

STILL-HUNTING

by Sarah K. Castle

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Illustration by Broeck Steadman

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Faced with big changes, anyone who can must do whatever it takes to adapt...

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Somewhere north of Noatak, Rariil caught a whiff of a woman. The smell, dilute in the breeze off the Chukchi Sea, was familiar. He licked the air, tasting for details. It was Graashah. She'd been here recently, and without cubs. Rariil grinned. As tradition demanded, she'd come home from Dheznaya to find a mate. She couldn't have walked. The ice across the Bering Strait had thawed early. She must have taken a ship. They now allowed bears on ships, polars and Kodiaks alike, with a special class of ticket. His lips curled back over his canines. He wondered what the terms of those tickets were.

Graashah had been Rariil's first mate, back when the ice pack lasted through the mating season. He'd been a smaller bear then, but well fed and determined enough to impress her. Rariil was now the biggest polar bear around. He'd secretly perfected a method for still-hunting seals in open water, so he was fat on seal blubber despite the warm winter. Graashah would surely choose him, if he could get to her first. A fishing boat was moored a couple of hundred yards offshore. If Graashah could take a boat, so could he. A polar bear could set his own terms on a boat that size.

He swam out and climbed on board. The boatmen weren't too happy about it. Those on deck ran to the bow and fired first a flare gun and then a shotgun. They shot up in the air and into the sea, anywhere except toward Rariil. They all knew shooting a polar bear was prohibited by law.

"Wevok." Rariil growled the name of his communal meeting ground.
"Wevok, now!"

The men lowered their guns and looked at each other.

“Aw, shit,” one said.

“No! Point Hope! We’re going to Point Hope,” another man yelled at Rariil.

“Wevok,” Rariil said and sat down heavily. The whole boat rocked. Rariil would talk to men when it was necessary, but there was rarely a reason to listen to them.

Finally, they motored up the coast with Rariil grooming himself calmly on the rear deck. His thoughts returned to Graashah and whom he’d have to fight to win her love. He believed he could beat any polar bear who’d spent the season trying to hunt on ice, but the damn Kodiaks could be a problem. Every year they came farther north. Dirty polar sows, who didn’t mind fishy breath, would mate with them. The brown buggers could fight and match a polar bear off the ice. Rariil chuffed. Graashah wasn’t that kind of bear. She wouldn’t come all the way back here to take up with a Kodiak. Rariil licked the rough, translucent fur on his forearms until its brilliant white compared favorably to the clean paint on the boat.

When he dove off at Wevok the boat bobbed like a cork, throwing a man into the water with him. The man should have known the law against bears eating men, but he looked pretty panicked anyway when Rariil helped him back on board. The boat turned a tight arc, its motor grumbling, and then it sped back towards Point Hope. The best thing about men was that they’d always leave, eventually.

He smelled Graashah strongly now. Her musk mingled with the rotten sweetness of aged carrion. For more than an hour, he stalked her along the gravelly beach. He found her near a beluga carcass at the water’s edge. The faint diesel smell told Rariil a boat had pushed it to shore. It was a handout, probably from the Food For Bears program. Men had started the program a couple years after the permanent ice receded so far from shore most polar bears couldn’t swim to it in the summer. He’d seen them bringing dead seals in once. Seals! A polar bear who couldn’t catch their own seals traditionally went to wait for death on the ice. To make it worse, the seals stank of human pride, tinged with guilt. Rariil wouldn’t eat that blubber, not even after dark.

Ten feasting bears had crushed through the ice on the ground around the whale. They were all covered in mud and blood. Rariil was disgusted with the filthy beggars. They probably hadn’t even done the Successful Scavenger prayer, and why would they? The bears hadn’t found the thing. It had been brought to them.

