

Predator's Gold

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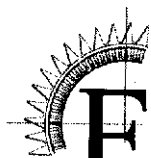
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Extract

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FROZEN NORTH



Freya woke early and lay for a while in the dark, feeling her city shiver and sway beneath her as its powerful engines sent it skimming across the ice. Sleepily, she waited for her servants to come and help her out of bed. It took her a few moments to remember that they were all dead.

She threw off the covers, lit the argon lamps and waded through dusty mounds of cast-off clothes to her bathroom. For several weeks now she had been working up the courage to have a shower, but once again this morning the complicated controls in the shower-stall defeated her: she couldn't make the water come hot. In the end she just filled the hand-basin as usual and splashed her face and neck. There was a sliver of soap left, and she rubbed some into her hair and plunged her head under the water. Her bath-servants would have used shampoo, lotions, salves, conditioners, all sorts of pleasant-smelling balms; but they were all dead, and the rack upon rack of bottles in the walk-in bathroom cabinet intimidated Freya. Faced with so much choice, she chose to use nothing.

At least she had worked out how to dress herself. She picked one of her crumpled gowns from the floor, laid it on the bed and burrowed into it from the bottom, struggling about inside until she got her arms and head out through the right holes. The long, fur-trimmed waistcoat which went over the gown was much easier to put on, but she had a lot of trouble with the buttons. Her handmaidens had always done up her buttons very



quickly and easily, talking and laughing about the day ahead and never, ever getting a button through the wrong hole; but they were all dead.

Freya cursed and tugged and fumbled for fifteen minutes, then studied the results in her cobwebby mirror. *Not bad*, she thought, all things considered. Perhaps some jewellery would make it look better. But when she went to her jewellery room she found most of the good pieces gone. Things were always vanishing these days. Freya could not imagine where they went to. Anyway, she didn't really need a tiara on her sticky, soap-washed hair, or a necklet of amber and gold around her grubby throat. Mama would not approve of her being seen without jewellery, of course, but Mama was dead too.

In the empty, silent corridors of her palace the dust lay thick as powder snow. She rang for a footman and stood staring out of a window while she waited for him to arrive. Outside, dim, arctic twilight shone grey on the frosted rooftops of her city. The floor trembled to the beat of cogs and pistons down in the engine district, but there was very little sense of movement, for this was the High Ice, north of north, and there were no passing landmarks, only a white plain, shining slightly with the reflection of the sky.

Her footman arrived, patting his powdered wig straight.

"Good morning, Smew," she said.

"Good morning, Your Radiance."

For a moment she was seized by an urge to ask Smew into her quarters and tell him to do something about all the dust, the fallen clothes, the lost jewellery; to make him show her how the shower worked. But he was a

man, and it would be an unthinkable break with tradition for a man to enter the margravine's private quarters. Instead she said what she said every morning: "You may escort me to the breakfast room, Smew."

Riding with him in the lift to the lower floor, she imagined her city scuttling across the ice cap like a tiny black beetle creeping over a huge white plate. The question was, where was it going? That was what Smew wanted to know; you could see it in his face, in the way his gaze kept flicking inquisitively at her. The Steering Committee would want to know, too. Running this way and that from hungry predators was one thing, but the time had come for Freya to decide what her city's future was to be. For thousands of years the people of Anchorage had looked to the House of Rasmussen to make such decisions. The Rasmussen women were special, after all. Had they not ruled Anchorage ever since the Sixty Minute War? Did not the Ice Gods speak to them in their dreams, telling them where the city should go if it were to find good trading partners and avoid trap-ice and predators?

But Freya was the last of her line, and the Ice Gods did not speak to her. Hardly anybody spoke to her now, and when they did it was only to enquire, in the politest possible way, when she would decide upon a course. *Why ask me?* she wanted to shout at them. *I'm just a girl! I didn't want to be Margravine!* But there was no one else left for them to ask.

At least this morning Freya would have an answer for them. She just wasn't sure that they would like it.

