

Shattering Ice

The sun was a mere hint on the horizon when Serisyra slung her bag and quiver over her shoulder and left her childhood home to venture out into the snowy tundra. For weeks, she'd resisted leaving. It was the waning food stores that finally drove her to abandon the cabin in search of the only other civilization she'd heard of.

"It's a bustling city, bigger than you could ever imagine," her mother used to say, as Serisyra and her younger brother, Malkoli, huddled into the warmth radiating from the fireplace. "So many people live there, you could get lost among them."

Serisyra's head would fill with images of buildings many times larger than her modest home and crowds of people too many to count.

"But, we can never go there," her mother would warn, as the fire ran low and a chill crept in through the walls, "for there are monsters that feed on more than just the ice and sunlight from which they're born."

Malkoli would shiver—from the cold, he would claim—but Serisyra saw through her mother's words. The tundra held many dangers. Serisyra knew her mother wouldn't mind telling a few lies about monsters that didn't exist if it meant keeping her children safe at home.

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Snow crunched under Serisyra's fur-lined boots as she walked. The flat expanse of the tundra spread out around her for as far as she could see, and the snow glittered like diamonds as the sun finally broke away from the horizon. The beauty of the landscape was almost enough distraction from the graves of her family growing smaller behind her.

A strong wind swept low across the ground, scattering snow in its wake. She smiled despite herself at the seeming playfulness of the resulting swirls. She'd always loved the snow. She'd had to fight herself often to stay near the cabin and not wander off. If her mother knew where she was going...

Serisyra's smile dropped. Her mother would never know anything ever again.

Her chin sank toward her chest.

On the wind came the sound of shattering ice.

#

The sun was melting into the tundra when Serisyra finally slowed her steps. She scanned the landscape, but it was as flat and unchanging as when she'd started walking earlier. She would have to dig out a shelter—

She pitched forward as her foot struck something solid. She barely managed to catch herself with her gloved hands, avoiding a face-full of snow. She dusted the fine powder off her clothes as she stood and then turned.

The object she'd tripped over was just a lump in the snow. Her first thought was that it was a large rock—not quite boulder-sized, but too big to carry. It was a strange shape, though. She'd never seen a rock with such jagged points. She knelt beside it as the wind blew some of the snow away.

And a soulless, frozen eye stared out at her.

She scrambled back, finally understanding why the rock had looked so strange. It wasn't a rock at all. It was a person—or what was left of one. The jagged points she now recognized as ribs speared through torn flesh and ruined clothing. The eye... There was only one. The other half of the corpse's face was gone.

Heart pounding, Serisyra stumbled to her feet and backed away. The eye followed her, accusing and angry, though she was sure it had looked scared before. It was a monumental effort to turn her back on the corpse, but she felt its eye on her back, even when she passed out of view.

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She stopped for camp sometime after darkness descended. She'd intended to stop sooner, when there was more light than just the stars and moon to work by. Every time she'd thought about making camp, though, the corpse would flash through her mind. In the end, she only managed to dig out a shelter because her animal skin clothing couldn't fight the dropping temperatures, and even her fear wasn't strong enough to overcome the cold.

She slept fitfully, with dreams of her blood-stained home interspersed with the corpse dragging itself across the snow, its one eye locked on her, unheeding of the bits of itself that it left behind.

She woke for real as the sky began to lighten. To her relief, the corpse was nowhere to be seen. As she slung her pack over her shoulder and prepared to set off again, she felt...something.

But, when she looked around, there was nothing but snow and an eerie silence.

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She kept walking. Her mother never said how far the city was, but Serisyra knew she had to go east toward the rising sun—and turning around was not an option. Nothing waited for her back home except a slow death as she succumbed to hunger and the cold.

But, the silence...

It stalked her, quieting even the sound of her boots in the snow. She searched for the playful swirls of the day before to calm herself, but even the wind seemed to have abandoned her. Everything was...still, as though it were waiting.

Or hiding.

She shook the thoughts away, though her hand tightened around her bow. “Monsters aren’t real,” she said aloud, just to break the quiet. Images of her slaughtered family assaulted her. “At least, not monsters like Mother spoke of.”

