

Frost Oysterson whispered into the ear of Salal Summersdaughter “I guess your uncle’s gonna make trouble.”

He was a slight young man, dark eyed, with blond hair tied back, no taller than the woman. He wore a poncho and kilt of woven cedar bark, she a cedar bark shift. Standing there embracing they were barely distinguishable from the trees that surrounded them.

Salal pulled away a little and said “I know. He won’t miss the chance. Just don’t let him get you mad.”

Frost watched Salal follow a path through the trees and become indistinct in the semidarkness. When she disappeared where the path curved he heard a distant roll of thunder.

He took the path in the opposite direction and came out of the woods behind a house of split cedar boards. Near one wall a few boards lay in the mud. Frost stacked them and stepped away from the house to study the roof, which was gapped where the boards had broken loose.

“We’ll fix that after. But jeez, look what Mother done to Old Frost.” In front of the house Saltspring Noorson stood in the rain, holding up one end of a six-foot carved pole.

Frost came to examine the damage. He said “Rotten at the bottom. No wonder it fellled over. I guess we should of fixed it a long time ago. ’Cause Duncan’s gonna love this. Just don’t say Mother done it, OK? You’re startin’ to sound like him.”

Saltspring said “I’m just jokin’, Nephew. And the next time you say I sound like that bastard you get a kick in the ass. But yeah, he’ll say Mother knocked our pole over ’cause she don’t like Old Frost’s people. You can bet on that.”

Saltspring was in his fifties, sturdy, with grey creeping into his black beard and hair, and eyes that glinted with rage or delight.

Frost said “Alls it was was a trembler.”

“Not to Duncan it wasn’t. Not to none of Summer’s people.”

The single carving on the fallen pole was of a narrow bearded face. Near the pole lay what resembled the frame of a pair of glasses, worked from some thin vine. Frost placed them back on the wooden face.

He saw people moving toward a structure seventy-five yards away between the houses and the seashore - a roof supported on poles, with a fire burning. He said “We better go.”

Saltspring went into the house and came out with a conical hat of woven bark, and a small cedar box. He placed the hat on Frost’s head and stood in front of him and dipped a forefinger into the mud-like substance the box contained. Frost stood still while his uncle sketched on his face a green pair of glasses.

Frost said “We don’t want to make no trouble. Neither her nor me.”

“Trouble’s comin’ whether you make it or not.”

Under the roof of the Talking Place, on a plastic folding chair that was draped in a throw of rabbit pelts, sat Oyster Noorsdaughter. She was bronze-skinned and stern-faced. She wore a conical hat like Frost's, and over her bark shift a cloak of pelts that amplified her substantial bulk. She stared sedately toward waves crashing at the base of the rise upon which the village was situated. Her hands rested in her lap. In one of them she held, upright like a sceptre, an eagle feather almost two feet in length. Frost stood beside her with a hand on her shoulder.

A few stragglers arrived - children mostly - and found places among their clans or relatives on cedar plank benches that faced the sea and formed a semicircle around the fire. At one end, behind Oyster and Frost, sat Saltspring and the two dozen or so relatives and other adherents of the Old Frost clan. At the other end of the Talking Place, beyond the fire, Summer Bearsdaughter sat on the front bench with her brother Duncan on one side and her daughter Salal on the other. Beside and behind them sat the blood-members and adherents of the Bear clan.

Between Oyster's people and Summer's people sat the largest contingent, formed by the rest of the villagers, who muttered among themselves and glanced worriedly from one clan to the other. Among these, one man's face stood out, partly because it was visible well above the others, and partly because the sparse beard was curly and red. The face was forming contortions that seemed to be directed toward Frost, who managed to ignore them and to continue gazing at the fire.

Saltspring stood up and shouted "Quiet now!" The muttering stopped. Frost helped Oyster to stand.

Oyster held the eagle feather prominently. She said "This is Most-darkest-day. This is the day when we come together so's we can see that we are one people, so's we can see that we're gonna make it through another winter, still alive, still one people. But it's also a day when we think about wheres we come from, who went before us to make us what we are. I'm talkin' about the antsisters. They survived, they done what they had to do, and we are here and alive and lookin' ahead to longer and warmer days alls because the antsisters done what they done."

From his bench Saltspring shouted "One people!"

There was an answering chorus of "One people!" - except from the Bear clan.

Oyster handed the feather to Frost and sat again. As Frost moved closer to the fire indistinct comments came from Summer's people, a few chuckles, an outright laugh. Duncan was smiling broadly, as was his sister. Salal, his niece, was staring at the ground.

Saltspring called "Respect, now! Frost gots the feather!"

The laugh came again.

