

Krúos

by H.T. Yim

Mama had taught Aner when he was just a wide-eyed cub, *Only the strongest survive.*

And so the Land and Ice had become a playground for him to grow and test his strength, everyday pouncing and tumbling in the pristine Snow with his twin brother, sending the white powder flying around them to glitter like so much Star-Light in a Cloud-less Winter Sky.

Every roll was practice as much as play. Every bite and blow landed – whether on himself or his opponent – a lesson learned.

Once he was no longer a cub, no longer humming at his mother's teat yet not quite a matured boar, he ventured alone into the severe, shining beauty of the world, gleaming with promises of adventure and glory.

Adventure and glory were yet to be had, though, and he fed as a mere scavenger on the meat of leftover seals which would sustain him yet which were stripped of the precious fat so crucial to endure the season of Light, when the Ice would melt away and dwindle his domain to a fraction of its magnificence.

Occasionally, he came across other young bears, with whom he would play-fight. He relished every spar which, though Light-hearted at its surface, had lost the clumsiness of cubhood, now with the silent knowledge that such meetings would soon become full-fledged battles.

It was when he harvested his first seal – waiting silently beside a breathing hole in the Ice, dragging out the slippery creature when it emerged at last and crushing its skull between his jaws, just as he had seen his mother do so many times – that he first felt a boar full grown, gleaming with pride and blood.

Aner knew he had crossed the threshold into adulthood during his sixth Summer, when he caught a scent – one which was familiar yet which now seemed to blaze through his entire body like Lightning, immobilizing him for a long moment. When the moment passed, he threw himself onto the Ground – rubbing against the aroma, bathing himself, drowning himself in it – then began his search.

He followed the perfume, sweet and musky and maddening. Through the vast Snow he trotted tirelessly, driven by a singular purpose – to find her, and to put cubs inside her.

The frozen Sea on which he travelled seemed almost alive as the Wind whistled all around him with a melodious ferocity, singing *Shhhhhhhhhh*, *Shhhhhhhhhh* as it charged forward with wisps of Ice and Snow – dancing ghosts of the Waves trapped below which yearned to ebb and flow at the surface once more.

The Wind took pause, parting for a moment to reveal tracks. Her tracks! Meticulously, he placed his paws in the prints the sow had left behind and, unhindered by the loose sink-holes of untouched Snow, continued his pursuit with newfound determination and speed.

When she came into view, he broke into a canter, leaping over the shimmering Land-landscape – then stopped in his tracks. At nearly half his size, she seemed almost cub-like, everything about her so slender, as though she'd break apart like the spring Glacier were he to mount her. Yet her onyx eyes shone with an intensity and wariness that only came with the years, and her scent screamed that she was ready...

Aner stood, staring. He knew what he wanted to do *to* her – but was lost as to how to get there. Never had he imagined that silence, so long his most intimate companion but for the Wind, could be so awkward!

She let out a huff. So she, too, was nervous! He chuffed in response, letting her know that she did not stand alone on these anxious Shores.

Suddenly, she charged forward, her teeth bared. With this bold encouragement, he answered in turn, growling, his face so close to hers, her breath warm upon his tongue. Together, they swayed back and forth, locked in an eternal, ephemeral dance.

She turned around and began to walk away – then paused, shooting him an upward glance, simultaneously bashful and beckoning. In that moment, he would have followed her anywhere.

She led him far up the side of the Mountain, and in the privacy of the highest Snow-covered peak, two became one.

The instant their bodies connected, he released his seed into her warmth, shuddering with pleasure. Feeling victorious yet abashed, he began to withdraw – when she stopped him.

“Stay,” she told him. “I like you inside.”

Aner let out a loud and sudden snort, startled by the desire which reclaimed his body in urgency, and he drove forward once more, pushing against her, her pushing against him, the both of them moaning, oblivious to the Steam rising and fading into the Air above.

Once he finished he remained where he was, his paws against her hips. Without hesitation or thought, he leaned forward and grazed the fur on her back softly, surprised by the surge of tenderness that filled him.

And so he spent his days, making discoveries as sweet as they were strange: of companionship, lust, and gentle affection.

Peace and passion were interrupted too soon – by an odour which sent his fur bristling. Identical to his in intent, within a hundred paces. Aner surged forward, bounding down towards the skirt of the Mountain – until he came across the other boar.

The blood coursed through his body in a frenzied rhythm, urging him to destroy! – to kill, to tear out the heart and rip out the throat, to savour the texture of muscle and tendon and bone between his teeth–

Yet he did not move. Each pair of eyes locked onto the other, gauging. He was slightly larger, he noted smugly, his haunches more muscular. Then, he reared on his hind legs, filled his lungs with the freezing Air, and let out a roar that shook the Mountain.

