

THE LONG, COLD GOODBYE

by Holly Phillips

Holly Phillips is a full-time writer living on an island off the west coast of Canada. She is the author of the award-winning story collection *In the Palace of Repose* and the dark fantasy novel *The Engine's Child*, released late in 2008 by Del Rey. The author tells us that she's grown tired of the blank stares people give her when she explains her chosen vocation as a fantasy writer, so she has recently decided to try calling herself a "professional fantasist." People will probably still stare, but the ensuing conversation might be fun. Her latest story for us explores the coldest reaches of an alien world and the frozen depths of the human heart.

Berd was late and she knew Sele would not wait for her, not even if it weren't cold enough to freeze a standing man's feet in his shoes. She hurried anyway, head down, as if she hauled a sled heavy with anxiety. She did not look up from the icy pavement until she arrived at the esplanade, and was just in time to see the diver balanced atop the railing. Sele! she thought, her voice frozen in her throat. The diver was no more than a silhouette, faceless, anonymous in winter clothes. Stop, she thought. Don't, she thought, still unable to speak. He spread his arms. He was an ink sketch, an albatross, a flying cross. Below him, the ice on the bay shone with the apricot-gold of the sunset, a gorgeous summer nectar of a color that lied in the face of the ferocious cold. The light erased the boundary between frozen sea and icy sky; from where Berd stood across the boulevard, there was no horizon but the black line of the railing, sky above and below, the cliff an edge on eternity. And the absence the diver made when he had flown was as bright as all the rest within the blazing death of the sun.

Berd crossed the boulevard, huddled deep within the man's overcoat she wore over all her winter clothes. Brightness brought tears to her eyes and the tears froze on her lashes. She was alone on the esplanade now. It was so quiet she could hear the groan of tide-locked ice floes, the tick and ping of the iron railing threatening to shatter in the cold. She looked over, careful not to touch the metal even with her sleeve, and saw the shape the suicide made against the ice. No longer a cross: an asterisk bent to angles on the frozen waves and ice-sheeted rocks. He was not alone there. There was a whole uneven line of corpses lying along the foot of the cliff, like a line of unreadable type, the final sentence in a historical tome, unburied until the next storm swept in with its erasure of snow. Berd's diver steamed, giving up the last ghost of warmth to the blue shadow of the land. He was still faceless. He might have been anyone, dead. The shadow grew. The sun spread itself into a spindle, a line; dwindled to a green spark and was

gone. It was all shadow now, luminous dusk the color of longing, a blue to break your heart, ice's consolation for the blazing death of the sky. Berd's breath steamed like the broken man, dusting her scarf with frost. She turned and picked her way across the boulevard, its pavement broken by frost heaves, her eyes still dazzled by the last of the day. It was spring, the thirtieth of April, May Day Eve. The end.

Sele. That was not, could never have been him, Berd decided. Suicide had become a commonplace this spring, this non-spring, but Sele would never think of it. He was too curious, perhaps too fatalistic, certainly too engaged in the new scramble for survival and bliss. (But if he did, *if* he did, he would call on Berd to witness it. There was no one left but her.) No. She shook her head to herself in the collar of her coat. Not Sele. She was late. He had come and gone. The diver had come and gone. Finally she felt the shock of it, witness to a man's sudden death, and flinched to a stop in the empty street. Gaslights stood unlit in the blue dusk, and the windows of the buildings flanking the street were mostly dark, so that the few cracks of light struck a note of loneliness. Lonely Berd, witness to too much, standing with her feet freezing inside her shoes. She leaned forward, her sled of woe a little heavier now, and started walking. *She* would not go that way, not *that way*, she would *not*. She would find Sele, who had simply declined to wait for her in the cold, and get what he had promised her, and then she would be free.

But where, in all the dying city, would he be?

Sele had never held one address for long. Even when they were children Berd could never be sure of finding him in the same park or alley or briefly favored dock for more than a week or two. Then she would have to hunt him down, her search spirals widening as he grew older and dared to roam further afield. Sometimes she grew disheartened or angry that he never sought her out, that she was always the one who had to look for him, and then she refused. Abstained, as she came to think of it in more recent years. She had her own friends, her own curiosities, her own pursuits. But she found that even when she was pursuing them she would run across Sele following the same trail. Were they so much alike? It came of growing up together, she supposed. Each had come too much under the other's influence. She had not seen him for more than a year when they found each other again at the lecture on ancient ways.

"Oh, hello," he said, as if it had been a week.

"Hello." She bumped shoulders with him, standing at the back of the crowded room—crowded, it must be said, only because the room was so

small. And she had felt the currents of amusement, impatience, offense, disdain, running through him, as if together they had closed a circuit, because she felt the same things herself, listening to the distinguished professor talk about the “first inhabitants,” the “lost people,” as if there were not two of them standing in the very room.

“We lost all right,” Sele had said, more rueful than bitter, and Berd had laughed. So that was where it had begun, with a shrug and a laugh—if it had not begun in their childhood, growing up poor and invisible in the city built on their native ground—if it had not begun long before they were born.

Berd trudged on, worried now about the impending darkness. The spring dusk would linger for a long while, but there were no lamplighters out to spark the lamps. In this cold, if men didn’t lose fingers to the iron posts, the brass fittings shattered like rotten ice. So there would be no light but the stars already piercing the blue. *Find Sele, find Sele.* It was like spiraling back into childhood, spiraling through the city in search of him. Every spiral had a beginning point. Hers would be his apartment, a long way from the old neighborhood, not so far from the esplanade. *He won’t be there,* she warned herself, and as if she were tending a child, she turned her mind from the sight of the dead man lying with the others on the ice.