She ate breakfast alone, in a high-backed black chair at a long, black table. The clatter of her knife against her plate, her spoon in her teacup, seemed unbearably loud

in the silence. From the shadowy walls, portraits of her divine ancestors gazed down at her, looking slightly impatient, as though they too were waiting for her to decide upon a destination.

"Don't worry," she told them. "I've made my mind up."

When breakfast was finished her chamberlain came in.

"Good morning, Smew."

"Good morning, Light of the Ice Fields. The Steering Committee awaits Your Radiance's pleasure."

Freya nodded, and the chamberlain swung open the breakfast-room doors to let the committee enter. There used to be twenty-three of them; now there were only Mr Scabious and Miss Pye.

Windolene Pye was a tall, plain, middle-aged lady with fair hair done up in a flat bun which made her look as if she were balancing a Danish pastry on her head. She had been the late chief navigator's secretary, and seemed to understand his charts and tables well enough, but she was very nervous in the presence of her margravine and bobbed little curtsies every time Freya so much as sniffed.

Her colleague, Søren Scabious, was quite different. His family had been engine masters for nearly as long as the city had been mobile, and he was the nearest thing Freya had left to an equal. If things had been normal, she would have been getting married to his son Axel next summer; the margravine often took a man from the engine districts as her consort, to keep the city's engineering-classes happy. But things were not normal, and Axel was dead. Freya secretly felt quite glad she would not be getting Scabious as a father-in-law; he

was such a stern, sad, silent old man. His black mourning robes blended into the darkness of the breakfast room like camouflage, leaving the white death-mask of his face hanging disembodied in the shadows.

"Good day, Your Radiance," he said, bowing stiffly, while Miss Pye curtsied and blushed and fluttered beside him.

"What is our position?" asked Freya.

"Oh, Your Radiance, we are almost two hundred miles north of the Tannhäuser Mountains," twittered Miss Pye. "We're on sound sea-ice, and there has been no sighting of any other city."

"The engine district awaits your instructions, Light of the Ice Fields," said Scabious. "Do you wish to turn back east?"

"No!" Freya shivered, remembering how close they had come to being eaten in the past. If they went back east, or turned south to trade along the edges of the ice, the Huntsmen of Arkangel were sure to hear about it, and with only skeleton crews to man the engines Freya did not think her city could outrun the great predator again.

"Maybe we should bear west, Your Radiance?" Miss Pye suggested nervously. "A few small towns over-winter along the eastern edge of Greenland. We might manage a little trading."

"No," said Freya firmly.

"Then perhaps you have another destination in mind, Your Radiance?" wondered Scabious. "Have the Gods of the Ice spoken to you?"

Freya nodded solemnly. In fact, the idea was one she had been turning around in her mind for a month or more, and she did not think it had come from any god; it

was just the only way she could see of keeping her city safe from predators and plagues and spy-ships for ever.

"Set course for the Dead Continent," she said. "We are going home."

HESTER AND TOM



Hester Shaw was starting to get used to being happy. After all her muddy, starveling years in the ditches and scavenger-villes of the Great Hunting Ground she had finally found herself a place in the world. She had her own airship, the *Jenny Haniver* (if she craned her neck she could just see the upper curve of her red envelope, behind that Zanzibar spice-freighter at strut seventeen) and she had Tom; gentle, handsome, clever Tom, whom she loved with her whole heart and who, in spite of everything, seemed to love her too.

For a long time she had felt sure it wouldn't last. They were so different, and Hester was hardly anyone's idea of beautiful; a tall, graceless scarecrow of a girl, her coppery hair done up in too-tight plaits, her face split in half by an old sword-blow that had robbed her of one eye and most of her nose and twisted her mouth into a snag-toothed sneer. *It won't last*, she had kept telling herself, all the time they were waiting on the Black Island for the shipwrights to repair the poor battered *Jenny Haniver*. *He only stays with me out of pity*, she had decided, as they flew down to Africa, then crossed to South America. *What can he see in me?* she wondered, while they grew rich ferrying supplies to the great oil-drilling cities of Antarctica and then suddenly poor again, jettisoning a cargo to outrun air-pirates over Tierra del Fuego. Flying back across the blue Atlantic with a merchant convoy she whispered to herself, *It cannot possibly last*.