Rariil stood on his hind legs and roared to announce himself. Graashah raised her head from the beluga and barked a greeting. The sight of her made his heart beat deeper. He sized up the competition. He was ready to fight and win her. The one Kodiak in the crowd recognized him and grudgingly moved off a short distance. Rariil growled; it was moving upwind. The young polars around the carcass smelled Rariil's indignation. They turned to watch the Kodiak's progress toward the dominant position.

It kept its head high and submissive. Maybe the damn thing didn't know it was being rude. Rariil roared and galloped a short distance toward it. The Kodiak watched him over its shoulder. Either wisely or through lucky chance, it moved inland and away from the upwind position. From where he stood, Rariil saw a strange shape on its head. At its crown, a smooth surface shaped like a half moon covered its ears. The Kodiak's eyes flashed from the shadow cast by the bent disc on its head, very handy for a bear not used to sunlight glaring on snow.

Rariil had never seen a Kodiak like this. He walked closer, until he could see what the thing was. It was a red plastic saucer, the kind human children slid down hills on. A cord hooked on each handle bent the saucer down over the Kodiak's ears and pulled tight under his chin. The Kodiak had not only come this far north, he'd brought human garbage with him. Rariil charged in silent fury.

The Kodiak ran, but slid and stumbled in the soft snow. Rariil caught it when it was down. It rolled to its back immediately. Rariil went for the saucer. He yanked the rim with his teeth. It didn't come right off, so he yanked again.

"My hat!" the Kodiak squealed.

The elastic cord whipped loose and smacked Rariil in the eye. He jumped aside to rub the stinging eye in the snow. The Kodiak rolled up and ran off. His eye soothed, Rariil tore the saucer to shreds with teeth and claws. Kodiaks in hats ... what would be next? He scattered the pieces to dilute the combined garbage and Kodiak stench, growling furiously as he did it. The worst thing about Kodiaks was that they always came back.

Back at the beluga, two nanulaks nibbled at the whale's gut. Their yellow fur was evidence that Kodiaks had found mates here before. Rariil growled as he passed them. Nanulaks would not fight for a female and had no interest in mating. When Rariil dreamed about his death, he often found the spirit world crowded with nanulak ghosts. They wandered the ice with their black-ringed eyes looking huge on their malformed faces. They gaped with desire to return to the living

world and howled with the knowledge that they never could. They were sterile, all of them. Nanulaks gave Rariil a bad feeling, but it wasn't one he could fight. They ate but didn't mate. It just seemed wrong. He went to the shore and washed his paws in the ice-clotted water.

Graashah approached him and dropped a large piece of blubber at his feet. It quivered in the low surf.

"Greetings, Rariil, father of three cubs by my womb," she said, in the language spoken only by polar bears.

"Greetings, Graashah," he replied. Her direct approach embarrassed him, but the blubber smell took it off his mind. Rariil drooled thickly but kept his head low to broadcast dominance. He watched the male polar bears at the carcass behind her. Three of them stared back.

Graashah slowly wagged her head in a playful gesture. "Eat the blubber, Rariil. You don't need to fight. I chose you the moment I saw you. There isn't a polar male as fat as you on either side of the Bering Strait. You'll sire my cubs this season."

"Why do you insult me? I'll fight for my mate as we've done since ice has floated on the sea."

Keeping her head low, she said, "Eat my offering, Rariil."

She pushed the blubber closer to his forepaw. It was a choice piece, and he was hungry. The largest polar male stepped forward. Its challenge suffused the air.

"A sea bear doesn't relax before mating, we fight. I don't like the way those youngsters are looking at me. It's traditional, and I'll be damned if I don't like to rough up a couple boys this time of year." Rariil began a lumbering charge toward the bears gathered around the carcass. The young polars stood their ground, bracing themselves against his charge. They smelled hopeful, which raised Rariil's rage to a fighting level.

Graashah ran to block him and then charged with her head low. Rariil stumbled to a stop. A female bear didn't behave this way unless she had cubs.

"I don't have time for this! I need to mate before the moon passes through another quarter."

