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HUDDLE

HIS BIRTH WAS VIOLENT. He was expelled from warm red-dark into black and white and cold, a cold that dug into his flesh immediately.

He hit a hard white surface and roiled onto his back.

He tried to lift his head. He found himself inside a little fat body, gray fur soaked in a ruddy liquid that was already freezing.

Above him there was a deep violet-blue speckled with points of light, and two gray discs. Moons. The word came from nowhere, into his head. Moons, two of them.

There were people with him, on this surface. Shapeless mounds of fat and fur that towered over him. Mother. One of them was his mother. She was speaking to him, gentle wordless murmurs.

He opened his mouth, found it clogged. He spat. Air rushed into his lungs, cold, piercing.

Tenderly his mother licked mucus off his face.

But now the great wind howled across the ice, unimpeded. It grew dark. A flurry of snow fell across him.

His mother grabbed him and tucked him into a fold of skin under her belly. He crawled onto her broad feet, to get off the ice. There was bare skin here, thick with blood vessels, and he snuggled against its heat gratefully. And there was a nipple, from which he could suckle.

He could feel the press of other people around his mother, adding their warmth.

He slept, woke, fed, slept again, barely disturbed by his mother's shuffling movements.

The sharp urgency of the cold dissipated, and time dissolved.

He could hear his mother's voice, booming through her big belly. She spoke to him, murmuring; and, gradually, he learned to reply, his own small voice piping against the vast warmth of her stomach. She told him her name -- No-Sun -- and she told him about the world: people and ice and rock and food. "Three winters: one to grow, one to birth, one to die..." Birth, sex and death. The world, it seemed, was a simple place.

The cold and wind went on, unrelenting. Perhaps it would go on forever.

She told him stories, about human beings.

"...We survived the Collision," she said. "We are surviving now. Our purpose is to help others. We will never die..." Over and over.

To help others. It was good to have a purpose, he thought. It lifted him out of the dull ache of the cold, that reached him even here.

He slept as much as he could.

No-Sun pulled her broad feet out from under him, dumping him onto the hard ice. It was like a second birth. The ice was dazzling white, blinding him. Spring.

The sun was low to his right, its light hard and flat, and the sky was a deep

blue-black over a landscape of rock and scattered scraps of ice. On the other horizon, he saw, the land tilted up to a range of mountains, tall, blood-red in the light of the sun. The mountains were to the west of here, the way the sun would set; to the east lay that barren plain; it was morning, here on the ice.

East. West. Morning. Spring. The words popped into his head, unbidden.

There was an austere beauty about the world. But nothing moved in it, save human beings.

He looked up at his mother. No-Sun was a skinny wreck; her fur hung loose from her bones. She had spent herself in feeding him through the winter, he realized.

He tried to stand. He slithered over the ice, flapping ineffectually at its hard surface, while his mother poked and prodded him.

There was a sound of scraping.

The people had dispersed across the ice. One by one they were starting to scratch at the ice with their long teeth. The adults were gaunt pillars, wasted by the winter. There were other children, little fat balls of fur like himself.

He saw other forms on the ice: long, low, snow heaped up against them, lying still. Here and there fur showed, in pathetic tufts.

"What are they?"

His mother glanced apathetically. "Not everybody makes it."

"I don't like it here."

She laughed, hollowly, and gnawed at the ice. "Help me."

After an unmeasured time they broke through the ice, to a dark liquid beneath. Water.

When the hole was big enough, No-Sun kicked him into it.

He found himself plunged into dark fluid. He tried to breathe, and got a mouthful of chill water. He panicked, helpless, scrabbling. Dark shapes moved around him.

A strong arm wrapped around him, lifted his head into the air. He gasped gratefully.

He was bobbing, with his mother, in one of the holes in the ice. There were other humans here, their furry heads poking out of the water, nostrils flaring as they gulped in air. They nibbled steadily at the edges of the ice.

"Here's how you eat," No-Sun said. She ducked under the surface, pulling him down, and she started to graze at the underside of the ice, scraping at it with her long incisors. When she had a mouthful, she mushed it around to melt the ice, then squirted the water out through her big, overlapping molars and premolars, and munched the remnants.

He tried to copy her, but his gums were soft, his teeth tiny and ineffective.

"Your teeth will grow," his mother said. "There's algae growing in the ice. See the red stuff?"

He saw it, like traces of blood in the ice. Dim understandings stirred.

"Look after your teeth."

"What?"

"Look at him."

A fat old man sat on the ice, alone, doleful.

"What's wrong with him?"

"His teeth wore out." She grinned at him, showing incisors and big canines.

