

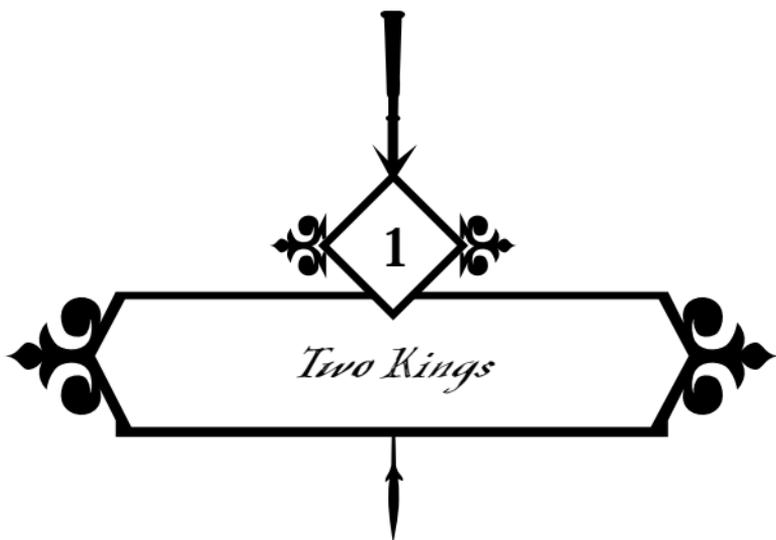


ICEWALL TRILOGY
VOLUME THREE

Winterheim

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he mountain loomed above the still waters of Black Ice Bay, above the rim of the coastal foothills, above the bare face of the vast cliff spreading west- and eastward from the glacial skirts of the great massif. Though the smooth white barrier, the Ice-wall, towered a thousand feet above the sea, it was dwarfed by the greatness of that solitary summit, whose majesty seemed almost too big, out of scale.

The peak thrust into a realm of thin air, shrouded in ice and snow even now, during the last month of summer. Other heights jutted skyward to the right and left, but even the lower shoulders of the great massif rose far above the loftiest mountains of the White Range and the other saw-toothed ridges extending across the frost bound polar reaches. These lesser elevations were as mere cubs, gathered around the feet of a great white bear.

This mountain was Winterheim, and as great as it was, it was so much more than just a mountain.

As the ogre king returned here, to his home, he stared at the massif that was also his fortress, the capital of his kingdom. He drew comfort from the fact that this lofty

vista, at least, remained unchanged. As he returned from an expedition that had claimed his mother's life, destroyed one of his two ships, and annihilated a proud bastion of his kingdom, he knew there were few constants in his world, but this mountain remained the greatest of those. For that he was grateful and relieved.

He remained aware that he was still a mighty king, could exercise his considerable power in many ways.

"Bring the prisoner up to the deck," he ordered, and several ogres of the Royal Grenadiers hastened to obey.

Grimwar was aware of his queen standing nearby, and though he felt her eyes upon him he did not deign to look at her. Instead, his gaze remained fixed upon that immaculate summit.

He heard a hatch open and the rattle of chains behind him, followed by a whip crack and the thud of a body being thrown to the deck. Only then did he shift his head to look down at the human who lay sprawled on the planking near the king's black whale-skin boots.

The man glared up at the ogre monarch, blue eyes icy with anger, mouth set in a tight line, but the human captive made no sound, even as a grenadier kicked him in the ribs.

"Kneel, slave!" growled the ogre warrior. "Kneel before your new master, the King of Suderhold!"

Instead the filthy, bearded man pulled his chained wrists together and slowly, awkwardly pushed himself to a sitting position. The grenadier drew back for another kick, but Grimwar Bane held up his hand, stopping the attack and allowing the chained human to rise to his feet. The king stared at his captive in frank interest.