She'd spoken the word *time* in English. There was no such term in the language native to polar bears.

"Time?" Rariil repeated, straining to recall its meaning.

Graashah smelled his confusion and explained. "The men have made a den for me in Anchorage. If you want to fight, you can fight my man, but I need to mate soon."

"Your man?" Rariil was baffled.

"Over there." She pointed with her snout.

Far off in the distance, Rariil could barely make out the shape of a human. Behind him sat a big spinney stick bug, the kind men fly around in. Sniffing at the air, Rariil picked out the acrid ash smell of burnt jet fuel from the other smells of rot. The bug must have been there for a while; the smell was faint.

He barked a laugh, "A man?"

Graashah's head stilled and she hissed, "Yes, a man. He was a watcher in Siberia. He would bring plump seals just for me. I taught him to speak polar bear. He made a stone that speaks properly, scents and all. We talk for hours. He wants me to come live with him in Anchorage. His name is Grrary."

Rariil smelled Graashah's affection for the man as she spoke. "A polar bear can't live in Anchorage except as a captive," he reminded her.

"He says he can make snow for me all year long, and I'll live in a large den where the floors are always ice."

"You would live in a zoo."

"We won't be in a zoo. Every fall, we'll travel back to Dheznaya. The cubs and I will roam free on the ice while Grrary works. In the summer, we'll stay in Anchorage. I'll work with the men to set up a preserve for polar bears, no Kodiaks allowed. Every breeding polar female will get a free ride to the preserve, in season.

"Grrary says I'll be an ambassador, the first ambassador to humans from land mammals. Sperm whales, dolphins, and now polar bears: the bears of the sea. It's perfect that we're next. I talked to an orca about it and she was envious.

Diplomatic recognition is a great honor.”

“Did you offer the orca your hind leg while you were at it?” Rariil remembered Graashah had always been a jokester.

“She wasn’t hungry,” she said without apparent irony.

Rariil scratched behind his ear with a rear paw. She had to be joking. He picked up the blubber and chewed it thoughtfully. It was delicious, just far enough past fresh to be savory.

“Let’s go see this man of yours, then.” Rariil raised himself up on all fours and stretched. He laughed to clear the doubts from his mind. When Graashah smelled the sweet spice of his credulity, they began to walk toward the man.

“Why do you trust this Grrary?”

“He’s learned our language and customs, shown respect. Besides, he’s fragile as a newborn cub, no fur, no blubber. Those puffy clothes he wears make him smell like a goose. He’s harmless.”

Rariil remembered the naked humans he’d seen and smelled at seaside sweat lodges. “I think they smell like piss.”

“Grrary smells very nice. Too nice, sometimes he makes me hungry. But all I have to do then is open my eyes. There isn’t enough fat on him to make a meal.”

The depth and detail of Graashah’s fantasy disturbed him. He decided to change the subject.

“So, how are the bear-class accommodations on a ship?”

“I’ve heard it’s miserable. They put you below deck, and you don’t get any fresh air from the time you board to the time you disembark. Wait for the ice and walk across the Strait. That’s what I’d do. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you recently came across yourself didn’t you?”

“No! Grrary flew me here in his spinney stick bug yesterday. Not many men have a bug like that, you know.”

Rariil sniffed hard at Graashah’s fur and smelled burnt fuel there, faintly. He

looked toward the spinney stick bug, now maybe twenty paces away. A man stood at its door. Rariil's hackles rose at this strangeness. Traditionally, men crawled back in their metal bugs as soon as they saw you take even a few steps in their direction. Law or no law, bears will be bears, and a human looks tasty when you're hungry.

The man slowly dropped to his hands and knees in the shallow snow as they approached. This seemed so wrong, Rariil reared up on his hind legs and roared. The man and Graashah both cringed, lowering their heads and bodies toward the ground.

Rariil roared in polar bear, "Whatever in Ursus' name is going on here better come to an end!" Then, in English, he shouted, "Stop this. Now!"

