came from further down the house, where he slept and kept his clothes. Maalioh paused to hand Fiitan an outer tunic, and then called his answer back.

"It may be a storm spirit, master. The wind rose very quickly after the ringing started."

"Storm spirit? Oh well, at least no-one is out on the sea."

Fiitan had pulled the tunic on, and gently lowered himself back to the bed, breathing heavily. Maalioh continued wrapping his legs, putting a final layer of fur over the top.

"Is this bearable?" he asked. Fiitan took a sharp breath, but nodded.

"Better than falling off the stretcher, anyway." Maalioh nodded back in acknowledgement, and tied off the final thong. He could feel the sweat running down his back, but there was no time to do anything about it.

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Outside, the wind had risen so that its howling competed with the ringing of the bell. A sudden crash of thunder, accompanied by a flare of light from the water door at the far end of the house, confirmed the arrival of the storm, and the bell stopped moments later, just as Tohflair came back into the infirmary.

"I certainly hope the bell was for the storm spirit; if there's something else as well we have real problems." He looked over the bindings, and nodded once, not even glancing at Maalioh. "These will do. Let's get moving." Maalioh darted out of the infirmary to grab his gloves, pulling them on as Tohflair extinguished the lamp and grasped his end of the stretcher. Maalioh turned his back on his master, and took up the handles at Fiitan's feet. Doctor and apprentice alike grunted as they lifted the fisherman; he was never the most slender member of the tribe. After a moment to find their balance, they stepped sideways away from the trestles, and manoeuvred the stretcher around the curtains that defined the infirmary.

The thunderclap was like an explosion, and the light from the land door was blindingly bright as the ground shook under them. The thunder seemed to continue for a long time, although that might just have been the ringing in Maalioh's ears. As his eyes readjusted to the gloom, he could see a pile of snow pushing the exit curtains inward.

They went forward anyway, but when Maalioh swept the curtain away with his foot he was not surprised to see a jumble of snow and ice; the lightning had struck the porch.

"Master..."

"I can see it, Maalioh. Fiitan, the land door is blocked.

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We're going to have to put you back on the trestles while we try to clear it." Fiitan said nothing, and Maalioh could not see if he responded in any other way, so the apprentice took that as acquiescence, at least, and turned the stretcher back to the infirmary.

When they returned to the doorway, things did not look good. There was no sign of light through the debris, and the quilting around the door bulged ominously inwards. Maalioh and Tohflair both prodded gently around the edges, provoking nothing more than small falls of snow and ice. The howl of the wind was still clearly audible, punctuated by crashes of thunder, but Maalioh wasn't even sure he could see the lightning.

"We have to clear it." Tohflair did not sound happy.

"Yes, master. Do we have time?" The doctor shrugged, and began pulling off his gloves and outer tunic.

"The storm spirit obviously isn't concentrating on this house, but it will doubtless be back. Or maybe Sairtowa and Faaniloh will drive it off first." Maalioh nodded, and began stripping off his outer garments. "Either way," Tohflair continued, "we need to clear this exit if we're going to get to the shrine."

Soon, both were down to their light inner tunics, and Tohflair started unhooking the curtains so that they could see what they were dealing with. Maalioh stood out of his way, looking at the bulging quilting. If that fell in... And that made him think of something.

"Master, shouldn't we put a frame over Fiitan?"

"What? A frame?"

"In case the roof collapses." Tohflair froze for a moment.

"A tent. Quickly, we'll put a tent up over him."

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Maalioh ran to the storage area to get one out, while Tohflair went to explain to the patient. By the time Maalioh got there, Fiitan had his eyes closed, and was breathing rapidly. Maalioh had to sympathise; he was starting to panic himself, and he didn't already have a broken leg.

As the two of them set the tent up, bracing the whalebone struts and checking that the layers of leather were properly fixed, he forced himself to calm down. The quilting would absorb a lot of the force even if the roof did give way; at worst he would be trapped, not crushed. Without broken limbs, he would be able to wriggle out, unless he was really unlucky. Fiitan was the only one with real grounds for concern on that point. He tried not to think about the consequences of being trapped, effectively outside, in a storm, or about the possibility of being suffocated by the quilting. It was too late, of course, and as lurid images raced through his imagination he eagerly followed Tohflair over to the door, desperate to take his mind off the dangers.

It didn't help. The blocks of ice and snow in the exit were heavy and thoroughly stuck in place; there were clearly more blocks above the doorway, from the upper part of the porch tower, and the two of them together could not get any of the blocks within reach to move. Even though he knew that the roof was only one layer of ice above the quilting, Maalioh could not help imagining being trapped under a pile like the one in front of him. Maybe the storm spirit would drop huge amounts of snow on them first, so that they could be buried and suffocated anyway.

When Tohflair admitted defeat and stood back,

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Maalioh did so too, trying to take deep breaths to calm himself. Thunder roared almost constantly now, and the flicker of lightning from the water door was enough to see by. The howl of the wind was almost as loud as the thunder, and Maalioh wondered whether the roof was still there. The ground shook again as lightning struck close by, and water began dripping off the icy barrier as the warmth of the interior finally took hold.

"Master! We can melt the ice!" Tohflair turned to look at Maalioh, his face half puzzled, half angry.

"Water from the lake, master," Maalioh continued. "It's warm enough to melt the ice quite quickly. We can melt it at the top, to make enough space to get out." Tohflair thought about it for a few more moments, and then nodded.

"It should work. Fetch buckets." They headed down to the water door, and dipped their buckets into the warm water of the lake. The water porch was still intact, flexing and drumming as the wind roared around it, and the surface of the lake was rougher than Maalioh could remember it. They filled the buckets quickly, and ran back to the entrance, throwing the water over the ice at the top.

The snow melted quickly, vanishing as soon as the water touched it, but the effect on the blocks of ice was much less obvious. Most of the water just ran down on to the floor, melting more of the snow on its way.

"More water!" Tohflair shouted, barely making himself heard over the noise of the storm, and the two of them ran back to the water door.

After the third set of buckets it was clear that they were having an effect, but also clear that it was too slow.

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Maalioh could see that the water wasn't in contact with the ice for long enough to have much effect, but he couldn't think of any way to hold it there. All of his plans with tents and buckets would either take too long or have too many leaks. Still, the buckets were not a complete waste of time, and would have to do until he could think of something better.

After the fifth set, Tohflair stopped.

"We need something more efficient. Can you think of anything?" Maalioh was already moving back to the water door.

"Not yet, master. I can't think of a way to hold the water in place." Maalioh was starting to feel short of breath, but he didn't stop moving to answer his teacher.

The next blast of lightning knocked him off his feet. He lay, dazed, on the floor for a few moments, and then slowly picked himself up. There was nothing pressing down on him, and he looked around for the damage. Immediately behind him, the quilting was bent down half way to the floor, and he could hear ominous creaking sounds from the whale bone struts beyond.

"Master?" In the half-light, he could not see clearly beyond the collapsing ceiling.

"I'm fine. We need to prop this bit up quickly, before it takes the whole quilting down." Maalioh glanced around, and grabbed a pile of blanket and cushions, wedging them under the centre of the depression to take some of the weight. He could now see Tohflair, on the other side, wedging curtain stands around the edges of the fallen ceiling, and he quickly gathered a few of his own.

Getting the supports in place took longer than Maalioh had hoped, and he could tell from Tohflair's face that the

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doctor wasn't happy, either. He was dripping with sweat, despite his light tunic, and his breathing was deep and ragged. As they prodded at the quilting around the fallen ice, Maalioh saw his master square his shoulders.

"More water. We have to get the exit cleared." Maalioh glanced around for his buckets, and then hurried back to the water door, Tohflair a short distance behind him. The lightning flared white in the water, reflecting in crazy patterns off the inside of the porch, and then flared again, broken into a thousand tiny shards as a white figure burst out of the lake and landed cleanly to stand between them.

"Soliin?" Tohflair broke the silence as the moonchild shook the water from her naked body.

"There are other moonchildren on this island? Are you going blind in your old age?" It was definitely Soliin, Maalioh thought.

"What are you doing here?" Tohflair, as always, tried not to let her rudeness affect him. Maalioh just kept his mouth shut, hoping to avoid being beaten up this time.

"Isn't it obvious? Sairtowa sent me to rescue you, and we need to get a move on. So stop staring and let's go." Maalioh immediately dropped his eyes to the floor, feeling his face heat up as blood rushed to it.

"We have to take Fiitan with us, so we need to clear a proper exit. And some of us can't run naked through a blizzard."

"I'm well aware of your shortcomings, old man. You and the boy get dressed, and let me worry about the exit." Maalioh bristled at that, but didn't dare say anything. "Old man" was a bit harsh about Tohflair, but Maalioh was a year older than Soliin. He glanced at her

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surreptitiously as he pulled his outdoor clothes back on; she had developed a lot in the last year, and barely qualified as a "girl" any more, which meant that Maalioh himself had to be a man. She was walking around the fallen ceiling, kicking aside the props they had so carefully put in place, and inspecting the quilting. Then, reaching up, she grabbed it either side of a seam and, in one smooth motion, ripped it open. The icy rubble collapsed into the interior, along with a mass of snow, and the howling wind. Soliin disappeared into the whiteness for a moment.

"Maalioh, stop staring at the girl and come and help me with Fiitan." At the sound of his master's voice, Maalioh suddenly realised that he had not taken his eyes off Soliin while he dressed. Blushing again, he hurried to the infirmary, where they quickly removed the tent. Fiitan looked very relieved to see them.

"We're getting out?"

"We are. But we still have to get through the storm. Ready?" The fisherman nodded, and Tohflair and Maalioh seized the stretcher and headed for the exit Soliin had created.

They found a hole in the roof, which Soliin had expanded by knocking more blocks of ice in through it, but they could see nothing through it but swirling snow, lit by occasional flashes of lightning. For a moment, Maalioh thought Soliin had abandoned them.

"Well, pass him up! Near the edge." Her voice came down, and they strained to raise the stretcher above their heads. Suddenly it became lighter and was pulled from their hands, as Fiitan screamed even above the sound of the wind.

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"His leg! Be careful of his leg!" Maalioh shouted up. There was no response for a moment, and then an arm shot down, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him sharply up, throwing him onto the snow that covered what remained of the house. He landed heavily, and cried out as his shoulder crashed into the ice.

"Be careful of your own, boy." Maalioh sat up, and could just make Soliin out against the snow as she reached back down and pulled Tohflair up, apparently somewhat rather more gently. Maalioh tried to get to his feet, but was knocked down as Soliin punched him in the chest, sending him sliding over the side of the house and into the snow drifting around it.

"Don't stand on the roof, you moron. The wind will catch you." Soliin slid quickly down, landing on her feet and then pulling the stretcher down. Fiitan screamed again, but Maalioh thought the girl was being a bit more gentle with it than before. Tohflair slithered into the snow beside Maalioh, and then reached out a hand to pull his apprentice up. Maalioh realised that he had just been sitting there, and stood quickly.

There was almost nothing to see but snow, and nothing to hear but the howling of the wind. The sun had vanished completely, and what light there was came from lightning, which seemed to illuminate a world equally white in all directions.

"I'll go in front. Take one of the rear handles of the stretcher each. Don't lose your grip; I doubt you can see where you're going." Maalioh could still just pick out Soliin's shape, apparently completely unperturbed by the cold that he could already feel seeping through his layers of fur. He picked up the stretcher, and immediately

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Soliin started off, pushing forward through the snow. Despite the wind, some remained on the ground to catch at their feet, while the air was thick with it. Every step was a battle against the wind, either to stay on track or to make any headway at all, as it shifted direction from moment to moment. Soliin remained confident, guiding them forward without apparently missing a step, and very soon Maalioh found that he had to focus all of his effort on not falling behind. He glanced down at Fiitan's face, and saw that his jaw was clenched, his eyes closed. Every jerking step they took must be jolting his leg, Maalioh realised. He risked a quick glance at Tohflair, and saw the doctor looking down at the patient as well.

