



**ICEWALL TRILOGY**  
**VOLUME ONE**

**The**  
**messenger**

**DOUGLAS NILES**



I can throw a harpoon as far as any man and hit the target twice as often!" Moreen knew that her voice was getting loud, but right now she didn't care. How could her father be so Chislev-cursed *stubborn*? "You know it's true! So why can't I take a kayak out with the rest of the hunters?"

"You're my daughter, and you will stay in the village with your mother!" growled Redfist Bayguard, his swarthy face darkening into the flush of deep anger.

The young woman opened her mouth to speak, but the chieftain trampled over her objections without hesitation. "I have already given you too much freedom! Do you know there are those who speak ill of me because I let you learn how to cast a harpoon, how to track a bear and build a fire on the tundra? They say I cannot control my own child—how can I be expected to manage the affairs of the *Arktos*?"

Moreen felt her own temper slipping away, knew that she should bite her tongue, but the words spilled out in a voice that reached far beyond the sealskin walls of the little hut. "Maybe people should worry more about their *own* affairs," she snapped.

"You will be silent, now!" roared the chieftain, rising to his feet and trembling in such rage that the daughter

momentarily feared his clenched fist. She stood up too, glaring, challenging him, all but daring him to strike.

He turned and pushed through the leather door, stomping into the misty dawn.

Striding after him, Moreen caught the flap of door before it closed, then stopped, quivering from her own anger but unwilling to press the fight. She saw the blue-white sky, the flat waters of the bay, and, closer, the villagers going about as if they hadn't heard the argument. It was early morning, but early morning in the time of the midnight sun. The sky was already fully bright after the short, ghostly interval of midnight.

"I know that you don't want to humiliate him, but that is what you do."

Her mother spoke from the shadows beyond the cold firepit. Inga Bayguard sat crosslegged, looking at Moreen with her dark eyes soft and sad.

"How can he be so unfair?" the younger woman demanded, even as a small voice inside of her suggested that it was she who was being unreasonable.

"If you had asked him to take you along when he was going hunting by himself, you know that he would have gladly let you accompany him. How many times has he done just that? Remember, not four years ago, he took you hunting in spring, and the two of you paddled as far as Tall Cedar Bay? But today . . . this is the great hunt of Highsummer. Every male in the tribe is going along, and, like it or not, your presence would be a huge distraction."

"Well, how can it be such a humiliation for him when in the end everyone knows I obey his will?"

"Because you shout at him, corner him in arguments. Because you make certain that everyone in the village knows how you feel."

Letting the door flap drop, which enclosed the hut in a dimness broken only by the whale-oil lamp, Moreen pushed a strand of black hair back from her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. Her mother rose and stepped around the small room to look up into her daughter's face.

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

“You have your father’s strength, Moreen Bayguard, and your mother’s—well, I want to believe you have your mother’s heart. But you are your own person. As you enter your eighteenth summer you have been granted unusual respect by the Arktos—even those old hunters who have now worked you into such a rage.”

“What do you mean, ‘respect’? They think I’m a frivolous pest.”

“Sometimes you *are* a frivolous pest,” retorted Inga. “There are other times when you show skill that cannot fail to impress. The men may complain about you learning manly skills, but they have noted your talent with the harpoon. You were right—you *can* throw better than any of them. They respect your intelligence, and the force of your words. You are a true heir to your great-grandfather.”

The young woman’s anger softened. She looked at the pelt that stretched across one whole interior wall of the hut, the lush black fur that was far too precious ever to lie upon the ground.

“I want to be worthy of Wallran Bayguard. I really do,” she said.

“I know, child,” Inga replied. “As it was for your father, the legacy of the Black Bear will be a burden and an honor that you carry all your life. Wallran Bayguard hunted and slew the mythic bear as foretold in the prophecy, killed it with a single spear-cast, as had been foretold since the Scattering. That promise for the future, that our people will one day prosper and rise to be masters of Icereach, is embodied in you. It is your legacy and your future.”