And yet it had lasted; it had lasted for more than two years now. Sitting in September sunshine on this balcony outside the Crumple Zone, one of the many coffee-houses on Airhaven High Street, Hester found herself beginning to believe that it might last for ever. She squeezed Tom's hand beneath the table and smiled her crooked smile, and he looked at her with just as much love as when she first kissed him, in the fluttering light of MEDUSA on the night his city died.

Airhaven had flown north this autumn, and now hung a few thousand feet above the Frost Barrens, while small scavenger towns that had been up on the ice during the months of the midnight sun clustered below it to trade. Balloon after balloon rose to moor at the docking struts of the flying free-port, disgorging colourful Old-Tech traders who started shouting their wares the instant their boots touched its lightweight deckplates. The frozen north was a good hunting ground for diggers-up of lost technology, and these gentlemen were selling Stalker parts, Tesla gun accumulators, nameless odds and ends of machinery left over from half a dozen different civilizations, even some pieces of an Ancient flying machine which had lain undisturbed in the High Ice since the Sixty Minute War.

Below them to the south, the east and west, the Frost Barrens stretched away into the haze; cold, stony country where the Ice Gods ruled for eight months of the year, and where patches of snow already lay in the shady bottoms of the criss-cross town-tracks. Northwards rose the black basalt wall of the Tannhäuser Mountains, the chain of volcanoes which marked the northernmost limit of the Great Hunting Ground. Several were erupting, their plumes of grey smoke like pillars holding up the



sky. Between them, faint behind a veil of ash, Hester and Tom could just make out the world-wide white of the Ice Wastes, and something moving there, vast, dirty and implacable, like a mountain gone rogue.

Hester pulled a telescope from one of the pockets of her coat and put it to her eye, twizzling the focusing ring until the blurry view came suddenly sharp. She was looking at a city: eight tiers of factories and slave-barracks and smut-spewing chimneys, a sky-train riding the slipstream, parasite airships sifting the exhaust plume for waste minerals, and down below, ghostly through veils of snow and powdered rock, the big wheels rolling.

"Arkangel!"

Tom took the telescope from her. "You're right. It keeps to the northern foothills of the Tannhäuser in summer, eating up scavenger towns as they come through the passes. The polar ice cap is much thicker now than it was in olden days, but there are still parts that are too thin to take Arkangel's weight till summer's end."

Hester laughed. "Know-all."

"I can't help it," Tom said. "I was an Apprentice Historian, remember? We had to memorize a list of the World's Great Traction Cities, and Arkangel was right near the top, so I'm not likely to forget it."

"Show off," grumbled Hester. "I wish it had been Zimbira, or Xanne-Sandansky. You wouldn't look so clever then."

Tom was peering through the telescope again. "Any day now it'll lift up its tracks and lower its iron runners and go skating off in search of ice cities and Snowmad scavenger towns to gobble up. . ."

For the present, however, Arkangel seemed content to trade. It was too vast to haul itself through the narrow passes of the Tannhäuser, but airships were lifting from its harbours and flying south through the haze towards Airhaven. The first of them cut an arrogant swathe through the swirl of balloons around the floating town and swooped in to dock at strut six, just below Tom and Hester's perch; they felt the faint vibration as its docking-clamps gripped the quay. It was a lean, short-range attack ship with a red wolf painted on its sable envelope and its name underneath in gothic script: the *Clear Air Turbulence*.

Men swaggered out of the armoured gondola, stomping along the quay and up the stairways which led to the High Street. Big, burly men with fur cloaks and fur hats and a chilly glitter of chain-mail under their tunics. One wore a steel helmet from which sprouted two huge, flaring gramophone horns. A flex led from the helmet to a brass microphone, clamped in the fist of another man, whose amplified voice boomed out across Airhaven as he climbed the stairs.