The three weeks below decks had not done the man any good—he was sallow and thin, eyes blazing from sockets that seemed to have sunk halfway into his skull during the voyage. He squinted in the glare of the first

daylight that he had seen in all that time. His movements were stiff, and he winced in pain as he forced himself to stand fully erect. He was a tall human, though still much shorter than the ogre king, and Grimwar well remembered the fellow's fearlessness in a hopeless attack, the frenzy with which he had wielded a lethal sword. No doubt the grenadier remembered, too, as a dozen of his comrades had been slain in that savage fight.

Grimwar Bane knew that the humans considered this fellow to be their king and a mighty king at that, and it amused the ogre monarch to see him debased like this. Since this summer's campaign had been an utter disaster, the ogre monarch had only this lone prisoner to show for his efforts and sacrifice, but the man was a valuable captive, and Grimwar tried to take some solace in that.

"A king, they called you," Stariz ber Bane declared scornfully, unable to remain silent any longer. The queen addressed the captive as she advanced to stalk a circle about him, glaring contemptuously down as the fellow utterly ignored her leering presence. "Now you will see the homecoming of a real king and a fortress that makes your petty castle look like a hovel on the tundra!"

Grimwar snorted his agreement, once again turning to glance at that massive mountain. The galley glided straight toward the base of the massif, where the plunging cliffs delved right into the deep, dark waters of the Black Ice Bay. The rocky face was smooth there, and as they drew closer the king nodded, pleased to hear the rumble of the massive capstan, the metallic clang as many tons of iron chain began to move. This was more proof of his power: a legion of slaves going to work because the king's approach had been observed. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the great Seagate of Winterheim began to move to the side.

"There are five hundred of your fellow humans turning those gears," Grimwar noted casually. "If you were a

less important prisoner, you might find your place among them, striving shoulder to shoulder with the mass of them until you die, but no—you are too valuable for that fate. We shall have to find a more exalted task for you.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, and the ogre king was not surprised to note a considerable depth of anger there.

The gap of shadow expanded, revealing the great cavern at the heart of Winterheim. The placid waters of the bay extended into the contained harbor, and as the opening grew wider sunlight spilled inside, brightening the vast, columned terraces of the ogre stronghold. Soon the gate was fully open, and *Goldwing*, propelled only by a few gentle, easy thrusts of her oars, slid beneath the lofty overhanging arch of stone and into the warm, moist air that kept Winterheim comfortable even during the most frigid depths of the sunless winter.

Stariz strode past the king to the edge of the deck, raising her arms and gesturing to Grimwar, drawing out a thunderous cheer from the great throng of ogres who had gathered to welcome their rulers back home. The king’s subjects shouted from the docks of the waterfront and from the market plaza, the great square surrounding the wharves, the flat surface raised barely a dozen feet above the water level. More ogres lined the balconies of the massive atrium, the great chimneylike column that rose toward the summit of the mountain, providing the citizens of every level with a clear view down to the square and the harbor.

Even in the shadowed heights they stood and chanted their accolades:

“Grimwar Bane!”

“Long live the king!”

The galley eased gently into her slip. After the first roared greeting, the monarch took little note of the cheers or the assembled throng of ogres waiting on the waterfront

plaza as the gangplank cranked down to the dock. This was as hollow a homecoming as he had ever experienced, and he felt the losses of the campaign so keenly that at first he could take little pleasure from the return to his great fortress city.

He was bred to this, and he would give his people what they desired. He stalked down the ramp and across the wharf with kingly bearing. To the assembled populace, he looked proud and regal, honored by their presence and pleased to be their ruler. He waved to the right and left and smiled, the gestures and expressions coming automatically, masking the darkness that churned within him.

The trappings of power, as they always did, helped to lift his bleak mood. He saw young nobles thumping their chests with clenched fists, the traditional hail of the bull ogre to his lord. Solid females lined the byways, waving bright pennants, smiling adoringly if his eyes so much as flicked in their direction.

“Take the prisoner to the Salt Caves,” he ordered the captain of the Grenadiers. “His fate remains to be decided.”

Some of his crewmen hurried to form an escort for the human, while twin ranks of palace guards, dressed in their scarlet cloaks and bearing huge, ceremonial halberds, flanked the approach to the lift that would carry the king and queen up to the royal level. The monarchs stepped inside the cage, turning to face the crowd as the door of metal bars rattled shut.