“My future?” Moreen replied in disgust. “My future looks like a lifetime of cooking and skinning the prey that the men bring home!”

Her mother’s expression gently chided her, but the younger woman was in no mood to heed it. Instead, she pushed through the door and stomped across the village square. The Arktos hunters there, busy with their preparations, had the good sense to avoid meeting her eyes.

By the time the Arktos hunters had rigged their kayaks and collected their gear Moreen and Bruni, her best friend, had ascended to the rocky crest rising just beyond the shore.

Beyond the mouth of the bay, the White Bear Sea was a dazzling swath of silver, bright with reflected sunlight. The sky overhead was pale blue, which brightened to white closer to the horizon. The summer sun was a shining presence in the northeast, a spot of fire burning through the haze.

The huts of Bayguard nestled across the flat ground between two hills and the sheltered bay that had been the tribe's home for three generations, since Wallran Bayguard had killed the black bear that had hallowed this spot. Here they weathered the brutal onslaught of Sturm frost each winter, and emerged each spring to, if not prosper, at least survive. The threescore structures looked neat and snug, clustered around the flat square and ceremonial firepit in the center of the village. Across that plaza rose a shape made of bundled sticks, the half-bird, half-fish image of Chislev Wilder, hunter goddess of the Arktos. Little kayaks were arrayed along the shore. For a time the two women watched the hunters push the boats into the shallows, each scrambling aboard and quickly starting to paddle.

"Do you think they will be gone long?" asked Bruni, lifting her voluminous leather skirt enough that she could sit comfortably on a large, flat boulder.

Moreen, who was dressed in sealskin trousers and a woolen shirt, leaned against another outcrop and shook her head. "I don't care," she snorted, "if the lot of them are gone until Lastsummer Day!" She watched as the kayaks bobbed through the gentle surf near the shore, each man paddling his little craft through the breakers until the boats gathered a short distance off the beach. Redfist Bayguard, his kayak distinguished by a crimson stripe, stroked into

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

the lead and led the boats toward the mouth of the small, protected bay.

Bruni chuckled, the sound rumbling from her big body with an easy humor that Moreen inevitably found infectious.

Moreen sighed in resignation. "If luck from the past holds, they'll find seals not too far away. Even if they get after a whale—" the chieftain's daughter winced inwardly at the thought of missing that thrill—"I would think they'd be able to tow it back here within a week or ten days."

"Let's hope for ten days of peace and quiet, then," Bruni said, shading her eyes with her hand as she looked toward the dazzling sun. She was sitting up straight, a tall and round-shouldered bulk on her flat rock. Bruni's face was flat and "round as the moon," as Inga was fond of saying. Her cheekbones were prominent, and when she smiled her face took on a glow all its own. She was tall and wide, with thick arms and strong, plump fingers. Her feet were bigger than any man's in the tribe, and instead of moccasins she encased them in heavy leather boots.

Moreen, by contrast, felt like a waif. Her frame was wiry and compact, the top of her scalp reaching just over five feet from the ground. She kept her dark hair cut to shoulder length, usually tied behind her ears, while Bruni favored the typical style of Arktos women, with a lush tail of black hair that, when unrestrained, reached nearly to the ground.

A girl's shriek rang out from the hillside below them, and they saw a child race into sight, shaking droplets of water from her hair. "I'll get you for that, Little Mouse!" she cried, reaching down to pick up a fist-sized rock. She hurled the missile into the hillside where it clattered loudly. Grinning broadly, a tall, dark-haired boy dodged out of the way, then stood making faces while the girl cast stone after stone.

"Ouch!" he cried suddenly as one finally glanced off his forehead. "Okay, Feathertail, I'm sorry," he said.

"That'll teach you to douse me!" the girl declared and

flounced away. In her hand was a basket partially filled with spring blossoms.

The youth's expression turned sour as he made his way higher onto the hillside. After he had taken a dozen steps he noticed the two women regarding him, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Lucky throw," he said, rubbing his forehead.

