

Ice

Elizabeth Bear

The stallion was gnawed and bloody, but he was not dead.

Snow fell between us, gentling the contours of the battlefield where my brethren had died with their backs to a raging ocean, but I could see him sprawled in the gathering drifts among the gaunt bodies of a half-dozen of Loki's vile-wolves. A final abomination still panted nearby, a tar-colored monster struggling to rise as I approached. It had the strength neither to attack nor flee.

I took a deep breath of the crystalline air, and with it came a realization: *So the vile-wolves can be killed.* And then I wondered, *Why didn't the valraven just fly up and escape them?*

An old wound, garnered fleeing, stung my thigh, and a hesitant step carried me toward him. I had lost my helmet somewhere; I shoved dirty-blond braids long as my arms out of the way. Far below us, the ocean foamed against boulders and ice at the foot of the seacliffs. The stallion raised one of his twin heads, and thrashed his shattered wings. His brown eyes shone white-rimmed and wide with fear beneath the horns. His other head, the antlered one, flopped on a broken neck, tongue lolling between fanged teeth. Under the tattered velvet of his hide, his lungs heaved; the blood that frothed from his nostrils was painfully bright. His wings — which should have been improbably white as unicorns — were streaked and daubed with blood and filth, while his struggles had churned earth and snow and gore into a horrible mire. I am ashamed to say I hesitated.

Oh, Muire, I thought, *woman, for pity's sake.* So I went to him, kneeling down beside him in the ice and the mud and the blood. I reached out an uncertain hand for his porcelain muzzle, and I let what Light remained shine out of my eyes, feeling as if it faded already. I had never touched one of the valraven before: the angelic destriers were for better warriors than I.

He grew quiet at my touch, and I almost wept at the terrible extent of his wounds. He sighed and pushed his face against me, as a horse might with a friend. That act, somehow, struck me with more pity and horror than any other thing that I had seen on all that cruel and terrible day. How many fallen? How many failures? And not the least of them mine. I struck the tear from my eye: I was not deserving of pity, even my own.

The day had gone poorly for the Othinn's children. Far greater of my brethren than I fell that day. I had seen Strifbjorn dragged down by the trickster's hungry wolves; seen Menglad Brightwing die on a kiss, her will and being snuffed out like a candleflame; seen Arngeir thrown down and savaged by the tarnished.

To my eternal shame and sorrow, I fled the field and lived, while my brethren fell like tears.

Æorian's weight across my back felt like a silent accusation. Only respect for the blade kept me from hurling her away. I was no longer fit to bear her.

Instead, I spoke softly to the stallion. "The Aesir have failed," I told him. "The enemy have the day, and the war, and you are dying, Bright one. Can I give you mercy?"

He squealed in fury, knocking me onto my back as he surged upright, bracing himself spraddle-legged on broken limbs. *LIVE!* he demanded in my mind, more the shape of defiance than any sense of a word.

I scrambled to my feet and stood, panting, facing him. Broken, unbowed, he met my gaze until I looked down and stepped away. I spread my hands so that he could see how the Light flickered back from them, rolling slowly up my arms as if being peeled away. Soon, the aura that shielded me would be gone.

"I abandoned the Light," I whispered, "and without it I can do nothing to heal you."

But then an edgy, grieving howl drifted to my ears from across the ice. I shuddered. The wounded vile-wolf twitched and whined, and I glanced reflexively at the sky. There were no stars to be seen and, not far away, the vile-wolves were hunting.

"I will be quicker than they," I told him. He seemed to shrug his broken wings and turned his face away from me, as if in dismissal. I shrugged as well, turning to leave him to his choice, there on the snow-silenced battlefield.

But I passed too close to the crippled vile-wolf, which lunged and snapped at me with a moment's desperate agility. I

skittered back through the snow, tripping, and tumbled wildly into a bloodied drift. My fingers found the object I had fallen over, recognizing armor and cooling flesh. Suddenly, I understood why the valraven had not flown up, why he had stood and permitted himself to be savaged.

I had fallen over the corpse of his rider, whom he would not have left while she yet breathed. The drifting snow had covered her. As I struggled to disentangle myself I saw the sword by her outstretched hand, ice freezing to the lashes of her open eyes, and the blood-spotted banner on which she had fallen. It was dark midnight blue, spangled in silver: starlight on the water.