* * * *

Dear Berd,

I cannot tell you how happy your news has made me. You are coming! You are coming at last! It seems as though I have been waiting for a lifetime, and now that I know I’ll only have to wait a few short weeks more they stretch out before me like an eternity. Your letters are all my consolation, and the memory I hold so vividly in my mind is better than any photograph: your sweet face and your eyes that smile when you look sad and yet hold such a melancholy when you smile. My heart knows you so well, and you are still mysterious to me, as if every thought, every emotion you share (and you are so open you shame me for my reserve) casts a shadow that keeps the inner Berd safely hidden from prying eyes. Oh, I won’t pry! But come soon, as soon as you can, because one lifetime of waiting is long enough for any man...

* * * *

Sele’s apartment was in a tall old wooden house that creaked and moaned even in lesser colds than this. Wooden houses had once been

grand, back when the lumber was brought north in wooden ships and the natives lived in squat stone huts like ice-bound caves, and Sele's building still showed a ghost of its old beauty in its ornate gables and window frames. But it had been a long time since it had seen paint, and the weathered siding looked like driftwood in the dying light. The porch steps groaned under Berd's feet as she climbed to the door. An old bell pull hung there. She pulled it and heard the bell ring as if it were a ship's bell a hundred miles out to sea. The house was empty, she needed no other sign. All the same she tried the handle, fingers wincing from the cold brass even inside her mitten. The handle fell away from its broken mechanism with a clunk on the stoop and the door sighed open a crack, as if the house inhaled. It was dark inside; there was no breath of warmth. All the same, thought Berd, all the same. She stepped, anxious and hopeful, inside.

Dark, and cold, and for an instant Berd had the illusion that she was stepping into one of the stone barrow-houses of her ancestors, windowless and buried deep under the winter's snow. She wanted immediately to be out in the blue dusk again, out of this tomb-like confinement. Sele wasn't here. And beyond that, with the suicide fresh in her mind and the line of death scribbled across her inner vision, Berd had the sense of dreadful discoveries waiting for her, as if the house really were a tomb. *Go. Go before you see ...* But suppose she didn't find Sele elsewhere and hadn't checked here? Intuition was not infallible—her many searches for Sele had not always borne fruit—she had to be sure. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness. She found the stairs and began to climb.

There was more light upstairs, filtering down like a fine gray-blue dust from unshuttered windows. Ghost light. The stairs, the whole building, creaked and ticked and groaned like every ghost story ever told. Yet she was not precisely afraid. Desolate, yes, and abandoned, as if she were haunted by the empty house itself; as if, having entered here, she would never regain the realm of the living; as if the entire world had become a tomb. *As if.*

It was the enthusiasm she remembered, when memory took her like a sudden faint, a shaft of pain. They had been playing a game of make-believe, and the game had been all the more fun for being secreted within the sophisticated city. Like children constructing the elaborate edifice of Let's Pretend in the interstices of the adult world, they had played under the noses of the conquerors who had long since forgotten they had ever conquered, the foreigners who considered themselves native born. Berd and Sele, and later Berd's cousins and Sele's half-sister, Isse. They had had everything to hide and had hidden nothing. The forgotten, the ignored, the perpetually overlooked. Like children, playing. And for a time Sele had

been easy to find, always here, welcoming them in with their bits of research, their inventions, their portentous dreams. His apartment warm with lamplight, no modern gaslights for them, and voices weaving a spell in point and counterpoint. *Why don't we...? Is there any way...? What if...?*

What if we could change the world?

The upper landing was empty in the gloom that filtered through the icy window at the end of the hall. Berd's boots thumped on the bare boards, her layered clothes rustled together, the wooden building went on complaining in the cold, and mysteriously, the tangible emptiness of the house was transmuted into an ominous kind of inhabitation. It was as if she had let the cold dusk in behind her, as if she had been followed by the wisp of steam rising from the suicide's broken head. She moved in a final rush down the hall to Sele's door, knocked inaudibly with her mittened fist, tried the handle. Unlocked. She pushed open the door.

"Sele?" She might have been asking him to comfort her for some recent hurt. Her voice broke, her chest ached, hot tears welled into her eyes. "Sele?"

But he wasn't there, dead or alive.

Well, at least she was freed from this gruesome place. She made a fast tour of the three rooms, feeling neurotic for her diligence (but she did have to make sure all the same), and opened the hall door with all her momentum carrying her forward to a fast departure.

And cried aloud with the shock of discovering herself no longer alone.

They were oddly placed down the length of the hall, and oddly immobile, as if she had just yelled *Freeze!* in a game of statues. Yes, they stood like a frieze of statues: Three People Walking. Yet they must have been moving seconds before; she had not spent a full minute in Sele's empty rooms. Berd stood in the doorway with her heart knocking against her breastbone, her eyes watering as she stared without blinking in the dead light. Soon they would laugh at the joke they had played on her. Soon they would move.

Berd was all heartbeat and hollow fear as she crept down the hallway, hugging the wall for fear of brushing a sleeve. Her cousin Wael was first, one shoulder dropped lower than the other as if he was on the verge of turning to look back. His head was lowered, his uncut hair fell ragged across his face, his clothes were far too thin for the cold. The cold. Even

through all her winter layers, Berd could feel the impossible chill emanating from her cousin's still form. Cold, so cold. But as she passed she would have sworn he swayed, ever so slightly, keeping his balance, keeping still while she passed. Keeping still until her back was turned. Wael. Wael! It was wrong to be so afraid of him. She breathed his name as she crept by, and saw her breath as a cloud.

If any of them breathed, their breath was as cold as the outer air.