"Not lucky enough," Moreen retorted, though she smiled enough to take the sting out of her words.

Little Mouse sighed, and his eyes drifted toward the kayaks which were now starting to round the point of the bay. In another few minutes they would be into the swell of the deep gulf waters and would make the turn to head north-eastward along the coast.

"You wish you were out there with them, don't you?" the chieftain's daughter said sympathetically. "I know how you feel."

Little Mouse looked at her eagerly, and she was reminded of a puppy, frantically eager to please. He was thirteen summers old, awkwardly torn between boyhood and becoming a man. "But you—they *should* let you go!" he proclaimed, his voice cracking an octave on the last word. "I've seen you throw—why, I bet you'd get the first seal!"

Now it was the woman's turn to sigh, and she shook her head ruefully. "You'll be going on the spring hunt before I will," she said.

"Papa said maybe next year," Little Mouse admitted. "Normally I'd wait til fifteen, but since I'm the only boy my age in the tribe they might make an exception."

"I know you'll be ready," encouraged Moreen.

"What's that?" Bruni asked abruptly, pointing into the dazzling brightness of the sea. Something came across the water, distant but moving toward them, trailing a long wake that sparkled in the sun.

The boy quickly looked toward the sun. "A whale? It's too big!"

"No . . . no whale." Moreen felt a peculiar chill, awe that quickly gave way to fear. She squinted, trying to adjust her

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

notions of scale and realized that it was a vessel, a massive hull slicing through the waters of the White Bear Sea. “It’s some kind of boat, but it’s as big as the village!”

As it emerged from the swath of the sun’s brightest glare they could begin to make out more details. The vessel was long and slender like a kayak, with a row of long paddles. It was hard to get a sense of the craft’s size, but it must be huge indeed. This was not a boat of any Arktos tribe.

“Highlanders?” asked Bruni tentatively.

“No.” Moreen was certain. “The only one of them I’ve ever met looked squeamish at the very thought of going on the water.”

“Have the hunters have seen it?” Bruni asked, with a glance toward the kayaks scattered like specks nearing the mouth of the bay. They were much closer than the strange ship but still tiny by comparison.

“Not yet.” Moreen was remembering her many hunting expeditions along the shores beyond the village. “There’s that headland to the east that will block their view—until they come around the point, and that thing will be right on top of them!”

“What is it?” asked Mouse, worriedly. “Are you sure it’s not some kind of whale?”

“No whale. I don’t know what it is, but I’m frightened. Let’s get to the village!” replied the chieftain’s daughter in growing urgency. “We can light a signal fire to call the hunters back.”

Little Mouse was already sprinting down the hill, while Moreen trotted after, and Bruni picked her way more cautiously between the jutting rocks.

What could it be? Little Mouse’s question churned in Moreen’s mind, coming up with the one and only possibility, a dire explanation indeed. A mythic name, imbued with terror and doom, a threat she had never seen but that had been a part of her people’s storytelling and folklore since before her birth.

Ogres.

The great brutes had not raided the Arktos in Moreen’s

lifetime or during the lives of her parents. They remained a threat of legends, monstrous figures from stories told by the shaman, crabby old Dinekki, to while away the long, dark months of winter. Always in the back of the tribal consciousness, though, there was the knowledge of this brutal race that also dwelled in the place called Icereach and that might one day renew on the cruel raids that had made ancient life deadly for the Arktos since the time of the Scattering.

It was because of these legendary ogres that every child of Clan Bayguard, from the moment he or she could first walk, learned the path to the Hiding Hole, the narrow-mouthed cave notched into the hill beyond the village. They learned the first rule, as well—never go to the Hiding Hole if an ogre can see you, or you may lead the raiders to the whole tribe.

How did that explain the great boat? Always in the stories the ogres had moved across the land, marching out of the spring mists to lay waste to this village or that town, dragging off slaves, smashing buildings, leaving death and destruction and despair in their wake. Surely the building of a craft like the one they had seen was beyond the cunning of an ogre mind!

