

# Alaya

**The first novel of the Doan**

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## Chapter 1

Alaya Roogain had only time to save a pitiful handful of treasures – foolish mementoes of a past life. She had no time for the essentials. From somewhere down the familiar, vaulted stone corridor beyond her door came the splintery sounds of violent entry. The smell of blood and unwashed bodies hung thick about her. Coarse voices shouted words not yet distinguishable, although the sound of heavy objects and shattering glass grew more distinct with each passing heartbeat.

Fighting tears, she pushed the disheveled mass of black hair from her pale face and thrust her tiny hoard into a yellow, daisy-embroidered bag that, in her former life, she had used to gather table flowers from the informal garden.

Where were her shoes? The sturdy, brown leather walking shoes Uncle Uli gave her two years ago for her sixteenth birthday. Where? She groped madly in the dark closet, considered going for a light, rejected that thought instantly and looked, illogically, behind the heavy drapes now drawn tightly over her beloved window seat.

A door slammed open. Not hers, but close. She caught a snippet – a gravel voice barked something in a language she didn't understand.

Under the carved four-poster bed, her hand fell on a pair of summer sandals. Alaya slipped them on. After one last pitiful glance around the room that had been her sanctuary, she ran to the great fireplace that had warmed her as long as she could remember. *Pull the torch bracket to the left; press the third stone down from the mantle.* It was instinctive, although she hadn't done it for years.

A large stone on the right side moved back into the wall revealing a low passage running to the right, just behind the wall. She remembered the passage being larger. Just inside, she pulled a stout lever set in a niche in the wall. The stone began to grind its way closed. Just before it seated itself in its original position, the studded oak door to her room splintered inward.

The passage was totally without light, but its peculiar musty, smoky smell brought back childhood memories of flickering torchlight clearly enough to navigate its one sharp left turn and the eventual flight of steep steps spiraling downward. As her instincts told her she was near the bottom, the sharp odor of burning fabric told her they had set fire to the house.

It didn't matter. The house was part of her past life. As was her family.

She had watched them kill her father; watched from her window as the yellow-haired barbarian, standing on the bodies of his fellows, buried the broad head of a bronze axe in her father's back. She could only hope her mother had died as quickly, wherever she was. If the Elder, the First Among Equals in the Conclave of Peers, died so easily at the hand of these Barbarians, who could stand? A wisp of a girl? She continued blindly downward.

There was nothing left. She clutched her flowered bag of treasures.

Almost nothing.

Alaya bumped hard into the stone door at the end of the passage, bruising her right knee and scraping her right hand. She nursed the knee a moment, and then fumbled for the twin of the lever above. The door moved inward a few inches and stopped. The acrid smell was stronger now, a mixture of burning wood, fabric and flesh.

Animals made panicked sounds from the stalls beyond. Chickens squawked, pigs squealed, milk cows joined the chorus.

She tugged on the stone, but it would move no farther. In desperation, she threw the lever closed, waited for the stone to seat, and then tried again. This time it opened far enough for her to squeeze through. She didn't bother closing it.

The bear stalls were at the far end, next to the doors. She ran as fast as her knee would let her, trusting blindly that Baldor would still be there. The other bears would probably be gone; when it came to bears, stalls were a formality. If an adult ice bear wanted to leave, nothing as simple as a stall gate would stop it. Bears stayed with humans because they wanted to.

Gina had been her mother's companion, Gor her father's. It was common for bears simply to walk away into the mountains when their human companion died. Reban was Gina's cub by Baldor, but he would, undoubtedly, go with his mother. Baldor had always been her... friend was not an adequate word. They had been inseparable from that day she had first toddled into his stall. Baldor would not leave her.

The bear stalls stood open, and empty. Ignoring the rest, she flew to the end one her friend called home. A furry, white snout appeared in the doorway. A warm, black tongue washed her face. Alaya threw her arms around the long, soft neck and sobbed. After a long minute, a massive, furry paw pushed her away.

*Go now.* The message was soundless—no more than an impression on Alaya's mind. Still it carried the sense of a deep, rumbling bass. Baldor took the familiar, blue leather saddle from its peg on the wall and extended it to her.

Just then, the ironbound double doors swung open, slamming loudly against their stops.