The stallion regarded me, and shame rose in me in response to the weight of his gaze. I stood and dried my hands carefully on my trousers before I drew Æorian and stood beside him.

"What is my life worth, now, anyway?" I asked him conversationally. "As well die here with you as later, alone."

He snorted, crimson blood dripping from his nostrils. In pity I reached out and laid my hand against his cheek. *No such courage in all the world*, I thought, and made myself ready to die.

Lean shadows drifting across the white distance, they came. Their ribcages protruded with eternal hunger; their backbones and tails were knobby and spined. Great splayed paws held them lightly on the snow, and their maws dripped slaver as they fell down on us like a breaking storm.

It was a small pack, four of them — not the dozen it had taken to pull down Strifbjorn. Still, I was not Strifbjorn, and the crystal sword was dark in my hand.

The first vile-wolf lunged in low while two others went wide to flank me. The fourth slunk around to the right side, apparently considering itself enough for one wounded valraven. The stallion somehow reared up on his taloned hind feet, striking out with cloven forehooves. The vile-wolf dodged away: the warsteed was too slow, too gravely wounded. When he came down, his hooves barely grazed the beast's flank, and he fell heavily to his knees.

I brought Æorian up from low guard in a sweeping blow, almost weeping at the darkness in her crystal blade. She connected with the vile-wolf, opening a gash along its ribs and belly. It was thrown back, but quickly rose to its feet and turned to nose the bloodless wound. Its molten, ravenous gaze returned to me, and the tail wagged once, twice, a third time in slow mockery.

In utter silence, it lunged again.

I had turned to deal with the two that were attempting to take my flank. Vile-wolves hunt like wolves; one distracts the prey while the rest make the true attack. I held Æorian in my hand like a lance, and the closest vile-wolf sheered off from her point.

I spun slowly to keep my three vile-wolves in my sight. The last one skulked up to the downed valraven behind me with a mincing, predatory gait, but I had no attention to spare for it or him. I shook hair and sweat from my eyes, and raised my blade once more, feeling my lips curve back in a vicious smile.

Perhaps a bit late, but I was dying now as I should have died that afternoon. There was some satisfaction to be had in it.

And then, as things will in combat, everything happened at once.

I caught a flurry of motion from the corner of my eye as the stallion suddenly, gracelessly, moved again. At that moment, all three of the vile-wolves stalking me lunged.

Æorian seemed to move with a will of her own: she sang through the air in a hurtling arc and clove the first vile-wolf in two. It shrieked — a high, thin sound — and fell to the ground, forelimbs still scrabbling toward me. The second one fastened its jaws in my forearm only because I threw that arm up in front of my throat, while the third one tried to swing wide and hamstring me.

Half spun about by the force of the vile-wolf's assault, I glimpsed the source of the commotion behind me. The fourth vile-wolf had tried to tear out the stallion's throat, thinking him finished. He was not; as I watched, his teeth clamped in the vile-wolf's shoulder. That great white head snapped up to shake the foul creature like a terrier shakes a rat, and it screamed, screaming again when the valraven threw it against the ground. Unable to stand, he knelt on it and tore twitching gobs of darkness and bone out of it with his teeth.

I brought Æorian down desperately, barely getting her blade in between the fangs of the attacking vile-wolf and my

thigh. The other one dragged at my arm, still silent. Meanwhile, the front half of the one I had dismembered hauled itself toward me grimly, gold eyes narrow in concentration and hate. Forgetting myself, forgetting our defeat, in fear and in horror I called on the lost and fallen Light....

And was answered by a flash and a flare in Æorian's crystal blade — a surge of brilliance crackling from my eyes, streaming from my mouth, and shining madly from the wound in my arm. The valraven had torn the struggling vile-wolf's flesh away from something red beneath its deathless hide; I saw him sink his teeth into that something and rip it free. The vile-wolf gave a horrible shriek.

The circling beast leaped at me, and I swung Æorian in a flat curve that bisected its chest. The blade flamed and spat, and the vile-wolf came apart like a torn feather-pillow as Æorian pierced its heart. The one that had my arm released its hold and whirled to run, but I took two steps after it and drove the blade down between its shoulders, feeling the spine part and then the brief resistance of its unholy heart. It gave a despairing cry and expired.

I glanced at the valraven, who had ripped the heart of the no-longer twitching vile-wolf in two. He cast it aside with something like disgust, and looked up at me.