The man trembled in his blue, puffy bodysuit. He wagged his whole body from the hips as he crawled forward two, then three steps before collapsing to the ground. His rear end lowered onto his heels. His forehead lowered to the snow. He stretched his arms towards Rariil. The man turned his right hand over, and then opened it to expose a small angular stone. He rubbed the stone with his thumb in a vigorous circular motion.

"Greetings, Rariil, honorable mate of Graashah. My name is Gary. I meekly greet you and ask that you share your food, if you have any to spare." The stone in the man's hand spoke in choppy but understandable polar bear. The sour scent of submission was perfect.

Rariil dropped to all fours in disbelief. He understood the words, but they didn't make any sense. Graashah must have taught him the traditional greeting for a submissive bear begging food from a dominant one. He didn't know how to respond, and it made him angry. *Now we'll have to listen, and they'll know we understand*, he thought. *These pale-skinned men always step directly upwind.*

"He's too small to fight," said Graashah, sniffing to understand the cause of Rariil's confusion. "Let's go. I need to mate."

Rariil smelled her heat rising. His body tensed. Bears were always upwind of men when it came to size and respect for tradition. A polar bear fights for mating privileges. The begging was offensive, no matter the language used to offer it.

Grrary remained prostrate in the wet snow, all puffed up with fake blubber. "I'm here to respect..."

Rariil snorted, lowered his head, and charged.

Graashah roared, “Grrary!” and ran at Rariil.

Grrary’s stone must have smelled Rariil’s aggression. He was already up, pulling a tranquilizer gun from between his knees. The dart stung Rariil’s chest seconds before Graashah tackled him. She held him down, and he fell deeply asleep.

Rariil woke up on ice, knowing he’d fought Grrary and lost. By tradition he should now be looking for another mate, but Graashah was nearby. They were alone as far as he could smell. There was only one thing to do. He followed her footprints from where they began, next to the stick bug rails’ impressions in the snow.

Graashah was still-hunting when he found her. Chin at the edge of a seal’s breathing hole, she lay on the ice as if asleep. Rariil waited at a distance until a seal popped up. Graashah bit its head, pulled it onto the ice, and killed it with a hard shake. She noticed him when she started to eat and growled a warning. Rariil stayed back. She’d need the blubber for her pregnancy.

They mated, wandered, and hunted together for days. The sun arced across the sky ten times before they got to the edge of the ice. Graashah would leave for her den soon. Rariil wondered if she would walk or if Grrary would pick her up.

“Will our cubs beg for food, or will you teach them hunt?” he barked when he saw how she watched the sky.

“They’ll live on the preserve full time after they’re weaned. Bears like you will teach them the traditional ways as they get older on the ice.”

Rariil grunted. “Men always step directly upwind. They’ll insist on driving around your preserve in their rolling metal bugs, making noise and flashing lights, careless of the wind. Their petroleum and piss stench will drive traditional bears away. You can’t keep your dignity in a situation like that.”

Graashah growled. Rariil smelled her impatience. “The frozen part of the world is shrinking. We need to work with men if we want to remain as we are: beautiful white bears living on and from the sea. I’ll feed my cubs through their weaning whether the blubber is given by Grrary or hunted by me. Seals won’t swim into our paws. We need ice to hunt.”

“Let me show you something.” Rariil pushed himself into the sea, chest first.

Graashah paddled after him into the open water. When they got a little more than halfway to shore, Rariil said, “Spread your arms and float. Be as still as you can. Clear your mind. Smell like ice.” His back and rump gleamed white against the dark green water. Though the water was calm, it took some effort to keep his nose above the surface. The rich saltwater smell filled his nostrils, and he imagined himself frozen, distilled from the sea.

The sun moved a short way across the sky before a pod of seals swam past. Their slick, dark heads broke the surface here and there. Rariil made no move to follow them; tradition held it better to wait quietly. He was tempted by the thought that two strong kicks would bring them into reach. But seals were snagged by their curiosity or their need to rest and breathe.