Three barbarians stepped cautiously in, armament held at the ready. Their hair was the color of straw, their unkempt beards only slightly darker. Their leather shirts and trousers were rough-cut and poorly sewn. They were strong, rough men; the one in the lead stood taller than her father had, and father had not been small. As soon as his eye fell on Alaya, his manor changed to one of arrogant ease. He set the point of his long steel sword on the cobbles and said, "We got ourselves a bed warmer—fine one with crow hair, be sure. Gently now lads, let's not damage it." He spoke High North with an odd accent and an unfamiliar rhythm. His words were obviously intended for her more than for his companions.

Alaya dropped the saddle, and fled to the back of the stall.

In two swift strides, the blond barbarian reached the stall gate and started in after her.

The white blur of Baldor's left forepaw caught him full in the chest. Blood spurted as he flew across the grooming area, struck a wooden support post, and dropped limply into a pile of dirty straw.

The barbarian's two companions gaped at the half-ton of bear now standing to his full height, head bent to clear the loft. They had turned to flee when a dozen or more of their comrades arrived. Together, they formed a phalanx of cutting edges blocking the doorway.

*Ride!* There was a commanding urgency in Baldor's projected message. As though to hurry her, he dropped flat on the cobbles.

Alaya hadn't ridden bareback since she was nine. It wasn't ladylike—the heir to Roogain House was always supposed to be ladylike. But then, the sole heir to Roogain House was supposed to stay alive. Awkwardly, she threw herself across the bear's back and twisted her fingers deep in his soft fur.

Baldor's right forepaw hooked the edge of the right-side door and flipped it closed like the cover of a book. The barbarians on that side were slapped backside-over-teakettle into the paved court. The others scrambled back in disarray.

If the conditions are urgent enough, a normally easy-going ice bear is capable of great speed over a short distance. Many of the barbarians didn't regain their feet in time to see bear and girl streak through the iron gate marking the outer boundary of the stable court.

The wind in the central courtyard blew cold this time of year, even here on the coastal plateau. The thin, red, dress Alaya had pulled on in the warmth of her room this morning now provided little defense against it. Her sandals provided none at all. She gave a small, involuntary shiver and held more tightly to the bear.

The courtyard was big, about 50 yards across, completely paved with dark gray stone cobbles in a circular pattern. Until today, a team of three young men had kept it weed-free and in perfect repair.

An ornate fountain dominated the center of the court. Half a dozen bodies now floated in it. Carved stone sturgeon spit graceful streams of bloodstained water onto a rampant stone bear.

Beyond the fountain, the gate stood open.

Beyond that, Alaya could see only sky—the road to Roogain House was purposely steep.

Barbarians swarmed the courtyard like flies on a carcass. None of them was prepared for a charging ice bear. Only two were close enough and quick-witted enough to challenge its passing. Both died for their efforts.

A blond giant stood guarding the iron-studded wooden gate. As soon as he saw the pair charging across the cobbles, he bent his back against the gates carved face.

Standing half again as high as the tallest man and designed to be opened and closed by a team of five strong guards, the gate barely moved at first.

The giant's face flushed, a trickle of blood appeared where his shoulder molded itself around a forged iron stud.

The gate accelerated.

Baldor tapped his last reserve of speed, but it was too late. The gate slammed against its stone stops with a force Baldor felt in his paws.

Never breaking stride, bear claws found purchase on the giant's back. Using the barbarian as a stepping stool, he launched himself up the face of the gate. Front claws gripped the top edge, slipped back a fraction, and then gripped again. Hind claws shredded first flesh, then wood. Bear and girl hit the cobbles beyond the gate with a bone-jarring whomp.

Alaya lost her tenuous grip on Baldor's neck ruff, and found herself scraping and tumbling down the steep incline beside the road.

The sandal on her right foot snagged on a low-growing, gnarled old bush.

After a few seconds of eternity, she struck a lichen-covered boulder and slid no farther. A few pebbles followed her down the incline, some bouncing off her back, others continuing to the half-frozen river far below.

It was as though she stood to one side of where her body lay, watching events unfold. “Breathe!” she shouted silently. “You’ve got to breathe.” The body in the red dress didn’t move. Oddly, she could still receive sensations.

The rock was cold.

There was shouting from up the hill.

There was no pain.

“Breathe!” It was almost a whimper.

The scene faded to gray. She felt warm now.

An annoyingly wet tongue washed her face. Teeth capable of rending flesh and breaking bone gently grasped her shoulder. She felt herself lifted—felt her legs dragging through brush.

The gray around her deepened to black.

Alaya awoke chilled to the bone and hurting in more places than she could count. It was dark. She lay on cold stone, wrapped in the familiar smell and feel of Baldor’s fur. A spasm of shivers momentarily racked her.