He stared at the old man.

The long struggle of living had begun.

LATER, THE LIGHT started to fade from the sky: purple, black, stars. Above the western mountains there was a curtain of light, red and violet, ghostly, shimmering, semi-transparent.

He gasped in wonder. "It's beautiful."

She grinned. "The night dawn."

But her voice was uneven; she was being pulled under the water by a heavy gray-pelted body. A snout protruded from the water and bit her neck, drawing blood. "Ow," she said. "Bull --"

He was offended. "Is that my father?"

"The Bull is everybody's father."

"Wait," he said. "What's my name?"

She thought for a moment. Then she pointed up, at the sky burning above the mountains like a rocky dream. "Night-Dawn," she said.

And, in a swirl of bubbles, she slid into the water, laughing.

Night-Dawn fed almost all the time. So did everybody else, to prepare for the winter, which was never far from anyone's thoughts.

The adults cooperated dully, bickering.

Sometimes one or other of the men fought with the Bull. The contender was supposed to put up a fight for a while -- collect scars, maybe even inflict a few himself -- before backing off and letting the Bull win.

The children, Night-Dawn among them, fed and played and staged mock fights in imitation of the Bull. Night-Dawn spent most of his time in the water, feeding on the thin beds of algae, the krill and fish. He became friendly with a girl called Frazil. In the water she was sleek and graceful.

Night-Dawn learned to dive.

As the water thickened around him he could feel his chest collapse against his spine, the thump of his heart slow, his muscles grow more sluggish as his body conserved its air. He learned to enjoy the pulse of the long muscles in his legs and back, the warm satisfaction of cramming his jaw with tasty krill. It was dark under the ice, even at the height of summer, and the calls of the humans echoed from the dim white roof.

He dived deep, reaching as far as the bottom of the water, a hard invisible floor. Vegetation clung here, and there were a few fat, reluctant fishes. And the bones of children.

Some of the children did not grow well. When they died, their parents delivered their misshapen little bodies to the water, crying and cursing the sunlight.

His mother told him about the Collision.

Something had come barreling out of the sky, and the Moon -- one or other of them -- had leapt out of the belly of the Earth. The water, the air itself was ripped from the world. Giant waves reared in the very rock, throwing the people high, crushing them or burning them or drowning them.

But they -- the people of the ice -- survived all this in a deep hole in the ground, No-Sun said. They had been given a privileged shelter, and a mission: to help others, less fortunate, after the calamity.

They had spilled out of their hole in the ground, ready to help.

Most had frozen to death, immediately.

They had food, from their hole, but it did not last long; they had tools to help them survive, but they broke and wore out and shattered. People were forced to dig with their teeth in the ice, as Night-Dawn did now.

Their problems did not end with hunger and cold. The thinness of the air made the sun into a new enemy.

Many babies were born changed. Most died. But some survived, better suited to the cold. Hearts accelerated, life shortened. People changed, molded like slush in the warm palm of the sun.

Night-Dawn was intrigued by the story. But that was all it was: a story, irrelevant to Night-Dawn's world, which was a plain of rock, a frozen pond of ice, people scraping for sparse mouthfuls of food. How, why, when: the time for such questions, on the blasted face of Earth, had passed.

And yet they troubled Night-Dark, as he huddled with the others, half-asleep.

One day -- in the water, with the soft back fur of Frazil pressed against his chest -- he felt something stir beneath his belly. He wriggled experimentally, rubbing the bump against the girl.

She moved away, muttering. But she looked back at him, and he thought she smiled. Her fur was indeed sleek and perfect.

He showed his erection to his mother. She inspected it gravely; it stuck out of his fur like a splinter of ice.

"Soon you will have a choice to make."

"What choice?"

But she would not reply. She waddled away and dropped into the water.

The erection faded after a while, but it came back. More and more frequently, in fact.

He showed it to Frazil.

Her fur ruffled up into a ball. "It's small," she said dubiously. "Do you know what to do?"

"I think so. I've watched the Bull."

"All right."

She turned her back, looking over her shoulder at him, and reached for her genital slit.

But now a fat arm slammed into his back. He crashed to the ice, falling painfully on his penis, which shrank back immediately.

It was the Bull, his father. The huge man was a mountain of flesh and muscle, silhouetted against a violet sky. He hauled out his own penis from under his graying fur. It was a fat, battered lump of flesh. He wagged it at Night-Dawn. "I'm the Bull. Not you. Frazil is mine."

Now Night-Dawn understood the choice his mother had set out before him.

He felt something gather within him. Not anger: a sense of wrongness.