Ignoring the blood running down my arm, I turned back and dispatched the injured vile-wolf. Then I wiped Æorian on my trousers and slid her into her sheath. A proper cleaning would have to wait.

I knelt beside the valraven again, and laid my hand on his shoulder. *Kasimir*, I heard inside my heart, and my eyes went wide. I knew the honor he did me. Only a valraven's rider may know his name.

"I am not worthy, Bright one."

He just snorted and let himself slump down in the bloody snow. *Will you wait with me?*

It was not so much words as a desire, a feeling in my heart, and I nodded. And then I felt the Light singing within me and started to my feet. "Maybe," I said aloud, "Maybe..."

I shook my head, holding out my hands. A lacy cirrus of fire flickered along my skin. "I can try..." I whispered. I already knew his answer. Live.

Miracles happen as they will. I spread my hands open, and I called on the Light.

It was not as it had been in the past: I could not feel the overwhelming presence and comfort of the Light surround me. Rather, what I called came from within, and seemed limited in scope. The quality was different — rather than the certainty of what to do and how to do it, I knew what my options were: the mercy he had already refused... or a gamble on wild magic that might very well destroy us both.

I knew I could not heal him. But perhaps I could turn him into something else. I chose, and called on the Light.

The earth itself quivered and ruptured, deep and deep. The snow at the crevice melted instantly, the torn brown soil laid bare. The valraven shuddered, trying to surge to his feet, but quieted at my whispered plea. And then, bone edging through his skin, he did scramble up. Molten metal crawled from the earth, stinking of some chthonic forge, and when it touched his flesh he screamed. *Oh, Light, I prayed, _what are you doing?*

There was no answer.

I smelled scorching meat, heard it sizzle over his piteous cries. He shrieked, but he did not struggle, and I know not how, but he stood. Over the awful crying I heard the nauseating crack of twisted bones healing, of bent limbs straightening. The white-hot metal burned through him, reworked him inside and out, made him more than alive, something alien, something *other*.... And yet he endured. He lived on.

I watched in awe and horror, heard my own voice as the voice of another. "Iron horse," I whispered. "Iron angel..." I looked down at my hands.

The Light had left them.

Conscious, impassive now, he straightened slowly. Both heads on their long necks turned to regard me, white rings already fading around living brown eyes in sculptured faces. His new skin cooled, his new bones hardened, and his bright new wings opened and flexed, feather-perfect. I could hear the soft whisper of the tiny interlocking barbs on the pinions as he fanned his wings like a declaration of war. Hydraulics hissed as he took a step and a low, slow breath with the sound of a steam locomotive's whistle blew from his nostrils. He shook out his mane, and each hair of it was a single, gleaming, steel-blue wire.

The snow sublimated under his footsteps as he came to me, my clothes smoldering where he touched. I laid my hand flat against his shoulder and jerked it away in a moment, scalded.

I took a step or two back.

"What are you?" I whispered.

Kasimir, he answered, as if in my ear. *Sorcery and steel*.

"What are you?" I asked again, and his eyes were warm and soft.

I am War.

I turned my head, looked away. "Why did you tell me your name?" I knew the answer. "I am not worthy of you."

I would not choose one unworthy.

"I fled." He graced me with the steady regard of four patient eyes. "I fled the vile-wolves, and the tarnished ones, and I hid while our allies died."

Heat rolled from him; the heat of the forge, the heat of a summer's day: a physical pressure. My torn arm ached: it was still bleeding. "I am a coward. I will bring you pain."

What pain could equal the pain of this creation? The antlered head ducked suddenly down, and he folded his wings neatly and began to vaporize the snow about his hooves with short, sharp nudges of his muzzle — shyly, and so like a horse. I turned away again. I was not worthy.

"Kasimir," I said softly, just to taste it once, to taste the wonder of his offer. "The Light has failed."

We are the Light that remains, he replied, and I could make no answer. *He* had not failed. *He* had not broken, and run. *His* honor was intact. How could I remain with him and face him?

"No," I said. "Oh, no..." And while I still could, I took the first step away.

Behind me I heard the rattle and the rustle of his wings. *When you name me, I shall come*. A knowing feeling with his next words. *You will come back to me. You are not so fallen as you think, and I am the coming Age of the World*. With a masterful leap he was airborne and gone, and I was blessedly, terribly, finally alone.

