

Part One

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHASE FOR THE PREY

The dark spruce forest stood frowning on either side of the ice-bound river. A recent wind had blown the white blanket of frost from the trees, and they, black and ominous, leaned against each other in the impending twilight. A deep stillness reigned all around. This whole land, devoid of any sign of life with its movement, was so desolate and cold that the spirit hovering over it could not even be called a spirit of sorrow. Laughter, but laughter worse than sorrow, was heard here - laughter as joyless as the smile of a sphinx, laughter as chilling with its callousness as a chill. It was the eternal wisdom - imperious, elevated above the world - that laughed, seeing the futility of life, the futility of struggle. It was the wilderness - the wild, frozen to the heart of the Northern wilderness.

And yet something alive moved in it and challenged it. A team of sled dogs was making its way along the frozen river. Their disheveled coats were freezing cold, their breath frozen in the air and crystallized on their hides. The dogs were in a leather harness, and leather straps ran from it to a sled that dragged behind them. The sled without runners, made of thick birch bark, lay flat on the snow. Its front was bent upward like a scroll, so that it could press against the soft waves of snow that came up to meet them. On the sled stood a narrow, oblong box, firmly fastened to it. There were other things there: clothes, an axe, a coffee pot, a pan; but above all it was the narrow oblong box that took up most of the sled.

Ahead of the dogs on wide skis was a man walking with difficulty. Behind the sled was a second man. On the sled, in the box, lay the third, for whom the earthly work was over, for the Northern wilderness overcame, broke him, so that he could no longer move or fight. The Northern wilderness does not like movement. It militates against life, for life is movement, and the Northern Wilderness seeks to stop all that moves. It freezes the water in order to delay its run to the sea; it sucks the sap from the tree, and its mighty heart freezes with cold; but with particular fury and cruelty the Northern Wilderness breaks the persistence of man, because man is the most rebellious being in the world, because man always rebels against its will, according to which all movement must eventually cease.

And yet in front and behind the sled were two fearless and rebellious men who had not yet parted with their lives. Their clothes were made of fur and soft tanned leather. Their eyelashes, cheeks, and lips were so icy from their breath frozen in the air that they could not see their faces under the icy crust. This made them look like some kind of ghostly masks, gravediggers from the netherworld, performing a ghost's burial. But they were not ghostly masks, but men who had entered the land of sorrow and mockery and silence, daredevils who had invested all their pitiful strength in an audacious scheme to compete with the power of a world as distant and desolate and alien to them as the vast expanse of space.