"I won't fight you," he said to the Bull. "Humans shouldn't behave like this."

The Bull roared, opened his mouth to display his canines, and turned away from him.

Frazil slipped into the water, to evade the Bull.

Night-Dawn was left alone, frustrated, baffled.

As winter approached, a sense of oppression, of wrongness, gathered over Night-Dawn, and his mood darkened like the days.

People did nothing but feed and breed and die.

He watched the Bull. Behind the old man's back, even as he bullied and assaulted the smaller males, some of the other men approached the women and girls and coupled furtively. It happened all the time. Probably the group would have died out long ago if only the children of the Bull were permitted to be conceived.

The Bull was an absurdity, then, even as he dominated the little group. Night-Dawn wondered if the Bull was truly his father.

...Sometimes at night he watched the flags of night dawn ripple over the mountains. He wondered why the night dawns should come there, and nowhere else.

Perhaps the air was thicker there. Perhaps it was warmer beyond the mountains; perhaps there were people there.

But there was little time for reflection.

It got colder, fiercely so.

As the ice holes began to freeze over, the people emerged reluctantly from the water, standing on the hardening ice.

In a freezing hole, a slush of ice crystal clumps would gather. His mother called that frazil. Then, when the slush had condensed to form a solid surface, it took on a dull matte appearance -- grease ice. The waves beneath the larger holes made the grease ice gather in wide, flat pancakes, with here and there stray, protruding crystals, called congelation. At last, the new ice grew harder and compressed with groans and cracks, into pack ice.

There were lots of words for ice.

And after the holes were frozen over the water -- and their only food supply -- was cut off, for six months.

When the blizzards came, the huddle began.

The adults and children -- some of them little fat balls of fur barely able to walk -- came together, bodies pressed close, enveloping Night-Dawn in a welcome warmth, the shallow swell of their breathing pressing against him.

The snow, flecked with ice splinters, came at them horizontally. Night-Dawn tucked his head as deep as he could into the press of bodies, keeping his eyes squeezed closed.

Night fell. Day returned. He slept, in patches, standing up.

Sometimes he could hear people talking. But then the wind rose to a scream, drowning human voices.

The days wore away, still shortening, as dark as the nights.

The group shifted, subtly. People were moving around him. He got colder. Suddenly somebody moved away, a fat man, and Night-Dawn found himself exposed to the wind. The cold cut into him, shocking him awake.

He tried to push back into the mass of bodies, to regain the warmth.

The disturbance spread like a ripple through the group. He saw heads raised, eyes crusted with sleep and snow. With the group's tightness broken, a mass of hot air rose from the compressed bodies, steaming, frosting, bright in the double-shadowed Moonlight.

Here was No-Sun, blocking his way. "Stay out there. You have to take your turn."

"But it's cold."

She turned away.

He tucked his head under his arm and turned his back to the wind. He stood the cold as long as he could.

Then, following the lead of others, he worked his way around the rim of the group, to its leeward side. At least here he was sheltered. And after a time more came around, shivering and iced up from their time to windward, and gradually he was encased once more in warmth.

Isolated on their scrap of ice, with no shelter save each other's bodies from the wind and snow, the little group of humans huddled in silence. As they took their turns at the windward side, the group shifted slowly across the ice, a creeping mat of fur.

Sometimes children were born onto the ice. The people pushed around closely, to protect the newborn, and its mother would tuck it away into the warmth of her body. Occasionally one of them fell away, and remained where she or he lay, as the group moved on.

This was the huddle: a black disc of fur and flesh and human bones, swept by the storms of Earth's unending winter.

A hundred thousand years after the Collision, all humans had left was each other.

Spring came slowly.

Dwarfed by the desolate, rocky landscape, bereft of shelter, the humans scratched at their isolated puddle of ice, beginning the year's feeding.

Night-Dawn scraped ice from his eyes. He felt as if he were waking from a year-long sleep. This was his second spring, and it would be the summer of his manhood. He would father children, teach them, and protect them through the

coming winter. Despite the depletion of his winter fat, he felt strong, vigorous.

He found Frazil. They stood together, wordless, on the thick early spring ice.

Somebody roared in his ear, hot foul breath on his neck.

It was, of course, the Bull. The old man would not see another winter; his ragged fur lay loose on his huge, empty frame, riven by the scars of forgotten, meaningless battles. But he was still immense and strong, still the Bull.

Without preamble, the Bull sank his teeth into Night-Dawn's neck, and pulled away a lump of flesh, which he chewed noisily.