Yet who else could it be? Clearly the vessel wasn't the work of the Highlanders. Moreen had encountered a group of those human hunters on one occasion and had not been impressed. Shaggy, bearded, tall, they seemed like simple-minded savages. One had tried to approach her, but of course she had turned and fled, and he had reacted with almost comical disbelief when she gotten into her kayak and rowed away. She suspected they were frightened of any liquid deeper than the mugs of warqat they reputedly drank continually during the long months of winter.

It was even less likely that the ship carried outlanders, people from beyond Icereach. Though there were tales of lands, of humans and even stranger beings from far across the turbulent ocean, outlanders were like imaginary beings. None of these had ever come to these shores, not in the

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

memories of the oldest elders recalling their own elders' stories.

The ogres, however, did live across the gulf in a mountain fastness. And if it had been a human's life span since their last raid, there was no doubt that they really existed—every child had been shown Dinekki's tusk and given a lesson about the nature of their ancient and brutal enemies. How many times, scolding Moreen for some infraction, had her mother threatened her with, "Behave, or I'll leave you outside where the ogre king will find you"? Always the warning brought a chill.

By the time Moreen reached the outskirts of the village, barely winded from her long downhill sprint, she had convinced herself that it was ogres coming. Little Mouse had already run between the huts, shouting an alarm, and the chieftain's daughter was met by a confused rabble of women, children, and elders.

"What is this racket?" crabbed Dinekki, as the skinny old shaman tried to tap Little Mouse on the foot with her staff.

The boy skipped out of the way, pleading earnestly for her ear. "Grandmother Dinekki, it's true! A great kayak sails the coast, coming this way! Moreen saw it, and Bruni too! We've got to light a smoke fire and bring back the hunters!"

"I saw it also!" claimed Feathertail, the girl hopping up and down beside Inga Bayguard. "It's coming toward my papa, toward the kayaks!"

Already another young woman, Tildey, was whipping a coal from her firepit into bright flame. Other women were busy grabbing logs from various woodpiles, dousing some with oil, and casting them into a great pile in the village square. Tildey touched her fire to the kindling, and quickly the bonfire crackled into a smoky conflagration.

"Are you sure it's ogres? Couldn't it be a ship of men?" asked matronly Garta with a quaver in her voice, three small children clinging to her gown.

"Not Arktos, and not Highlanders either," Bruni declared with a shake of her big head. "Can't be men."

"This tusk will tell." Dinekki's dry, brittle voice somehow cut through the commotion. The shaman held up a curved ivory tooth, one of the many talismans she wore on various strands around her neck. She removed the thong from the hole that had been drilled through the base of the object. Next she blew softly on the ivory, then muttered a rhythmic prayer in the language of the goddess Chislev. Raising the tusk, she held it in her fingertips at the end of her rigidly extended arm.

*"Ogre tusk shall show the truth—seek thy owner, lonesome tooth!"*

She released her grip on the tusk with a sudden gesture, but instead of falling straight down to the ground, the tooth spun away toward the sea, finally clattering to the stony ground some ten feet distant.

"Yes! There are ogres there," Dinekki said, pointing along the line of the tusk's flight.

"That's the direction to the great boat," Moreen said, feeling a sickening tightness in her belly.

By now the fire was crackling hungrily through the wood, and a plume of black smoke was rising high above the village. A gentle breeze curved the smoke over the land, but it rose as a clear beacon. The kayaks were beyond the point of the bay, now invisible from the square, but Moreen felt certain they would take immediate note of the time-honored signal and return.

"Everyone to the Hiding Hole!" declared Inga Bay-guard. "Gather your precious things."

"I will stay here to fight alongside the men!" her daughter declared in a sudden burst of emotion.

"You will lead this tribe to the Hiding Hole," Inga replied in a clipped tone that somehow halted any attempt Moreen might have made at an argument. "Bruni, you must carry Grandfather Oilfish. You bigger children help with the youngsters—start out now, and your mothers will be right behind. Now hurry, all of you!"