The wind was too loud to speak over, but there was nothing to say anyway. They had to get Fiitan to the shrine, and there was no way they could do that smoothly. Even though the ground beneath their feet seemed to be quite level, the snow and wind made it impossible to keep a steady footing, especially at the pace Soliin set.

As they advanced, Maalioh realised that the thunder and lightning were ahead of them, and getting closer. Now he could feel the ground shake a little with every strike, and the cracks of thunder were clearly louder than the wind. It took him a moment to work out what was happening; the storm spirit was focusing its attack on the shrine and, presumably, Sairtowa. But in that case, how would they get in?

"Soliin!" Maalioh yelled as loudly as he could, but had no idea whether the Moonchild heard him. "Soliin! The storm is attacking the shrine! We can't go through that! We can't go straight to the shrine!" For a moment he

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thought that she hadn't heard, but then she came to an abrupt stop, almost dropping the stretcher. Maalioh could hear Fiitan's scream, and he and Tohflair quickly lowered the stretcher to the ground.

Soliin came back to the head of the stretcher, and moved very close to Maalioh. The world seemed to be nothing but her red eyes floating in whiteness.

"Are you sure?" she yelled, and Maalioh could just about hear her.

"The lightning is nearly all ahead of us. Why else?"

"Speculation? Oh, Towa's pus-ridden arse, I thought you actually knew something." For a moment, Maalioh thought she was going to hit him, but she just went back to the front of the stretcher and picked it up. Maalioh and Tohflair scrambled to get their end before she dragged Fiitan through the snow.

Their progress got no easier, and the storm got louder. By the time they had reached the hill and the bottom of the stairs to the shrine, it was obvious that Maalioh had been right. Lightning struck against the hill and through the air, creating explosions of snow. They could see and hear nothing but the battle, and there was no way they could climb the stairs with the stretcher. Soliin said nothing, but motioned for them to put the stretcher down before running a few steps and jumping into the lake.

Maalioh and Tohflair huddled closer together, around Fiitan.

"Has she abandoned us?" Maalioh asked, shouting as loud as he could.

"I hope she's gone for help," Tohflair replied. "I hope it finds us before the spirit does."

"Will it?"

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Tohflair shrugged. "As long as the spirit is fighting Sairtowa." Maalioh thought about that for a moment.

"*How* is Soliin going to get help?"

"Swim up the channel from the lake, I suppose."

"Can she do that?" Fiitan asked.

"I don't think she ever has." Maalioh fell silent at Tohflair's reply, and started wondering whether they could seek shelter in the lake. That really depended on how Hiiron felt about them, of course, and Maalioh was not at all sure that it would risk a fight for them, despite the pact.

Maalioh couldn't be sure whether they had waited for hours, or whether it was merely minutes that felt like hours. Actually, that wasn't true; had it really been hours he would have had frostbite, and he could still feel the cold in his fingers. It still felt like far too long before he saw the first signs that someone would come for them; a dark spot, getting steadily larger, in the white of the snow. At first it kept appearing and disappearing, but soon it was definitely there. He nudged his master and pointed.

The spot turned into a bubble of empty air surrounding Ketaa, the apprentice shaman. She walked down the stone steps with her hood down, her black hair streaming about her head, and the red spirit band painted across the brown skin of her face. Her eyes looked out of the band, startling green.

Tohflair motioned Maalioh to the front of the stretcher, and he took up his end of the burden. Carefully, they started climbing the steps towards Ketaa. The storm spirit did not seem to have noticed her, or them, yet, but

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they did not know how long that could last. The less time they were outside Sairtowa's protection, the better.

As they climbed, the wind at times seemed to try to pluck them from the steps and throw them into the lake. Every time a gust blew in that direction, Maalioh's heart rose into his throat, knowing that if the wind really was trying to throw them off, the spirit had noticed them, and they were doomed. Each time, however, they were able to keep their footing, and move forward, until finally Maalioh stumbled through an invisible barrier, and found that the air was still, almost warm, and free of snow. He kept moving, glancing back constantly, until Tohflair was also within it. Ketaa stood beside Fiitan, between them, and turned to face back uphill. She took a deep breath, and nodded. Maalioh turned back to the front, and began walking.

They had climbed fifty steps before the spirit noticed them. The lightning exploded against the barrier that Sairtowa had put around them, but nothing more than the light got through.

"Move!" The sound came from Ketaa's mouth, but it was not her voice. Maalioh shivered, as he always did when he heard a spirit speak, and tried to find the energy to pick up the pace. It was hard, especially as lightning continued to explode around them, followed by gusts of wind bearing huge quantities of snow, and even hailstones that shattered against Sairtowa's protection. It seemed that their ancestress spoke again every few steps, urging them to more speed.

The steps seemed to go on for ever, with every step forward revealing nothing more than another step to take. But then the step ahead of them became broader,

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and the plateau on top of the hill became visible. Another few steps, and they stood on it, the double lintel of the shrine gate appearing ahead of them. Ketaa guided them to the right-hand entrance, and, as they passed through, bowing their heads, the violence of the storm seemed to vanish into the distance.

Within the red stone wall that marked the shrine precincts, the air was still, and the ground only thinly coated with snow. Even the flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder seemed to be moderated, despite clearly happening just beyond the wall. As soon as they were inside Ketaa slumped slightly, her breathing turning ragged as she pulled her hood up. She said nothing, but led the way to the shrine building.

The shrine towered above them, the wall vertical and shining, tapering to a sharp point where the side walls met to form the roof. Ketaa took them to the right-hand door, bowing formally to it before pulling it open and leading the way inside. Maalioh also bowed his head as he crossed the threshold, unable to do more due to the stretcher. Ketaa was waiting beside the door, and closed it behind them.

"Put the stretcher down on those benches," Tohflair said. "We'll take some of the furs off before taking you through." The shrine vestibule was much warmer than outside, and Ketaa had sat down on one of the benches, breathing hard as she began removing her outer cloak. Maalioh set the stretcher down and pulled his gloves off, turning his attention to the thongs he had tied around Fiitan's legs. His fingers were numb, and it took a while for him to get a grip on the knots. Fiitan was sitting up, and struggling out of the outer tunic.

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"Thank you. That seems like a powerful spirit," he said. Ketaa replied before Maalioh or Tohflair could say anything.

"It was simply my duty as shaman. I do not think that this spirit is any threat to us now that we are within the shrine, and Sairtowa will drive it off soon." Fiitan nodded in acknowledgement, and then lay down again, wincing slightly.

"I really could have chosen a better time to break my leg," he said, an edge of amusement in his voice. "And to think I was upset about missing the festival on Miisesaa." Maalioh smiled, and Tohflair chuckled out loud.

"You kept me here, as well, you know," the doctor said, his tone light. "I'm still young enough for the festival, and Maalioh could have dealt with most emergencies." Maalioh blushed at the unaccustomed praise, and Fiitan laughed.

"The real test of that is whether Sairtowa lets you off the island. Right, Ketaa?"

"Our ancestress wants what is best for the village." The voice was Liifa's, and Maalioh spun round to sink to his knees. His master did the same.

"My lady, thank you for your protection," Tohflair said. The elderly shaman shook her head gently.

"Not mine, but Sairtowa's. I and Ketaa are merely her vessels. But I am glad to see that you made it here safely. When Nairla reported that the storm spirit had destroyed the entrance to your house, we feared that you would be trapped." Tohflair nodded.

"Soliin got us out; did she make it back to the shrine?" With a shock, Maalioh realised that Soliin might not

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have made it; Tohflair was right that she had never swum up the water channel before.

"She did. And so Sairtowa possessed Ketaa to come for you. Oh, you may rise. No need to kneel for this long. Now, get your outer things off and come into the main shrine. There are a few minor injuries, and once you have rested I would like you to look at them."

Ketaa left with Liifa, giving Tohflair and Maalioh a chance to collect their thoughts before facing everyone else, as well as time to get out of their outdoor clothes. Fiitan was staring up at the ceiling, blushing a little.

"Don't worry," Tohflair said. "Liifa wasn't annoyed." The fisherman shook his head.

"It's not that. Mother sent people out looking for me. Again." Maalioh turned away quickly to hide his smile, then, with his face under control, went back to the front of the stretcher, and looked to Tohflair for guidance.

"Yes, Maalioh. I think we should brave the main chamber now. Don't worry, Fiitan, I'm sure Nairla is waiting for you."

"I don't suppose we could go back outside? No..." Fiitan sighed, and visibly attempted to compose himself. Maalioh made less attempt to hide his smile this time, and started reaching for the stretcher. Then, mentally kicking himself, he stood up.

"I'll open the doors, master," he said over his shoulder, walking across the vestibule to push the right hand doors into the main chamber open.

The light within was, as ever, the dancing red and blue of Hiiron's Flame, in stark contrast to the whale-oil lamps in the vestibule. As he opened the doors, he heard the murmur of many voices, quickly falling silent as they

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noticed his activity. Hurrying back, he took his end of the stretcher and led the way into the nave.

Here there was no ceiling, the two sloped walls rising all the way to their peak. At the back the red and blue light of the flame danced up through the floor grille, painting elaborate and ever-changing patterns on the walls around it. The skulls of the ancestors looked down reassuringly from the frames around the edge, while the living Piisairtowa, gathered on the central benches, had all turned to look at them. Maalioh could feel himself blushing.

His blush deepened when one of the women let out a sound that was almost a scream, and came rushing over.

"My baby! You are safe!" Nairla dashed to the head of the stretcher, followed by her wife Wohsair and daughter Tiisam, who looked almost as embarrassed as Fiitan had. While Nairla fussed over her son, Wohsair took the time to thank Tohflair. Tiisam joined her, but glanced round.

"Thank you, too, Maalioh." She smiled, and now Maalioh was sure he was blushing more than anyone. Tiisam was a few years older than he, and already one of the tribe's best hunters. To take his mind off her, he scanned the crowd, looking for his mother. She was looking at him, but she simply smiled, and nodded. Maalioh smiled back, and turned his attention to looking for somewhere to put the stretcher down, as soon as they could extract themselves from Nairla.

He was interrupted by Soliin's appearance in front of him, still wet but now wrapped in her ice bear cloak.

"Well?" she demanded, her voice and eyes challenging.

"Er... thank you."

"Thank you?" Now she sounded incredulous, and loud.

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Maalioh was sure that everyone was staring at them, even if they hadn't been before. "Thank you? Is that all? I risked my life for you, going out in that storm, and then swimming *up* the water channel, and all you can say is "thank you"?" Her hand flashed up and slapped his face. Maalioh rocked back, blinking back reflexive tears, and tightened his grip on the handles of the stretcher. He had no idea what to say next.

"Soliin!" Liifa's voice was surprisingly powerful for her age. "You went because you were commanded to go." Somehow, this information did not surprise Maalioh in the slightest. "You have no excuse for that behaviour."

"I still risked my life." Soliin was quieter now, almost sulky, but still defiant, and the shaman had come up to stand beside them. The wrinkles around her eyes were permanently red where the paint for the spirit band had become ground in, but her brown eyes still sparkled with life.

"You did. But you did not offer. Maalioh also risked his life to save the patient, so I believe his level of gratitude is quite appropriate." Soliin said nothing, but the look she shot at Maalioh was angry, promising violence. He sighed silently, even as he enjoyed the shaman's praise. Tohflair broke in.