*Alive?* Baldor nuzzled her ear.

“Yes, I’m alive you silly fur ball. I’m just not sure if that’s good or bad.”

*Good.*

“If you say so.” She drifted off again.

When Alaya awoke the second time, there was enough light to see her surroundings. It was a small stone cave, not high enough to stand in. Baldor’s white mound pressed against both walls. In one direction lay coal-pit blackness, in the other a gray light. Beside Baldor’s clean smell, there were other animal smells—wild and musky.

She began to take stock. She was very thirsty and her lips were cracked. It hurt to breathe deeply, but gentle pressure on her ribs produced only slight pain. She had a crusted scrape half the length of her left arm. Her right sandal hung in shreds, useless. She removed both sandals and began to search for the tortoiseshell comb she had put in her bag.

The bag wasn’t there.

This final loss was too much—the strength she had been gathering fled, and she began to sob quietly. She regretted leaving her room. At least she would have died quickly instead of freezing, or starving, or meeting some other slow end. Instantly, the image of the barbarian in the stables came back to her. He would not have killed her quickly. She shuddered.

She wondered what had happened to her mother. She assumed the worst—rape, brutal death—but in fact, she didn’t know the fate of any except her father.

What now? Her beloved Roogain House was burning. For all she knew, she was the last of her house, noble or commoner. A tiny sob shook her.

*Better?* Baldor had not moved.

“I lost my bag.” The words sobbed out.

The bear grunted. *Thirsty?*

“Very. And hungry, and scratched, and bruised, and cold, and I lost my *bag*.”  
*Ride*, was the only response.

Alaya groaned and wiggled deeper into the white fur.

Baldor rolled over just slowly enough to keep from crushing her. There was nowhere else to go; she ended up on his back.

The mouth of the den was farther than she had anticipated, but after about two minutes of Baldor’s half crawling, she could see the gold-and-flame of a spectacular sunset framed by the roughly triangular opening. “At least it’s not snowing,” she said more to herself than to Baldor.

Once in the open, Baldor loped to a stand of dark green conifers with long needles and pendulous branches. Under the shelter of those branches, the bear stretched himself on a soft thick bed of fragrant needles. Alaya slid to the ground and began scratching that most-favorite spot behind his left ear. Baldor reciprocated with a tongue to the cheek. Unbidden, tears streamed down, stinging the tongue with salt.

*Wastes water.* The thought carried a decidedly parental overtone.

“We have to find drinking water soon. I can’t go as long as you can without it.”

*Soon. Dark.*

As soon as the last trace of twilight faded, the bear urged her onto his back and they left the hollow under the trees. They continued about half an hour, keeping to the trees as much as possible, always traveling downhill. At last, Alaya heard the sound of water flowing over rocks.

The stream was small, but the water tasted better than any she had had at her father’s table. She washed her face and cleaned the scrape on her arm. Despite the cold, the water restored life to her battered body. She thought a warm meal would have helped a great deal. None was forthcoming.

“Baldor,” she said softly. The ice bear was nowhere in sight, but a grunt from across the stream reassured her. “Can you find Uncle Uli’s house from here?”

*Far.*

“Can you *find* it?”

*Far.*

“Well, I can’t sit here. I’m going to Uncle Uli’s.” She got to her feet with the aid of a water-worn rock imbedded in the stream’s bank, started to look for her flowered bag, and then remembered. She straightened her back and marched off toward where she remembered the sun setting. Silent tears streaked her cheeks.

An hour later, she came to a well-traveled road. Her feet were in the early stages of frostbite and hurt beyond anything she had ever experienced. The going had been slow; she had to pick her footing for each step. Why couldn’t she have found her walking shoes? A quarter moon appeared occasionally from behind scuttling clouds. It helped—a little—when it was there, but mostly it was navigation by memory. She couldn’t believe Baldor would simply abandon her. But why not? The others had left. At least he had stayed long enough to get her out of the house. Still, she had expected better of her Baldor.

As she stood at the road’s edge, the moon put in an appearance. She could see a milestone on the far side of the road only a few feet to her left. It was almost as tall as herself, cut to a regular rectangular shape in the tradition of her people. On burning feet, she hurried to read it before the moon vanished again.

At the top was the number 16 chiseled in block numerals.

Below that, in more ornate script, the sign read, *Roogain*, with an arrow to the right.

Below that was chiseled, *Balori*, with an arrow pointing to the left.

Balori? Balori house was to the North. But she was walking west, away from this road, not east as the post would suggest.