Night-Dawn backed away, appalled, breathing hard, blood running down his fur.

Frazil and No-Sun were here with him.

"Challenge him," No-Sun said.

"I don't want to fight."

"Then let him die," Frazil said. "He is old and stupid. We can couple despite him." There was a bellow. The Bull was facing him, pawing at the ice with a great scaly foot.

"I don't wish to fight you," Night-Dawn said.

The Bull laughed, and lumbered forward, wheezing.

Night-Dawn stood his ground, braced his feet against the ice, and put his head down.

The Bull's roar turned to alarm, and he tried to stop; but his feet could gain no purchase.

His mouth slammed over Night-Dawn's skull. Night-Dawn screamed as the Bull's teeth grated through his fur and flesh to his very bone.

They bounced off each other. Night-Dawn felt himself tumbling back, and finished up on his backside on the ice. His chest felt crushed; he labored to breathe. He could barely see through the blood streaming into his eyes.

The Bull was lying on his back, his loose belly hoisted toward the violet sky. He was feeling his mouth with his fingers.

He let out a long, despairing moan.

No-Sun helped Night-Dawn to his feet. "You did it. You smashed his teeth, Night-Dawn. He'll be dead in days."

"I didn't mean to--"

His mother leaned close. "You're the Bull now. You can couple with who you like. Even me, if you want to."

"... Night-Dawn."

Here came Frazil. She was smiling. She turned her back to him, bent over, and pulled open her genital slit. His penis rose in response, without his volition.

He coupled with her quickly. He did it at the center of a circle of watching, envious, calculating men. It brought him no joy, and they parted without words.

He avoided the Bull until the old man had starved to death, gums bleeding from

ice cuts, and the others had dumped his body into a water hole.

For Night-Dawn, everything was different after that.

He was the Bull. He could couple with who he liked. He stayed with Frazil. But even coupling with Frazil brought him little pleasure.

One day he was challenged by another young man called One-Tusk, over a woman Night-Dawn barely knew, called Ice-Cloud.

"Fight, damn you," One-Tusk lisped.

"We shouldn't fight. I don't care about Ice-Cloud."

One-Tusk growled, pursued him for a while, then gave up. Night-Dawn saw him try to mate with one of the women, but she laughed at him and pushed him away.

Frazil came to him. "We can't live like this. You're the Bull. Act like it."

"To fight, to eat, to huddle, to raise children, to die.... There must be more, Frazil."

She sighed. "Like what?"

"The Collision. Our purpose."

She studied him. "Night-Dawn, listen to me. The Collision is a pretty story. Something to make us feel better, while we suck scum out of ice."

That was Frazil, he thought fondly. Practical. Unimaginative.

"Anyhow," she said, "where are the people we are supposed to help?"

He pointed to the western horizon: the rising ground, the place beyond the blue-gray mountains. "There, perhaps."

THE NEXT DAY, he called together the people. They stood in ranks on the ice, their fur spiky, rows of dark shapes in an empty landscape.

"We are all humans," he said boldly. "The Collision threw us here, onto the ice." Night-Dawn pointed to the distant mountains. "We must go there. Maybe there are people there. Maybe they are waiting for us, to huddle with them."

Somebody laughed.

"Why now?" asked the woman, Ice-Cloud.

"If not now, when? Now is no different from any other time, on the ice. I'll go alone if I have to."

People started to walk away, back to the ice holes.

All, except for Frazil and No-Sun and One-Tusk.

No-Sun, his mother, said, "You'll die if you go alone. I suppose it's my fault you're like this."

One-Tusk said, "Do you really think there are people in the mountains?"

"Please don't go," Frazil said. "This is our summer. You will waste your life."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You're the Bull. You have everything we can offer."

"It's not enough."

He turned his back, faced the mountains and began to walk.

He walked past the droppings and blood smears and scars in the ice, the evidence of humans.

He stopped and looked back.

The people had lined up to watch him go -- all except for two men who were fighting viciously, no doubt contesting his succession, and a man and woman who were coupling vigorously. And except for Frazil and No-Sun and One-Tusk, who padded across the ice after him.

He turned and walked on, until he reached bare, untrodden ice.

After the first day of walking, the ice got thinner.

At last they reached a place where there was no free water beneath, the ice firmly bonded to a surface of dark rock. And when they walked a little further, the rock bed itself emerged from beneath the ice.

Night-Dawn stared at it in fascination and fear. It was black and deep and hard under his feet, and he missed the slick compressibility of ice.

The next day they came to another ice pool: smaller than their own, but a welcome sight nonetheless. They ran gleefully onto its cool white surface. They scraped holes into the ice, and fed deeply.