"And even Maalioh and I were just doing our duty as doctors, and as members of the tribe. Duty deserves no thanks."

"I'm neither of those things!" Soliin spat it out without thinking, and then seemed to shrink within herself as Liifa turned on her.

"You are a part of this tribe in many ways, Soliin. Do not forget it. You owe your life to the tribe as much, or

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more, as to the moon." Then Liifa turned to Tohflair. "And, doctor, while no thanks are required for duty, that does not mean that they are not deserved." She took two steps back, and drew herself up. The tribe fell silent, realising that she was about to speak formally.

"Tohflair, Maalioh, Soliin, on behalf of Sairtowa and her tribe, I thank you for your courage today." She bowed formally, and straightened up with a twinkle in her eyes. "Now, find somewhere to put that stretcher down before you drop Fiitan on his mother's feet."

* * *

As they treated the few injuries, Maalioh had thought that the storm had inflicted little damage. Now, a few hours later, as he stood on the plateau just outside the precincts and looked over the valley to the bay, he was not so sure. The sky overhead was clear, but the storm still raged beyond the entrance to the bay, now held out by the power of the island's spirits. Hiiron's lake stood out black against the thick layer of new snow, which had also drifted against the houses ranged around the shore.

Looking, Maalioh could not see a single intact water door, although only a few houses had lost the whole structure. Of those that had, a couple appeared to have collapsed completely, now no more than long, slender piles of jumbled blocks of ice. The land doors had fared better; their own was, as expected, completely destroyed, but most were still standing, although several showed signs of lightning strikes. Down at the bay, it looked like several boats had been lost, and he wasn't sure that any were undamaged, although it was too far for him to be sure. The tone of the mutterings he could hear around him suggested that his assessment was not far out.

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Kiisair clapped her hands once and called from behind them, acting as her mistress's herald as usual.

"Listen! Liifa will speak." Everyone turned to face the shamans, who stood within the central gate. Liifa herself was just off-centre, while Kiisair was a step behind her, and in the left hand side of the opening. Ketaa, meanwhile, was further back, and almost in line with the right-hand upright. The scarlet bulk of the shrine formed an imposing backdrop.

"Sairtowa and Faaniloh have driven the spirit back, but it was a mighty storm spirit, and we have not escaped unscathed. Thanks to the courage and skill of our doctor and his apprentice, we have no deaths or serious injuries, and thanks to them and the moonchild we were all safely within the shrine for the worst of the battle. Thus we still have our strength, and can face the challenges, and rebuild.

"First, then, return to your homes and assess the damage. Those of you who cannot stay there may stay in the shrine. We will assemble there tomorrow at moontouch, to plan our actions.

"Go, and Sairtowa watches over you." Everyone bowed, and then moved to the stairs in household groups. The snow had largely been blown away from the upper steps by the force of the battle, but as they descended it became thicker, and the going slower. Maalioh was not sure that they would be able to stay in their house, even though Fiitan had remained in the shrine for now, and he wasn't looking forward to having to climb the steps again later, most likely in the dark.

As they walked, Tiisam came to walk beside him.

"Maalioh?" He looked at her, smiled, and blushed.

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"Tiisam."

"I just wanted to thank you again for helping with my brother. I remember what it's like to be an apprentice; the master gets all the credit, no matter how hard you work." Maalioh was blushing even more now.

"Tohflair does do most of the work, you know."

"Yes, that's what I said, too."

"But..." Maalioh was briefly at a loss for words. "But everyone knows that you're a much better hunter than Wohsair. Even she says so." Tiisam smiled again, and laughed a little.

"Actually, she says I have much more *potential*. And she's still a better wolverine hunter than I am."

"But you are better with birds, already." Tiisam just smiled, shaking her head slightly, and said nothing for a moment.

"Anyway, I just wanted to thank you again, before we all get too busy repairing damage."

"It was my duty. Duty requires no thanks."

"Ah, but it might deserve it. I was listening too, you know." With another laugh, Tiisam bowed her farewell and returned to her parents. Nairla was still muttering and glancing back, but Tiisam and Wohsair had finally convinced her that Fiitan would be perfectly safe in the shrine; Fiitan's repeated protests to that effect had had no effect whatsoever.

* * *

From the outside, the damage to the porch looked even worse than it had from within. The lightning strike had collapsed the whole upper level, filling the interior with jumbled blocks of ice, and the storm's snowfall had settled into the gaps. It took only a few minutes for both

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Maalioh and Tohflair to be sure that there was no way in through it, and that repairs would take days, even if they had a lot of help.

The damage to the main body of the house, by contrast, was a lot lighter. The hole in the roof remained, but it looked like their props, and the release of the blocks into the interior, had stopped the damage from spreading. Soliin's rip in the quilting was along a seam, and while a lot of feathers had been lost, the leather was salvageable.

Inside, they came to the conclusion that they had been very lucky. The water porch was still intact, and they could see from the shore that many were not. What was more, the damage that the storm had wrought inside was only minor; the wind had knocked all the curtains down, and there was a lot of snow, some of which had melted, but the only serious damage was that one of Tohflair's glass flasks had been shattered by a falling lamp stand. The doctor sighed when he found the shards.

"Tama said this was from the Empire of the Sun." He picked up one of the delicate fragments and held it up to the light. "That was probably just talk, but it took him two years to get hold of it. Towa alone knows how long it will take him to find a replacement." Maalioh said nothing, merely nodding in sympathy and busying himself collecting the fragments.

Despite the lack of damage, however, it was clear that they could not spend the night in the house; the large hole in the roof would make it far too cold. Together, Tohflair and Maalioh pitched the tent that had covered Fiitan over the damage, with one eye on the storm that was still furious over the ice, and made themselves a simple meal before heading back to the shrine.

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As they climbed, Maalioh could see another family in front of them, and a second one had started up the steps before they reached the top. Maalioh and Tohflair bowed at the outer gate, and again at the doors. As they entered, Kiisair came to greet them.

"We were expecting you. How bad is the damage?" Tohflair smiled.

"Very light, apart from the wreck of the porch. The hole in the roof means that we cannot stay there tonight, but I think we could repair the quilting tomorrow, and the hole fairly soon after that. Clearing the porch should also not take long. Inside, there is not much damage at all." Kiisair looked very relieved.

"It sounds like you got off relatively lightly in the end, then. At least two houses collapsed completely, and the winds wrecked the interiors of others." Maalioh looked around. There were already a couple of dozen people in the shrine.

"There is at least one more family coming," he said. "We saw them behind us. That means that at least half the houses are unusable."

"You are right." Liifa had come over to join them. "We must hope that the men get back soon, because we will need their assistance." They both knelt in front of the shaman, but she quickly motioned them to rise. "We should all rest tonight, because we will have to work hard from tomorrow."

* * *

In the morning, Tohflair decided that they had time to get back to the house, clear some of the fallen ice, and then get back to the shrine before the meeting. Maalioh couldn't argue with his master's logic, but he had been

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hoping to rest for a while after the exertion of the previous day. In the end, they quickly found that the blocks of ice were too big for one of them to lift out of the hole, and that the hole was too high to reach if they were both inside. Between them, they soon devised a simple winch, but actually adapting the tent and getting the carrying basket securely fixed took them the whole morning, until well after moonrise. They did manage to raise two loads before Tohflair looked at the dart of the rising moon and called it a day.

"We'd better go; we mustn't be late."

"No, master." Maalioh wasn't about to argue. He turned from where he stood on the roof to look out across the bay; the storm still raged over the pack ice. "That's a very persistent spirit." Tohflair looked over.

"Yes, but it will get bored soon. It's clear that Faaniloah is keeping it out successfully." Maalioh nodded, and slid down from the roof. Across the lake he could see other families abandoning their repair attempts and heading for the shrine, so he was not surprised when Tohflair set a fast pace.

The women, and the few remaining men, of the tribe gathered in the nave of the shrine, and Liifa, Kiisair, and Ketaa moved among them, asking for information. Maalioh tried to watch their expressions; Liifa and Kiisair kept theirs neutral, which was not a good sign, but the grim look that settled over Ketaa's face was even worse. Finally, the three shamans met to confer, and then Liifa mounted the platform to address them all.

"It is not good. Four houses have been completely destroyed, and we must assume that the supplies in them are lost. Another six houses have been very badly

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damaged inside and out, and those supplies are lost. Only one of the four caches that have been checked was intact, and all the remaining houses have some damage. And, of course, almost all the men are on Miisesaa, and are not due to return for several days.

"Those who do not have houses may, of course, stay in the shrine until they can rebuild. But we are short of food."

The tribe erupted in murmurs of consternation. Maalioh held his tongue, but his mind was racing, looking for solutions. He feared that there would be little he or his master could do; medicine was little good without food. Tohflair was also silent, but the look of concern on his face suggested that he was thinking along similar lines. Other groups, families and neighbours, continued talking, and Liifa waited, letting the initial reaction pass.

"Why didn't Sairtowa protect us?" Nairla's voice rose above the background, and was clearly a question directed at Liifa. The shaman turned to look in her direction, glowering.

"How can you suggest that we were not protected? How can you even think that?" Liifa's tone was controlled, but Maalioh could hear the control in every syllable, keeping anger in check. "We were assaulted by a strong storm spirit and no-one, not even the man who was already injured, suffered more than minor bruising. I think Sairtowa's protection is obvious enough."

"That's not much help if we're all going to starve to death." Nairla was still defiant, and there were a few murmurs of support, although Maalioh noticed that Tiisam was looking embarrassed, and avoiding her

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mother's gaze. Liifa took a deep breath and raised her hands placatingly.

"We are not all going to starve to death. We are short of food, but not that short." Nairla was still unconvinced.

"So, are you saying that it is time for Sairtowa to decide who will continue the tribe? Time for a kinslaying?" Everyone fell silent, and Maalioh felt as though Soliin had punched him in the stomach. Could Nairla be right? It wasn't Liifa who spoke up, however.

"Not yet. Kaalohsair's bounty can still sustain us." Maalioh turned to look at Prohlma, and the priestess looked determined. "Even in the heart of winter, there are still beasts to hunt."

"But not enough." Nairla sounded defensive now.

"Enough for what? Enough to live luxuriously, with weekly feasts? No. Enough for everyone to survive, if the hunters work hard? I believe so. Liifa said that one of the caches was intact, and we still have the stores in about half of the houses. It will be a hard winter, to be sure, but we need not die."

"I will help. The murre, guillemot, dovekie, and ptarmigan can all be hunted in winter without a special pact." It was Tiisam, and she spoke loudly even though she looked rather flushed. She was pointedly not looking at her mother.

"Thank you, Tiisam," Prohlma said. "Kaalohsair will bless your hunting. I will hunt hares and lemmings." Maalioh began to feel better about the situation; with Tiisam and Prohlma leading the hunters, they would surely find a good amount of food. "And when the men return, they can hunt the walrus." That was also true; the men would be back before too long, and the walrus

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stayed close enough to the island to be safely hunted in winter. Liifa nodded her acknowledgement to Prohlma, and spoke again.

"Things are not good, but we are all alive, and we still have the resources to survive. I will negotiate with Hiiron for permission to fish the lake again. It *will* be a hard winter, but we are a strong tribe, and we will survive."

Maalioh let his breath out, and nodded to himself. It was hard, but far from hopeless. Around him, he was aware of other people doing the same; even Nairla had subsided into silence. Liifa waited a few moments, and then continued.

"The hunters must hunt. We need all the food they can gather. Everyone else must work on repairing and rebuilding the houses. Repair must be the first priority, so that we can get as many people as possible living in the village again." She paused, and Tohflair spoke up.