“Lift, slaves!” shouted an overseer, cracking his whip in warning. Instantly two dozen slaves put their shoulders to the gearlike teeth of a large crank. Chains clanked, and the floor beneath Grimwar’s feet lurched then settled into a steady rise. More roars of approval rose from the ogre population, and the king treated his subjects to another wave.

Stariz, however, waited only until they were a few dozen feet up, out of immediate earshot of the guards and attendants. She had been surly and glowering during the whole voyage, but since the ship had been very crowded this was the first real privacy they had experienced since beginning the journey home from Dracoheim.

“How do you intend to recover from this disaster?” she demanded. “You have lost Dracoheim Castle and one of your ships—“

“Did you think I had forgotten?” snapped the king, his deep voice rumbling above the metallic noise of the lift.

“I wondered,” she replied tartly, “yet if you had listened to me—“

Grimwar Bane was in no mood to hear his wife’s rebukes though, as usual, his mood did not diminish the queen’s torrent of words. Nevertheless, he felt the sting of those words with unusual acuity. Perhaps this was the reason that he responded not in an exasperated roar but in a rumbling growl—a tone that, at the very least, commanded her attention.

“Do you think I do not grieve for the loss of my own mother? That I do not understand that it was the humans who brought about this disaster? Do you think I forget that it was you who bade me go to Dracoheim to have the orb made! If blame rests in this palace, my queen, it falls upon your ample shoulders!”

Stariz snorted, and avoiding the king’s eyes, turned to look outward through the gridwork of the cage door. The two royal ogres rose steadily through the great central atrium of Winterheim. The galley *Goldwing* rested in her berth below, illuminated by the sunlight that spilled through the still-opened harbor gates. The ship was scarred, battered and worn from a season of vigorous campaigning, looking as tired as Grimwar felt. The empty slip nearby, where *Hornet* should be docked, absolutely tore

at the king's heart. That beautiful ship was driftwood now, timbers scattered on the rocky shores below fortress Brackenrock.

Stariz drew a breath—a sign that she was taking a rare pause before continuing her tirade. When she did speak, her own voice had softened, her tone as gently persuasive as she could manage.

“Why did you refuse to execute the prisoner on Dracoheim?” she pressed. “Your own men witnessed the destruction wrought by the humans. Did you not see that a display of royal resolution—and vengeance—might go far toward restoring their spirits? What is the value of one paltry slave brought back to Winterheim? He is perhaps a strapping specimen of a man, though still he is but one.”

Even when her tone was gentle, the king reflected, it was as coarse as the growl of an angry she-bear.

“I saw that, and I saw, too, that this human is no ordinary prisoner. His value does not come from the fact that he is another slave—I already have thousands of the wretches! He is unique—you saw how his companion revered him! He is a king of the humans!”

“Why should that insure his life?” demanded Stariz.

“Perhaps it does not, but surely it is reason for consideration and planning. If he is to die, then his death can be wielded to good effect.”

She surprised him by nodding in pensive agreement. “You may be right. How should he be killed, then?”

“I have not decided, yet,” declared the ogre monarch, realizing that he had not decided because he hadn't given the matter proper thought. Until now, it had been enough to know that he held an important enemy leader. “I have been giving the matter much consideration,” he declared breezily. “I will let you know when I have made my decision.”

“He should be executed on the day of the equinox, at the ceremony of Autumnblight!” Stariz announced excitedly. “It will be a death witnessed by all the slaves in the city and will serve as a strong lesson to them, a reminder of your mastery!”

The king felt his temper rising again. “I have thought about this matter, and I will solve it my way, not yours!” he barked. “Now I desire to bathe and to garb myself in royal finery. Unless you have something important to say right now, I suggest that you depart for your quarters and do the same.”