Behind Wael was Isse, Sele's beautiful half-sister. Her head was raised and her white face—was it only the dusk that dusted her skin with blue?—looked ahead, eyes dark as shadows. She might have been seeing another place entirely, walking through another landscape, as if this statue of a woman in a summer dress had been stolen from a garden and put down all out of its place and time. Where did she walk to so intently? What landscape did she see with those lightless eyes?

And Baer was behind her, Berd's other cousin. He had been her childhood enemy, a plague on her friendship with Sele, and somehow because of it her most intimate friend, the one who knew her too well. His name jumped in Berd's throat. He stood too close to the wall for Berd to sidle by. She had to cross in front of him to the other wall and he *had* to see her, though his head, like Wael's, was lowered. He might have been walking alone, brooding a little, perhaps following Isse's footsteps or looking for something he had lost. Berd stopped in front of him, trembling, caught between his cold and Isse's as if she stood between two impossible fires.

"Baer?" She hugged herself, maybe because that was as close as she dared come to sharing her warmth with him. "Oh, Baer."

But grief did not lessen her fear. It only made her fear—made *them*—more terrible. She had come too close. Baer could reach out, he only had to reach out ... She fled, her sleeve scraping the wall, her boots battering the stairs. Down, down, moving too fast to be stopped by the terror of what else, what worse, the dark lobby might hold. Berd's breath gasped out, white even in the darkest spot by the door. It was very dark, and the dark was full of reaching hands. The door had no handle. It had swung closed. She was trapped. No. No. But all she could whisper, propitiation or farewell, was her cousin's name. "Baer..." *please don't forget you loved me.* "Baer..." *please don't do me harm.* Until in an access of terror she somehow wrenched open the door and sobbed out, feeling the cold of them at her back, "I'm sorry!" But even then she could not get away.

There was no street, no building across the way. There was no way, only a vast field of blue ... blue ... Berd might have been stricken blind for that long moment it took her mind to make sense of what her eyes saw. It was ice, the great ocean of ice that encircled the pole, as great an ocean as any in the world. Ice bluer than any water, as blue as the depthless sky. If death were a color it might be this blue, oh! exquisite and full of dread. Berd hung there, hands braced on the doorframe, as though to keep herself from being forced off the step. She forgot the cold ones upstairs; remembered them with a new jolt of fear; forgot them again as the bears came into view. The great white bears, denizens of the frozen sea, exiles on land when the spring drove the ice away. Exiles no more. They walked, slow and patient and seeming sad with their long heads nodding above the surface of the snow; and it seemed to Berd, standing in her impossible doorway—if she turned would she find the house gone and nothing left but this lintel, this doorstep, and these two jambs beneath her hands?—it seemed to her, watching the slow bears walk from horizon to blue horizon, that other figures walked with them, as white-furred as the bears, but two-legged and slight. She peered. She leaned out, her arms stretched behind her as she kept tight hold of her wooden anchors, not knowing anymore if it was fear that ached within her.

And then she felt on her shoulder the touch of a hand.

She fell back against the left-hand doorjamb, hung there, her feet clumsy as they found their new position. It was Baer, with Wael and Isse and others—yes, others!—crowding behind him in the lobby. The house was not empty and never had been, no more than a tomb is empty after the mourners have gone.

“Baer...”

Did he see her? He stood as if he would never move again, his hand outstretched as though to hail the bears, stop them, call them to come. He did not move, but in the moment that Berd stared at him, her heart failing and breath gone, the others had come closer. Or were they moved, like chess pieces by a player’s hand? They were only *there*, close, close, so close the cold of them ate into Berd’s flesh, threatening her bones with ice. Her throat clenched. A breath would have frozen her lungs. A tear would have frozen her eyes. At least the bears were warm inside their fur. She fell outside, onto the ice—

—onto the stoop, the first stair, her feet carrying her in an upright fall to the street. Yes: street, stairs, house. The door was swinging closed on the dark lobby, and there was nothing to see but the tall, shabby driftwood

house and the brass doorknob rolling slowly, slowly to the edge of the stair. It did not fall. Shuddering with cold, Berd scoured her mittens across her ice-streaked face and fled, feeling the weight of the coming dark closing in behind her.

* * * *

Dear Berd,

I am lonely here. Recent years have robbed me of too many friends. Do I seem older to you? I feel old sometimes, watching so many slip away from me, some through travel, some through death, some through simple, inevitable change. I feel that I have not changed, myself, yet that does not make me feel young. Older, if anything, as if I have stopped growing and have nothing left to me but to begin to die. I'm sorry. I am not morbid, only sad. But your coming is a great consolation to me. At last! Someone dear to me—someone dearer to me than anyone in the world—is coming towards me instead of leaving me behind. You are my cure for sorrow. Come soon...

* * * *

Berd was too cold, she could not bear the prospect of canvassing the rest of Sele's old haunts. Old haunts! Her being rebelled. She ran until the air was like knives in her lungs, walked until the sweat threatened to freeze against her skin. She looked back as she turned corner after corner—no one, no one—but the fear and the grief never left her. Oh, Baer! Oh, Wael, and beautiful Isse! It was worse than being dead. Was it? Was it worse than being left behind? But Berd had not earned the grief of abandonment, no matter how close she was to stopping in the street and sobbing, bird-like, open-mouthed. She had no right. She was the one who was leaving.

At least, she was if she could find Sele. If she could only find him this once. This one last time.

She had known early on that it was love, on her part at least, but had been frequently bewildered as to what kind of love it was. Friendship, yes, but there was that lightness of heart at the first sight of him, the deep physical contentment in his rare embrace. She had envied his lovers, but had not been jealous of them. Had never minded sharing him with others, but had always been hurt when he vanished and would not be found. Love. She knew his lovers were often jealous of her. And Baer had often been

jealous of Sele.