"I do not think it will take long to repair our house, and once it is repaired we can house another family. Thanks to Sairtowa's protection, we do not need the infirmary space." Liifa smiled at him.

"Thank you, doctor. That confirms my belief that we should repair your house first; if there are further injuries, we should have a functioning infirmary. But we must discuss this in detail. I will confer with the heads of families for a while." Liifa nodded to Kiisair, who clapped her hands and formally closed the meeting.

"Liifa has spoken. Sairtowa has heard, and remembers."

* * *

Tohflair was counted as a family head, despite being a

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man, and thus was called away to the meeting. Maalioh stood around feeling useless for a few minutes, and then decided to go to check on Fiitan. He found the man in conversation with his sister.

"... have to do it publicly." He sounded rather annoyed.

"Neither did she. I don't think we are doomed, and I want to do my part." Tiisam sounded half defensive, half defiant, and Maalioh thought she blushed briefly as she looked up and caught his eye. "Oh, Maalioh. I didn't see you." Fiitan quickly looked over, his eyes suspicious, measuring, and then relaxed, apparently judging that the apprentice was not a problem.

"Maalioh. Thank you for coming. My leg isn't too bad at the moment. Mind you, feel free to take your time repairing the infirmary." Maalioh grinned, but Tiisam looked puzzled.

"Why?" She looked between her brother and Maalioh.

"I don't believe Fiitan is looking forward to the return journey. Don't worry, Fiitan. Without a storm spirit, and with someone other than Soliin carrying you, you should be fine." Tiisam had started smiling, but she suddenly frowned, shaking her head.

"She'll hear you!" she hissed, keeping her voice down. Maalioh looked at her in surprise.

"But she's right over..." he gestured to the back of the shrine; Soliin always kept herself out of the way, making her distance from the rest of the tribe obvious. And, indeed, she had been over there, but she was now striding across the floor, bearing down on them, her ice bear hood pulled over her head. "Oh, Towa's toenails. She did." Maalioh felt his heart sink as his stomach

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started to churn. There was nowhere to run, and he just stood there as the moonchild approached.

"So, you didn't like my assistance. I should have left you in the storm to die." Soliin kept her voice low, apparently not wanting to draw Liifa's attention.

"I'm really sorry, Soliin. I didn't mean it like that..." She cut him off.

"Oh, really? How did you mean it, then? It sounded a lot like you were saying that it would be better if I didn't help you."

"No, just..." Maalioh trailed off, floundering. Soliin was right; it had been an unfair joke. "I'm really sorry."

"I don't believe you. Down on the floor. Kneel down and kiss my feet." She stuck a bare leg out of the cloak, and Maalioh began to lower himself to his knees.

Suddenly, Tiisam was standing between him and the moonchild.

"He just made a joke to cheer my brother up, Soliin. Leave him alone."

"Why are you defending him?"

"He saved my brother's life." Soliin had no answer to that, and Maalioh bit back his instinctive denial. Now really was not the time. There was a pause, and Maalioh stood up straight again, moving aside to look at the girl and woman staring one another down. Soliin was already slightly taller, and the snow-white of her skin and hair, even paler than the fur on her cloak, was a sharp contrast to Tiisam's deep brown skin and shining black hair. The bear's jaw shaded her face, reminding everyone that she had killed it single handed, and unarmed. Tiisam's tunic was fringed with the feathers of dozens of birds, however, and she didn't back down. Tiisam's eyes, wide

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and brown like most in the tribe, returned Soliin's red glare without flinching. Soliin shifted slightly, and Tiisam responded.

"Soliin!" Tiisam's voice was barely above a whisper, but urgent nonetheless. "We're in Sairtowa's shrine, and face a crisis. Don't!"

"Don't what?" Soliin's voice sounded innocent, but the pause before she spoke and the relaxation in her body betrayed her; with a shock, Maalioh realised that she had been planning to attack the hunter.

"Don't think you can bring in more food for the tribe than I can." Tiisam responded very smoothly, and Maalioh was impressed. Soliin wasn't, however.

"Why would I hunt for the rest of you? You aren't my tribe." Stark white amid the brown skins of Maalioh and the others, she certainly seemed separate, but Tiisam merely shrugged.

"Well, if you're that sure I'd win, I won't press it."

"You win? Don't be absurd. I can bring in more meat in one bear hunt than you can do in a week of hunting your little birds."

"You say."

"Watch me!" The moonchild spun round and stalked off to the doors, flinging them open and storming out of the shrine. Tiisam and Maalioh both shook their heads as they watched her go.

"So easy to manipulate," Tiisam said. Maalioh smiled, but shook his head.

"She might bring one bear in, to prove she can, but she'll quickly decide that she doesn't need to prove she's better than you." Tiisam looked quickly at Fiitan, who grimaced, and nodded in agreement. Her face fell.

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"Oh well. At least I stopped her from hitting you."

"Yes. Yes, thank you for that."

"You're most welcome." Tiisam smiled brightly at him, so that after a moment Maalioh had to drop his eyes to the floor.

* * *

It was no surprise that the heads of families had agreed with Liifa that Tohflair's house should be repaired first. From the bits Tohflair mentioned, Maalioh gathered that agreement on future priorities had been much more difficult, and that the offer to Nairla to let her family be the one to stay in the infirmary had been necessary to break the deadlock.

Maalioh definitely had mixed feelings about that, which he tried to put in some sort of order the next day, as a couple of dozen people helped them to repair their house. In the end, of course, it wasn't everyone; there were some children too young to help, and some men and women too old, and a couple of women had been set to carrying more supplies up to the shrine, to handle the people who would be staying there. The hunters, of course, were out, which meant that Tiisam was not helping. On balance, Maalioh was glad of that. Nairla was focusing most of her grateful attention on Tohflair, for which Maalioh was simply grateful.

He was stationed on the roof, at first helping to operate their winch, which gave him a good view of the storm, still thundering although it could not, apparently, approach the island. He couldn't remember another storm spirit that had been so persistent, and the nervous looks from the other villagers suggested that this wasn't entirely due to his youth.

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It took very little time to clear the ice from the hole in the roof, but then they had to move the winch to the porch, and that took a lot longer. The deep drifts of snow against what remained of the walls made access difficult, and although they made a first attempt just before noon, the winch proved not to be firmly fixed. In the end, it was moonrise before they moved the first load of ice, and the arrival of a group of hunters brought them to a halt.

"Maalioh!" Tiisam called and waved, sounding happy. She held up three birds; Maalioh peered at them, and realised that they were ptarmigan. He groaned, and then quickly schooled his face to look pleased. It did look like a good haul for one morning, and most people liked ptarmigan; it wasn't Tiisam's fault that the smell alone made Maalioh want to vomit. He waved back, and, noticing that everyone was going to talk to the hunters, jumped down from the wall to join them.

"We had good hunting, Maalioh. There seem to be more ptarmigan around than normal, and I got a guillemot as well." Wohsair, looking equally pleased, came up beside her.

"I only got a couple of ptarmigan, but for a morning, at this time of year? That's lucky. Maybe Sairtowa struck a deal with their guardian spirit." Their happiness was infectious, and Maalioh found himself smiling. Maybe the tribe wouldn't have it so bad after all. Behind them, a third hunter, Katen, shook her head ruefully.

"I only got a couple of dovebies." She held the small birds up, and forced a smile; they really were small. "I think the storm scattered them. Still, they'll be back."

"So, Maalioh," Tiisam said. "You can have first choice."

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Which bird would you like?" Wohsair frowned, and Tiisam seemed to notice. "For you and the doctor, of course." Maalioh could feel the blood rushing to his face.

"Ah, that's very kind. Er..." Although he desperately wanted to pick the guillemot, he knew that his master really liked ptarmigan. For a moment his selfish desire wrestled with his duty, and then duty won. "That ptarmigan, please." He thought he had picked the second-best one, and as Tiisam started to hand it over, Wohsair put a hand on her arm.

"No, Tiisam. This one." The older hunter indicated the best of the three, smiling and nodding at Maalioh. "Maalioh knows his manners, but that's still no excuse for slighting the doctor." Tiisam's skin darkened, and she dropped her eyes to stare at her feet for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up. "I should have thought." Maalioh shook his head, accepting the gift, but couldn't think of anything to say. He just smiled instead, and that seemed to be enough.

Tohflair was very pleased with the ptarmigan, and had Maalioh put it in the store; he said they would eat it to celebrate the repair of the house. The hunters shared a simple meal with the workers before setting off again, confident that they could catch more before sunset. The work on the porch progressed well, and by sundown Maalioh could get into the house through the land door fairly easily. Tohflair had taken a look at the gap and declared that he wasn't going to wriggle through that at his age, which raised a laugh, and they returned to the shrine for the night.

Since the work on the land porch was going so well, a couple of the women went inside the house the next

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morning, and started working on fixing the quilting. Two builders started sorting the discarded ice, looking for reusable chunks, and sent a small group off to the mountains to bring some new blocks back from the glacier. With fewer hands, work on the porch slowed, but it was still clear soon after moontouch, just before the women sent to the glacier returned with a laden sled.

Repairing the structures needed a bit more thought, and the people with no useful skills were sent to the next house. That turned out to be Katen's; it had lost its water door completely, and most of the lakeside end had caved in. Katen's young daughter Teni was already trying to remove blocks of ice when they arrived, but she was only six, and had made no difference. When they started work, they found that the warmth of the lake had remelted some of the ice, and even with over two dozen people helping they had made no visible impact before sunset. At the shrine the builders were joking that they'd have Tohflair's land porch finished before everyone else could clear the wreckage at Katen's.

By the next night, they were laying bets, rather than joking.

At noon the following day, the rubble was finally cleared, and the workers ran round the lake to where the builders had just started on the roof of the the land porch. They complained good-naturedly, and demanded a second opinion. Tiisam was back from a hunt, leaving another ptarmigan with Tohflair, and she volunteered to check, soon returning to confirm that it was cleared. Maalioh waved to her, and she smiled and waved back but, glancing across at her mother, did not approach. Maalioh blushed again, wondering what she had

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guessed. The builders tried to argue that, if they finished on the same day, it counted as a dead heat, so the bets were off, but the others were having none of it, and all work stopped for a while as they went to get the materials to pay their gambling debts. The storm still continued, hanging over the ice, but that night, as Maalioh lay in his usual bed, with Tiisam and her family behind curtains a bit further towards the lake, he reflected that the tribe seemed to have pulled through the crisis well.

* * *

Maalioh was first up in the morning, taking his bucket to collect fresh snow. For the first time since before the storm the sky was covered in grey clouds, although it didn't seem that any snow had fallen yet. He glanced out across the bay, and then looked back. The storm was gone; the spirit had, it seemed, finally given up. He wondered whether that accounted for the change in the weather, as he looked around the surrounding hills, trying to decide where would be the easiest place to get undisturbed snow.

As he stood there, Katen came hurrying towards him.
"Maalioh! Maalioh! Get Tohflair! Teni is sick!"

Chapter Two

Katen wanted to run back to the shrine, but Tohflair insisted on taking some time to prepare.

"Tell me a bit about what is wrong with her. I might be able to take the right medicines to treat her on the spot, and that will be much faster than going to the shrine and coming back here."

Katen looked for a moment as if she would object, but then she swallowed, hard, and conceded.

"Yes, of course. She vomited this morning immediately after eating, and she complains of the heat, although her body feels very cold." Tohflair nodded, but Maalioh was already taking fever medicine and chills medicine from the stores. Only the weaker ones, because Teni was young. As he measured out some of the anti-vomiting preparation he pulled a face, both at the smell and at the amount left. It was really about time to restock, something he did not relish doing in winter. Tohflair glanced at the medicines, and caught Maalioh's eye, nodding his approval.