Lost? She couldn't be. This was *her* land. She looked at the milestone again as though she could change the cold stone letters. She leaned against the stone, her chin resting on its smooth flat top. The tangible presence of death was suddenly clear. She felt oddly calm. The wind brought the evidence of unseen pines. To her right, she heard metal strike metal—a faint clinking sound.

Her mind was numb with cold. It wasn't until she heard the sound again, this time much closer, that it soaked through.

Alaya crouched behind the milestone and tried to remain perfectly still. The moon refused to cooperate by going once again behind a cloud. As heavy footsteps approached, it took all her willpower not to move. She became part of the rock.

There were five in the group. They were young, tall, blond. They walked with the ease of conquerors in a vanquished land, but without the banter and rough humor one might expect. The day had been long, they had seen friends die, it was late and they still had a long march to their encampment.

The one in the lead stopped and squinted at the milestone. "Sixteen! Not going to get fed is what we're not going to do. Cook'll be close up and bedded time we get there. Damn the pot." He spoke a strange tongue.

Alaya understood not a word.

One of the others turned aside to relieve himself. He was slightly older than the rest, with heavy body hair not common to his race. The others returned to their steady route step. A gust of wind blew spray back on the feet of the woolly one who swore with practiced skill. Still muttering, he rearranged his clothing and started a hurried step to catch up.

Another gust of wind caught the hem of Alaya's dress, now black in the dimness of the moonlight. A corner of fabric rippled and flapped silently across her ankle.

The barbarian froze in mid-stride, carefully placing his free foot on the ground. He slid a short, old-style, thick-bladed sword from a soft leather scabbard slung under his left armpit.

The hindmost of the other four, glancing back to see how his comrade was fairing, made a soft hiss to stop the others.

Training replaced fatigue. All four melted into the shadows and began finding strategic positions around the milestone.

When the others were in place, the hairy one stepped to the edge of the stone in one smooth motion. With the sword held high in his right hand, he plucked the small form from behind the stone with his left. At his first motion, the others closed in, weapons drawn.

Alaya let out a high-pitched squeal and began to kick, scratch and bite at anyone and anything within range. One of her flailing kicks found her captor's newly drained groin. With a single word that Alaya didn't understand, he hurled her into the middle of the road like a rag doll. Moving purely on the strength of adrenalin, she sprang to her feet. Instantly, a ring of honed edges sprang up around her.

The hairy one glared at her for a long moment, then spat on the ground and raised his sword to strike her down.

There are few things as blood chilling as the roar of an angry adult ice bear. It both rumbles in some terrible contrabass range and shrieks at an earsplitting level. The sound froze the barbarian at the top of his swing.

Baldor stood head-and-shoulders above the tallest of the barbarians. A yellow, flowered handbag lay at his feet. He took one great step forward, accompanied by another roar.

The warriors fell back into a defensive phalanx, shoulder to shoulder, weapons held high, every fiber and nerve on high alert. In the tension of the moment, the girl sprawling in the roadway was forgotten.

*Come!*

On hands and knees, Alaya scrambled away from her captors. Too late, the hairy one drove his blade into the packed-earth roadbed, inches behind her flying skirt. When she caught sight of the bag, she let out a squeal and snatched it to her breast.

The bear dropped to all fours. *Ride!*

Alaya launched herself ungracefully across his back.

## Chapter 2

The sky had cleared. Stars were fading in the east. They had been climbing now for over an hour, picking their way through the blackness of ancient pine forest, skirting cliffs of lichen-cover granite. Baldor navigated as though darkness was not a problem. As the sky began to pink up, Baldor stopped at the base of just such a cliff. Boulders the size of a small house had tumbled from the face and now lay among the towering pines like the dim shapes of some disorderly village. The bear shifted uneasily from side to side, turned to the west and sniffed the morning air, started in that direction then stopped and resumed his swaying.

Alaya was tired beyond caring. Her mind was slow to register the bear's uneasiness, but at last she said, "Why have we stopped?"

*Not speak!*

The girl sat up and peered into the black shadows. "Why?" she whispered.

*Bears here. Not speak.*

Alaya knew wild bears existed—everybody did—tame bears had to come from somewhere. When she was small, her governess had delighted in telling her wild bears would come and gobble her up if she didn't mind. Years later, her tutor had explained, in greater detail than she wanted to hear, how wild ice bears had been domesticated many generations ago. She had never actually seen a wild one.