That had been love as well, Berd supposed. It was not indifference that made Berd look up in the midst of their scheming to see Baer watching her from across the room; but perhaps that was Baer's love, not hers. Baer's jealousy, that was not hers, and that frightened her, and bored her, and nagged at her until she felt sometimes he could pull her away from Sele, and from the warm candlelit conspiracy the five of them made, with a single skeptical glance. He had done it in their childhood, voicing the doubting realism that spoiled the game of make-believe. "You can't ride an ice bear," he had said—not even crushingly, but as flat and off-hand as a government form. "It would eat you," he said, and one of Berd and Isse's favorite games died bloody and broken-backed, leaving Baer to wonder in scowling misery why they never invited him to play.

Yet there he was, curled, it seemed deliberately, in Sele's most uncomfortable chair, watching, watching, as Sele, bright and quick by the fire, said, "Stories never die. You can't forget a story, not a real story, a living story. People forget, they die, but stories are always reborn. They're real. They're more real than we are."

"You can't live in a story," Baer said, and it seemed he was talking to Berd rather than Sele.

Berd said, "You can if you make the story real."

"That's right," Baer said, but as though he disagreed. "The story is ours. It only becomes real when we make it happen, and there has to be a way, a practical way—"

"We live in the story," Sele said. "Don't you see? *This* is a story. The story *is*."

"This is real life!" Baer mimed exasperation, but his voice was strained. "This story of yours is a *story*, you're just making it up. It's pure invention!"

"So is life," Sele said patiently. "That doesn't mean it isn't real."

Which was true; was, in fact, something Berd and Sele had argued into truth together, the two of them, alone. But Berd was dragged aside as she always was by Baer's resentful skepticism—resentful because of how badly he wanted to be convinced—but Berd could never find the words to include him in their private, perfect world, the world that would be perfect

without him—and so somehow she could not perfectly immerse herself and was left on the margins, angry and unwilling in her sympathy for Baer. How many times had Berd lost Sele's attention, how many times had she lost her place in their schemes, because Baer was too afraid to commit himself and too afraid to abstain alone? Poor Baer! Unwilling, grudging, angry, but there it was: poor Baer.

And there he was, poor Baer, inside a cold, strange story, leaving Berd, for once, alone on the outside with Sele. With Sele. If only she were. *Oh Sele, where are you now?*

It seemed that the whole city, what was left of it, had moved into the outskirts where the aerodrome sprawled near the snow-blanked hills. There had been a few weeks last summer when the harbor was clear of ice and a great convoy of ships had docked all at once, creating a black cloud of smoke and a frantic holiday as supplies were unloaded and passengers loaded into the holds where the grain had been—loaded, it must be said, after the furs and ores that paid for their passage. Since then there had been nothing but the great silver airships drifting in on the southern wind, and now, as the cold only deepened with the passage of equinoctial spring, they would come no more. *Until, it was said, the present emergency has passed.* Why are some lies even told? Everyone knew this was the end of the city, the end of the north, perhaps the beginning of the end of the world. The last airships were sailing soon, too few to evacuate the city, too beautiful not to be given a gorgeous goodbye. So the city swelled against the landlocked shore of the aeroport like the Arctic's last living tide.

The first Berd knew of it—it had been an endless walk through the empty streets, the blue dusk hardly seeming to change, as if the whole city were locked in ice—was the glint and firefly glimmer of yellow light at the end of the wide suburban street. She had complained, they all had, about the brilliance of modern times, the constant blaze of gaslight that was challenged, these last few years, not by darkness but by the soulless glare of electricity. But now, tonight, Berd might have been an explorer lost for long months, drawing an empty sled and an empty belly into civilization with the very last of her strength. How beautiful it was, this yellow light. Alive with movement and color, it was an anodyne to grief, an antidote to blue. Her legs aching with her haste, Berd fled toward, yearning, rather than away, guilty and afraid. And then the light, and the noise, and the quicksilver movement of the crowd pulled her under.

It was a rare kind of carnival. More than a farewell, it was a hunt, every citizen a quarry that had turned on its hunter, Death, determined to take Him down with the hot blood bursting across its tongue. Strange how living and

dying could be so hard to tell apart in the end. Berd entered into it at first like a swimmer resting on the swells, her relief at the lights that made the blue sky black, and at the warm-blooded people all around her steaming in the cold, made her buoyant, as light as an airship with a near approximation of joy. *This* was escape, oh yes it was. The big houses on their acre gardens spilled out into the open, as if the carpets and chandeliers of the rich had spawned tents and booths and roofless rooms. Lamps burned everywhere, and so did bonfires in which the shapes of furniture and books could still be discerned as they were consumed. The smells wafting in great clouds of steam from food carts and al fresco bistros made the sweet fluid burst into Berd's mouth, just as the music beating from all sides made her feet move to an easier rhythm than fear. They were alive here; she took warmth from them all. But what storerooms were emptied for this feast? Whose hands would survive playing an instrument in this cold?

The aerodrome's lights blazed up into the sky. Entranced, enchanted, Berd drifted through the crowds, stumbling over the broken walls that had once divided one mansion from the next. (The native-born foreigners had made gardens, as if tundra could be forced to become a lawn. No more. No more.) That glow was always before her, but never within reach. She stumbled again, and when she had stopped to be sure of her balance, she felt the weight of her exhaustion dragging her down.

"Don't stop." A hand grasped her arm above the elbow. "It's best to keep moving here."