They stayed a night. But the next day they walked onto rock again, and Night-Dawn could see no more ice ahead.

The rock began to rise, becoming a slope.

They had no food. Occasionally they took scrapes at the rising stone, but it threatened to crack their teeth.

At night the wind was bitter, spilling off the flanks of the mountains, and they huddled as best they could, their backs to the cold, their faces and bellies together.

"We'll die," One-Tusk would whisper.

"We won't die," Night-Dawn said. "We have our fat."

"That's supposed to last us through the winter," hissed No-Sun.

One-Tusk shivered and moved a little more to leeward. "I wished to father a child," he said. "By Ice-Cloud. I could not. Ice-Cloud mocked me. After that nobody would couple with me."

"Ice-Cloud should have come to you, Night-Dawn. You are the Bull," No-Sun muttered.

"I'm sorry," Night-Dawn said to One-Tusk. "I have fathered no children yet. Not every coupling--"

One-Tusk said, "Do you really think it will be warm in the mountains?"

"Try to sleep now," said Frazil sensibly.

They were many days on the rising rock. The air grew thinner. The sky was never brighter than a deep violet blue.

The mountains, at last, grew nearer. On clear days the sun cast long shadows that reached out to them.

Night-Dawn saw a gap in the mountains, a cleft through which he could sometimes see a slice of blue-violet sky. They turned that way, and walked on.

Still they climbed; still the air thinned.

They came to the pass through the mountains. It was a narrow gully. Its mouth was broad, and there was broken rock, evidently cracked off the gully sides.

Night-Dawn led them forward.

Soon the walls narrowed around him, the rock slick with hard gray ice. His feet slipped from under him, and he banged knees and hips against bone-hard ice. He was not, he knew, made for climbing. And besides, he had never been surrounded before, except in the huddle. He felt trapped, confined.

He persisted, doggedly.

His world closed down to the aches of his body, the gully around him, the search for the next handhold.

...The air was hot.

He stopped, stunned by this realization.

With renewed excitement, he lodged his stubby fingers in crevices in the rock, and hauled himself upward.

At last the gully grew narrower.

He reached the top and dragged himself up over the edge, panting, fur steaming.

... There were no people here.

He was standing at the rim of a great bowl cut into the hard black rock. And at the base of the bowl was a red liquid, bubbling slowly. Steam gathered in great clouds over the bubbling pool, laced with yellowish fumes that stank strongly. It was a place of rock and gas, not of people.

Frazil came to stand beside him. She was breathing hard, and her mouth was wide open, her arms spread wide, to shed heat.

They stood before the bowl of heat, drawn by some ancient imperative to the warmth, and yet repelled by its suffocating thickness.

"The Collision," she said.

"What?"

"Once, the whole world was covered with such pools. Rock, melted by the great heat of the Collision."

"The Collision is just a story, you said."

She grunted. "I've been wrong before."

His disappointment was crushing. "Nobody could live here. There is warmth, but it is poisonous." He found it hard even to think, so huge was his sense of failure.

He stood away from the others and looked around.

Back the way they had come, the uniform hard blackness was broken only by

scattered islands of gray-white: ice pools, Night-Dawn knew, like the one he had left behind.

Turning, he could see the sweep of the mountains clearly: he was breaching a great inward-curving wall, a great complex string of peaks that spread from horizon to horizon, gaunt under the blue-purple sky.

And ahead of him, ice had gathered in pools and crevasses at the feet of the mountains, lapping against the rock walls as if frustrated -- save in one place, where a great tongue of ice had broken through. Glacier, he thought.

He saw that they could walk around the bowl of bubbling liquid rock and reach the head of the glacier, perhaps before night fell, and then move on, beyond these mountains. Hope sparked. Perhaps what he sought lay there.

"I'm exhausted," No-Sun said, a pillar of fur slumped against a heap of rock. "We should go back."

Night-Dawn, distracted by his plans, turned to her. "Why?"

"We are creatures of cold. Feel how you bum up inside your fat. This is not our place..."

"Look," breathed One-Tusk, coming up to them.

He was carrying a rock he'd cracked open. Inside there was a thin line of red and black. Algae, perhaps. And, in a hollow in the rock, small insects wriggled, their red shells bright.

Frazil fell on the rock, gnawing at it eagerly.

The others quickly grabbed handfuls of rocks and began to crack them open.

They spent the night in a hollow at the base of the glacier.

In the morning they clambered up onto its smooth, rock-littered surface. The ice groaned as it was compressed by its forced passage through the mountains, which towered above them to either side, blue-gray and forbidding.

