

BEARS OF THE ICE

The Keepers
of the Keys

Book 3

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CHAPTER 1

An Old Spy Reflects

On an island in the far west of the Everwinter Sea, a bear by the name of Svern huddled in his Yinqui den. He pressed the stubble of what used to be his port ear against the peculiar ice. This particular ice was known for its singular properties, which allowed it to transmit sound and coded messages. Thus, Svern, a seasoned Yinqui, the old Krakish word for listener or spy, would know if the cubs—his daughter, Jytte; his son, Stellan; and their two friends Third and Froya—had safely made the passage to Ga’Hoole. And when they did, Blythe, a barn owl and the code cracker, would tap out the news of the cubs’ safe arrival. Not on ice, however. For such ice did not exist there. She would tap her message on the roots of the Great Ga’Hoole Tree.

The roots of that immense and legendary tree in which the Guardians of Ga’Hoole dwelled also had the odd attribute of transmitting sound. Svern would wait patiently, but he was not a

patient bear when it came to those four cubs who had taught him how to be a father. And he had taught them, or rather advised them, how to penetrate the Den of Forever Frost. That den was where the key to the deadly Ice Clock had lain for centuries. And it was the key that would stop the clock, the source of the Grand Patek's authority. These four cubs had accomplished the unimaginable, and they were now on their way to deliver the key to where it would be safe until the owls of Ga'Hoole could be convinced to launch a flight force to take the key, slip it into the tumblers of the keyhole, and stop the clock once and for all. Those creatures were the only ones who could fly high enough to reach the keyhole. Svern had been cautious, however, when he spoke to the cubs. His mind now flashed back to the somewhat awkward conversation he had had with the cubs, in which he tried to avoid the subject of the possibility of war. *With the key, he'd told them, the ultimate control of the clock is ours . . . for centuries no one has ever possessed the key. They did not know where it was, and without it, the Grand Patek's power is nothing but a pretense.*

But then of course Jytte, impulsive and insightful as only Jytte could be, had parried. "But it doesn't seem a pretense. The Grand Patek has complete control of the Ice Cap. He is worshipped by the Timekeepers."

Svern'd tried to ignore his daughter's argument. He'd just wanted the cubs to focus on delivering the key. Let King Soren and the parliament speak of war. *Your sole mission*, he'd thought. *Get the key to the owls. The owls will take care of the rest.* "I must

stop calling you cubs. You are nearly full grown now. You are yosses.”

“Yosses?” Third had said with more than a hint of disbelief.

“It’s not just about size, Third,” Svern explained. “It’s about experience.”

Svern would have liked to go with the cubs on this mission. He knew the owls. He knew the Hoolian ways. But the times were simply too dangerous for him to be abroad. He was too well-known for one thing. His very presence might attract Roguer bears and endanger the cubs. He had to stay hidden. That was how he could most effectively help in the fight against the Timekeepers of the Ice Clock.

Svern had been captured once by Roguer bears and been tortured. They had burned off his ears with hot coals. But in spite of that, he could still hear if he pressed his ear holes close enough to the ice. And he himself was an expert coder like Blythe. He had to keep track of any enemy activity in the region. Therefore, he remained in his den on Stormfast, an island strategically placed to pick up communications from not just the Great Ga’Hoole Tree, but his paw master, Blue Bear, stationed on the Hrath’ghar Glacier, and another Yinqu bear named Long Ice to the north and slightly east on the same glacier. The points of the three dens of these Yinquis formed a triangle that allowed them to pinpoint any enemy movements within that space. It was vital that he remain at his post.

Svern thought back to the moment he saw his daughter triumphantly holding aloft the key as she came out of the Den of

Forever Frost. It was a moment he would never forget. The four cubs had done what no bear had ever done. They had even slain the unslayable, those monsters from the past who had been sleeping for thousands of years and were awakened when the cubs had trespassed the death pits in the den known as the *hyrakiums*.

Svern had taught them how to use ice weapons with which they had killed the hagsfiends and the dragon walruses that had emerged from those pits—and perhaps killed them once and for all. But for the task ahead, he knew different skills would be required. The cubs had to learn the ways of the owls, and they had to convince these owls to stop the clock. Wings—wings were required, but not just wings. The entire kingdom of all the creatures of Ga’Hoole was needed. And this would be hard for the cubs to understand. For the world of Ga’Hoole was a complex one. Much more so than the ice-locked land of the Nunquivik. But they would have to learn quickly, for much depended on the cubs. They were now the Keepers of the Key.