"Anything else, Katen?"

"I think she had a bit of a rash. But I'm not sure." Maalioh thought it sounded a lot like food poisoning, and added two purgatives to the kit they would be taking. As he was bundling it up, Tiisam emerged from their sleeping area, still in her short inner tunic.

"Anything I can do?" The question was directed at Maalioh, but Tohflair answered.

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"I don't think so; even if we need to bring her back here, Katen can carry her." Tiisam nodded.

"I'll go out hunting again, then. Make sure the sick don't go hungry." Maalioh realised that he had been staring at Tiisam's legs at the same time as he realised she had turned to look at him, and he quickly raised his eyes to her face. She was smiling at him. "See you later, Maalioh."

"Um, yes. Good hunting."

"Come along, Maalioh. We mustn't waste time." Tohflair sounded slightly amused.

Katen wanted to run back, but Tohflair refused again.

"I'm not a hunter, Katen. I simply can't run all the way to the shrine, at least not if I expect to be able to treat a patient when I arrive. We will walk quickly."

Katen set a very stiff pace, but Tohflair did not complain again. As they reached the foot of the hill it began to snow, a few flakes in the air at first, but steadily thickening as they climbed the steps. Tohflair did slow down now, clearly concerned about his footing, and Katen said nothing, although her impatience was clear.

"I'll go on ahead, and wait for you in the shrine," she said, the fifth time she had to wait for them to catch up. Tohflair agreed.

"Good idea. We won't be far behind you." The hunter turned and sped up the steps, so fast that Maalioh was afraid she would slip. The snow was heavy enough now that it became hard to make her out long before she reached the shrine, and at several points Maalioh thought that the shrine itself was on the point of disappearing. However, they were approaching quickly enough to keep it in sight. A glance back confirmed that the base of the

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hill was invisible, however, and Maalioh started to worry about getting back.

They entered through the left-hand outer gate, bowing deeply as they did so, and hurried across the precincts to the main sanctuary. Katen was not in the vestibule, although her outer clothes were piled roughly on one table. Another of the women, Lairna, was, however.

"Pesii is sick as well, doctor. She seems the same as Teni." Maalioh felt his stomach lurch. Two sick children with the same symptoms was a lot worse than one, because it threatened even more. He glanced at his master, but Tohflair's face was impassive.

"We will examine them both then." Quickly, he began stripping off the layers of fur necessary for surface travel, and Maalioh, putting the medicine bag on a table, followed suit. Lairna's impatience was obvious from the way she kept looking at the doors to the nave, and finally Tohflair told her to go to Pesii. When she had left, he turned to Maalioh.

"How much medicine did you bring?"

"Enough for two doses of everything, master." Tohflair nodded.

"Good. We might be able to treat both of them, then." Without another word, the doctor pushed the inner door open, and led the way into the nave.

There were very few people present; most had presumably gone down to the village at first light, although they wouldn't be able to do much work while the snow lasted. It was mainly the old and young, with the mothers of the sick children standing out. Kiisair and Ketaa were tending to them, but quietly withdrew when the doctor approached.

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Both girls were crying and naked, moaning about the heat and trying to run for the doors, but held back by their mothers. Teni had a clear rash, red lines in a regular diamond pattern standing out against the brown skin of her chest. Even from a distance Maalioh could see that neither was sweating, which was wrong for a fever.

Tohflair quickly knelt beside Teni, putting a hand on her forehead, then her chest, and then the small of her back. He looked at Maalioh, and frowned very slightly. As his master turned to Pesii, Maalioh repeated his investigation of Teni. He tried to keep the shock from showing on his face. Her forehead was cool, but her chest and back were positively cold. Pesii had slightly milder symptoms, and her rash was less clear, but the two clearly had the same problem.

"Wrap them up again, with a blanket or cloak." Both girls started kicking and complaining at that, shouting that they were too hot already. "Can they hold fluids down?" Both mothers shook their heads.

"They vomit water up almost as soon as we give it to them," Lairna said. "They haven't even tried to eat."

"What did they eat last night? Katen?"

"Teni had some seaweed, fresh ptarmigan, and some bear berries." Tohflair nodded.

"Lairna?"

"Seaweed, ptarmigan, and red berries. Pesii doesn't like bear berries."

"Was it the same ptarmigan?"

"No," Katen answered. "We ate one I caught, but Lairna and Pesii ate one from Tiisam."

"Where did the seaweed come from?"

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"The stores here." Tohflair looked up, searching until he found Ketaa.

"Ketaa! I want to see the seaweed stored here, the one you ate last night. Is there any left?" The apprentice shaman just looked at him for a moment, and then looked around. Kiisair's voice came quickly from across the shrine.

"Of course you can see it. Ketaa, take Maalioh to the store room, and show him which seaweed it is." There was a definite edge to her voice, but Ketaa bowed her head in a formal way that gave no indication that she had noticed it.

"Yes, my lady. Come, boy."

Fuming at being called a boy again, by someone who was still an apprentice even if she was a year older than him, Maalioh said nothing as he followed her to the vestibule. It wasn't even as if he needed to be shown to the shrine's store room; everyone knew where it was. As he began pulling on his outer clothes, however, he reflected that he didn't know which seaweed they had eaten, and couldn't think of any way to work it out, at least not quickly.

"The store room is next to the outer wall. I will show you the way." On the other hand, he thought, Ketaa seemed to be going out of her way to be patronising. Keeping his mouth firmly shut, he nodded and followed her out of the right-hand door.

The snow was still falling heavily, and the new fall made walking rather difficult. He could barely make out the red of the precinct wall, now topped with a layer of white snow, but it was still obvious enough where the store room was.

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"This way. Do not lose sight of me." Maalioh couldn't entirely repress a hiss of irritation. She was acting as though she was guiding him through the mountains, not just across the courtyard.

Ketaa pushed the curtain out of the way and stepped into the room, letting the leather fall behind her. Maalioh pushed it out of his way with a bit more violence than was really necessary, and followed her in. The room was very dim, as little light filtered in through the gaps under the roof. Ketaa placed one hand on a bale.

"This seaweed was eaten last night." Maalioh moved to take some, and realised that Ketaa was glaring at him. For a moment, he wondered what it could be, and then he realised.

"Thank you, my lady." He tried very hard to keep all traces of sarcasm out of his voice, but from the way Ketaa's eyes narrowed he suspected he hadn't quite succeeded. He pulled a little seaweed out of the bale, and sniffed at it. It didn't seem obviously bad, but that was hardly surprising; several people had eaten it without immediate problems. He took a little more, so that they would have enough to analyse, and then turned to nod at Ketaa.

"You may speak, boy." Maalioh's eyes flew open in surprise. Did she really think he had been requesting permission to speak? Who on earth did she think she was? He tried to remember if she had always been like this, but realised that this was the longest conversation he had had with her since she became an apprentice shaman. Before that, they were all small children, and he just remembered that she was always the bossy one. So yes, maybe she had always been like this.

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"I have gathered the necessary seaweed. We may return to the shrine."

"You do not grant permission, boy. That is the prerogative of the shamans. We shall return to the shrine. Follow me." As Ketaa turned to lead the way back out of the store room, Maalioh shook his head in disbelief. She was acting more high-and-mighty than Liifa; come to think of it, more so than Sairtowa herself.

Back in the shrine, Ketaa swept off to the shamans' area without a word. Maalioh ignored her, and went over to where Tohflair was still examining the girls. Teni was doubled over a bucket, retching violently and crying. Maalioh couldn't help wincing a little, but Tohflair's face remained calm, as always.

"Master, I have brought the seaweed." Tohflair nodded in acknowledgement, and gestured at a bench.

"Sit down and wait a moment." Katen was comforting Teni, who seemed to have finished vomiting. "Is that the same as this morning?" The question was directed at Katen, who nodded. Tohflair looked in the bucket, sniffed, and frowned.

"Maalioh, give me a little of the seaweed."

"Yes, master." Maalioh had a little ready, and handed it over immediately. Tohflair sniffed at it, and put a little in his mouth, slowly chewing it. Then he sniffed the vomit again, put a finger in and touched it to his tongue. Maalioh shuddered a little, as always. He had still not quite got used to this kind of testing; it was one thing to know intellectually that an amount that small could not unbalance your own elements, and quite another to actually taste vomit.

"Maalioh, you should do the same." Maalioh could feel

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his shoulders sag at Tohflair's words, but he knew his master was right. He had to practise all kinds of diagnosis if he was going to be a good doctor. He took the seaweed first, noting that it tasted rather good, but also trying to catch the distinctive flavours of the elements in it. As far as he could tell, it was normal; water and wood, with a touch of earth, and nothing detectable of the others.

Then he moved to the bucket, and sniffed at the vomit. There was something very odd about the smell, as well as very unpleasant, so he sniffed again, but he still couldn't place it. Then, very gingerly, he reached out and touched his right index finger to the surface of the liquid, and raised it to his mouth.

There he paused for a long moment. Most people were quite deliberately looking away, slightly pale around the mouth, but he could feel Tohflair's eyes on him, even though the older doctor said nothing. Taking a deep breath and screwing up his courage, he touched his finger to his tongue.

His first reaction was to gag at the foul taste, and he desperately tried to concentrate, separate out the signs of the elements. Excreta were supposed to be easy, that was what the books, and his master, said. Easier than food. But, for a long moment, he could detect nothing but visceral disgust; he could feel his own stomach starting to churn.

And then he got it. Fire and water, both strong. That was why it seemed odd. Hints of wood, earth, and air, which fitted with what they had eaten, although the metal from the berries and ptarmigan was extremely

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weak if he wasn't just fooling himself. But fire and water together; that was very strange.

He looked at his master.

"Fire and water, master." Tohflair nodded.

"Yes, Maalioh." The doctor turned back to the mothers. "Lairna, I am afraid that I am going to have to check Pesii as well. They may not have the same problem." Lairna sighed, but nodded, and took up a cup of water, holding it to Pesii's mouth.

When the other girl had vomited, and they had checked the vomit, it was clear that she had the same strange imbalance. Tohflair's face was as calm as ever, so Maalioh tried to school the confusion from his.

"I will need to consult my books," Tohflair said. "This does not appear to be food poisoning, however. It may well right itself quickly, but in any case, please collect their urine the next time they pass water; I need to examine that as well." Both the mothers nodded, clearly worried, and not at all sure that it was going to get better quickly. Maalioh was also unsure; for fire and water to both be in excess at the same time, in two patients, was very strange. One should really offset the other.

Gathering their things, the two took their leave, and set off back down to the village. The snow had weakened, but new fall was still heaped up on the steps, making their footing somewhat treacherous. Without Katen to hurry them on, they took things slowly, and Tohflair was silent, apparently lost in thought. By the time they reached the house, the snow had stopped and the sky had started to clear, and the thin crescent of the winter sun was high in the sky. Maalioh paused in the land porch,

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taking his bucket and nipping out of the door to fetch some fresh snow.

When he entered, Tohflair was already in conversation with one of the builders, Miila, who was wrapped in a guest robe.

"...complaining of the heat." Tohflair nodded.

"We will come right away. Maalioh, prepare the medicines again."

* * *

It did not take long to confirm that Miila's son had the same complaint; he had the same rash, and the same cold chest and back. Tohflair had insisted that they check his vomit anyway, and that had also been the same. Miila's house had survived almost untouched, so her family were still staying there, and they had not been back to the shrine. That confirmed that it wasn't food poisoning.

