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LEDGE

THE GLACIAN TRILOGY, BOOK I



ANGRY ROBOT
An imprint of Watkins Media Ltd

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London N1 3DF
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angryrobotbooks.com
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Stay the Frost

An Angry Robot paperback original, 2022

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Cover by Kate Cromwell
Edited by Gemma Creffield and Andrew Hook
Map by Thomas REY
Set in Meridien

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ISBN 978 1 91520 216 1
Ebook ISBN 978 1 91520 217 8

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Ltd.

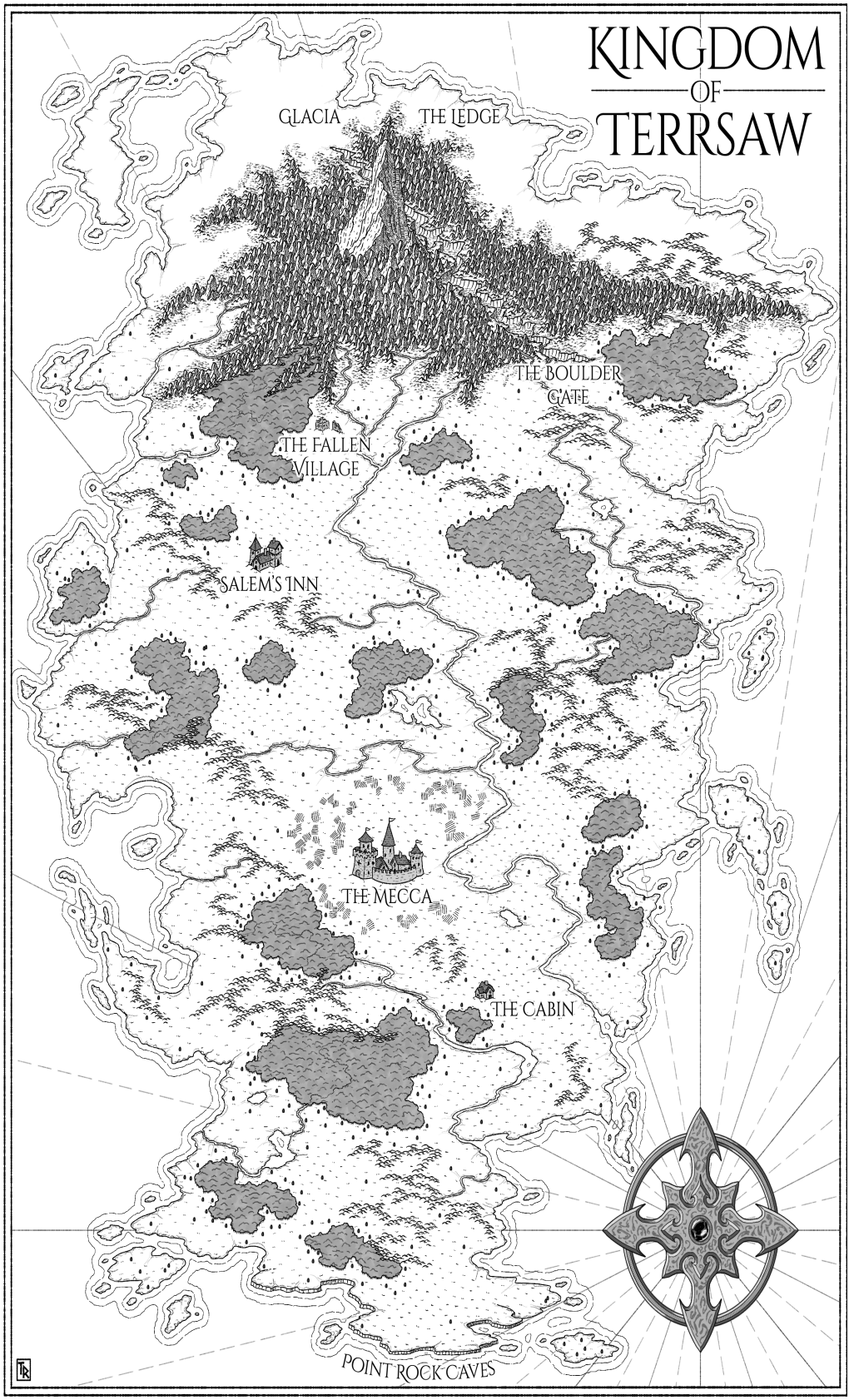
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To my parents, Andrew and Julie McCallum,
who would have leapt over the Chasm for their girls.

CONTENT WARNINGS:
gratuitous violence & death;
death of a minor;
suicide;
attempted sexual assault


KINGDOM
OF
TERRSAW
GLACIA
THE LEDGE
THE BOULDER GATE
THE FALLEN VILLAGE
SALEM'S INN
THE MECCA
THE CABIN
POINT ROCK CAVES



Chapter One

The cold is cruel, but it is not alive. It can consume you, extort you, and convince you to do unspeakable things. It can turn your enemies into body heat, and your friends into the coats you steal from their backs. The cold does not live, but there can be no ridding yourself of it.

Dawsyn smacks her gloved hands against the nearest trunk and wills her fingers to feel. Beneath her breath, she murmurs her mantra. On the days she neglects to, the cold feels like a creature.

The cold is not alive.

Stay the frost.

Watch the Chasm.

It is a hum that lives within her. A proverb even. First, it was just a lesson in childhood, but now it is a code that keeps her among the living in a place meant for the dead.

