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Blood on the Ice

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The dull eyes of the polar bear could discern only what was beneath his black nose. But his nose told him that the quest must continue. The cold wind that swept in from the north carried no scent of an open lead,¹ and therefore there would be no seals. The polar bear sat down, bracing his huge body with his ponderous front paws, and looked behind him.

Though it was high noon, the ice upon which he sat was revealed as a dim, almost gray sheet that here and there was broken by a tiny ridge. There was no sun, or light, except when the aurora borealis² flashed its weird radiance. The polar bear was looking for his constant attendant, and for the past ten days his partner in hunger. Presently he saw him. The little white fox sat 10 feet away.

In the gloom his eight-pound, thickly furred body was a warped image that seemed to shimmer into and out of the frozen background. The fox's bushy tail was curled about his hind legs, and the steady wind that whipped out of the north ruffled his fur. He lifted a front paw, held it against his body a moment, and put it back down on the ice. The fox warmed his other front paw.

The polar bear turned, and took one step toward the tiny creature. Like a slithering ghost, the fox glided 10 feet farther back and again sat down. For almost a month he had followed this bear, always maintaining his distance and proper respect.

The first day the fox had attached himself to his huge host the bear had stalked a seal at an open lead. Crouching close to the ice, he had covered his black nose with his front paws and pushed himself forward with his hind ones. Absolute master of such hunting, the bear had at no time looked like a bear, a killing machine without peer.³ So perfect was his camouflage that he had seemed another ice hummock, a pile of snow, a part of the frozen pack upon which he hunted. The basking seal had had one split second to know fear; then the bear's sledge-hammer front paw crushed his back. After the bear had eaten his fill, the fox had darted in to feast on what remained.

For fifteen days they had enjoyed such abundance. The bear had killed a seal every day, sometimes stalking them beside open leads and sometimes killing them in the water, and both he and the fox had eaten well. But in the following five days the bear had killed only one seal, and two days afterward he had backtracked 40 miles to eat the frozen skin, flesh, and bones that had not been worth eating before.

The fox's last meal, ten days ago, had been only the iron-hard chips of skin and flesh that remained after the bear had fed. In that five days, and their single kill, the ice pack had shrieked and groaned. It was a tortured monster,

1. open lead *léd* \ an opening in the ice at which seals come up for air.

2. aurora borealis *ʌ'rór-ä bö'r-äl-äs* \ the northern lights. Streamers of light best seen at night in arctic regions.

3. peer *ʌpér* \ equal.

moved by the wind and the slow-flowing but inexorable water. The leads had closed, and the seals were breathing through their blow-holes beneath the ice. The land of plenty had become one of starvation.

The fox had followed the bear westward through a nightmarish place of weird shapes and shadows. It was neither land nor sea, but an endless desert of ice from which all life had fled. The polar bear, lord of the arctic and master of all in it, was a puny thing when pitted against so vast a space.

And all the while the north wind blew over the pack, and it enraged the polar bear.

Had his belly been full, no wind could have disturbed him. But his belly was empty. Pinching hunger was a thing with life, an invisible being that walked on the ice beside him and mocked him with the wind's voice. The polar bear reared suddenly and whipped his paws about. But the wind merely split on either side and keened past.

Equally hungry, the little white fox was not equally desperate. The polar bear was a lone thing, a monstrous steel and whiplcord creature whose strength was his only salvation. Dimly within himself he felt that that strength was pitted against something stronger, and he was frustrated because he was unable to combat it. But the fox was a little thing. In winter, when the gulls were departed, there was nothing on the ice pack that he could kill even if he encountered it. He had no strength, but turned that of the bear to his own devices. Bears always made kills, and eventually this one would do so. So long as the bear walked before him, the fox knew that he would eat. He was not alone.

The bear rose to go on, and the little fox padded after him.

The day did not pass. Rather, it

blended into a deeper and thicker gloom, an undulating, velvetlike blackness that clung with smoky fingers to the ice pack. The arctic night was a solid thing, a live animal that fought desperately for life and seemed to find in its tenuous hold a hope of life enduring. The bear and the fox strode through it. But their lives combined were only a speck of consciousness striving through an infinite emptiness, a ripple in a sea of loneliness. As living things, the continuance of the spark that actuated them depended upon their ability to find, and kill, and eat, other living things. But except for themselves there was no tangible life here in the vast frozen reaches.