But, as they dried off after returning, Maalioh racked his brains for some reasonable cause. There was an obvious possibility, of course, but he was keen to find an alternative. Tohflair seemed to be taking the same approach.

"We must consult the books, Maalioh. Light the lamps and prepare the lectern."

"Yes, master." Tohflair's books were the only ones in the village, brought by Tohflair's master's master from the continent to the south. Even then, Tohflair said that the books had come from even further away, probably from the Empire of the Sun itself. They were written in a strange language, not the tongue of the Frozen Islands and also not, apparently, the language of the trader who had sold them. They claimed to contain the complete works of Saliipipi, but Maalioh wondered about that, as

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each book had clearly been copied by a different person, and they had not originally been a set. One section, on leg injuries, appeared both at the end of one volume and the beginning of the next. There was nothing obviously missing, but Maalioh always had a niggling doubt that there might have been a continuation.

The books were almost certainly irreplaceable, although Maalioh thought that Seseli, Tohflair's old apprentice, had gone to look for another set. Reading them was almost a ritual, and one to which Maalioh was now thoroughly accustomed. He set up the curtains around the reading area, while Tohflair went to check on Fiitan. The whale-oil lamps, glass and metal ones from the south, were fixed firmly on their stands, and Maalioh lit them with a taper, carefully closing and latching the windows. Finally, he took the covers off the whalebone lectern, moving it to the centre of the reading area and driving the spikes into the slots in the floor. He pushed on it a couple of times, to make sure that it was solidly in place.

Tohflair returned and looked around quickly at the preparations, checking one of the lamps before nodding and turning to the chest. Maalioh hurried over to help lift the cover. Made of bear bones and skin, it was heavy, and strong enough to survive the roof collapsing on top of it. Between the two of them, they could just about lift it off, putting it down again to one side. Within, the chest was wrapped in seal skin, and Tohflair removed that by himself, first undoing the thongs, and then removing the skins themselves.

That exposed the chest itself, the only wood in the village outside the shrine. It was squared off, and bound

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in metal, which Maalioh thought was probably iron, or maybe bronze. There were a number of loops on the front, and metal plates with a slot through them. When the plates were lowered and a thong tied through the loops, there was no way for the chest to come open by mistake. Tohflair untied the thong and lifted the lid of the chest. Maalioh came over to stand beside him, and took the first book, wrapped in soft fox leather, as Tohflair passed it up. This volume was concerned with injuries, and thus they need not check it. The next volume down was wrapped in hare skin, and included a discussion of digestive disorders. This one was necessary, and Tohflair carefully unwrapped it, placing in on the lectern, and then standing back.

Maalioh moved to stand in front of the lectern, carefully opening the covers. He still remembered the first time he had been allowed to touch the book himself, when his master had told him that the apprentice should read for the master, to fully learn the contents of the books. Maalioh could remember much of the material, now, but there were still many details worth confirming. Slowly, he turned the pages, through the duplicated material on leg injuries, and on to the beginning of disorders of the throat. The scribe of this book wrote in small characters, and was by far the most irregular and hardest to read. On the other hand, he had made small drawings in the margins; some were of things mentioned in the text, but others were apparently doodles, of fantastic animals and people that Maalioh assumed must live wherever the book had been written. Those pictures provided the images for when he dreamed of the Empire of the Sun.

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He took a deep breath, and began reading. He found that he still stumbled over some words; they consulted the book on injuries far more often, and that was written by a scribe who formed his letters in exactly the same way, every time, and kept them in almost perfectly straight lines. Maalioh had once tried to copy a page, onto a sheet of ice, but he could not make his letters that similar. It was certainly the easiest of the books to read, however, and Maalioh realised that he had been slightly spoiled by it.

With the habit of long practice he listened as he read, trying to determine whether a disease might be appropriate. After the initial description of each disorder he paused, looking at Tohflair, who shook his head if he wanted Maalioh to skip the details. In many cases the illnesses were so obviously different that Maalioh barely needed to wait; in others there was a slightly longer pause, and sometimes Tohflair even nodded when Maalioh thought that it would be best to press on. He read until his voice became hoarse and his throat sore, but they found nothing that sounded like the illness they faced.

At last, Tohflair raised his hand to indicate that Maalioh should stop reading. He noted the page, and then carefully closed the cover, standing back from the lectern. Tohflair took the fox book from the chest, handing it to Maalioh, and then wrapped the hare book again, replacing it in its proper place. Maalioh watched in silence as his master closed the chest, retied the thong, and wrapped the seal skins around it again. Then they lifted the cover back into place. Only when it had settled did Tohflair speak.

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"We must continue tomorrow." Before Maalioh could answer, a voice called from outside the curtains.

"Doctor! Please come quickly now! Our son is sick." For a moment, Maalioh caught a flicker of panic in his master's eye.

* * *

The moon was already sinking in the east by the time Maalioh and Tohflair had finished seeing all the patients. Two were in houses with fully-repaired water porches, so they had swum to them, but one was not, and more time had been lost wrapping up against the night's chill. They had made their way to the patient while snow was falling, feeling their way from one waystone to the next, but by the time they had finished the sky had cleared. Kaalohsair was directly overhead, flourishing his spear, but Saliipipi was nowhere to be seen; Maalioh could not help taking that as a bad omen.

It was not nearly as bad as the disease, however. The three new patients, all children, had the same symptoms as Teni, although they were less advanced. Maalioh had seen nothing like it, and Tohflair seemed to be equally at a loss.

When they entered their house, Tiisam was waiting for them, half asleep in a pile of cushions. The pulse of cold air from the door stirred her, and she sprang to her feet.

"I've prepared dinner for you. Fresh ptarmigan and pink gull, with vegetables from our stores." She asked nothing, preparing the meal as Maalioh and his master unwrapped their outer garments. Maalioh relaxed into the warmth of the house, and felt his fatigue catch up with him.

Maalioh found himself picking at his food, as worry

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reduced his appetite. Tohflair was also eating little, which gave Maalioh the ideal excuse to avoid his ptarmigan altogether. Tiisam was watching them with concern, clearly wanting to ask about the situation. After a few minutes, Tohflair looked straight at her, and gently shook his head.

"Thank you for the food, Tiisam. You should go to bed; you will have to hunt again tomorrow." It was politely said, but clearly a dismissal, and Tiisam took it as such. Tohflair waited, to give her time to get into bed, and then sighed and put his plate down.

"We will have to talk to Liifa tomorrow, Maalioh." Tohflair kept his voice low, but fatigue and worry were clear in it. "This may be the work of a spirit." Maalioh said nothing; it was the possibility he had been worrying about, but hearing it from his master made it all the more real.

"I have never seen anything like this, and I don't remember anything similar from the books," Tohflair continued. "Maybe Saliipipi never encountered a spirit like this." He picked up the plate again, and ate a couple of mouthfuls before giving up, staring into space. When he spoke again, it seemed that he was only half talking to Maalioh.

"I remember the last time I faced something like this. One of the fishermen came back with a fever, and nothing would bring it down. At first, he had a very strong appetite, but soon he lost it. Even feeding him nothing but fish and seaweed had no effect on the excess of fire, and Liifa could find no spirit causing the imbalance." He did look at Maalioh then. "I wish you could have had more of your training before facing this

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kind of problem." He fell silent, and Maalioh wrestled with whether he should ask the question.

"Master, what happened to him?" Tohflair blinked, and then lowered his eyes.

"He died, after two weeks."

* * *

Maalioh got no sleep that night. His master's answer was a shock. In his seven years as an apprentice, Maalioh had only seen one of his master's patients die of anything other than old age, and he had been gored by a walrus so badly that Tohflair was astonished he had lived to get back to the village. Even then the doctor had been able to ease his pain and clear his head, so that he could make proper farewells to his husband and sons. Somehow, Maalioh had believed that there was nothing his master could not treat; certainly, most of the Piisairtowa believed that, as did most of the surrounding tribes.

He rose, haggard, in the morning, and prepared his master's breakfast. Tiisam rose a little later; she said nothing, but the way her face fell when she looked at him showed that she had understood more from his expression than he would have liked. With an effort, he forced a smile.

"Good morning, Tiisam. Thank you for the dinner last night." She shook her head.

"It was nothing. You need to keep up your strength until you have cured the disease." Maalioh had to work hard to keep his face neutral at that, but he managed a short nod. Tiisam seemed to be waiting for him to say something, but Maalioh could not bring himself to speak. In the end, she gave up.

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"Well, I should get out on the hunt. I'm planning to go after gulls today; everyone has been focusing on the ptarmigan. Good luck." As she walked past, she put her hand on his shoulder, and the whole of Maalioh's body tingled. He quickly turned to finish preparing breakfast, mumbling his thanks.

Tohflair emerged almost as soon as Tiisam had left, leading Maalioh to suspect that he had been avoiding her. His face was still grim, but maybe a little more positive than it had been the previous day.

"The children are not dead yet." Maalioh nodded. "Even if the books are no help, we can think for ourselves. Moderate the symptoms. Let their bodies heal themselves." The doctor took the offered plate and ate quickly, his eyes unfocused as he lost himself in thought. Maalioh tried to follow his example, but soon realised that his appetite had really not returned, and he certainly couldn't force down even the small amount of ptarmigan he'd served himself. When Tohflair stood and began dressing, Maalioh abandoned his breakfast and started pulling on his own outer garments. Nairla came out of the area set aside for her family.

"You're leaving? What about Fiitan? You haven't looked at him." With a shock, Maalioh realised that he had forgotten the fisherman. Tohflair was about to reply when a voice came from behind the curtains.

"Mother, I'm fine. The doctor has to go to see the sick children."

"But you might fall prey to the illness..." Nairla had turned back to the curtains, and peeped inside.

"If I do, then I'll call the doctor."

"That might be too late!" Tohflair grinned at Maalioh,

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and the genuine amusement on his face cheered Maalioh as well. His master beckoned to him, and they crept quietly out of the land door while Fiitan and his mother continued arguing.

When they had walked some distance from the house, Tohflair actually laughed.

"Fiitan must be desperate for his fathers to get back; they seem to be the only people who can get his mother to back off."

"What about his husband?" Tohflair snorted in disbelief.

"Are you serious? Laka avoids Nairla as much as possible; she doesn't believe he's good enough for her little boy. I hope asking them to stay in our house wasn't too big a mistake..." The doctor's voice trailed off, as his train of thought seemed to bring him back to the problem at hand. His steps slowed for a while, and then, with a slight shake of his whole body, he picked up the pace again, leaving Maalioh to hurry to catch up.

Tohflair hardly eased up even when they began climbing the steps to the shrine. The wind in the latter part of the night had cleared most of the snow, and although the clouds were thickening they had yet to drop their load of snow, so the steps were relatively easy. Nevertheless, Maalioh was breathing hard by the time they reached the top, and Tohflair actually paused outside the precincts, leaning against the wall while he caught his breath. Not for long, though; he soon led Maalioh through the right-hand gate, pausing only to bow deeply.

As soon as they entered the shrine, they were greeted by a babble of voices. Maalioh understood at once, from

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the tone, that the children had not recovered, and he quickly confirmed that they were not dead. It took a little longer to piece together the details of the situation, and even Tohflair's requests for one person to provide a straightforward account fell on deaf ears.

This was not, in the end, surprising. Teni and Pesii were no better, although also not noticeably worse. However, all of the other children had fallen ill, even the nursing babies. Their symptoms were the same, and as Maalioh examined them all he felt his panic growing again. He fought to keep it from showing, but he feared that he was failing; certainly, he could see Tohflair's growing concern, and the doctor had far more practice at schooling his expressions.

