

# BEARS OF THE ICE

The Quest of the Cubs

Book 1

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# CHAPTER 1

## Ice Lessons

*“We wait for the jumble moon, the one that will drive the tide  
And the wintry wind, just 'round the bend  
That will bring the ice by the bye  
The creaks, the groans, and the mumbles  
As the ice piles up in jumbles  
And beneath those icy crests  
Swim seals in blubbery vests  
Let my little cubs learn  
before the midnight sun burns . . .”*

Svenna sang the song as she led the cubs out to the edge of the Nunqua where the sea met the frozen land, where the jumble ice would soon mass. Jumble ice was the sign that true hunting could begin.

There was no time to waste. That terrible thing called a Tuesday was coming. She glanced back at her two cubs as they scrambled over the piles of ice. They were always looking for the perfect ice slide for skeeters, a game her cubs loved to play. But, sadly, there was no time for that anymore. First and Second had to learn all they could from their mum before those dreadful bears came back.

Svenna had arranged to leave her cubs with a distant cousin, Taaka, in exchange for a rare, valuable filing stone Svenna had brought all the way from Ga'Hoole. It was quite useful for keeping claws sharp enough to slice seal blubber, and Taaka had seemed pleased with the offering. But that was no guarantee Taaka would care for the cubs as her own, so it was essential that Svenna teach them to hunt for themselves.

If Svenna's cubs had been born to the south in the Northern Kingdoms of Ga'Hoole, they would have been named three months after their birth. But here in Nunquivik, the custom was different. It was a harsher land. Many cubs died young; therefore they weren't named until their second season on the ice. So for now, Svenna's cubs would continue to be called First and Second, the order of their birth.

The cubs were squealing with delight over a newly discovered ice slide.

"This one's great! Look how it curves!" First called to his sister.

“Yeah, but I can make it even better!” Second said, bounding over to dig into the ice. “I can make it steeper, faster.”

And she would, Svenna thought. Her younger cub had an uncanny gift for building with snow and ice. It was as if Second could see exactly how the crystals locked together. She was what some used to call an ice gazer, though Svenna hadn’t heard anyone use that term in a very long time.

“You’d better grip a bit with your hind claws. You might crash,” First cautioned his sister, sounding wary.

“Nonsense! I know ice.”

“I know you know ice, but be careful,” Svenna interjected. “Don’t be reckless, Second!”

Second scowled at her mother’s reprimand. She wasn’t reckless. She was *brave*. Like her father, a great hunter. He wouldn’t scold her for being daring. He’d trust her!

First had his unique skills as well. There were occasions when Svenna sensed that her firstborn could pick up the scent of other creatures’ thoughts. Some called bears with this particular gift riddlers, for they could riddle another creature’s mind.

Just the evening before, Svenna and her cubs had spotted a tern high above their den, and First had said, “She won’t nest here.”

“Now, how would you know that, First?” Svenna had asked.

“I can’t explain. She just won’t.” He’d shrugged his furry shoulders.

“Why?” Second had asked.

“Something bad happened to her here.”

“Okay, but *what?*” Second had prodded, growing irritated.

A troubled look had crossed First’s face. “I don’t know. But look at her flight pattern. She keeps coming back in at the exact same slant. Then she swivels at the last moment, as if she can’t bear to come too close.” The guard hairs of Svenna’s neck had bristled. First’s words had left her with an uneasy feeling.

Watching her cubs play, Svenna had a different sickening sensation. She had not yet told them that she was leaving, and that they’d have to stay with their cousin Taaka, whom they had never met.

“I dare you to do a *gludderwump!*” Second shouted as she scampered toward the ice slide. Second was the most competitive little cub imaginable and was always challenging her brother.

“Of course I can do a *gludderwump*,” First replied evenly. “I taught you how to do it. I showed you exactly how to curl so you roll while you slide.”

“So what? I do it better. My rolls are perfect. Tuck my knees, tuck my chin, and off I go.”

“Who taught you that knee trick, Second? Me!” First said.

*Oh great Ursus*, Svenna thought sadly. How she would miss their bickering. But when she called to them, her voice was stern. “Come over here right now, cubs. You’re both almost yearlings, and there is much to learn.” She stopped herself from saying, “Before I leave.”

She had considered running off with the cubs, but the Roguers would find her. Taaka had assured her of this when Svenna sneaked off while the cubs were sleeping. Taaka had not seemed surprised at all about the Roguers. “Happens a lot around here,” she’d said brusquely. “There’s nothing you can do about it. And don’t even think of running away.”

“The cubs are still young. They couldn’t run far.”

“Exactly, and the Roguers are very good trackers. You know of course what they’ll do if they catch you?”

Svenna had shaken her head.

“They murder you in front of your own cubs and take them anyway.”

Svenna shuddered as she recalled those chilling words and tried to focus on watching the cubs play. It was hard to imagine them hunting yet. They were barely a year old, born on the longest night of the year, the night when the first of the Jumble Roarings Ice begin. But they would have to learn to hunt, young as they were. Taaka had three cubs of her own to nurse. She would have no milk for First and Second.