At the glacier's highest point, they saw that the river of ice descended to an icy plain. And the plain led to another wall of mountains, so remote it was almost lost in the horizon's mist.

"More walls," groaned One-Tusk. "Walls that go on forever."

"I don't think so," said Night-Dawn. He swept his arm along the line of the distant peaks, which glowed pink in the sun. "I think they curve. You see?"

"I can't tell," muttered No-Sun, squinting.

With splayed toes on the ice, Night-Dawn scraped three parallel curves -- then, tentatively, he joined them up into concentric circles. "Curved walls of mountains. Maybe that's what we're walking into," he said. "Like ripples in a water hole."

"Ripples, in rock?" Frazil asked skeptically.

"If the Collision stories are true, it's possible."

No-Sun tapped at the center of his picture. "And what will we find here?"

"I don't know."

They rested awhile, and moved on.

The glacier began to descend so rapidly they had some trouble keeping their feet. The ice here, under tension, was cracked, and there were many ravines.

At last they came to a kind of cliff, hundreds of times taller than Night-Dawn. The glacier was tumbling gracefully into the ice plain, great blocks of it carving away. This ice sheet was much wider than the pool they had left behind, so wide, in fact, it lapped to left and right as far as they could see and all the way to the far mountains. Ice lay on the surface in great broken sheets, but clear water, blue-black, was visible in the gaps.

It was -- together they found the word, deep in their engineered memories -- it was a sea.

"Perhaps this is a circular sea," One-Tusk said, excited. "Perhaps it fills up the ring between the mountains."

"Perhaps."

They clambered down the glacier, caution and eagerness warring in Night-Dawn's heart.

There was a shallow beach here, of shattered stone. The beach was littered with droppings, black and white streaks, and half-eaten krill.

In his short life, Night-Dawn had seen no creatures save fish, krill, algae and humans. But this beach did not bear the mark of humans like themselves. He struggled to imagine what might live here.

Without hesitation, One-Tusk ran to a slab of pack ice, loosely anchored. With a yell he dropped off the end into the water.

No-Sun fluffed up her fur. "I don't like it here --"

Bubbles were coming out of the water, where One-Tusk had dived.

Night-Dawn rushed to the edge of the water.

One-Tusk surfaced, screaming, in a flurry of foam. Half his scalp was torn away, exposing pink raw flesh, the white of bone.

An immense shape loomed out of the water after him: Night-Dawn glimpsed a pink mouth, peg-like teeth, a dangling wattle, small black eyes. The huge mouth closed around One-Tusk's neck.

He had time for one more scream -- and then he was gone, dragged under the surface again.

The thick, sluggish water grew calm; last bubbles broke the surface, pink with blood.

Night-Dawn and the others huddled together.

"He is dead," Frazil said.

"We all die," said No-Sun. "Death is easy."

"Did you see its eyes?" Frazil asked.

"Yes. Human," No-Sun said bleakly. "Not like us, but human."

"Perhaps there were other ways to survive the Collision."

No-Sun turned on her son. "Are we supposed to huddle with that, Night-Dawn?"

Night-Dawn, shocked, unable to speak, was beyond calculation. He explored his heart, searching for grief for loyal, confused One-Tusk.

THEY STAYED on the beach for many days, fearful of the inhabited water. They ate nothing but scavenged scraps of crushed, half-rotten krill left behind by whatever creatures had lived here.

"We should go back," said No-Sun at last.

"We can't," Night-Dawn whispered. "It's already too late. We couldn't get back to the huddle before winter."

"But we can't stay here," Frazil said.

"So we go on." No-Sun laughed, her voice thin and weak. "We go on, across the sea, until we can't go on anymore."

"Or until we find shelter," Night-Dawn said.

"Oh, yes," No-Sun whispered. "There is that."

So they walked on, over the pack ice.

This was no mere pond, as they had left behind; this was an ocean.

The ice was thin, partially melted, poorly packed. Here and there the ice was piled up into cliffs and mountains that towered over them; the ice hills were eroded, shaped smooth by the wind, carved into fantastic arches and spires and hollows. The ice was every shade of blue. And when the sun set, its light filled the ice shapes with pink, red and orange.

There was a cacophony of noise: groans and cracks, as the ice moved around them. But there were no human voices, save their own: only the empty noise of the ice -- and the occasional murmur, Night-Dawn thought, of whatever giant beasts inhabited this huge sea.