After examining the last patient, Tohflair announced that he needed to speak to the shamans. Ketaa sprang to her feet, as Liifa said,

"Of course. We will confer in Hiiron's Chamber." Tohflair beckoned Maalioh to follow as they headed for the steps leading down, but at the top Ketaa moved to stand in front of him.

"Wait above, boy." Maalioh took a step back, but Tohflair intervened.

"No, I want my apprentice to join us." Ketaa did not move.

"Ketaa, let Maalioh past. And then remain at the top of the steps to ensure that we are not disturbed." The young shaman briefly lost her poise, flicking a disbelieving look at Liifa, and then a look of hostility at Maalioh. Still, she stood aside, and when Maalioh looked back at her as he descended, she had recovered her normal

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dignity, standing with her arms folded at the head of the stairs.

Hiiron's Chamber was a natural cave under the shrine, where the hot spring that fed the lake and Hiiron's Flame burst from the ground. As they entered they bowed to the flame, and when he straightened up Maalioh thought that he could see a pair of eyes within it. This close to the flame it was even warmer than above, and Maalioh felt himself beginning to sweat. Liifa sat, with Kiisair standing behind her, and she motioned for Tohflair to do the same. He shook his head.

"I would rather stand, if you would permit it. I am too..." He paused, apparently searching for the right word. "Nervous. Too nervous to sit."

"As you wish, doctor." Liifa's voice was as calm as ever. "What is your diagnosis?" Tohflair sighed, and began pacing.

"I do not know. Most of the children in the village are now showing the same symptoms. They have an excess of fire and water, which is very unusual. However, Maalioh detects the same imbalance, and it would explain both the chill and the feeling of heat. An excess of water would also explain the vomiting." He paused, and Liifa broke in.

"Will they recover?"

"I don't know." The sentence was short and sharp, and brought Tohflair to a sudden stop in his pacing. He breathed deeply for some time before continuing. "I don't know. I have never seen anything like this, nor have I read about it. The imbalance is highly unnatural, so normally I would expect it to right itself quickly, within a day or so." He paused again, this time looking straight

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at Liifa. "If the cause is removed, they should recover quickly. But I do not know what the cause could be."

"You suspect a spirit." It was not a question.

"My lady, I am not knowledgeable in the ways of spirits."

"You are not completely ignorant, either," Liifa pointed out. "I agree that it is a possibility we need to consider. However, Sairtowa did not detect any disease spirits entering the area."

"My lady, I do not know what could naturally cause this." Now Maalioh could clearly hear the tension in his master's voice.

"Then I must also accept that it might be a spirit. Your knowledge of natural philosophy is unmatched in the Frozen Islands." Tohflair nodded, once; that was not flattery so much as a universally recognised fact. Maalioh was well aware that he, personally, was his master's only possible competition, and he knew far less than his teacher. Liifa continued. "The storm spirit was large and powerful; a subtle disease spirit could have slipped in while both Sairtowa and Faaniloah were occupied with it." Maalioh's eyes widened slightly in surprise, a reaction that did not escape the shaman. "Yes, Maalioh, both. If you are to succeed your master, you need to know more of the truth, but you must say nothing of what you have learned. You do not yet have the discretion to decide for yourself what can be made public."

"Yes, my lady." Maalioh felt greatly privileged, a feeling reinforced by his master's next words.

"You do my apprentice an honour, my lady."

"You clearly trust him, doctor, or you would not have

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brought him to the meeting. On this, as well, I will follow your judgement." Tohflair bowed, and then smiled.

"Truly, Sairtowa has blessed us in your leadership." Liifa looked at him for a moment, and then chuckled briefly.

"Very well, doctor." Maalioh had no idea what that was about, and Liifa left him no time to think further. "We will search for a spirit. What can you do while we are searching?" And then Tohflair said something that turned Maalioh's legs to jelly.

"My apprentice will explain." Maalioh's mind went blank. What could he explain? Tohflair had not discussed this with him. His eyes searched his master's face, but he saw only expectation. Could he have forgotten a discussion? No, that made no sense. He turned his gaze back to the old shaman, who was looking at him expectantly.

"Well, Maalioh?" she asked. Maalioh floundered again.

"I... Well... That is..." Taking a deep breath, he pulled himself together. "I am deeply honoured to be asked to speak." He bowed formally, kneeling and pressing his forehead to the floor, buying himself a little thinking time. By the time he stood up, most of the pieces had come together.

"First, although the patients complain of the heat, they are actually cold. They must be kept warm.

"Second, as they have an excess of fire and water, foods rich in those should be avoided. Fish and seaweed are heavy in water, while berries have a great deal of fire. Roots and tubers have more earth and wood, while birds have more air, so they would be suitable.

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"Third, there is the problem that they do not seem to be able to hold food or water down. Water may not be a problem for a while, as they have an excess already, but we must look into ways to help them feed." He finished, looking over at Tohflair, who simply nodded, his face neutral.

"It is as my apprentice says. I believe that they may be able to keep very small amounts of food down, but we have not yet tested that idea." The shaman nodded.

"Will this cure them?"

"It may," Tohflair answered, "depending on the strength of the cause. However, it is more likely to simply keep the symptoms under control and give us more time to look for that cause."

"And could they die?" Tohflair frowned; he clearly did not like discussing the subject.

"They could starve to death. The chill does not, yet, seem life threatening, but I fear I do not know how this disease will progress." Liifa nodded, her face grim.

"We will search for spirits; the care of the sick, we leave to you."

* * *

Maalioh thought that they got home before sunset, but the heavy clouds, which had sporadically dropped snow during the day, made it hard to tell for sure. After the shrine, they had been round all the homes with sick children, confirming that the symptoms were still the same everywhere. As soon as they entered the main house, Nairla emerged from the curtains and hurried towards them, pursued by her son's voice.

"Ignore her, I'm fine." She stopped in her tracks, her face darkening, and disappeared back behind the

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curtains. The argument that followed was conducted quietly enough that Maalioh could not hear the details, but at least it kept Nairla out of their way.

Maalioh was exhausted, and sank onto the cushions next to the hearth without waiting for permission. Tohflair said nothing, simply sitting down across the hearth from him and putting his head in his hands. They sat in silence for some time. Maalioh was remembering the crying children, complaining of the heat as they tried to throw all coverings off their icy bodies, vomiting through their sobs when they had tried to eat. In the end, they found that very small amounts of completely fresh meat did not provoke vomiting, and the parents had been left with instructions to feed the children small amounts of fowl many times per day.

After sitting for a few minutes, Maalioh finally noticed that he was hungry, and started to stir himself to prepare dinner. Before he could do much more than stand up, however, the curtains were pushed aside, and Tiisam returned from her hunting. She looked at him, and her smile quickly changed to a look of shock.

"Maalioh! Sit down again! You look dreadful. Let me get undressed, and I'll prepare the dinner."

"Thank you." Maalioh sank down again, and the ache in his head subsided a bit. Tohflair had still barely moved since sitting down, and had yet to acknowledge Tiisam's return. The hunter hurried over, talking brightly, and Maalioh thought she was making a determined effort to be cheerful.

"Don't the houses feel warm when you come in from hunting? Oh, I suppose you don't know, but I imagine it's the same when you're visiting patients over land. Of

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course, they feel cold when you come in through the water door. It's strange, I hardly ever do that." Maalioh smiled as the young hunter busied herself around them, first hanging up her catch for the day and then moving to prepare the food.

"Hunting's getting a bit harder now; the birds seem to have re-settled after the storm. I think a couple of hunters even came back empty-handed, although the ptarmigan still seem to be disturbed. Prohlima managed to catch three hares, though, which is impressive for the middle of winter." She paused. Tohflair had yet to even acknowledge her presence, and Maalioh felt compelled to say something.

"I'd quite like to eat some fresh hare." Immediately, he blushed, realising that it could sound like a criticism of Tiisam's hunting.

"Really? I'll trade something with her, then." Tiisam looked up at the day's take, her face thoughtful. "The guillemot, I think. There are more ptarmigan around, but I'm the only one who's caught guillemot recently." She was preparing the stove as she spoke, pushing bones, skin, and fat into the fuel area and getting it burning steadily. "So, I guess I'll be cooking the ptarmigan tonight." Fortunately, she wasn't looking at Maalioh as she said that, because he didn't manage to keep his face completely under control. He put it in his hands, copying his master for long enough to restore a calm expression.

"It seems warmer in here than normal. You don't mind if I take my tunic off, do you? I suppose it's because I'm cooking." Maalioh looked up, and Tiisam had already grasped the hem, but she did seem to be waiting for permission.

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"Er, no. No, I don't mind." She pulled the tunic over her head, dropping it behind the cushions, and continued her preparations naked. Maalioh knew he should look away, but he couldn't. The smooth brown curves of her body held his attention, even though she was a member of his tribe. Her long limbs, strong from constant exercise. Her black hair, shining as it fell straight to her shoulders. Her skin, richly coloured, smooth and dry.

Dry. Suddenly, Maalioh was fully alert.

"Tiisam, could you come here a moment?" She looked round, puzzled.

"Of course. What is it?" Maalioh stood up, and once she was in front of him he put his hand quickly on her forehead, between her breasts, and then, reaching round, on the small of her back. Her forehead felt normal, but her chest and back were distinctly cool. Peering at her chest, he thought he could see the beginnings of red lines. It was only when he finished that he realised Tiisam had gone very still. He looked at her face, which was creased with worry.

"Maalioh, do you think...?" The question tailed off; Maalioh guessed that his face had betrayed him again. He couldn't bring himself to answer her directly.

"Master, I think you should examine Tiisam. She is complaining of the heat, but her body is cold." Tohflair's head came up sharply, and it took him long moments to suppress the panic written on his features.

* * *

Tohflair was not willing to commit himself after the examination, but he had made Tiisam put her tunic back on, on the grounds that it was no warmer than normal in the house. Maalioh helped her to finish preparing the

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meal, watching her carefully, and even Nairla emerged to make sure that her daughter was all right. Wohsair returned from her hunt, empty-handed, just before the meal was ready, and was quickly pulled aside by Nairla.

By the time they sat down, around Fiitan's bed so that he didn't get bored, Tiisam was fidgeting constantly with hem and collar of her tunic, although she never complained about the temperature. Watching her carefully, Maalioh concluded that she was trying to create evidence that she wasn't ill. As the meal progressed, she started eating more slowly, the muscles in her throat working hard with every mouthful. Maalioh wasn't surprised when she sprang up, before finishing, and ran for the latrine. He was quick enough to get a clean bucket, and stop her.

"In here, please." Tiisam doubled up, vomiting into the bucket. When she finished and sat up, Maalioh took a deep breath and smelled and tasted her vomit. Fire and water were both strong, and Tohflair confirmed his diagnosis.

Tiisam was remarkably calm. Nairla was not.

"Are you saying that my son and daughter are both sick?"

"I'm not sick, mother," Fiitan put in. "I have a broken leg." Nairla completely ignored him.

"Is this the sort of protection and treatment we get from the doctor? We come into your house and the first thing that happens is that Tiisam falls ill." Tohflair tried to calm her down.

"Tiisam is strong. I am sure that she will overcome this illness."

"And if she doesn't? And what if the rest of us suffer?"

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Something has unbalanced her elements, and it could unbalance ours. I'm starting to feel warm."

"That's because you're shouting and storming around, dear. You look warm." Wohsair rarely intervened in her wife's tirades, and even this gentle intervention brought Nairla to a stop. She said nothing for a moment, and then strode off to the other end of the house.

"Doctor, I apologise for my mother." Tiisam's voice shook slightly, but she still managed to sound in control. "What should I do?"