I stood on that battlefield a long time before I returned to myself. The snow fell all that night and into the morning, and the dawn was recognizable chiefly by a lightening of the gloom. The cold did not trouble me, and I did not feel the wind then as I would feel it later.

In the end, the simple passage of time brought me back to my senses.

I had no way to bury the bodies in the frozen ground and not enough fuel to raise a pyre for them. I labored in silence and with bare rest, piling up course upon course of stones there on the killing ground, at the edge of the cliff over the ocean where we had turned at bay. When I could not reach the top I packed snow into a ramp, up which I toiled until I had built a wall eight feet tall and a bowshot long. The wound in my arm healed quickly, although it left a white scar. I did not know cold, then. I did not know hunger, although to my sorrow I had known and quailed at fear.

When I fell into a snowdrift and could not lift myself, I rested. I chewed snow from the battlefield for water — for thirst was beginning to haunt me — and sometimes that snow was frozen solid with the blood of my brethren. I built a wall. When the wall was built I stacked the bodies in its lee, course upon course of them, and by the time I had finished that task I felt the first stirrings of what I would eventually come to identify as hunger.

There was nothing to eat. *I am becoming mortal*, I thought, and welcomed the seeming revelation. Mortals live a little, proscribed time, and then their shells are laid to rest, and their spirits hale off I know not where. Surprising, I know: but my kind and I were always firmly tied to the earth under our feet, the stars overhead, the Light upon the waters in the primeval darkness.

I could do nothing for my hunger so I worked. I laid crystal blades in the hands of dead warriors, and I found ways to move the bodies of the valraven to lie among those of their masters. I buried the tarnished as well as the *valkyries* and the *einherjar*: we were brothers again, in death. The vile-wolves...I left them where they had fallen.

It snowed and I was thankful for the snow, because I did not wish to look up and see the sun, or the stars. I found one

crystal blade abandoned, washed up among the rocks, and I put her with the rest: Svanvítr, with a knotted brass pommel more elaborate than that of my own blade. I knew to whom she had belonged, although I sorrowed that I did not find his body among those of the tarnished.

Ragnarok. It was prophesied. It was *not* foretold that any of us would survive.

I walled the bodies around, stone upon stone, and then I levered up the slabs for the barrow's roof and laid them in place. I grew thinner and paler as day piled upon day like stone upon stone. My strength waned at first, and then began to grow again, again far outstripping that of mortal Men. I did not call upon the aid of miracles: I feared I would be answered, and I feared more that I would not.

In the end it was complete, and the snow stopped falling, and the clouds broke, and I stood over the grave and watched the sunrise paint the grey granite boulders with lichens of blood and time. I hoisted Æorian to my shoulder. I had thought of leaving her there, to mark the barrow, but it seemed... indecent. So I kept her. Instead, I plunged into a crevice the staff of a tattered standard of midnight blue, decorated with myriad tiny flaring four-pointed stars in glittering silver.

The sun flamed, breathtaking, crimson and incarnadine and vermilion and hellebore and scarlet; I gasped in awe as it rose over the sea. I breathed it in with all my strength, coughing at the unexpected clash of cold air with my lungs. It was new, all new, and I hated every shiver and chilblain and cracked lip and droplet of snot.

I thought of stepping into that sunrise from the top of the barrow. I pictured my fall, tumbling, and the wreck of my body on the sea-ripped boulders below. I imagined the brief sensation of flight, considered it very carefully, and I closed my eyes.

I spread my arms wide, feeling the bitter sea-breeze tug at me, almost lifting me up, and I took a deep and singing breath. This time, I did not choke on it.

I stepped forward, and the echo arrested my movement. *Live*. I struggled, tangled in a spiderweb of doubt, of despair, of self-hatred: *I'm no good to anyone and it will be quicker than waiting fifty mortal years to die and no-one will grieve for me and Strifbjorn is dead anyway and who cares, who cares, who cares?*

Silence. Long, still, empty silence. And then his voice, or the memory of his voice: I was too far gone in hunger and grief and exhaustion to know which. *Live*, it said. *One makes what difference one can.*

And the moment passed.

I opened my eyes. The sunrise was over: there were splinters of gold dancing on the dark water far out to sea, and that was all. It looked like a path.

I turned around and headed South, toward the lands of men.

—THE END—