The chieftain's daughter hastened into the hut. She looked at the huge black bearskin on the wall and for a

moment felt a pang as she remembered Wallran Bayguard's legacy. She should take it—the pelt was a rare treasure in this land where all other bears were white. Even more, it was symbolic of her family's place, as chieftains of all the Arktos in their many coastal villages.

Nonetheless it was more than she could carry alone, and there was no time for such a burden. Picking up three of her harpoons, she also grabbed a heavy woolen cloak and a large skin of water. By the time she emerged the other women were gathering in the village square. Little Mouse was directing a file of several dozen children who were already making their way up the winding hillside path, some suppressing frightened sobs, others casting longing looks toward their homes.

"Let's go," Moreen said, coming to her mother's side.

"I said *you* will lead them," Inga replied. "I will follow when I know that you are safe and the men have seen the beacon. Until then, I will stoke the fire." Her mother indicated the signal pyre, and Moreen saw that the initial fuel had already been reduced to crumbling coals. "Now make haste—and Chislev be with you!"

Giving her mother a quick hug, Moreen gathered the rest of the women and the elders. She saw that Tildey had armed herself with a bow and arrows, while Brunni carried a stout stick.

"What about Grandfather Oilfish?" asked Inga. That elder, his legs crippled years earlier, would be unable to walk on his own.

"He refused to come—he has his harpoon and sits inside his doorway."

Inga blinked, then nodded. "Very well—now, hurry!"

Several other women had armed themselves with harpoons, but for the most part the group consisted of frightened, white-haired grandfathers and grandmothers wrapped in woolen shawls and wide-eyed hearthwives who bit their lips and, for their children's sakes, made brave efforts not to cry.

They started out of the village, moving as quickly as they could, many of the women helping the elders. Moreen

cast one glance back to the sea, despairing as she saw no sign yet of the kayaks returning to the bay. Inga was tossing more wood onto the fire, and she dumped the contents of an oil lamp into the rekindled blaze. Quickly she retreated as a black, smoky cloud once more erupted into the sky.

It seemed to take forever to climb the hill, though in reality the tribespeople ascended the twisting path in just a few minutes. Moreen and Bruni brought up the rear, watching the last of their village-mates slip through the narrow crack in the rocky cliff to enter the deep, dry cave.

The shelter was perfectly concealed, for the irregular surface of the precipice curled around itself here, so that the cave mouth was not even visible to one who peered straight at the hillside. Still, as she glanced down Moreen was dismayed to see the trampled brush and dusty tracks leading up the hill.

“Here, help me sweep this away,” she declared. Pulling up a brittle willow bush she moved partway down the path and started brushing away the footprints. Bruni followed, dropped tufts of greenery onto the trail until it looked no different from the rest of the hillside.

“There are the hunters,” Moreen said, as she saw that the kayaks had come around the point and reentered the bay. The men were paddling with crisp, efficient strokes, and the little boats fairly skipped over the gentle swell, racing like gliding birds toward the shore.

“The great boat, close behind!” Bruni exclaimed.

Her observation was unnecessary as the chieftain’s daughter, too, saw the immense vessel glide into view. It seemed to move impossibly fast for a craft of such size, for it churned around the point and surged toward the shore, closing the distance on the nimble kayaks, looming over the smaller boats like a mountain over mere huts.

“Let’s get out of sight”

The big woman knelt and Moreen shrank beside her, dropping behind the cover of several boulders. She looked back quickly, saw that the mouth of the cave was still. None of the other villagers were showing themselves.

The first kayaks reached the shore. She could spot the

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

men scrambling out of their little boats, turning to help their fellows onto shore. The great ogre vessel loomed close behind, churning toward the beach. Golden rails gleamed and sparkled in the sunlight, and the burnished image of a great, tusked head loomed awkwardly above the bow. The deck was crowded, teeming with figures bearing tall, golden-tipped spears.