"Keep wrapped up. You are not warm, no matter how you feel. Eat small amounts of fresh fowl at frequent intervals. Don't eat so much that you throw up, but as much as you can short of that."

"What about hunting?" Tohflair paused before answering.

"We will see in the morning. You may not be fit enough to hunt. It might be advisable to sleep now, however."

Tiisam nodded, saying nothing, but her eyes seemed to glitter more than normal as she prepared for bed.

* * *

Maalioh fell asleep almost as soon as he had burrowed into the furs, and had no idea what time it was when he was awoken by a hand insistently shaking his shoulder. He opened his eyes, but at first could see nothing in the darkness. He put one of his hands on the one shaking him, and then carefully raised the cover on the lamp nearest the furs slightly.

To his surprise it was Tiisam, not Tohflair, crouched by his bed.

"Can I talk to you?" Her voice was low, but there was a

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level of urgency in it Maalioh had not heard before. Maalioh nodded, and quickly wriggled out of the furs, turning his back to Tiisam and pulling an indoor tunic on before she could see that he was becoming erect. It was too dark for her to see him blush, fortunately, and he tried to get his mind back on to things that she was actually likely to ask about.

Once he was ready, she picked up the lamp and beckoned him to the land door end of the house. As they walked, Maalioh realised that she was naked under the single fur blanket thrown around her shoulders, and that she did not seem to be paying too much attention to it. She led Maalioh to some cushions near the door, where the air was quite cool, and sat down on the side nearest the exit. Maalioh quickly began to feel the chill, but Tiisam showed no signs of it.

"What is the matter with me, Maalioh? I am too hot to sleep, but Tohflair tells me that I need to keep warm." Maalioh said nothing for a while, weighing his options in the darkness. How much could he safely tell her? Tiisam soon noticed his hesitation.

"Maalioh, I'm the sick one. Surely I have a right to know what's wrong with me?"

"I suppose you do. You have an excess of fire and water, quite a strong excess of both."

"What does that mean?" Maalioh cursed himself for an idiot. Tiisam had no philosophical training, unlike the shamans.

"You know that everything is made up of six elements, right?" Maalioh was not entirely sure that she would, but it would be insulting to get it wrong.

"Yes, I heard that."

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"Well, you are the same, and the elements should be in a certain balance if you are to be healthy. Illnesses happen when the elements get out of balance."

"So I'm ill because I have too much fire and water relative to the other four?" Maalioh smiled. Tiisam was not stupid.

"Right."

"Why are they out of balance?" Maalioh felt himself start to shiver in the cold air, even as he wished she hadn't asked that question.

"We don't know yet. Fire and water oppose each other, so it is very unusual for them both to be in excess."

"Oppose each other? What do you mean?"

"Normally, if you have too much fire, it reduces the amount of water, and vice versa. That's how illnesses get worse; the excess of one element reduces its opposing element, which makes the balance even worse than it was before."

"You're shivering. Here." Maalioh gratefully accepted the blanket that Tiisam draped around his shoulders. "So, what could make both have an excess?" Maalioh sighed.

"Well... You mustn't tell anyone else, but it could be a disease spirit. We haven't started eating anything new, and the disease hasn't affected everyone yet, so it is hard to see what in the environment could have caused it. And, of course, it's hard to..." He stopped abruptly as he realised something.

"Tiisam, you mustn't sit there naked! You are not warm." Quickly, he pulled the blanket off his own shoulders, and tried to put it back on Tiisam. She pushed him away, trying to stop him.

"I'm so hot, Maalioh. I feel like my insides are on fire."

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"That's the excess of fire." Maalioh had not stopped trying to put the blanket around her, but she was not helping. "The excess of water is actually chilling you, so that you are really cold. If you don't wrap up, you might suffer from it."

"You don't understand. I'm burning. Feel!" She grabbed one hand, and put it squarely on her chest. At first, Maalioh's only conscious thought was that he could feel one of her nipples, but that was quickly followed by the realisation that her chest was very cold, almost icy. His stomach churned in panic, but he forced himself to speak calmly.

"Tiisam, your chest feels very, very cold. You must wrap up. Let's go and sit near the water door." He took one of Tiisam's hands and tried to pull her up. She resisted briefly, but then gave up. He led her back down the house, the air getting noticeably warmer. As they passed the spaces where Tohflair and Tiisam's family were sleeping, it suddenly occurred to him that he would be in trouble if any of them saw him leading a naked Tiisam by the hand. It was almost enough to make him drop it, but not quite.

He tried to lead her into the water porch, but she balked at the threshold.

"Isn't this far enough? I really don't feel..." Her voice trailed off, and Maalioh conceded. The air here was warm enough for him to be comfortable in his tunic, so if he could get the blanket back around her, Tiisam should be fine.

Of course, Tiisam was not having any of it, pushing the blanket away as soon as he tried to put it round her shoulders.

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"No, Maalioh, please. I can't bear it." Maalioh remembered the crying children, and with a nervous look back into the house he let the blanket drop. Tiisam looked very uncomfortable, shifting constantly in place and glancing towards the land door repeatedly.

"Tiisam, listen to me." The young hunter turned to look at him directly, hope in her eyes. Maalioh swallowed hard, not wanting to disappoint her but not sure what he could say. "If you keep warm and eat small amounts, your body should correct the imbalance by itself."

"But what if it is a spirit?" There was an edge of panic in her voice.

"Then Sairtowa and Liifa will find it and drive it out. And then you will recover. You must keep warm until that happens, though."

"Could you keep your hand in a fire if I told you to?" She was shifting more noticeably in place now, as if she wanted to get up and run. If she really felt that bad, it could be a real problem.

"Tiisam, breathe on my face." She looked a little puzzled, but leaned close and breathed gently on him. Even her exhaled breath was cold, but that was not what Maalioh was after; the smell of fire and water, a faint but unmistakable tang, confirmed his fears. The imbalance had got substantially worse. A glance down at her chest revealed a regular network of red lines forming diamond shapes across her breasts, and Maalioh reached out to touch them. The lines were almost hot to the touch, contrasting strongly with the cold skin between them. For a moment he wanted to wake Tohflair, but he shied away from the prospect of explaining why he was awake

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in the middle of the night with a naked woman from his own tribe.

"Tiisam, you must be strong. Go back to bed. Stay inside the furs." Maalioh had a sudden thought. "Or get in the water, and I'll stay with you. I'll even get in with you." Tiisam shuddered, and pulled away.

"I can't get in the water!" She managed to keep her voice quiet, but the horror in it was clear enough. Maalioh quickly tried to reassure her.

"That's all right. Just staying in bed should be enough." She didn't look very pleased at that, but she nodded her head, conceding. "Tomorrow, Tohflair and I will look for ways to treat the symptoms. But please keep warm until then." She nodded again, and let Maalioh lead her back to the area where her family were sleeping. She slipped inside the curtains with a hunter's grace, and Maalioh remained standing outside. He still wasn't sure that she would do as she was told, but as long as she stayed inside the house, she would survive. Moving as quietly as possible he gathered furs from his sleeping area, and carried them to the land door. Laying them on top of the trailing end of the curtains, he wrapped himself up and settled down to sleep.

* * *

"Tiisam! Tiisam!" Nairla's voice woke Maalioh, and for a moment he wondered why he was sleeping in the doorway. Then he remembered, and sat up sharply. The curtain was undisturbed under him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Getting up, he pulled his tunic on as he hurried to see what the problem was. Nairla was standing in the centre of the house, looking around.

"Maalioh! Tiisam is gone!" Maalioh stopped dead, as

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his heart went cold and his stomach lurched. She couldn't be gone; Maalioh had been sleeping across the exit.

"No," he said. "She can't be. She must be around somewhere. Tiisam!" He pushed past Nairla into the family's sleeping place, and threw the furs in Tiisam's place aside, as if she might have been missed underneath them. Wohsair and Fiitan looked at him curiously.

"What's the panic? Maybe she's just gone hunting," Wohsair suggested. Maalioh could only shake his head, as he ran out again, heading for the exit. Tohflair was awake now, and saw Maalioh run past.

"Maalioh! What is it?"

"Tiisam has gone outside, master, through the water door. I was sure she couldn't use the water door. It was too hot but she's gone and we have to find her now." Maalioh was already pulling his outdoor clothes on, while Tohflair stared at him. For a moment the doctor didn't move, but then understanding broke over his face, and he raced over to join Maalioh.

"Quickly, Nairla, Wohsair, we have to find her soon. She might be out in the snow." Nairla just looked puzzled.

"She couldn't go into the snow from the water door. She'd be naked."

"Exactly. So we have to find her soon." Maalioh couldn't keep quiet, but Nairla still seemed undecided. Wohsair, however, came running out of the sleeping area, her inner tunic tangled around her shoulders as she tried to pull it on without stopping moving. Nairla just looked at her, still uncomprehending.

"But she can't be in the snow."

"Nairla, she might be out there naked."

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"But she'd freeze to death."

"Exactly!" Maalioh almost screamed, as he pulled his boots on and grabbed his gloves. Finally, Nairla understood, and she did scream, running to join them at the entrance.

Maalioh was already on his way out, shouting Tiisam's name as he pushed his way past the curtains.

Snow had fallen in the night, but now the sky was clear, and the upper limb of the sun's crescent was just rising above the eastern hills. Vapour from the lake formed a light mist in the air, as Maalioh looked around desperately for any sign of Tiisam. The white of the snow was almost untouched, so Tiisam would have left tracks. He turned, running to the side of the house. Tiisam could hardly bear the heat, so she would have got out of the water as quickly as possible. For a moment he dared to hope that she would have simply stopped in the snow on the side of the lake, mere moments ago, but there was no sign of her on either side.

At first, he thought that there were no tracks, either, but then he found a large depression in the snow, where it started to stick a short distance back from the lake, as if someone had thrown herself into it to cool down. It had clearly snowed a little since then, but, now that he knew where to look, Maalioh could clearly see Tiisam's tracks leading away. She must have still felt hot, he reasoned, and tried to get away from the lake.

Moving as quickly as he could through the deep, soft snow, Maalioh followed the trail, something even he was up to. He passed the entrance to the house before anyone else had emerged, but he didn't wait. Tiisam had little time now that she was out in the cold.

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The trail led across the village path and into the hills, into the snowdrifts. Suddenly, he lost it. For a long moment he stared around in confusion, and then he caught sight of something dark. Kneeling, he started brushing the snow from Tiisam. She did not respond, but Maalioh was sure he could see her chest moving. As soon as he could see her body clearly, he put his arms under her shoulders and struggled to lift her, sinking deeply into the drift as he did so.

He let her go, struggling out of the snow, calling to her.

"Tiisam! Wake up, Tiisam! You mustn't go to sleep here, it's too dangerous." He moved around to stand downslope of her, grabbing her shoulders to turn her body so that he could move it across the snow to somewhere with better footing. As he did so, Wohsair and Tohflair came up beside him, taking some of the weight. Wohsair quickly spread a fur on the snow, and they dragged Tiisam onto it, wrapping her as they picked her up to carry her back to the house. Tohflair had pulled a glove off, thrusting his hand inside the furs as they moved back. He left the hand inside for a long time, and withdrew it slowly. His face set, he turned to Wohsair, who was staring at him with as much intensity as Maalioh felt, and gently shook his head.

Wohsair shook her head more fiercely, and picked up her speed, making Maalioh stumble as he tried to keep up. They got Tiisam into the house, and Wohsair carried her straight down to the far end, to immerse her in the lake. As they reached the water door, Tohflair spoke, his voice gentle.

"Wohsair, it's too late. She was out too long."

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Maalioh looked at Tiisam's face, the dry, open eyes staring at the ceiling, and the denial died in his heart.

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