They walked for days. The mountain chain they had left behind dwindled, dipping into the mist of the horizon, and the chain ahead of them approached with stultifying slowness. He imagined looking down on himself, a small, determined speck walking steadily across this great, molded landscape, working toward the mysteries of the center.

Food was easy to find. The slushy ice was soft and easy to break through.

No-Sun would walk only slowly now. And she would not eat. Her memory of the monster that had snapped up One-Tusk was too strong. Night-Dawn even braved the water to bring her fish, but they were strange: ghostly-white creatures with flattened heads, sharp teeth. No-Sun pushed them away, saying she preferred to consume her own good fat. And so she grew steadily more wasted.

Until there came a day when, waking, she would not move at all. She stood at the center of a fat, stable ice-floe, a pillar of loose flesh, rolls of fur cascading down a frame leached of fat.

Night-Dawn stood before her, punched her lightly, cajoled her.

"Leave me here," she said. "It's my time anyhow."

"No. It isn't right."

She laughed, and fluid rattled on her lungs. "Right. Wrong. You're a dreamer. You always were. It's my fault, probably."

She subsided, as if deflating, and fell back onto the ice.

He knelt and cradled her head in his lap. He stayed there all night, the cold of the ice seeping through the flesh of his knees.

In the morning, stiff with the cold, they took her to the edge of the ice floe and tipped her into the water, for the benefit of the creatures of this giant sea.

After more days of walking, the ice grew thin, the water beneath shallow.

Another day of this and they came to a slope of hard black rock, that pushed its way out of the ice and rose up before them.

The black rock was hard-edged and cold under Night-Dawn's feet, its rise unrelenting. As far as he could see to left and right, the ridge was solid, unbroken, with no convenient passes for them to follow, the sky lidded over by cloud.

They grasped each other's hands and pressed up the slope.

The climb exhausted Night-Dawn immediately. And there was nothing to eat or drink, here on the high rocks, not so much as a scrap of ice. Soon, even the air grew thin; he struggled to drag energy from its pale substance.

When they slept, they stood on hard black rock. Night-Dawn feared and hated the rock; it was an enemy, rooted deep in the Earth.

On the fourth day of this they entered the clouds, and he could not even see where his next step should be placed. With the thin, icy moisture in his lungs and spreading on his fur he felt trapped, as if under some infinite ice layer, far from any air hole. He struggled to breathe, and if he slept, he woke consumed by a thin panic. At such times he clung to Frazil and remembered who he was and where he had come from and why he had come so far. He was a human being, and he had a mission that he would fulfill.

Then, one morning, they broke through the last ragged clouds.

Though it was close to midday, the sky was as dark as he had ever seen it, a deep violet blue. The only clouds were thin sheets of ice crystals, high above. And -- he saw, gasping with astonishment -- there were stars shining, even now, in the middle of the sunlit day.

The slope seemed to reach a crest, a short way ahead of him. They walked on. The air was thin, a whisper in his lungs, and he was suspended in silence; only the rasp of Frazil's shallow breath, the soft slap of their footsteps on the rock, broke up the stillness.

He reached the crest. The rock wall descended sharply from here, he saw, soon vanishing into layers of fat, fluffy clouds.

And, when he looked ahead, he saw a mountain.

Far ahead of them, dominating the horizon, it was a single peak that thrust out of scattered clouds, towering even over their elevated position here, its walls sheer and stark. Its flanks were girdled with ice, but the peak itself was bare black rock -- too high even for ice to gather, he surmised -- perhaps so high it thrust out of the very air itself.

It must be the greatest mountain in the world.

And beyond it there was a further line of mountains, he saw, like a line of broken teeth, marking the far horizon. When he looked to left and right, he

could see how those mountains joined the crest he had climbed, in a giant unbroken ring around that great, central fist of rock.

It was a giant rock ripple, just as he had sketched in the ice. Perhaps this was the center, the very heart of the great systems of mountain rings and circular seas he had penetrated.

An ocean lapped around the base of the mountain. He could see that glaciers flowed down its heroic base, rivers of ice dwarfed by the mountain's immensity. There was ice in the ocean too -- pack ice, and icebergs like great eroded islands, white, carved. Some manner of creatures were visible on the bergs, black and gray dots against the pristine white of the ice, too distant for him to make out. But this sea was mostly melted, a band of blue-black.

The slope of black rock continued below him-- far, far onward, until it all but disappeared into the misty air at the base of this bowl of land. But he could see that it reached a beach of some sort, of shattered, eroded rock sprinkled with snow, against which waves sluggishly lapped.

There was a belt of land around the sea, cradled by the ring mountains, fringed by the sea. And it was covered by life, great furry sheets of it. From this height it looked like an encrustation of algae. But he knew there must be living things there much greater in scale than any he had seen before.