No one knew how the domesticated bears gained their limited telepathic abilities, or why not every human could communicate with them. The tutor assured her that wild bears had no such powers, and would eat her if they got the chance. Despite the fatigue, a thrill of fear ran down her spine.

Baldor started west again, cautiously placing each shaggy white paw. Then there were bears.

The biggest bear Alaya had ever seen seemed to grow out of solid granite not twenty feet to her right. When she looked around, six more had surrounded them. Baldor stood stock-still.

The big bear made a soft grunting noise and the others moved closer.

Baldor made the same sort of grunting sound. The wild bears stopped and seemed to look to the big one for direction. A conversation, of sorts, consisting of grunts, snorts, and a lot of posturing went on for several minutes. At last, the big bear ambled up close and began to examine Alaya in uncomfortable detail.

*Walk.*

"Are you kidding?"

*Walk. Not ride, not talk.*

Alaya made a point of sliding down so Baldor stood between her and the wild bear. It was wasted effort. Her feet had hardly touched the mossy ground when the bears, Baldor included, started ambling north, toward the cliff face, at a deceptively fast pace. Alaya had to hurry to keep up. She was still deathly afraid of the wild bears, but the thought of being left alone in the forest was even worse. At least the ground was soft, if not warm.

A jumble of fallen boulders nearly blocked the mouth of the cave. A wide path, beaten several inches into the ground, twisted between the rocks and entered an irregular opening in the cliff face. Alaya stopped when she saw the dark hole, but a wild bear behind her nudged her none too gently with its nose. She stumbled forward.

Inside the cave, there was no light at all. The air reeked of wild bear. The floor was loose sand. So far, she had not stubbed her foot, but each step was a new challenge. Every time she stopped, Alaya received another nudge. Finally, she smelled the familiar odors of the stable and felt soft fur against her right hand.

*Hold.*

She clenched her fist around a tuft of fur and walked steadily, if cautiously, forward. After what seemed like a long time, they stopped.

*Sleep.*

“Here?” She pictured herself in the center of some great cavern.

*Here.*

She dropped to her knees in the sand and felt around her. On her left side, less than a foot from where she had been walking, she found a vertical stone surface that could have been a wall or just a large rock. She pressed her back to the stone, wriggled until she had a depression in the sand for her hip and shoulder and laid her head on the flowered bag. Fatigue overcame all else—she fell asleep in a matter of seconds.

She awoke to parched lips. The stone pressed against one side, a wall of stable-scented fur rested against the other. She sat up, and immediately her head began to spin. She would have vomited had there been anything in the stomach. Dry heaves gripped her for a while, and then subsided.

*OK?*

“Not OK. If I don’t get something to drink and some food in me soon, I don’t think I’ll make it.”

*Come.*

The wall of fur shifted and moved upward. She held on once again, and they began walking. In only a few moments, there was enough light to see what few obstacles there were. They were walking in a passage at least twenty feet wide and almost as high. Here and there, a rock protruded from the sand, but mostly the passage was smooth and level. Shortly they rounded a bend and found themselves in a wide room with a ceiling lost in shadow. Orange sunlight slanted through the cave mouth. Alaya looked at the sunshine with mild surprise.

“It’s afternoon. How long did I sleep?”

*Night, day, night, part day.*

She stopped. “A day and a half?”

The bear only grunted and kept on walking.

“Where are the other bears?”

*Hunt*

“I half expected them to eat me.” She smiled.

*Wanted to.*

By now they were out of the cave. The air was crisp and scented with pine. The sun stood in the southwest, low because of the season. Its rays felt good on her thin dress and bare arms.

Baldor stopped. *Ride*, came the thought.

She was no more than on his back when he started into the woods at his best traveling pace. Ten minutes later, they were at a clear pond. Alaya stripped off the red dress and plunged in, luxuriating in the deep water, soaking it in, drinking great gulps. In a matter of seconds, she regretted it.

Her muscles cramped from the cold water. Her gut refused the unexpected slosh of liquid. In seconds, she found herself shuddering uncontrollably just below the surface. Her arms and legs would not respond. Slowly she floated to the surface, but face down.

A pair of large white paws paddled into her field of vision and she felt herself pushed through the water. On the shore, she lay on a mat of slippery pine needles, and shivered in the sun.

When she could speak, she stammered, “T-thank you, Baldor, my f-friend.”

*Not me.*

“Not . . .” She looked around. The wild bears stood in a circle, watching quietly. The huge leader was dripping wet. “I thought they wanted to eat me.”