Here? She looked to see what the voice meant before she looked to see to whom the voice belonged. "Here" was the empty stretch between the suburb and the aerodrome, still empty even now. Or perhaps even emptier, for there were men and dogs patrolling, and great lamps magnified by the lenses that had once equipped the lighthouses guarding the ice-locked coast. This was the glow of freedom. Berd stared, even as the hand drew her back into the celebrating, grieving, furious, abandoned, raucous crowd. She looked around at last, when the perimeter was out of view.

"Randolph!" she said, astonished at being able to put a name to the face. She was afraid—for one stopped breath she was helpless with fear—but he was alive and steaming with warmth, his pale eyes bright and his long nose scarlet with drink and cold. The combination was deadly, but Berd could believe he would not care.

"Little Berd," he said, and tucked her close against his side. With all their layers of clothing between them it was hardly presumptuous, though

she did not know him well. He was, however, a crony of Sele's.

"You look like you've been through the wars," he said. "You need a drink and a bite of food."

And he needed a companion in his *fin de siecle* farewell, she supposed.

"The city's so empty," she said, and shuddered. "I'm looking for Sele. Randolph, do you know where he might be?"

"Not there," he said with a nod toward the aerodrome lights. "Not our Sele."

"No," Berd said, her eyes downcast. "But he'll be nearby. Won't he? Do you know?"

"Oh, he's around." Randolph laughed. "Looking for Sele! If only you knew how many women have come to me, wondering where he was! But maybe it's better you don't know, eh, little Berd?"

"I know," said little Berd. "I've known him longer than you."

"That's true!" Randolph said with huge surprise. He was drunker than she had realized. "You were pups together, weren't you, not so long ago. Funny to think ... Funny to think, no more children, and the docks all empty where they used to play."

A maudlin drunk. Berd laughed, to think of the difference between what she had fled from and what had rescued her. All the differences. Yet Randolph had been born here, just the same as Wael and Isse and Baer.

"Do you know where I can find him, Randolph?"

"Sele?" He pondered, his narrow face drunken-sad. "Old Sele..."

"Only I need to find him tonight, Randolph. He has something for me, something I need. So if you can tell me ... or you can help me look..."

"I know he's around. I know!" This with the tone of a great idea. "I know! We'll ask the Painter. Good ol' Painter! He knows where everyone is. Anyone who owes him money! And Sele's on that list, when was he ever not? We'll go find Painter, he'll set us right. Painter'll set us right."

So she followed the drunk who seemed to be getting drunker on the deepening darkness and the sharpening cold. The sky was indigo now, alight with stars above the field of lamps and fires and human lives. Fear receded. Anxiety came back all the sharper. Her last search, and she had only this one night, this one night, even if it had barely begun. And the thought came to her with a shock as physical as Baer's touch: it was spring: the nights were short, regardless of the cold.

She searched faces as they passed through fields of light. Strange how happy they were. Music everywhere, bottles warming near the fires, a burst of fireworks like a fiery garden above the tents and shacks and mansions abandoned to the poor. Carnival time.

Berd had never known this neighborhood, it was too far afield even for the wandering Sele and her sometimes-faithful self. All she knew of it was this night, with the gardens invaded and the tents thrown open and spilling light and music and steam onto the trampled weeds and frozen mud of the new alleyways. They made small stages, their lamplit interiors as vivid as scenes from a play. Act IV, scene i: the Carouse. They were all of a piece, the Flirtation, the Argument, the Philosophical Debate. And yet, every face was peculiarly distinct, no one could be mistaken for another. Berd ached for them, these strangers camped at the end of the world. For that moment she was one of them, belonged to them and with them—belonged to everything that was not the cold ones left behind in the empty city beside the frozen sea. Or so she felt, before she saw Isse's face, round and cold and beautiful as the moon.

No. Berd's breath fled, but ... no. There was only the firelit crowd outside, the lamplit crowd within the tent Randolph led her to, oblivious to her sudden stillness, the drag she made at the end of his arm. No cold Isse, no Wael or Baer. No. But the warmth of the tent was stifling, and the noise of music and voices and the clatter of bottle against glass shivered the bones of her skull.

The Painter held court, one of a hundred festival kings, in a tent that sagged like a circus elephant that has gone too long without food. He had been an artist once, and had earned the irony of his sobriquet by turning critic and making a fortune writing for twenty journals under six different names. He had traveled widely, of course—there wasn't enough art in the north to keep a man with half his appetites—but Berd didn't find it strange that he stayed when all his readers escaped on the last ships that fled before the ice. He had been a prince here, and some princes did prefer to die than become paupers in exile. Randolph was hard-pressed to force himself close enough to bellow in King Painter's ear, and before he made

it—he was delayed more than once by an offered glass—Berd had freed her arm and drifted back to the wide-open door.

It seemed very dark outside. Faces passed on another stage, a promenade of drunks and madmen. A man dressed in the old-fashioned furs of an explorer passed by, his beard and the fur lining of his hood matted with vomit. A woman followed him wearing a gorgeous rug like a poncho, a hole cut in the middle of its flower-garden pattern, and another followed her with her party clothes torn all down her front, too drunk or mad to fold the cloth together, so that her breasts flashed in the lamplight from the tent. She would be dead before morning. So many would be, Berd thought, and her weariness came down on her with redoubled weight. A stage before her, a stage behind her, and she—less audience than stagehand, since these performers in no wise performed for her—stood in a thin margin of nowhere, a threshold between two dreams. She let her arms dangle and her head fall back, as if she could give up, not completely, but just for a heartbeat or two, enough to snatch one moment of rest. The stars glittered like chips of ice, blue-white, colder than the air. There was some comfort in the thought that they would still shine long after the human world was done. There would still be sun and moon, snow and ice, and perhaps the seals and the whales and the bears. Berd sighed and shifted her numb feet, thinking she should find something hot to drink, talk to the Painter herself. She looked down, and yes, there was Isse standing like a rock in the stream of the passing crowd.