"...It is a bowl," Frazil breathed.

"What?"

"Look down there. This is a great bowl, of clouds and water and light, on whose lip we stand. We will be safe down there, away from the rock and ice."

He saw she was right. This was indeed a bowl -- presumably the great scar left where one or other of the Moons had tom itself loose of the Earth, just as the stories said. And these rings of mountains were ripples in the rock, frozen as if ice.

He forgot his hunger, his thirst, even the lack of air here; eagerly they began to hurry down the slope.

The air rapidly thickened.

But his breathing did not become any easier, for it grew warm, warmer than he had ever known it. Steam began to rise from his thick, heavy fur. He opened his mouth and raised his nostril flaps wide, sucking in the air. It was as if the heat of this giant sheltering bowl was now, at the last, driving them back.

But they did not give up their relentless descent, and he gathered the last of his strength.

The air beneath them cleared further.

Overwhelmed, Night-Dawn stopped.

The prolific land around the central sea was divided into neat shapes, he saw now, and here and there smoke rose. It was a made landscape. The work of people.

Humans were sheltered here. It was a final irony, that people should find shelter at the bottom of the great pit dug out of the Earth by the world-wrecking Collision.

...And there was a color to that deep, cupped world, emerging now from the mist. Something he had never seen before; and yet the word for it dropped into place, just as had his first words after birth.

"Green," Frazil said.

"Green. Yes..."

He was stunned by the brilliance of the color against the black rock, the dull blue-gray of the sea. But even as he looked into the pit of warmth and air, he felt a deep sadness. For he already knew he could never reach that deep shelter, peer up at the giant green living things; this body which shielded him from cold would allow heat to kill him.

Somebody spoke.

He cried out, spun around. Frazil was standing stock still, staring up.

There was a creature standing here. Like a tall, very skinny human.

It was a human, he saw. A woman. Her face was small and neat, and there was barely a drop of fat on her, save around the hips, buttocks and breasts. Her chest was small. She had a coat of some fine fur -- no, he realized with shock; she was wearing a false skin, that hugged her bare flesh tightly. She was carrying green stuff, food perhaps, in a basket of false skin.

She was twice his height.

Her eyes were undoubtedly human, though, as human as his, and her gaze was locked on his face. And in her eyes, he read fear.

Fear, and disgust.

He stepped forward. "We have come to help you," he said.

"Yes," said Frazil.

"We have come far--"

The tall woman spoke again, but he could not understand her. Even her voice was strange -- thin, emanating from that shallow chest. She spoke again, and pointed, down toward the surface of the sea, far below.

Now he looked more closely he could see movement on the beach. Small dots, moving around. People, perhaps, like this girl. Some of them were small. Children, running free. Many children.

The woman turned, and started climbing away from them, down the slope toward her world, carrying whatever she had gathered from these high banks. She was shaking a fist at them now. She even bent to pick up a sharp stone and threw it toward Frazil; it fell short, clattering harmlessly.

"I don't understand," Frazil said.

Night-Dawn thought of the loathing he had seen in the strange woman's eyes. He saw himself through her eyes: squat, fat, waddling, as if deformed.

He felt shame. "We are not welcome here," he said.

"We must bring the others here," Frazil was saying.

"And what then? Beg to be allowed to stay, to enter the warmth? No. We will go home."

"Home? To a place where people live a handful of winters, and must scrape food from ice with their teeth? How can that compare to this?"

He took her hands. "But this is not for us. We are monsters to these people. As they are to us. And we cannot live here."

She stared into the pit of light and green. "But in time, our children might learn to live there, Just as we learned to live on the ice."

The longing in her voice was painful. He thought of the generations who had lived out their short, bleak lives on the ice. He thought of his mother, who had sought to protect him to the end; poor One-Tusk, who had died without seeing the people of the mountains; dear, loyal Frazil, who had walked to the edge of the world at his side.

"Listen to me. Let these people have their hole in the ground. We have a world. We can live anywhere. We must go back and tell our people so."

She sniffed. "Dear Night-Dawn. Always dreaming. But first we must eat, for winter is coming."

"Yes. First we eat."

They inspected the rock that surrounded them. There was green here, he saw now, thin traces of it that clung to the surface of the rock. In some places it grew away from the rock face, brave little balls of it no bigger than his fist, and here and there fine fur-like sproutings.

They bent, reaching together for the green shoots.

The shadows lengthened. The sun was descending toward the circular sea, and one of Earth's two Moons was rising.