

THRYMSA

THE ICE REMEMBERS



BOOK ONE

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First Edition

To my family — by blood and by choice. You're the reason I learned to disappear into my own head. Some of those reasons were beautiful. Some were just survival. But character doesn't come from a boring life, and neither do stories.

I: BEFORE THE EDGE

CHAPTER 1 — THE HELICOPTERS

The helicopter banked hard over the Laptev Sea, and Eira Skeldsen felt the needle slide into her arm.

“Antidote,” Volkov said, his voice steady over the rotors. His weathered hand was already on his own syringe, thumb depressing the plunger with practiced calm. “Preemptive.”

Eira nodded, watching the clear liquid disappear into her bloodstream. They both knew what had happened to the Norwegians. Forty-eight hours after the Russians had “shared supplies,” the Norwegian research team had evacuated their ship, citing equipment failure and medical emergencies. That was the official story. The truth—that they’d been infected with a bioweapon designed to drive competitors from the Arctic drilling zone—was known only to a handful of people in Moscow and to the two scientists now airborne over the ice.

The antidote should have worked. It had worked in the lab.

But something had mutated.

Eira tilted her head toward the small circular window. Below, the Arctic stretched in every direction—not the pristine white wilderness of travel documentaries, but something far more massive and indifferent. The ice cap covered fourteen million square kilometers, a frozen desert larger than the United States, almost as large as Russia itself. From this height, even the two research vessels looked like toys: the Northern Endeavor, an American deep-sea drilling platform, and Akademik Fyodorov, her Russian counterpart, both locked in the ice two kilometers apart.

They were here for Helium-3. The moon rock that wasn't on the moon anymore. A rare isotope found in Arctic seabeds, essential for the next generation of fusion reactors. Whoever controlled the Helium-3 deposits controlled the future of clean energy—and with it, geopolitical dominance for the next century. The race wasn't about flags anymore. It was about fuel.

And Russia was losing.

Hence the virus.

“You ever think about the absurdity of it?” Eira asked, watching the pilot's hands adjust the controls. “Drilling for fuel to power reactors that don't exist yet, while accidentally creating bioweapons that escape containment.”

Volkov's mouth twitched—not quite a smile. “In Soviet Union, we called this Tuesday.” He settled back in his seat. “Absurdity is luxury for people who think history has rules.”

He'd been stationed in Norilsk during the '91 crisis, had watched the permafrost melt and refreeze as institutions collapsed around him. He'd survived. That was what mattered.

Eira studied him in the dim cabin light. He was in his early sixties, old enough to remember when “the West” was still an enemy, young enough to adapt when it became a competitor instead. His hands were steady on the armrest, the calluses on his fingers evidence of fieldwork, not just theory. He'd been sent because Moscow didn't want theater. They wanted reliability.

Eira, on the other hand, was here because of her credentials.

On paper, Dr. Eira Skeldsen was thirty-six years old. Born in Reykjavik, educated at the University of Iceland and the University of Oxford. Her doctoral dissertation on viral latency mechanisms in cold-preserved pathogens had been published three years ago. Flawless academic record. No gaps. No irregularities. She'd been recruited from a postdoctoral fellowship in Greenland, where she'd developed passive monitoring systems for subsurface microbial activity—exactly the skill set needed for Arctic biocontainment.

But the woman sitting in the helicopter looked younger than thirty-six.

Volkov had noticed it the first time they'd met. She didn't argue like a young scientist trying to prove herself, didn't defer to authority. She waited. And when she spoke, it was with the kind of precision that came from having seen arguments play out a thousand times before.

She had the patience of stone.

The truth was simpler, and impossible.

Eira Valkaeth Skeldsen was not thirty-six years old.

She was one hundred seventy-five.

But that information existed only in archives no human had access to. For now, she was Dr. Skeldsen, senior research scientist, Arctic Pathogen Stability Program. She'd earned that title. Every degree. Every publication. She had lived among humans long enough to know that the best way to remain invisible was to be exactly what they expected: competent, credentialed, and slightly boring.

Because the goal was not to lead humanity.

It was to understand them.

And she did.

The helicopter shuddered as it descended. Eira felt the cold seep through the fuselage immediately—the Arctic didn't wait for invitations. The cabin temperature read seventeen Celsius—warm by Arctic standards, arctic by human ones. But outside, the thermometer showed minus forty-three. In six hours, it would drop to minus fifty-two.

Her breath would freeze in her lungs in less than three minutes if she stepped outside unprotected.

Or rather, a human's would.

Eira could tolerate the cold far longer. But she couldn't let Volkov know that.

“Tiksi?” Eira asked, though she already knew the answer.

Volkov nodded. “Five thousand people on a good day. Three thousand in winter.”

Tiksi. A port town on the Laptev Sea coast in the Sakha Republic, one of the northernmost settlements in Russia. It had been built during the Soviet era as a waystation for Arctic shipping routes and scientific expeditions. Now it was a ghost of its former self—crumbling Soviet-era apartment blocks, a skeletal port, and the Tiksi Hydrometeorological Observatory, still operational after nearly a century.