She might have been a statue for all the notice anyone took of her. Passersby passed by without a glance or a flinch from Isse's radiating cold. It made Berd question herself, doubt everything she had seen and felt back at the house. She lifted her hand in a half-finished wave and felt an ache in her shoulder where Baer had touched her, the frightening pain of cold that has penetrated to the bone. Isse did not respond to Berd's gesture. She was turned a little from where Berd stood, her feet frozen at the end of a stride, her body leaning toward the next step that never came. Still walking in that summer garden, her arms bare and as blue-white as the stars. Berd rubbed her shoulder, less afraid in the midst of carnival, though the ache of cold touched her heart. Dear Isse, where do you walk to? Is it beautiful there?

Something cold touched Berd's eye. Weeping ice? She blinked, and discovered a snowflake caught in her eyelashes. She looked up again. Stars, stars, more stars than she had seen moments ago, more stars than she thought she would see even if every gaslight and oil lamp and bonfire in the north were extinguished. Stars so thick there was hardly any black left in the sky, no matter how many fell. Falling stars, snow from a cloudless

sky. Small flakes prickled against Berd's face, so much colder than her cold skin they felt hot. She looked down and saw that Baer and Wael had joined Isse, motionless, three statues walking down the impromptu street. How lonely they looked! Berd had been terrified in the house with them. Now she hurt for their loneliness, and felt an instant's powerful impulse to go to them, join them in their pilgrimage in whatever time and place they were. The impulse frightened her more than their presence did, and yet ... And yet. She didn't move from the threshold of the tent, but the impulse still lived in her body, making her lean even as Isse leaned, on the verge of another step.

Snow fell more thickly, glittering in the firelight. It was strange that no one seemed to notice it, even as it dusted their heads and shoulders and whitened the ground. It fell more thickly, a windless blizzard that drew a curtain between Berd and the stage of the promenade, and more thickly still, until it was impossible that so much snow could fall—and from a starlit sky!—and yet she was still able to see Wael and Baer and Isse. It was as though they stood not in the street but in her mind. She was shivering, her mouth was dry. Snow fell and fell, an entire winter of snow pouring into the street, the soft hiss of the snowflakes deafening Berd to the voices, music, clatter and bustle of the tent behind her. It was the hiss of silence, no louder than the sigh of blood in her ears. And Isse, Wael, and Baer walked and walked, unmoving while the snow piled up in great drifts, filling the street, burying it, disappearing it from view. There were only the three cold ones and the snow.

And then the snow began to generate ghosts. Berd knew this trick from her childhood, when the autumn winds would drive fogbanks and snowstorms onto the northern shore. The hiss and the monotonous whiteness gave birth to muttered voices and distant calls, and to the shapes of things barely visible behind the veil of mist or snow. People, yes, and animals like white bears and caribou and the musk oxen Berd only knew from the books they read in school; and sometimes stranger things, ice gnomes like white foxes walking on hind legs and carrying spears, and wolves drawing sleds ridden by naked giants, and witches perched backwards on white caribou made of old bones and snow. Those ghosts teased Berd's vision as they passed down the street of snow, a promenade of the north that came clearer and clearer as she watched, until the diamond points of the gnomes' spears glittered in the lamplight pouring out of the tent and the giants with their eyes as black as the sky stared down at her as they passed. Cold filled her, the chill of wonder, making her shudder. And now she saw there were others walking with the snow ghosts, people as real as the woman who wore the beautiful carpet, as solid as the woman who bared her breasts to the cold. They walked in their carnival madness,

as if they had stumbled their way through the curtain that had hidden them from view. Still they paid no notice to the three cold ones, the statues of Baer and Isse and Wael, but they walked there, fearless, oblivious, keeping pace with the witches, the oxen, the bears.

And then Randolph grasped Berd's sore shoulder with his warm hand and said, "Painter says Sele's been sleeping with some woman in one of the empty houses ... Hey, where'd everybody go?"

For at his touch the snow had been wiped away like steam from a window, and all the ghosts, all the cold ones, and all the passersby were gone, leaving Berd standing at the edge of an empty stage.

"Hey," Randolph said softly. "Hey."

It was perfectly silent for a moment, but only for a moment. A fire burning up the street sent up a rush of sparks as a new log went on. A woman in the tent behind them screamed with laughter. A gang of children ran past, intent in their pursuit of some game. And then the promenade was full again, as varied and lively as a parade.

Berd could feel Randolph's shrug and his forgetting through the hand resting on her shoulder. She could feel his warmth, his gin-soaked breath past her cheek, his constant swaying as he sought an elusive equilibrium. She should not feel so alone, so perfectly, utterly, dreadfully alone. They had gone, leaving her behind.

"No." No. *She* was the one who was leaving.

"Eh?" Randolph said.

"Which house?" Berd said, turning at last from the door.

"Eh?" He swayed more violently, his eyes dead, lost in some alcoholic fugue.

"Sele." She shook him, and was surprised by the stridency in her voice. "Sele! You said he was in a house with some woman. Which house?"

Randolph focused with a tangible effort. "That's right. Some rich woman who didn't want to go with her husband. Took Sele up. Lives somewhere near here. One of the big houses. Some rich woman. Bitch. If I'd been her I'd've gone. I'd've been dead by now. Gone. I'd've been gone

by now..."