Her grief was a distraction that she latched onto, and for a time, she walked without fear of what else might be walking with her.

And then, movement.

She paused, her breath quickening as she swept her gaze around. But there was nothing. She took a step forward—and a small shape darted past her. She started, nearly falling, and then scolded herself inwardly when she recognized the shape as a hare. It had frozen at her movement, its ears twitching, and she pulled an arrow from her quiver with practiced slowness.

The hare’s dark eyes watched her—stark against its white fur—as she nocked the arrow and raised her bow. She breathed out, drew the string back, and shot.

The hare jumped, the arrow missing by a hair’s breadth. Serisyra cursed under her breath (neither her father nor mother were around to scold her for it), and the hare disappeared behind a mound of snow.

“Malkoli would’ve teased me endlessly about—”

The hare screeched—a shrill sound cut short with an abruptness that signaled death. Serisyra held her breath, staring after where it had disappeared, but nothing else moved.

There are monsters... Her mother’s words flitted by on a breeze that didn’t exist.

“Or it’s just a fox,” Serisyra said. “I’m not afraid of foxes.”

She crept forward, arrow at the ready. She rounded the snow mound—and stilled. The remains of the hare were splayed out in snow stained red with blood, but there was no fox or any other animal to be seen. She moved closer, her heart pounding in her ears.

There were no tracks leading to or away from the body of the hare.

“An eagle,” she said, ignoring the obvious fact that she would’ve seen an eagle flying around. “An eagle could’ve...” But even an eagle would have made some impression in the snow, and it wouldn’t have left the hare behind.

Serisyra backed away, stumbling over her feet until she finally turned. She walked, just slow enough to not be running. The snow seemed deeper than before—not by much, but enough so that her steps grew sluggish. She caught movement in the corner of her eye, but when she whipped her head around, there was nothing.

But there was...*something*. The same *something* she’d felt when she’d woken in the morning, only it was heavier now, like a weight on her shoulders.

She quickened her pace, fighting the snow and the *something* that wanted to drag her down. Her breaths puffed out in clouds before her, and she couldn’t keep her gaze from darting around, looking for—

Looking for what?

“Monsters that don’t exist.” Her teeth chattered as she spoke. “Monsters that aren’t real.”

And then, she tripped. Face-down in the snow, she let the cold shock her back into sense. She was alone for the first time in her life. She was just letting it get to her.

She pushed herself up, and if the snow seemed to grab at her, it was just her imagination. She’d always had an overactive one. She got to her feet and bent to pick up her bow from where she’d dropped it—

And a hand shot out of the snow.

Serisyra bit back a scream. It was only after her pounding heart relaxed that she recognized that the hand belonged to another corpse that was not actually alive. It was, however, underneath her bow, and if she wanted it back, she'd have to reach past the frozen hand and into the disemboweled ribcage.

Her own hands shook as she knelt and stretched her arm out, but inches away from the corpse's hand, she froze, unable to move closer. This corpse didn't have any eyes left, but its empty sockets watched her. It was impossible that the hand had actually moved, but she hadn't seen the corpse before she'd tripped, and now, it lay there as though it had just fallen.

It was impossible that it had moved, and yet...

Unwise though it was, Serisyra left her bow with the corpse. As she turned away, she cast one last glance at the corpse's face.

She could've sworn it hadn't been smiling before.

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There were more corpses. She didn't always trip over them, but she saw them nonetheless. They dotted the landscape like the beginnings of a plague, their dead and sometimes eyeless faces following her as she walked.

And the *something* drew closer.

She couldn't see it, but she felt it in the hairs standing up on the back of her neck, the sense that she was being watched by something more alive than the dead things she could no longer escape. She didn't know what it was, but it was dangerous. Unnatural.

And it wanted her.

“The monsters,” her mother had said one night when Malkoli had asked for more information, “are made from the ice. They’re a part of the land, and they feed on sunlight.”

“So, why do they kill?” Malkoli had asked, his blue eyes wide with fear and wonder.

“It’s the nature of monsters,” her mother had said. “Why does the sun rise? It’s just the way of the world.”