Still the bear fought on, a ghostlike wraith⁴ in the arctic gloom. His small head swung constantly, always in the wind, and his black nose moved as he snuffled about for the scent of that one thing which would be different from all the others. Strength was a mighty factor, one that had never been defeated before. It could not be conquered this time, because it was all-powerful. He could continue until the scents that the wind carried to his questing nostrils became transformed. Sooner or later he would have to smell the salty, flavorful tang of an open lead. Wherever there was open water there would be seals.

But the hunger that had assumed shape and form still walked beside him. It was much nearer than that other shadow, the arctic fox. And it was terrifying because the bear knew that he could neither fight nor walk away from it. It had neither pity nor mercy.

Even if they had existed, the bear would not have known how to accept either. Born in an ice-sheathed cave 20 miles inland, he had drunk coldness and

4. wraith \wraith\ an apparition, ghost.

savagery with the milk that flowed from his mother's dugs. He had lain in the cavern, a helpless, mewling thing, when the arctic wolves had come. His mother had met the big, white, long-fanged things, clubbed them with her paws, and slashed them with her jaws until five lay dead about the cavern and four had fled fearfully into the snow-spattered barrens. Then she had entered the cave, and the cubs had fed from her blood-spattered teats.

The bear arose, and again slapped futilely at the howling wind. The gaunt and haggard specter that had emerged from his belly was very close beside him now, walking with long strides as he plowed through the arctic night. He turned again to look at the fox.

Ever since, as a yearling cub, he had broken away from his mother, he had been followed by foxes. But within his ponderous brain there was no clear realization of what they meant or why they followed him. He knew only that they were there, and when he killed a seal to which he returned later their scent was always about it. They had eaten of the seals that he killed and left as carrion⁵ on the floes.⁶

Many times they had been impudent, dashing in even while he fed to snatch choice tidbits from his very jaws and make away with them. He had tried and failed to catch them. The little white foxes moved as swiftly and smoothly as the water itself. His paws had always slapped down upon the places where they had been.

But the foxes were fashioned of flesh and warmed with blood. The bear's nose told him that, and the new awareness of the little white fox was slowly instilled

into his brain. He had never eaten—save for his mother's milk—anything except seals, and until he had grown as hungry as he was now it had never occurred to him that anything else was good to eat. But the new awakening to other sources of food set his mouth drooling and his tongue lolling.

Without breaking stride the bear whirled about and cast himself backwards. Invariably the little fox followed him on the left and about 10 feet behind. The bear knew that, and when he lunged, both front paws slapped down on the fox's accustomed place.

But the fox was not there. There had been no time to think of the bear's lightning-swift pass, but inborn senses that a thousand generations of his ancestors had developed were razor-keen. A split second before the bear's flashing paws had cracked down upon the ice, he had rolled sideways. Now with his tail curled about his legs, he sat 20 feet away. Like an inquisitive kitten he watched his mighty host. He knew that the bear would have killed and eaten him. But that inspired neither fear nor resentment, because the fox understood such actions. He himself, if he were able, would gladly kill and eat anything. The spur of hunger was a sharp one.

The little fox barked, softly and appeasingly, and watched the bear with calculating eyes. Again, he pressed both front feet against his breast and put them down on the ice. He was ready to spring from another charge if one came. But none did.

As though it was irresistibly attracted by some magnet set deep in the north, the bear's head swung that way. He turned his body and tensed every muscle while his black nose probed for more of the faint story he had scented.

At a shuffling lope he started into the darkness.

5. carrion *Kār'ē'an* \ dead flesh.

6. floes *Vfōz* \ sheets of floating ice.

A mile and a half to the north, Agtuk, the Eskimo, was walking across the ice pack. Twenty hours ago he had eaten. True, his meal had been only a few leathery shreds of seal skin. But they had stilled the gnawing pain in his shriveled belly. Now he had nothing to eat and could look forward to nothing.

But he still had hope. It was not the soaring hope that had been his six months ago. The arctic day had reigned then, and a few minutes of gray twilight at midnight had been the only symbol that there ever was a night. Agtuk had started north with Einar Larsen, a great man and explorer who had conceived the vision of land lost somewhere in the arctic sea. Agtuk had been very excited because no man had ever been where he was going. When he came back, and told of his journey, he would be the greatest man of his village.

However, though the last faintly lit spark of hope refused to flicker out, Agtuk's reason told him that he was never going back. The first three months on the ice had been easy ones, marked by soft living. Einar Larsen had known things about the pack that even the Eskimos had never discovered. Hundreds of miles from land he had chiseled holes in the ice and harpooned seals through them. They had filled their bellies recklessly. Even the seven dogs, working hard and pulling the sledge every day, had grown fat.