*Baldor guest. Not eat Baldor’s pet.*

She was still pondering the implications of that tidbit when Baldor nudged her toward the pond.

*Drink,* came the command. *Little.*

Her gut didn’t want to drink, even little, but she forced herself to the water’s edge. She parted the thin, dark-green grass at the water’s edge and cupped a little water in her hand. It tasted wonderful. Better yet, it stayed down.

After twenty minutes of warm sun, and five more sips of cold water, she pulled her dress back on and asked, “Is there any food?”

A grunting and snorting session followed. Soon one of the wild bears, a small one—she still couldn’t really tell them apart—came forward with a small furry bundle in its teeth. The bundle dripped fresh blood.

The bundle landed on her toes with a soft squishy plop. It resembled no creature she had ever seen.

*Eat*

Alaya pondered the pitiful carcass for a long moment, then picked up the flowered bag and began to rummage around in its depths. In a moment, she had produced a small, pearl-handled penknife—a birthday gift from her father—and a steel box the size of her palm. She set about gathering dry sticks and pine needles, which she arraigned in a neat pile. From the steel box she extracted the flint, steel and tinder she used to light her candle at night. In two minutes a small flame licked at the base of her pile.

It took an hour to make everything ready, and another to roast the creature. When she finally tasted the flesh, the flavor was mild, not gamy, as she had expected. It was the best meal of her life.

Although she had been sure she could eat an entire horse, hooves and all, she found she could eat less than half of what she had. Having nothing to wrap it in, she impaled it on the stick she had used to roast it, and carried it over her shoulder.

“Can we make it to Uncle Uli’s today?”

*Tomorrow*

“Then we better get going.”

*Tomorrow.* Baldor started ambling in the direction of the cave.

“Baldor,” she called after him a bit peevishly. “I want to leave now.”

Baldor’s broad backside and stumpy tail brushed past a low-hanging pine bough and vanished.

Alaya scrambled to gather up her stuff and follow.

When she caught up, she walked beside the bear in miffed silence. At last, she said, “What was all that about me being your pet?”

After a long silence, Baldor replied, *Not right word.*

“What is the right word?”

*Not know. Like cow. Something to eat.*

“Livestock?” She paused. “The bears keep livestock and wouldn’t eat me if they thought I was yours?” Then, amazed, she said, “The bears keep *livestock.*”

*You ate.*

Before she could digest what she had just learned, they were at the cave. In full afternoon sunlight, she could see more of the cave than before. There were low openings to other rooms or side passages—no more than black holes in the rock wall. Against the far wall of the main room, she saw what appeared to be a large brush pile. As they drew closer, she realized the pile was bones. The realization that the only thing between her and that bone pile was a courtesy extended by wild creatures sent her into near panic.

“Let’s sleep somewhere else tonight, Baldor. This place gives me the creeps”

*Insult clan.*

“You mean the bears?”

*Bear clan, yes. Sleep here.*

As much as she despised the idea of another night with the bears, Alaya wasn’t ready to try the forest alone again. As she considered her extremely limited options, Baldor waddled deeper into the cave in stoic silence. For fear of losing sight of him in the rapidly diminishing light, she clutched her bag and her leftovers, and trotted after him.

She assumed they were sleeping in the same spot as before. No light she could perceive filtered that far in. Baldor seemed to know exactly where to go—she didn’t even try to ask how. Although she was sure she wouldn’t sleep a wink, she was out in minutes. She had the same dream at least a half dozen times. With variations, she always ended as part of the bone pile.

When Baldor woke her with broad, wets lick on her forehead, she was almost surprised to be alive.

*Leave now.*

Alaya needed no urging. I took her but a moment to gather her two belongings, and get a handful of Baldor’s fur.

In the main cavern, all the bears were assembled. Baldor approached the big one and, after considerable swaying, grunting and snorting, cuffed the huge bear smartly on the left ear.

The ear cuff Baldor got in return knocked him off his feet. Without further conversation, Baldor headed for the daylight as a fast pace.

Alaya had to run to keep up. “What was that all about?” she panted as they entered the pines.

*Show respect.*

“Odd way to show respect.”

*Our way.*

It didn’t hit her for three full steps. *Our way, not their way.* Had Baldor always felt kinship with wild bears? His lineage had lived in the great houses since shortly after her people first arrived in the North.

*Ride.*

She stopped and looked at the ice bear she had known all of her life. More from long habit than trust, she clambered onto the offered back.