A spot of color flashed along the graveled beach and the women saw Inga Bayguard running toward the men, her dyed cloak trailing from her shoulders. She was carrying Redfist's bear spear, his mightiest weapon, as with a flurry of powerful strokes the chieftain pushed his red-striped kayak right up to his wife.

The big rowing ship churned right through some of the kayaks that hadn't reached shore, breaking a few of the little boats like child's toys crushed under heavy booted steps. Arktos hunters boldly hurled their harpoons at the hulking figures lining the gunwale of the great vessel. Moreen couldn't see if any of these casts scored hits, but she groaned as she saw big spears fly outward from the ogre ranks, easily piercing several hunters and some kayaks. A few of the boats sank, carrying their men into the chill depths.

Another overturned near shore, and a hunter flailed in the water, trying to crawl out of his leaking boat. Moreen saw that he was lanced through with a huge spear, bleeding so much that the wave breaking around him foamed into a crimson crest. Finally the little vessel rolled over, nudging gently into the shallows, the hunter obviously too weak to right his craft. The young woman felt a rush of guilt, oddly shamed that she couldn't recognize which of her village-mates was dying before her eyes.

The grinding of the rowing ship hitting shallow water was audible even up on the hillside. Surf broke to either side of the big hull. Two broad ramps dropped downward, one to each side of the bow, and big raiders lumbered down the platforms to splash into the knee-deep water.

The Arktos hunters met them on both sides of the vessel, casting harpoons, slashing in with fishing knives,

paddles, anything that could serve as a weapon. One ogre bore a huge axe, and he swung it into a human, dropping the man with a wound so deep that Moreen could see the spray of blood from her lofty vantage. The raiders were monstrous, looming a foot or two over their victims. Wearing armored breastplates, heavy boots, and thick gauntlets, they seemed to merely brush aside any of the villagers' attempts at resistance.

Another man fell back, lying in the shallow water with a huge spear sticking in his midriff. Here again, and now in many other places too, the frothing surf was tinged red. An ogre howled as a harpoon struck him in the shoulder, penetrating deep into gristly flesh—but even before the brute plucked the weapon from the wound his attacker was beaten down by a pack of other ogres who surrounded him. The Arktos were outnumbered and losing badly.

"Where is my father?" whispered Moreen, as the melee spread from the shallows onto the flat beach. Here and there men established pockets of resistance, while the ogres spread out and moved in slowly.

"There," Bruni said grimly, pointing a finger.

Moreen gasped, seeing Redfist wield his spear against a huge ogre with Inga behind him. The chieftain made a curt gesture to his wife, and she finally turned and raced toward the village, sprinting past the first little domes. When the ogre attacked, Redfist thrust the tip of the spear up through the creature's great belly. With a roar, the ogre reeled sideways, and the chieftain twisted his weapon and then pulled the gory tip out of the wound. The stricken raider collapsed on the ground, kicking weakly, as Redfist turned and race in the same direction as his wife.

"So many are dying," Bruni said numbly. Moreen could only nod with heartsickness. Already the surf was thick with bodies, and ogres were advancing toward the village along the whole breadth of the beach. A few men still fought in the open, while others fell back among the skin-walled huts.

A woman—it was Inga Bayguard—screamed as burly

ogre paws grabbed her arms. She was thrown roughly to the ground as another one of the raiders rushed up, raising a large axe.

“By Chislev—no!” cried Moreen. She tried to spring forward, racing to her mother’s aid, but Bruni threw her to the ground and held her there with firm pressure.

“I have to go to her!” hissed the chieftain’s daughter.

“No,” Bruni said, her tone gentle despite the power of her stout grip. “You cannot help her—and you would only give away the position of the Hiding Hole.”

With a sob Moreen collapsed onto her stomach, still staring with horror. The ogre with the axe stumbled sideways, as Redfist raced up to jab his bloody spear into the monster’s hip. It collapsed with a roar and a feeble kick, but now the other ogre reached out and seized the haft of the chieftain’s spear. With a twist the brute yanked the weapon out of the man’s hands. Redfist drew his long, bone-bladed knife, but the ogre used the bloody spear like a club, bashing him in the head and sending him reeling to the ground.