Stariz scowled, a wrinkled and dour expression that rendered her blocky face into an ugly smear. Her husband fought a powerful urge to smash his fist into her piglike nose. It was not the presence of the honor guard, royal troops assembled as the lift came to a rest on the lofty royal level of the city, that held his hand. Indeed, these ogres were loyal to him, and many had felt the lash of the queen’s tongue. No doubt they would not be displeased by such a display of royal temper. Nor did he worry about the slaves, human men and women who stood respectfully back from the landing, waiting to garb the king and queen, to feed and bathe them. They were less than nothing—he didn’t know how they would feel about a blow delivered by the king to the queen, but neither did he care.

In truth, acknowledged only in the deep pit of his belly, it was fear that restrained his blow—fear not of his wife but of the vengeful god who was her true lord. For Stariz Ber Glacierheim Ber Bane was not just the queen of Suderhold and mistress of Winterheim. She was the high priestess of Gonnas the Strong, seer of mystical truths and worker of dire magicks.

He was afraid that if his anger was released in violence, her reprisal—though certainly more subtle—would be far worse than a punch in the nose. Would his belly

turn to fire in the night, wracking him with agony until his guts exploded to poison him? Would his eyes wither and dry, leaving him blind? Or his mind fail, turning him into a feeble, drooling fool who couldn't so much as ladle gruel to his own lips? Or would she think of something even worse?

These were questions he could not answer and had no desire to explore. He gave his wife a curt nod then let the guards fall in behind as he stalked regally through the palace gate and down the long, wide hallway leading to the royal apartments. The doors were opened by slaves, and at last he felt as though he could exhale as he entered the familiar comfort of the cavernous chambers. A fire burned on the massive hearth, and the several comfortable chairs arrayed about the room, each layered in plush white bearskin, offered instant soothing for his weariness.

Instead he turned immediately toward his bathing chamber where a tub of steaming water awaited. The waters relaxed and cleansed him, and the heat soothed the aches of the long campaign from his flesh. He lay there, half conscious, eating a loaf of fresh bread and five steamed ice-trout, and gradually his life seemed good again. He was clean, well fed, and found that he could think about more pleasant pursuits.

One pursuit in particular came to mind . . . for he knew that Thraid Dimmarkull, the royal mistress, awaited him with a greeting that would banish all of his remaining troubles to the far corners of his mind.



Thraid Dimmarkull lolled against the railing of one of the city's lower balconies, excited and frightened at the same time. She would have loved to greet the galley in the harbor, to have run forward and clasped her beloved

Grimwar with all the affectionate power of her soft, enveloping embrace. Though it seemed terribly unfair, she knew that such a display would only make him mad.

The hardest part about being the king's mistress—secret mistress, for now—was that Thraid was required to be patient, and patience did not come easily to her. She had come to the railing because for the immediate present she had nowhere else to go. The king would debark then be busy for several hours . . . but she knew that he would soon be anxious to see her. She hoped he would like it, the little place she had prepared for them on the terrace level. It was discreet, perfectly private, and sumptuously appointed.

The best feature: a single tunnel rose from the rear of the chambers all the way to the royal section of the city, so the king would be able to come, perfectly unseen, to his tryst.

Thraid had entrusted her slave Wandcourt with a message for Grimwar Bane, detailing the arrangements. Wand was a human, but he had proved himself loyal over many years. Indeed, she trusted him more than any ogre for this task. Sooner or later, the king would come, and she would be there....

She watched as the queen marched down the gangplank, glaring around the city as if seeking reason for complaint, looking for signs of things that had gone wrong during the absence of the royal couple—an absence that despite the king's pledge to the contrary had lasted all summer.

Her heart, her very being, brightened as her Grimwar, the most handsome, strapping, powerful—indeed, beautiful—ogre in all Kryn, came striding off of the gangplank. She felt vicarious pride as the ogres who had gathered on the waterfront, nearly a thousand of them, burst into cheers at his arrival. He waved—he was always gracious

to his people—but even from this height she could see that he was tired, discouraged, weary beyond words.

How desperately she wanted to take his broad head and nestle it between her breasts, to stroke his hair and murmur soothing words of affection. How he needed her! No doubt the long voyage, trapped aboard the ship with that hateful ogress, had taken a terrible toll on him.