True to Baldor's estimate, Balori House appeared just after noon. They had stopped to rest and eat beside a tiny stream that wandered through an open meadow. Trees were few this high, and those that clung to the mountain were twisted dwarfs. As she began to eat, Alaya suddenly realized she hadn't seen Baldor eat since they left Roogain house half a lifetime ago.

She offered to share. The bear refused, typically, without elaboration. As she ate, her eyes swept the forbidding, snow-covered peaks ahead. *If we have to cross those, she thought, I'll freeze to death.* Then she saw the dark gray outline of Balori house's main tower outlined against the lighter gray of the mountain beyond.

"There!" she cried. "Look, it's Uncle Uli's."

*Far,* was the only response.

"Yes, but I can *see* it." She bolted the rest of the meat and climbed on the bear's back, unbidden. Baldor once again pressed up the wide, ever-climbing path.

## Chapter 3

Although sunset was still half an hour away, the mountain cast the path in deepening shadow. Long, thin, dark, clouds streaked pink across the western sky when the road ended abruptly at the ornate, iron-studded entrance to Balori House. The massive door stood alone with little clue of what lay beyond. Cut into living stone, its arched top rose higher than Alaya's head even from her seat on Baldor's back. Balori house itself was still several hundred feet up the impassable mountain face.

Baldor struck the door a resounding thump with a forepaw. After several minutes with no response, he struck the door again. No one answered.

Alaya slid from his back. She winced as her raw feet reminded her of the abuse they had endured. Where was the gatekeeper? She tried the latch—a tiny iron bar set into the door jam. When the door opened freely on silent hinges, her apprehension began to mount. Balori house was a fortress; Uncle Uli took a good deal of friendly ribbing about it from the other family members. His invariable response was to look out a window at the distant mountain range.

“Someday someone will come through one of those passes. Someone, mind you, with blood on his hands. He'll come here first, of course. Balori house will not fall, this I pledge to you. Not fall.”

Alaya had heard the speech, with little variation, all her life. *Where* was that gatekeeper? And how could the door be unlocked? She looked at the great door standing open before her, solid oak as thick as her waste, bound and studded with iron. It was unmarked. No one had forced their way past it, or even tried.

“Hello.” It was a tentative word with a rising inflection—more question than anything else. Only echoes answered from the dim interior.

The gatekeeper's desk was there in its alcove, neat as always, but unattended. Beyond it, the iron portcullis was raised. Beyond that, the ornately carved inner doors stood open. There was not a sound beyond the sighing of the wind.

*Leave now.*

There was something in the way the bear's thought came across that made her want to leap on his back and flee at his best pace. She fought it down. “Where would we go? I'm going up to the main house. Even if it's dark, I remember the way well enough. You coming?” She hoped she sounded confident—she didn't feel anything like confident.

*Something bad here.*

“You don't know that for sure. Maybe Uncle Uli's taken the house to help someone else.” She didn't believe that, but she had to say something.

The bear only stood in the outer door and rocked from side to side. *Bad here!*

In an iron hanger on the wall beside the gate keeper's desk hung an ancient pike, its thick shaft fully ten feet long. It was ceremonial, of course, but sharp and full functional. Alaya lifted it down, but could hardly keep the polished steel head off the floor. As a weapon, it was useless in her hands. She put it back in its place exactly as it had been, feeling a bit guilty that she had disturbed the gatekeeper's domain. There were only two paths available to her, in or out. She drew a deep breath, closed and latched the outside door behind her and started in.

The shaft leading up to the main house was at least 30 feet in diameter. Wide stone steps spiraled up out of sight like the threads of some giant bolthole. Windows occasionally pierced the

outside wall. Their light was not bright, but good enough to see by. She carefully looked behind both sides of the inner door before starting up the stairs.

It was a long climb, but the only way in. It was part of Uncle Uli's great plan that every person, every scrap of food, every stick of firewood, and all enemies had to climb those endless stairs. His only concession to fatigue was a series of little resting niches cut into the wall every second turn around the shaft. She rested three times before she reached the grand entry hall at the top. By the time she reached the first niche, she felt warm for the first time since leaving Roogain house. It only made her feet hurt more intensely.

Baldor followed in silence, his every move exuding disapproval of her course of action.

The double doors to the hall stood open—Alaya had never seen them closed. Between them, the doorway was a twelve-foot square designed to frame the grandeur beyond. Lofty stone arches framed stained glass windows and heavy tapestries. Ornate wrought iron brackets held oil lamps, their brass fonts and glass chimneys polished to perfection. The mezzanine's carved wooden handrail encircled the room not quite halfway up. From it hung a silk banner bearing the Balori crest. The room served as the central rotunda for the main house. It was empty now and ghostly quiet.