With casual contempt the great brute aimed the point of the spear downward, piercing Inga’s body and staking her to the ground. Her hands clasped at the blood-slick haft, but her struggles quickly ceased. In moments the chieftain’s wife lay still, a patch of crimson slowly staining the ground around her.

Redfist, meanwhile, had been roughly hoisted to his feet. Seeing his wife’s death, he thrashed with fury, but the brute hoisted him as if he was a child, carrying him toward the rest of the raiders who were starting to gather in the midst of the village square.

“That is their chief,” Bruni said, once more pointing.

The gesture was unnecessary—the leader of the raiders was clearly identifiable even from this high vantage. He swaggered forward between a pair of his fellows, awaiting delivery of Redfist. A gold breastplate gleamed across his massive chest. His twin tusks gleamed with gilded wire, tightly wrapped around the ivory stubs. Bracelets and thigh guards, also made of gold and secured with golden chains,

protected his limbs. Massive boots of black whaleskin rose past his knees, and at his waist he wore a sheath and a long sword. Moreen hadn't seen this gaudy ruler in the thick of the battle, and she wondered contemptuously if he had been absent and was content to let others do his fighting for him.

"Someday we will feed him those gold chains, one link at a time," vowed Bruni, for the first time betraying bitter emotion in her voice.

Numbly Moreen pledged agreement. She was tense and trembling, but her eyes were dry, and her thoughts seemed strangely calm.

For the first time, she saw the dwarf.

He swaggered out from behind the ogre leader, his chest thrust out, straw-colored beard bristling in a self-important display. A metal breastplate, gray instead of gold, protected his chest, and a cap of similar material fitted his head, though stiff, wiry hair jutted out from beneath the rim. With manifest arrogance he stalked up to Redfist Bayguard, staring into the struggling chieftain's face, then walked past to turn toward the surrounding hillsides.

"Hear me, people of Icereach!" the dwarf cried. "Come forward and pay homage to your prince! His name is Grimwar Bane, and he is the son of Grimtruth Bane, the King of Suderhold, who rules your lands from his citadel in Winterheim. Know that you are his subjects, and you owe your lives, your breath, your homes, to his beneficence!"

Redfist twisted, tried to raise his clenched hand, but the two ogres now holding him merely exerted a little more pressure until he hung motionless in their arms.

"We know you are up there, hiding . . . watching," cried the dwarf. Even from this distance his eyes seemed unusually large to Moreen, but they were pale and empty. He brandished a dagger, a silver-hilted knife that he waved back and forth so that it sparkled in the spring sun.

"It is important that you understand the power of Grimtruth Bane, as shown here by his son Grimwar. Do not defy him."

Abruptly the dwarf spun around. He stood several steps

## ❧ *The Messenger* ❧

away from Redfist Bayguard, but he raised the knife as if he would have stabbed the man. He barked some word, a sound Moreen could not identify.

Instantly the short blade of the knife flashed into a long, slender sword. The silver tip flicked across Redfist Bayguard's cheek, scoring a shallow cut.

The chieftain came alive with a scream, a sound of pain and anguish that would haunt Moreen's memories for the rest of her life. Her father was a brave and stoic man—she had seen him pull a barbed harpoon right through the meaty part of his thigh after a tribesman's miscast—and so his eerie shriek was a shock to the young woman.

His struggles became so frantic that he somehow managed to pull away from the two ogres. With both hands pressed to his face, he stumbled weakly, bouncing off of the low stone wall surrounding the village square. The ogres watched in amusement, some of them laughing, as the stricken man staggered to his wife's body. With a last strangled sob, the chieftain dropped to his knees, gasped once more, and then collapsed beside Inga's lifeless form.

Moreen didn't have to watch any longer to know that her father, too, lay dead.