Soon the seals came back. They swam around him, just out of reach, long enough to try his patience and his strength. He concentrated, tried to tangle them in his thoughts, willing them into his reach. Finally, one swam to Rariil’s arm and touched it with a fin, testing it as a place to haul out and rest. Rariil quickly folded the seal to his chest and bit its head, killing it in the traditional way. He rolled and tore into the seal, holding it steady with his paws over his stomach.

“The seals need ice to rest. We can be that ice. Teach the cubs.” Rariil tossed the half-eaten seal to Graashah. She floated nearby, nodding. The sea smell overpowered her scent, so Rariil couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

They began the long swim back. It took more out of a bear to float still than it did to lie on the ice. Fatigued, he searched the horizon for the white line that meant rest. He heard the spinney stick bug long before he saw it. Graashah stopped swimming and floated, waiting for her man. Rariil swam past her, still heading for shore.

He heard the bug stop to hover over Graashah. He rolled to his back, hoping for a short rest and curious about how Grrary would pick Graashah up from the sea. Grrary leaned from the bug’s open door, aiming a large gun that rested on his shoulder. He pointed it at Graashah. It fired with a loud pop.

Rariil saw a net fly from the muzzle and land in the water. Graashah swam into it and carefully pushed her arms through two of the net’s holes. Slowly, she was lifted out of the water toward Grrary. Rariil stared in disbelief. Surely they both knew it was illegal to trap a polar bear. Graashah relaxed into the net. The scent of her relief blew past him on the wind pushed by the bug’s rotors. It

couldn't be a trap if it was consensual. Rariil rolled back over to resume his swim.

The wind from the rotors suddenly began beating on his back. The water whipped into a choppy froth, making it more difficult to swim. Rariil roared his frustration and then choked when his mouth filled with water. The net hit the water in front of him. He turned to swim away, felt the angle of the rotor wind change, and his back legs snagged in the net being pulled up behind him. Rariil rolled to tear at the net with his claws, but his arm got tangled. A gentle pull wrapped the net around him and pulled him out of the water.

Rariil struggled and the net swung wide arcs, pulling the bug from side to side. He was on his back staring up at the bug and the sky beyond it.

"I am trapped!" he roared in polar bear. "You take me against my will!" He thrashed again, and the bug tilted toward the water.

"If you don't quit struggling, the copter will crash and we'll all drown. Let us take you to the ice. You won't make it on your own." Grrary's speaking stone sounded from the bug, unnaturally loud.

Rariil twisted around to see the ice still far away on the horizon. What the man said made sense. His energy drained away with his adrenaline, and he brayed his resignation. The man might not understand, but Graashah would.

They laid him gently on the ice and remotely unclipped their line from the net before flying away. Rariil lay still for a while, feeling the net press into his back. He'd almost swum into his nanulak nightmare. An open water still-hunt could kill if it took too long or didn't bring in enough blubber to fuel the swim back.

The frozen part of the world was shrinking. It was now necessary to listen to men, and there was a reason to speak to them. The terms of a polar preserve would need to be negotiated. Kodiaks would leave them alone if the distance across the ice was great enough. Polars on the preserve shouldn't have to compete for blubber and space against nanulaks, who could never bear or sire cubs.

Rariil rolled over and stood up. The net draped over his back, hanging on him like a parka on an Inupiat. He shrugged. The net slid easily off his arms and legs to pile around his feet. Offended by its human smells, he tore at it with his longest claw, cutting it in half. He paused, remembering how it so gently entangled him. A net this small could be easily shrugged off and held the water. He could use it to snag seals from an arm's length away, or bring in two seals at once. Rariil

grinned. An open water still-hunt could make a bear fat, if the conditions were right. This was something to teach the cubs. Rariil kept his tongue in his mouth. It would take a while to get used to the smells.