Then, suddenly, there were no more seals. They had eaten the provisions on the sledge. Reluctantly, but of necessity, they had eaten the seven dogs and the skin thongs with which the sledge runners were bound. For a month Agtuk and Einar Larsen had been fighting their way out of the wind-swept desolation toward the shore and safety. They would have won their fight, too, but Einar Larsen had sickened. When they left what remained of the sledge he had been able to walk

only 1 mile a day. The last twenty-four hours he had walked less than a quarter of a mile, and Agtuk had carried him another 500 yards before he awakened to the realization that he had a dead man on his back.

Agtuk had drawn the other man's parka close about his face and left him under the shelter of a towering pressure ridge. He had taken the .38 Magnum that Einar Larsen had worn in a holster at his belt and plodded on. The next morning he had eaten the last handful of seal skin, and sat for a long while in the shelter of a pressure ridge.

While sitting, he had taken the .38 from its holster and looked at it. It was a shiny gun, with a smoothly working cylinder that contained as many cartridges as could be put into a rifle. And it had all the power of a rifle. Agtuk himself had seen Einar Larsen shoot a basking seal with it, and when they came upon the seal its back had been shattered. Most seals, when struck with even a rifle ball, would still slide into the water. But this one hadn't moved.

For a very long while, sitting with his back braced against a pillar of ice, Agtuk pondered the gun. It was a wonderful thing, a great and beautiful thing that he himself would have given a year's catch of furs to have as his own. Of course he could not have it because it still belonged to Einar Larsen, and if Agtuk reached land it must be given to whichever of the dead explorer's friends could prove himself most worthy of it. Agtuk thrust the gun back into its holster and went on.

He walked calmly, serenely, ignoring the pinch in his belly and the biting wind that drove freezing cold through the minute pores of his skin parka. A man must walk that way if he was to consider himself worthy of carrying such a gun. He must not be tormented by petty fears. Einar Larsen had walked in such a

fashion, and it had been very painful for him to do so. He, too, had known that he would leave his dead body here among the floes. But his spirit had had noble clay from which to spring. The dark day merged into night, and Agtuk grinned.

The aurora borealis flickered across the ice pack, lighting it up like a pale moon. Agtuk staggered, and sank down.

From the first, the bear had known that he was on the trail of a man. But he knew men, he had met them paddling their skin kayaks and seen them on their whaling ships. And he was positive that they were not nearly so agile or so hard to catch as were the little white foxes. When Agtuk fell, the bear was so near that even his dull eyes witnessed the act. Drooling, making impatient little whining noises, the bear hurried to the motionless man. He opened his great jaws.

Then there was a sudden roaring smash not born of the eternal ice or conceived by the howling wind. The bear stiffened, as though in surprise, and all four legs grew taut. But he stood only for the barest fraction of a second. The bullet, shot into the roof of his mouth, had smashed his brain and torn the top of his head off. Quietly the bear collapsed on the ice.

Agtuk rose, gravely and deliberately, and knelt to lap up the hot blood that ran in little rivulets from the bear's smashed skull. It was surprising how food, any food, could re-create strength within a man. But he must hurry now, the bear would be frozen hard very soon. Still gravely, but swiftly, he cut from the hot carcass such strips of meat as he needed and rose to go on.

A man could meet death as a man should. But it was no part of a man's creed to die if dying was not necessary. Certainly, when the aurora flickered and revealed a bear 20 feet away, no one

could condemn a man, or call him a weakling, because he fell on the ice and lured that bear to where it could be shot. Anyone would know that, in this arctic desert, bears would be hungry enough to come to the lure. Agtuk walked serenely into the darkness.

As soon as he was gone the little white fox came forward. It was all part of the plan. He had known that he would eat if he followed the polar bear far enough.

PLAIN SENSE

I

Survival by Cunning

1. Why was Agtuk, the Eskimo, caught on the floe? What possession did he carry?
2. What trick did Agtuk use to entrap the bear? Why did the bear fall for this trap?
3. What assets did the bear have in his fight for survival in the arctic? How did these compare with the strengths of the fox and the Eskimo?

II

IMPLICATIONS

- Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Why or why not?
1. Cunning is more valuable for survival than brute strength.
 2. The polar wilderness is a powerful enemy in itself.

III

READING LITERATURE

Story Patterns

This tale belongs to the "journey or quest" story pattern. Three animals, a man, a fox, and a bear, roaming across an arctic floe, are struggling with each other for survival.

1. What are the elements generally found in a journey story? Which of these are present in this story? How does it differ?
2. How did you guess that the bear is the central character?