Berd forced her icy hands to close around both his arms, holding him against his swaying. "Which house? Randolph! *Which house?*"

* * * *

My dearest Berd,

I'm embarrassed by the last letter I wrote. It must have given you a vision of me all alone in a dusty room, growing old before my time. Not true! Or, if it is, it isn't the only truth. I should warn you that I have been extolling your virtues to everyone I know, until all of my acquaintance is agog to meet the woman, the mysterious northerner, the angel whose coming has turned me into a boy again. You are my birthday and my school holiday and my summer all rolled into one, and I cannot wait to parade you on my arm. Will it embarrass you if I buy you beautiful things to wear? I hope it won't. I want shamelessly to show you off. I want you to become the new star of my almost-respectable circle as you are the star that lights the dark night of my heart...

* * * *

4198 Goldport Avenue.

There *were* no avenues, just the haphazard lanes of the carnival town, but the Painter (Berd had given up on Randolph in the end) had added directions that took into account new landmarks and gave Berd some hope of finding her way. Please, oh please, let Sele be there.

"It's a monstrous place," the Painter had said. His eyes were greedy, unsated by the city's desperation, hungry for hers. "A bloody great Romantic pile with gargoyles like puking birds and pillars carved like tree nymphs. You can't miss it. Last time I was there it was lit up like an opera house with a red carpet spilling down the stairs. Vulgar! My god, the woman has no taste at all except for whiskey and men. Your Sele will be lucky if she's held onto him this long."

His eyes had roved all over Berd, but there was nothing to see except her weary face and frightened eyes. He dismissed her, too lazy to follow her if she wouldn't oblige by bringing her drama to him, and Randolph was so drunk by then that he stared with sober dread into the far distance, watching the approach of death. Berd went alone into the carnival, feeling

the cold all the more bitterly for the brief warmth of the Painter's tent. Her hands and feet felt as if they were being bitten by invisible dogs, her ears burned with wasp-fire, her shoulder ached with a chill that grew roots down her arm and into the hollow of her ribs. Cold, cold. Oh, how she longed for warmth! Warmth and sunshine and smooth pavement that didn't trip her hurting feet, and the proper sounds of spring, waves and laughter and shouting gulls, rather than the shouting crowd, yelping as though laughter were only a poor disguise for a howl of despair. She stumbled, buffeted by strangers, and wished she could only see, if she could only see. But Wael and Isse and Baer were near. She knew that, even in the darkness; heard their silence in the gaps and blank spaces of the noisy crowd, felt their cold. And oh, she was frightened. She missed them terribly, grieved for them, longed for them, and was terrified that longing would bring them back to her, as cold and strange and wrong as the walking dead.

But she would not go that way, not that way, she would not.

Berd stumbled again. Under her feet, barely visible in the light of a bonfire ringed by dancers, there lay a street sign that said in ornate script Goldport Ave. She looked up, past the dancers and their fire—and what was that in the flames? A chair stood upright in the coals and on the chair an effigy, please let it be an effigy, burning down to a charcoal grin—she dragged her gaze up above the fire where the hot air shivered like a watery veil, and saw the pillared house with all its curtains open to expose the shapes dancing beneath the blazing chandeliers. Bears and giants and witches, and air pilots and buccaneers and queens. Fancy dress, as if the dancers had already died and moved on to a different form. Berd climbed the stairs, the vulgar carpet more black than red after the passage of many feet, and passed through the wide-open door.

She gave up on the reception rooms very soon. They were so hot, and crowded by so many reckless dancing drunks, and the music was a noisy shambles played by more drunks who seemed to have only a nodding acquaintance with their instruments. Perhaps the dancers and the musicians had traded places for a lark. Berd thought that even were she drunk and in the company of friends it would still seem like a foretaste of hell, and she could feel a panic coming on before she had forced a way through a single room. Sele. Sele! Why wouldn't he come and rescue her? She fought her way back into the grand foyer and climbed the wide marble stairs until she was above the heads of the crowd. Hot air mingled with cold. Lamps dimmed as the oil in the reservoirs ran low, candles guttered in ornate pools of wax; no one seemed to care. They would all die here, a mad party frozen in place like a story between the pages of a book. Berd sat on a step halfway above the first landing and put her head in her hands.

“There you are. Do you know, I thought I’d missed you for good.”

Berd burst into tears. Sele sat down beside her and rocked her, greatcoat and all, in his arms.

He told her he had waited on the esplanade until his feet went numb. She told him about the suicide. She wanted to tell him about his sister, Isse, and her cousins, but could not find the words to begin.

“I saw,” she said, “I saw,” and spilled more tears.

“It isn’t a tragedy,” Sele said, meaning the suicide. “We all die, soon or late. It’s just an anticipation, that’s all.”

“I know.”

“There are worse things.”

“I know.”

He drew back to look at her. She looked at him, and saw that he knew, and that he saw that she knew, too.

“Oh, Sele...”

His round brown face was solemn, but also serene. “Are you still going?”

“Yes!” She shifted so she could grasp him too. “Sele, you have to come with me. You must, now, you have no choice.”

He laughed at her with surprise. “What do you mean? Why don’t I have a choice?”

“They—” She stammered, not wanting to know what she was trying to say. “Th-they have been following me, Wael and Baer and Isse. They’ve been following. They want—They’ll come for you, too.”

“I know. I’ve seen them. I expect they’ll come soon.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s wrong, but they frighten me so much. How can you be so calm?”

“We did this,” he said. “We wanted change, didn’t we? We asked for it. We should take what we get.”

“Oh, Sele.” Berd hid her face against his shoulder. He was only wearing a shirt, she realized. She could feel the chill of his flesh against her cheek. She whispered, “I can’t. It’s too dreadful. I can’t bear to always be so cold.”