Snarling, his opponent answered the challenge just as loudly – and advanced.

He drew his head back to dodge the bite, then lunged with his left paw, landing a blow to the head so hard he felt the impact vibrating within his shoulder.

The two locked onto each other in violent embrace, then pulled apart, their great chests heaving, black eyes reassessing. Thick crimson droplets trickled down the face of his rival onto the pure driven Snow.

Aner let out a deep growl, a low rumble which trembled deep inside his core. The other bear huffed – then turned tail, slipping and sliding down the frozen hill as he escaped.

Victory! His first real confrontation, and he had emerged winner without injury. Elated, the previous instinct to kill now replaced by that to mate, he trotted back to his prize–

– and found only a desolate scene of Snow and jagged Rock.

Panic flooded his chest as he wheeled around, raising his head high to catch her scent.

There she was in the distance, lumbering away! As perplexed as he was relieved, he rushed to catch up to her.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Aner asked, baffled.

“Oh,” she said, peering at him with eyes colder than the Ice that lay beneath their paws. “What’re you doing here?”

He cocked his head in further confusion. “Huh?”

“You left me.”

“What? No, I was protecting you.”

“As far as I can tell, you left me alone.”

“What on Ice was I supposed to do? Couldn’t you smell him? He was lurking around, he was a threat!”

“*You left me completely alone.* What if someone else came and had me? Or killed me? I carry, birth and raise the cubs; you protect me while we make them. That’s the unspoken deal.” She bared her teeth in disgust. “And now you’ve gone and made me say it.”

He gaped at her, not knowing how to respond.

“The next time you leave, do it for good.”

He was an apex predator, a lord of Land and Ice – he was a king! Yet in this moment before her Aner felt powerless, the sweet taste of his earlier triumph now foul Smoke.

Always by her side, he mated with her when she permitted, fending off rivals (never beyond her eye’s reach) in battle after brutal battle, each more vicious than the predecessor. At the end of it all, he emerged from the pass exhausted, his tooth broken, his fur so stained with blood it was more red than white to the eye.

When they parted ways, she left without looking back. He watched as her figure faded into a silhouette, then as her silhouette disappeared, merging with the paleness of the Glacier which loomed a leviathan high above the Land.

His chest swelled with admiration and affection – and relief. As much pride as he took in

his first mate, as cold and strong as she was comely, partnership had taken an exhausting toll on him, and he was eager to retreat into the simplicity of solitude.

Yet even as his old life and Winter were restored, something had changed profoundly. The Ice was never the same but always had two constants: its vast size, and the proffer of game. Now, the grandness of the Ice had diminished, and game was nowhere to be found.

Through the frigid world Aner searched in vain, feeling cheated. Or was he simply self-entitled? Yet all the promises from his cubhood seemed now to be lies. Where were the seals, the riches of skin and blubber?

It was not long before he felt his strength waning, but he refused to succumb. He would do the only thing he knew how to – he would fight!

Abandoned by Ice, he turned instead to Land, and in the Tundra found himself outside his element. The reindeer were too fast, he too slow. With only the occasional nest of goose eggs to sustain him, his body grew thin and haggard, his hide loose and sagging.

He raised his head, catching a new, complicated array of smells. Amongst it, meat! And with it, hope. Aner followed it to come across an alien scene with the most curious objects, the shapes and scents of which he had never before encountered.

Caution gave way to hunger, and he lowered his head into a small, bizarre black Cave, thin and movable, its opening the perfect circle of a fully waxed Moon. He located and grabbed the meat, coated in a dark substance – what, he was not sure, and did not care. Anything to subdue the growling in his stomach!

Aner left the foreign environment, his matted fur now spotted with black, his insides queasy and cramping, wandering for nights that felt like eternity.

How strange it was, that he could feel so heavy with so empty a belly. He laid down, his knees buckling with the force of an invisible weight.

Although his stomach had ceased its rumbling protest, he licked the lichen off a Rock – and cringed at the bitterness, at the unfairness of it all.

He was dying, this he knew.

There was no terror in Aner's heart. Mama had taught him that Death was the twin to Life, to be greeted with a smile at the end of years long spent swimming and hunting and loving.

Yet he was only seven, in his prime age! Great Waves of rage roared and crashed within his chest, sapping the last of his energy and leaving him with only pain – and utter despair.

His duty had been to bring cubs into the world. Would they also inherit his fate, doomed to fade away like the Ice?

He curled what was left of his body, feeling small and frightened, feeling as though he were a cub once more.

But he had no mother now to soothe him.

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