Of course, Thraid had heard things, tales of a battle lost, *Hornet* destroyed, even rumors of some dire disaster on Dracoheim, but in the mind of the king's mistress, those things were of secondary, even trivial, concern. To look for the cause of Grimwar's fatigue she had to search no further than the presence of that awful queen.

At that moment Stariz turned and stared behind her, not at Grimwar but at something else, something on the ship. Thraid watched the rest of the crew trudge up from the rowing benches and plod wearily down the gangplank. One figure caught her eye: small among the ogres and golden haired. He was chained, but even in shackles he walked with a bearing of unbreakable pride.

A human, she realized—a captive taken by her Grimwar, brought back to the city.

The man glared around him, and somehow Thraid felt the dazzling ice of that glance, even as far above as she was. He was intriguing, this prisoner, and strangely appealing. Queen Stariz all but spat in hatred as she stared, and the ogress at the railing quickly saw that the human was the source of the queen's hatred.

Immediately Thraid wanted to know more about him.



As the ship was made fast to the dock, Strongwind Whalebone warily examined his new surroundings. Whatever fate held in store for him, he lacked the energy,

the stamina, to put up much of a fight. However, his spirit remained vital, so he would look for ways to rebuild his strength, to study his enemies, and to plan.

He had welcomed his release from the hold primarily because of the chance to breathe fresh air. For two weeks the fish guts and whale blubber that mingled effluence in the deep hold of the galley had raised a stink that choked and nearly suffocated him. There, below the benches where ogre oarsmen labored, a heavy wooden hatch had sealed out any glimpse of sun or sea, rendering the little chamber into a smothering cell.

The lone prisoner had suffered in silence and immobility, since stout manacles secured his wrists, chafed his skin and held him awkwardly across a wide bench. Water, carrying an irregular and ever shifting array of flotsam, sloshed across the floorboards and kept his feet permanently cold. His wounds burned, while hunger gnawed at his belly and thirst parched his lips. Nevertheless, Strongwind Whalebone was determined to make no complaint, to offer no display of weakness that might give his captors a sense of satisfaction or reward.

Indeed, what complaint could he have made? What mere verbiage could possibly articulate the devastation that blackened his heart, rendering insignificant his own predicament? There was a greater truth that doomed his whole future, signaled the end of his dreams and visions. He knew this in the naked honesty of his own heart.

For the Lady of Brackenrock was dead.

When the ogres had shackled him and thrown him into this dank hold he had felt a sense of vague relief—not that he had survived but that he was locked away so that he could grieve in private. In that compartment he had cried like a baby until numb, bruised, and drained, he fell into a well of dreamless sleep. Whenever he was

awake, he grieved, and for the weeks of the journey his only respite had come from fitful intervals of sleep.

In that solitary gloom he had come to understand something about himself, a surprising realization driven home by the insurmountable pain in his heart. Though he had pursued Moreen aggressively for years, making the case for their marriage as though he were proposing a political treaty—which, on the one hand, he was—he had never really considered the possibility that he truly loved her. Certainly he had desired her more than any other woman he knew, but this desire had been a feeling such as the hunter holds toward the prize stag. Moreen Bayguard seemed a trophy, valuable and even cherished but little more than that.

Now she was dead, and he saw how very wrong he had been.

He didn't count the days or nights; he knew only that it was a very long time later that the hatch opened and ogre guards came down the ladder, seized his chains, and hauled him up to the deck. He saw the mountain, forced his expression to remain bored despite the wonder of this place as they glided inside.

So this was Winterheim. He viewed the massive gate with a sense of detachment, didn't marvel at the enclosed harbor, barely recoiled at the great crowds of ogres cheering their rulers and jeering the new captive. As the shadows of the underground harbor embraced him, the king of the Highlanders looked up as the archway passed overhead, wondering if he was looking at the sun for the last time in his life.

That, too, didn't really seem to matter.

For the Lady of Brackenrock was dead.