“Oh, little Berd.” He stroked her hair. “You don’t have to. I’ve made my choice, that’s all, and you’ve made yours. I don’t think, by now, there’s any right or wrong either way. We’ve gone too far for that.”

She shook her head against him. She wanted very much to plead with him, to make her case, to spin for him all her dreams of the south, but she was too ashamed, and knew that it would do no good. They had already spun their dreams into nothing, into cold and ice, into the land beyond death. Anyway, Sele had never, ever, in all their lives, followed her lead. And at the last, she could not follow his.

They pulled apart.

“Come on,” Sele said. “I have your things in my room.”

The gas jet would not light, so Berd stood by the door while Sele fumbled for candle and match. Two candles burning on a branch meant for four barely carved the shape of the room out of the darkness. It seemed very grand to Berd, with heavy curtains round the bed and thick carpets on the floor.

“A strange place to end up,” she said.

Sele glanced at her, his dark eyes big and bright with candlelight. “It’s warm,” he said, and then added ruefully, “It was warm. Anyway, I needed to be around to meet some of the right people. It’s such a good address, don’t you know.”

“Better than your old one.” Berd couldn’t smile, remembering his old house, remembering the street sign under her feet and the shape in the bonfire outside.

“Anyway.” Sele knelt and turned up a corner of the carpet. “My hostess is nosy but not good at finding things. And she’s been good to me. I owe her a lot. She helped me get you what you’ll need.”

“The ticket?” Berd did not have enough room for air in her chest.

“Ticket.” Sele handed her the items one at a time. “Travel papers. Letters.”

“Letters?” She was slow to take the last packet. Whose letters? Letters from whom?

“From your sponsor. There’s a rumor that even with a ticket and papers they won’t let you on board unless you can prove you aren’t going south only to end up a beggar. Your sponsor is supposed to give you a place to stay, help you find work. He’s my own invention, but he’s a good one. No,” he said as she turned the packet over in her hands, “don’t read them now. You’ll have time on the ship.”

It was strange to see her name on the top envelope in Sele’s familiar hand. He had never written her a letter in her life. She stowed them away in her pocket with the other papers and then checked, once, twice, that she had everything secure. *I can’t go*. The words lodged in her throat. She looked at Sele, all her despair—at going? at staying?—in her eyes.

“You’re right to go,” Sele said. “Little Berd, flying south away from the cold.”

“I don’t want to leave you.” Not *I can’t*, just *I don’t want to*.

“But you will.”

She shivered, doubting, torn, and yet knowing as well as he that he was right. She would go, and he would go too, on a different journey with Isse and Wael and Baer. So cold. She hugged him fiercely, trying to give him her heat, wanting to borrow his. He kissed her, and then she was going, going, her hand in her pocket, keeping her ticket safe. Running down the stairs. Finding the beacon of the aerodrome even before she was out the door.

Out the door. On the very threshold she looked out and saw what she had not thought to look for from the window of Sele’s room. Inside the masquerade party was in full swing, hot and bright and loud with voices and music and smashing glass. Outside...

Outside the ice had come.

It was as clear as it can be only at the bottom of a glacier, where the

weight of a mile of ice has pressed out all the impurities of water and air. It was as clear as glass, as clear as the sky, so that the stars shone through hardly dimmed, though their glittering was stilled. Berd could see everything, the carnival town frozen with every detail preserved: the tents still upright, though their canvas sagged; the shanties with the soot still crusted around their makeshift chimneys. Even the bonfires, with their half-burnt logs intact, their charcoal facsimiles of chairs and books and mannequins burned almost to the bone. In the glassy starlight Berd could even see all the little things strewn across the ground, all the ugly detritus of the end of the world, the bottles and discarded shoes, the dead cats and dead dogs and turds. And she could see the people, all the people abandoned at the last, caught in their celebratory despair. The whole crowd of them, men and women and children, young and old and ugly and fair, frozen as they danced, stumbled, fucked, puked, and died. And, yes, there were her own three, her own dears, the brothers and sister of her heart, standing at the foot of the steps as if they had been caught, too, captured by the ice just as they began to climb. Isse, and Wael, and Baer.

The warmth of the house behind Berd could not combat the dreadful cold of the ice. The music faltered as the cold bit the musicians' hands. Laughter died. And yet, and yet, and yet in the distance, beyond the frozen tents and the frozen people, a light still bloomed. Cold electricity, as cold as the unrisen moon and as bright, so that it cast the shadows of Baer and Wael and Isse before them up the stairs. The aerodrome, yes, the aerodrome, where the silver airships still hung from their tethers like great whales hanging in the depths of the clear ocean blue. Yes, and there was room at the right-hand edge of the stairs where Berd could slip between the balustrade and the still summer statue of Wael, her cousin Wael, with his hair shaken back and his dark eyes raised to where Berd still stood with her hand in her pocket, her ticket and travel pass and letters clutched in her cold but not yet frozen fist. The party was dying. There was a quiet weeping. The lights were growing dim. *Now or never*, Berd thought, and she took all her courage in her hands and stepped through the door.

* * * *

My darling, my beloved Berd,

I wish I had the words to tell you how much I love you. It's no good to say "like a sister" or "like a lover" or "like myself." It's closer to say like the sun that warms me, like the earth that supports me, like the air I breathe. And I have been suffering these past few days with the regret (I know I swore long ago to regret nothing, even to remember nothing I

might regret, but it finds me all the same) that I have never come to be with you, your lover or your husband, in your beloved north. It's as though I have consigned myself to some sunless, airless world. How have I let all this time pass without ever coming to you? And now it is too late, far too late for me. But I am paid with this interminable waiting. Come to me soon, I beg you. Save me from my folly. Forgive me. Tell me you love me as much as I love you...