Alaya found herself tiptoeing through the hall, and consciously forced herself to walk as boldly as her feet would allow. This was, after all, her beloved Uncle Uli's house. The first time she had toddled across these stones, someone had to offer her a supporting finger.

"Hello!" Her voice, stronger now, echoed, but there was no response. After a moment, she walked quickly to the far corner of the room and took one of several narrow spiral staircases leading up to the mezzanine.

Baldor balked at the confines of the stairs, and sat on his haunches. *Bad here*, he repeated.

Alaya ignored him. She entered an open corridor leading away from the right side of the entry hall. The lamps were not lit, but she knew the way by heart. A finger held lightly against the wall counted doors as she passed them. She opened the fifth one on the left, and entered.

Light from two small windows set high in the wall illuminated a small room with a simple bed and a dressing table. The smell of the room, more than its familiar sight, brought a torrent of relived experiences rolling over her in a random jumble. Uncle Uli and Aunt Annale had given her this tiny sanctuary for her first birthday.

An open doorway in the left wall led to a closet. She selected a warm shirt and sturdy trousers from the clothes she always kept there. Gratefully, she dug walking boots out of a less-than-tidy pile beneath her hanging clothes.

The bathing facilities were at the end of the corridor. Water ran freely from cisterns above into a large stone tub. Although there was no one to bring boiling water from the kitchen to temper it, it was heaven.

When the grime was gone, and her fingertips had started to wrinkle, she fetched a rough towel from a worn wooden shelf, and began rubbing life back into her skin. A loud metallic clanking behind her almost stopped her heart. As she spun around, a tin water ladle rolled to a stop near the back wall. A thin face topped with golden curls watched her from the service stairs leading to the kitchen. Slowly, a rail-thin boy of about seventeen stepped through the door.

The boy stopped—blue eyes wide, mouth open.

Alaya pulled the towel around her and said, "If I call, my ice bear will be here in three seconds." She wasn't at all sure Baldor could hear her from this distance, and in any case, the three-second figure was a gross exaggeration. She glared at the boy as though daring him to test

the validity of her statement.

The boy remained frozen to the spot, eyes locked on the memory of what the towel now covered.

*Yellow hair*, she thought. *They've been here too*. The thought of Uncle Uli and Aunt Annale savaged by the same beast who buried an axe in her father's back sent a surge of fire through her gut. Anger overcame modesty—she felt her back straighten unbidden. Deliberately, she dropped the towel and reached for her trousers.

The familiar scratch of her shirt's rough fabric on her shoulder and breast brought slight comfort. In all the time she was dressing, her eyes never left the boy's curls. His never left her body. She pulled the heavy, brown boots on. Their soft, smooth, leather lining belied their rough exterior.

Done, she turned her back on the boy and marched down the passage toward the entry hall and Baldor. She could feel the boy's eyes follow her; hear an occasional footfall. Something inside screamed, "Run!" By the force of her will, her pace never varied. Although the boy was not armed, a spot between her shoulder blades burned in anticipation of the axe fall.

Baldor lay flat on his back on the smooth stone floor of the great hall—paws flung outward, head upturned. At Alaya's appearance on the spiral stairs, he wriggled in slow ecstasy, and then suddenly flipped onto his feet in one smooth motion. A low rumble rolled from deep in his chest. His body pointed stiffly at the railing above her. Bad!

Fortunately for the boy, the mezzanine was higher than Baldor could reach. At the sight of the bear, his thin face had gone ashen; his eyes were wider now than when he had first seen Alaya. He did not run; whether it was courage or paralysis keeping him at the rail, no one could tell. He spoke for the first time, his voice deeper than one would expect of such a scrawny boy.

Alaya understood not of word of what he said, but the terror in his words was clear.

The boy's terrified state was also clear to Baldor, who thought that was as it should be. To reinforce it, Baldor let out one of his best rumbling, shrieking roars. The stone and wood of the hall reverberated for a full second.

Blue eyes winced, but stayed in place at the rail.

Baldor charged the spiral staircase, but found that his shoulders and backside were a press fit. He backed down the three steps he had taken, and once again glared at the railing.

While Baldor was threatening and posturing, Alaya walked to the middle of the room. "Who are you, boy?" she called up to him.

Again he spoke in a foreign tongue, holding out empty hands. Then, slowly and deliberately, he turned and vanished the way he had come.