"Greetings, airlings! From Great Arkangel, Hammer of the High Ice, Scourge of the North, Devourer of the Spitzbergen Static, greetings! We have gold to exchange for anything you can tell us about the locations of ice cities! Thirty sovereigns for information leading to a capture!"

He started to push his way between the Crumple Zone's tables, still booming out his offer, while all about him aviators shook their heads and made sour faces and turned away. Now that prey was in such short supply everywhere several of the big predators had begun to offer finder's fees, but few did it this openly. Honest air-traders

were starting to fear that they might soon be barred altogether from the smaller ice cities, for what mayor would risk giving docking permits to a ship that might fly off next day and sell his course to a greedy great urbivore like Arkangel? Yet there were always others, smugglers and demi-pirates and merchants whose ships were not bringing in the profits they had hoped for, who were ready to accept predator's gold.

"Come and find me at the Gasbag and Gondola if you have traded this summer aboard Kivitoo or Breidhavig or Anchorage and know where they plan to overwinter!" urged the newcomer. He was a young man, and he looked stupid and rich and well-fed. "Thirty in gold, my friends; enough to keep your ships in fuel and *luftgaz* for a year. . ."

"That is Piotr Masgard," Hester heard a Dinka aviatrix at a neighbouring table tell her friends. "He's the youngest son of the Direktor of Arkangel. Calls that gang of his the Huntsmen. They don't just advertise for snoops; I've heard they land that ship of theirs on peaceful little cities too fast for Arkangel to catch and force them to stop, or turn round – force them at sword-point to steer straight into Arkangel's jaws!"

"But that's not fair!" cried Tom, who had also been listening, and unluckily his words fell loudly into a momentary gap in Masgard's speech. The Huntsman swung round, and his big, lazy, handsome face grinned down at Tom.

"Not fair, airling? What's not fair? This is a town-eat-town world, you know."

Hester tensed. One thing she could never understand about Tom was why he always expected everything to be fair. She supposed it was his upbringing. A few years

living by his wits in a scavenger-ville would have knocked it out of him, but he'd grown up with all the rules and customs of the Guild of Historians to keep real life at bay and, despite all he'd seen since, he could still be shocked by people like Masgard.

"I just mean, it's against all the rules of Municipal Darwinism," Tom explained, looking up at the big man. He got to his feet, but found that he was still looking up, for the towering Huntsman was at least a foot taller. "Fast cities eat slow ones, and strong cities eat weak ones. That's the way it's meant to work, just like in nature. Offering finder's fees and hijacking prey upsets the balance," he went on, as though Masgard was just an opponent at the Apprentice Historians' Debating Society.

Masgard's grin grew broader. He flicked his fur cloak aside and drew his sword. There were gasps and cries and a clatter of falling chairs as everyone in the vicinity tried to get as far back as possible. Hester grabbed hold of Tom and began pulling him away, always keeping her eye on that gleaming blade. "Tom, you idiot, leave it!"

Masgard stared at her a moment, then let out a roaring laugh and sheathed his sword. "Look! The airling has a pretty girlie to keep him from harm!"

His crew laughed with him, and Hester blushed patchily and tugged up her old red scarf to hide her face.

"Come and find me later, girl!" Masgard shouted. "I'm always at home to a pretty lady! And remember, if you have a city's course to tell me of, I'll give you thirty in gold! You can buy yourself a new nose!"

"I'll remember," promised Hester, pushing Tom quickly away. Anger flapped inside her like a trapped crow. She wanted to turn and fight. She was willing to



bet Masgard didn't know how to use that sword he was so proud of. . . But the dark, murderous, revengeful part of her was something she tried to keep hidden these days, so she contented herself with slipping out her knife and quietly severing the lead of Masgard's microphone as she passed. The next time he tried to make an announcement the laughter would be directed at him.