Eira had passed through three days ago, long enough to see the kind of people who chose to live there: researchers who didn't mind isolation, ex-military personnel with nowhere else to go, and Indigenous Sakha who'd lived in the region for millennia and had no intention of leaving. Hardly anyone lived this far north unless they had no choice—or unless they

were studying something that couldn't be studied anywhere else.

The Arctic wasn't empty. It was uninhabitable by human standards. Temperatures that could drop to negative fifty Celsius. Months of total darkness. Ice that shifted unpredictably, swallowing equipment and people alike.

And yet, humans kept coming. Kept drilling. Kept pushing into places they didn't belong.

The helicopter touched down on the ice with a crunch that reverberated through the cabin. Eira unbuckled, pulled on her parka—unnecessary for warmth but necessary for appearances—and stepped out into the wind.

The cold was immediate. Air so dry it pulled moisture from exposed skin. The wind carrying ice crystals that stung like needles.

To Volkov, struggling with his own parka, this was barely survivable.

To Eira, this was comfortable.

She had to remember to shiver.

Three hours after they'd arrived at the Akademik Fyodorov, Volkov started showing symptoms.

Eira was reviewing viral samples in the ship's makeshift lab when she heard the commotion. Raised voices. Someone calling for a medic.

She found Volkov in his cabin, slumped against the wall, fever-bright eyes staring at nothing.

"The antidote," he muttered. "It should have... should have worked..."

His temperature was 39.2 Celsius. Rising. The Norwegian team had spiked to 40 degrees before they'd become delirious.

Eira knelt beside him, checked his pupils, felt the heat radiating from his skin. The other Russian scientists crowded the doorway, uncertain, afraid.

“Everyone out,” Eira said. “Now. Quarantine protocols.”

They hesitated.

“Now!”

They left. Eira closed the door behind them.

Alone with Volkov, she made a calculation.

She could let the fever run its course. He might survive. Probably wouldn't. The virus was aggressive, designed to incapacitate quickly, kill slowly if untreated.

Or she could help him. Using methods no human doctor would know. Thrymsan techniques refined over a hundred millennia, combined with nearly two centuries living among humans.

But helping him would reveal things. Not everything. But enough to raise questions.

Volkov's eyes focused on her briefly. “Skeldsen... you should... quarantine...”

“I injected the antidote. I'm fine.”

“Mutation... it's not working...”

Eira looked at him—this man who'd survived the collapse of empires, who'd weathered decades of cold with stoic resilience. Who didn't deserve to die because someone in

Moscow thought bioweapons were acceptable tools of geopolitical competition.

She looked at Mikhail. Fevered. Dying.

She could save him. But it would require using techniques no human doctor would know. Touching him with hands colder than any living human's. Working in ways that might raise questions she couldn't answer.

Risk versus reward.

She made the choice.

She pulled out her field kit—human medical supplies, mostly, but with additions no human doctor carried. Temperature-regulating compounds derived from Arctic lichen. Metabolic stabilizers extracted from extremophile bacteria. Things that existed in nature but that human medicine hadn't discovered yet.

She'd been very careful to "discover" them herself, publish papers, establish provenance. Just in case.

"Mikhail Sergeyevich," she said quietly. "Stay still. This will help."

She administered the compounds. Within twenty minutes, his temperature stabilized, then dropped; he was lucid again. Within an hour, the fever had broken entirely.

He stared at her from the bed, eyes clearer now but full of questions.

"How?" he asked.

"Research," Eira said. "Cold-adapted organisms produce compounds that regulate cellular stress response. I've been studying them for years."

It was true. Just not the whole truth.

“You just... happened to have treatment for a bioweapon that was classified three months ago?”

“I have treatment for fever and cellular distress. The cause doesn’t matter to the compounds.”

Volkov sat up slowly, testing his body, finding it functional. “The others need this. The Norwegian team—”

“Are already gone. Evacuated. But I can synthesize more. Enough for anyone exposed.”

He looked at her for a long moment. “You’re very prepared, Dr. Skeldsen.”

“I’m thorough.”

“Or you knew this was coming.”

Eira met his eyes. “Did you know?”

“No. But I suspected. Moscow doesn’t send Biological Weapons specialists to routine drilling operations unless something is already wrong.”

“Then we’re both here because someone made a terrible choice. And we’re both trying to clean up the mess. Does the rest matter?”

Volkov was quiet. Then: “No. I suppose not.”

He stood, still weak but functional. “Can you teach others to make this? In case you’re incapacitated?”

“Yes.”

“Then do it. And Skeldsen?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you. For not asking questions I couldn’t answer. And for not making me ask ones you won’t.”

After he left, Eira sat alone in the cabin and allowed herself to feel the weight of what she’d done.

First rule of observation: don’t interfere.

She’d just broken it.

But she’d also kept a good man alive. And prevented a bioweapon from killing indiscriminately.

Sometimes rules had to bend.

She hoped the Council would see it that way.