She lifts her ax from the snow. It swoops over her shoulder and then falls with sickening finality, splitting a log in two. And all the while the frost creeps in, finding pathways over the forest floor and into the breaches of her clothing. She hums to keep it at bay.

"The Drop! It comes!"

The voices reach her on the wind. At once, she whirls, sheathing her ax, abandoning her task. She runs, willing her feet not to be swallowed by the drifts. She emerges through the grove of pines. Around her dozens of feet hasten, running to the center of the village like insects to a carcass, where the Drop will fall.

Dawsyn looks skyward and sees it. White wings flap beneath the roiling cloud, a great wooden crate dangling from the talons below them.

She moves faster still, her boots spraying snow. She hears many footfalls

behind her, clawing at her. Unless she is fast, there will be nothing left in that wooden crate to reap.

From above, the two-winged creatures drop their burden and she watches as it falls into their midst, wood splintering in an ungodly crunch. The crate gives way, spilling its contents onto the snow. And the people… they swarm.

Dawsyn reaches the broken mound mere moments after it lands but still, there are already too many ahead of her. People she will have to claw her way through. Only the swift and the strong get their share of the meager food, cloth and tools the dropped crate provides.

She climbs onto the back of a man hunched to collect some fallen fruit and launches herself into the fray. A stray elbow clips her jaw and she grunts in pain as she lands. Someone tries to grab the back of her coat and she kicks them away. Dawsyn snatches at the pitiful piece of flint she sees within a mess of limbs, only to have her wrist yanked by a withered hand. A feminine hand.

She does not think, does not look to see who. She shoves the owner with all the weight she carries. If they are frail, starved, or sick, it makes no odds. She will not cede to the weak.

The contents from the crate diminish to crumbs and brawls break out between the winners and losers. They always do. It's not uncommon for death to follow the Drop. The Ledge does not reward the meek.

Dawsyn walks away from the emptied ruins, returning to the trees with only a piece of flint and a few scraps of cloth. No food, no other tools, but thankfully not nothing. She pockets them, slowly rubbing her swelling jaw and reclaims her ax from its place along her spine.

In her twenty-four years, Dawsyn muses, she's spent twenty of them chopping wood. Her hands show the wear. It's been an age since they blistered. Sometimes though, the cracks between the calluses open and bleed but she doesn't feel them beneath the hide that covers her hands.

Not quite at the peak of their maturity, the trees she harvests are marked with a carved *S*. *S* for Sabar – her family name. Their branches are weighted with the ever-present snow. The pines in this particular grove were only planted a little under two decades ago. All the trees in this small wood are marked with various family signatures. Only two are marked with the *S*.

"*S* for supremacy," her mother would joke. "*S* for survivors."

Two trees for twelve months of warmth. She fought hard for these trees,

this wood. When her neighbors on the Ledge came to commandeer them, Dawsyn swung her ax, spat foul words, threatened death and worse. The trees are hers – for now. Even in spite of the carved *S*, they will not be safe until they sit, chopped and stacked, by her home. So, she lifts the ax. She'll keep chopping until every piece is truly hers.

The wind slices along her cheeks. It howls lowly through the neatly spaced trunks, disturbing the snow so that it drifts like ghosts along the forest floor. It hits her legs through her leathers like stones. *The cold is not alive.*

She swings the ax around and over her shoulder, letting gravity and the weight of her body pull it down, splitting the wood again, again, again. There is a rhythm here that brings her peace. The pain in her shoulder is familiar, if not a friend. The ax knows her hands and yields each time, obeying her command, hitting where directed. Again. Again.

While her body falls into a conversant pulse, her mind wanders. It wanders over her grandmother's tales – some real but most not. It wanders to her mother and sister and the songs they would sing as they worked. She sings them now to stay the frost that creeps in through the soles of her boots.

There may only be two trees, but it is weeks of work for just one person – the only person remaining of the Sabar family. *S* for solitary. *S* for singular.

The pine takes more than an hour to haul back to her cabin atop a sled, but she pulls until her shoulders scream. It will not serve her, lying in the snow. Before she retreats inside from the cold, she takes the saplings from her pockets, the ones she carefully cut and saved.

Dawsyn takes a bent trowel to the ground, digging through the snowdrift to the frozen earth. She attacks it until the soil turns from gray to deep brown and lays one of the saplings down, covering its roots. She plants her remaining sapling another ten paces away and whispers a word of encouragement to it. She looks to the sky and prays that it yields wood and warmth one day, should she live so long.

There is food to prepare, but when she finally reaches the safety of her small cabin she collects her tools instead. Tonight, her body rejects the need to eat in favor of the call for woodcarving. She will turn one of the pieces of pine into a table. It will take several days in between her other chores, but she doesn't mind. The skill to whittle a tree into any shape she pleases was given to her, like an heirloom, by her father. Like the wood

chopping, there is a cadence to it, but it is softer. It flows rather than beats. It lets her mind travel again down the river of her memory to see her long-gone family. While the hearth can sparsely warm her body, her mind can. If there is nothing else she has learned in her lifetime, she has at least learned the best way to keep warm, and that is to dupe the mind. So she carves and chops, remembers and fights the frost, because sometimes, when the cold tells her to jump into fire, to submerge in boiling water, to bury herself in the bodies of the dead, she wants to listen.

But not today. Today, she stays the frost. The cold is not alive.