"Sorry," Tom said bashfully, as they hurried down to the docking ring, which was crowded now with traders and sightseers fresh in from Arkangel. "I didn't mean - I just thought -"

"It's all right," said Hester. She wanted to tell him that if he didn't do brave, foolish things like that from time to time he wouldn't be Tom, and she might not love him so. But she couldn't put all that into words, so she pushed him into the space under a tier-support and, after making sure that nobody was looking, wrapped her skinny arms around his neck and pulled her veil down and kissed him. "Let's leave."

"But we don't have a cargo yet. We were going to look for a fur-trader or—"

"There are no fur-traders here, only Old-Tech, and we don't want to start carrying that sort of stuff, do we?" He looked uncertain, so she kissed him again before he could say anything. "I'm tired of Airhaven. I want to be back on the Bird Roads."

"All right," said Tom. He smiled, stroking her mouth, her cheek, the kink in her eyebrow where the scar cut through. "All right. We've seen enough of northern skies. Let's go."

But it was not to be so simple. When they reached strut seventeen there was a man waiting beside the

Jenny Haniver, sitting on a big leather pack. Hester, still smarting a little from Masgard's mockery, hid her face again. Tom let go her hand and hurried to meet the stranger.

"Good day!" cried the man, standing up. "Mr Natsworthy? Miss Shaw? I gather you are the owners of this splendid little ship? Golly, they told me at the harbour office you were young, but I didn't realize quite how young! You're barely more than children!"

"I'm almost eighteen," said Tom defensively.

"Never mind, never mind!" beamed the stranger. "Age makes no difference if the heart is great, and I'm sure you have a great heart. 'Who's that handsome young chap?' I asked my friend the harbour master, and he told me, 'That's Tom Natsworthy, pilot of the *Jenny Haniver*.' 'Pennyroyal,' I said to myself, 'that young man may be just the fellow you're looking for!' So here I am!"

Here he was. He was a smallish man, balding and slightly overweight, and he wore a trim white beard. His clothes were the typical outfit of a northern scavenger – a long fur coat, fur hat, a tunic with many pockets, thick breeches and fur-lined boots – but they looked too expensive, as if they been run up for him by a fashionable tailor as a costume for a play set in the Ice Wastes.

"Well?" he asked.

"Well what?" asked Hester, who had taken an instant dislike to this posturing stranger.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Tom, much more politely. "We don't really understand what you want. . ."

"Oh, I do apologize, I beg your pardon," the stranger babbled. "Permit me to elucidate! My name is Pennyroyal;



Nimrod Beauregard Pennyroyal. I have been exploring a little among these great horrible towering fire-mountains, and now I am on my way home. I should like to book passage aboard your charming airship."

THE PASSENGER



Pennyroyal was a name that rang a bell with Tom, although he could not think why. He was sure he'd heard it mentioned in a lecture, back in his days as an Apprentice Historian – but what Pennyroyal had done, or said, to make him worth lecturing about, he did not recall; he had spent too much time daydreaming to pay much attention to his teachers.

"We don't carry passengers," said Hester firmly. "We're bound for the south, and we travel alone."

"The south would be just fine and dandy!" beamed Pennyroyal. "My home city is the raft resort of Brighton, and it is cruising in the Middle Sea this autumn. I am eager to be home quickly, Miss Shaw. My publishers, Fewmet and Spraint, are desperate to have a new book from me by Moon Festival, and I need the peace and quiet of my own study to begin working up my notes."

As he spoke, he glanced quickly over his shoulder, scanning the faces of the people on the docking ring. He was sweating slightly, and Hester thought he looked not so much eager to be home as downright shift. But Tom was hooked. "You are a writer, Mr Pennyroyal?"

"Professor Pennyroyal," beamed the man, correcting him very kindly. "I am an Explorer, Adventurer and Alternative Historian. Maybe you've come across my works: *Lost Cities of the Sands*, perhaps, or *America the Beautiful – the Truth about the Dead Continent*..."

Now Tom remembered where he had heard that name before. Chudleigh Pomeroy had once mentioned