“What do they look like?” Serisyra had asked, despite her disbelief in the monster’s existence.

Her mother had stared into the dying fire. “Pray you never find out,” she’d finally said.

Trudging through the snow with corpses and *something* dogging her steps, Serisyra thought that she might finally get the answer to her question, whether she wanted it or not.

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The sun began to set as Serisyra’s strength faded. She hadn’t stopped walking, even to eat—too afraid of what might reach her if she’d slowed. The corpses had stayed with her, but just as she’d become almost used to their presence, she’d started seeing...other things.

Inhuman eyes had tracked her from within the snow, which had moved as if it breathed. Large, icy rocks had shifted, taking on new shapes every time she looked away and back. The sun itself had seemed to darken despite the lack of clouds, as if something was stealing its power.

Or feeding from it.

When night finally fell, Serisyra didn’t know if she’d only imagined the things she’d seen, but she did know that, for the first time since waking that morning, the *something* was gone.

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She tossed and turned for hours until she decided sleep would continue to elude her. She started off again while the moon was still out, hoping that while the *something* was gone (or asleep itself), she could put some distance between it and her. The darkness also hid the corpses, for which she was grateful. She'd seen enough of them for her lifetime.

By the time the sun began piecing itself together over the horizon, Serisyra had managed to convince herself that her paranoia was just that. But her certainty was short-lived, for as the light grew, the *something* returned—only this time, it was more, as though it had multiplied in number.

She hunched her shoulders and refused to look up for fear that she'd see what she felt to be true: the *somethings* were closer than before.

"If they eat sunlight," Malkoli had asked once, too curious for his own good, "then what do they eat at night?"

"I don't know the reason," her mother had said, "but when and where there is no light, the monsters do not roam."

Serisyra didn't need to look to know that there were no shadows around, and the night was far from returning.

She broke into a run, unable to stay at a walking pace with the *somethings* following her. The snow had grown even deeper, though she hadn't seen it fall since she'd left her cabin, and she stumbled her way through the drifts. Icy breath ghosted across her neck and she whirled around, but she only caught movement in her peripheral vision as the *somethings* circled her.

She ran, heedless of the direction. It didn't matter where she cast her gaze—the *somethings* stayed just out of sight. They could've reached her, grabbed her, flayed her open like all the other corpses she'd seen—but they didn't. She didn't know why, and she didn't ask.

Why ask a monster why it does what it does? It's just the way of the world.

She stumbled into snow that came up to her waist. Her pace slowed to a crawl as she shoved snow aside, struggling to break free. A sound carried through the still air—an unnatural keening that vibrated into her bones. It froze her for only a moment before she fought her way out of the sticky snow that snagged on her clothes like syrup.

And that's when she saw it: a forest so dense, only shadows lived under its boughs.

She bolted for it, ungraceful in her desperation. The keening returned, louder, closer, more insistent. Ice shattered and crashed, and *something* brushed her arm.

She didn't bother to look before she pulled an arrow from her quiver and stabbed where she thought it was.

The arrow was ripped from her hand as a sound like grating rocks shook the ground. She staggered and nearly fell, but managed to keep her footing. The forest was far, but it was getting closer.

The snow grabbed at her heels. Rocks shot up to trip her. She slid across ice that she hadn't known was there, and through sheer luck alone, she didn't fall.

Something caught on her quiver, jerking her back.

"What do they look like?" Serisyra had asked.

"Pray you never find out," her mother had said.

Serisyra squeezed her eyes shut against the temptation to look and squirmed out of her quiver's strap. She stumbled back to a run, and she could *hear* them now as they pursued her. Rocks and ice shattered and broke with every footfall, and she was so close to the forest now.

Then it hit her, and she went flying.

Her breath abandoned her as she slammed onto ice. Her vision blacked as something broke. She crawled blindly toward where she hoped the forest was as something warm pooled beneath her with the coppery scent of blood.

Her vision faded in.

A presence loomed above her that cast no shadow, and she rolled onto her back.

“Pray you never find out,” her mother had said.

Serisyra saw it.

And then, she saw nothing else.

On the wind came the sound of shattering ice.

END