Frost stopped on the seaward side of the fire. The wind was erratic, pushing the smoke in one direction and then another. But as Frost began to speak the wind stilled, so that the smoke accumulated against the roof and spilled out past the edges.

He held the feather as Oyster had, like a sceptre. His voice was boy-like but strong enough. "A long time ago there was the Good Times. There was electricity in the Good Times. There was cars and planes and confuters. There was books, and everyone could understand what was in them books. There was medicines that could fix every kind of sickness. There was law."

From somewhere in the Bear clan came the sound of a fart. There were giggles, stifled laughter.

Frost went on. "Old Frost was a good man, kind and brave and smart. He was borned in the Good Times. But then the Good Times come to a end. All the stuff that worked so good in the Good Times stopped workin', and there come a big sickness that finished pretty well everyone. But Old Frost made it through. Old Frost was our first antsister."

Saltspring called out "One people!" And the shouted response of "One people!" from his clan blended with a stutter of thunder, closer than before.

Frost intoned "Old Frost had a daughter that he brung from way across the saltchuck. Her momma and daddy give her to Old Frost 'cause they seen that the Good Times was comin' to a end. So Old Frost brung her across the saltchuck to his farm over near Town, that yous all know wheres that is. Old Frost and his people lived good on his farm. They growed stuff to eat that we don't got no more, and they growed their own animals instead of huntin'. Old Frost's daughter that he brung from across the saltchuck died, and no one remembers her name. But she had a daughter of her own befores she died, and that was Noor."

Someone in the Bear clan said "Yeah, yeah, we know."

The wind shifted. Frost stood there quiet for a minute with his eyes closed as smoke blew into his face. He did not lower the feather.

The wind changed again, and smoke streamed toward the Bear clan, causing many of the members to twist their heads aside and squeeze their eyes shut. From the Old Frost clan came laughter. But at the front of the Bear clan Summer and Duncan stared straight into the smoke.

Frost said "A bad man called Langley wanted Frost's farm. There was a big fight. Old Frost was real old by this time, so Langley managed to finish Old Frost. But Noor finished Langley, 'cause she was brave and smart and she was a good fighter. Our antsister Noor was the first Bosswoman."

Frost's mother emitted a piercing ululation, which was echoed by all the women of the Old Frost clan.

For a second a flicker of lightning illuminated the bay in front of the village. There was a long rumble of thunder.

Frost continued. "Noor had a boy called Fraser, that growed up to be a giant and a famous fighter. After a while, 'cause of all the sickness that come from Town, there was only a few people left on Frost's farm. So Noor and Fraser and Fraser's woman Winter and Fraser's baby boy that was called Frost like his great-great- grampa, them and a few others left the farm and went lookin' for a new place to live."

Among the Bear clan someone yawned loudly.

"Now listen good, 'cause I'm gonna tell yous about all the antsisters that come after Old Frost, which is my job 'cause I'm the Teller. Noor was Old Frost's granddaughter. Fraser was Noor's son. Fraser's son was Frost Winterson, 'cause his momma was Fraser's woman that was Winter. When Frost Winterson growed up his woman was Leaf, and her and Frost Winterson had a daughter. This was Gull Leafsdaughter, and she come to be Bosswoman when Noor died.

Durin' this time more people joined up with Old Frost's people. And Old Frost's people kept movin' tills they finally found a good place to live. What happened is, they were on the coast, and away across the saltchuck they seen the mountains of a big island. So they decided to try and make it over to that island they seen. So they come in some canoes, and at last they got to a wonderful place to live, and that was right here wheres we are right now."

There were a few cheers, a few whistles.

"It was wonderful 'cause there was lots of berries and lots of good roots to eat. It was wonderful 'cause there was lots of cedar to build with. It was wonderful 'cause the salmon and halibut and oolichan, that were gone from the saltchuck, they started comin' back a little, so there was always enough fish to eat. And more people come to live with Old Frost's people. Fraser, that was the giant, died happy 'cause he never had to fight no more and 'cause his people were doin' so good. Gull Leafsdaughter never had no daughter, but she had two boys, that were Highway and Koksilah. Highway's woman was Hawk, and Hawk's daughter was Sky Hawksdaughter, and when Gull Leafsdaughter died Sky Hawksdaughter come to be Bosswoman. And more fish come back in the saltchuck, and pretty soon there was lots of clams and oysters too, just like way back in the Good Times. And the eagles, that were gone from the sky, they started comin' back too. And ...."

The wind shifted. The smoke from the fire twisted, danced, and enveloped Frost. Again he closed his eyes and waited. Directly overhead there was a blast of thunder. In a pulse of lightning the bay and the opposite headland seemed for an instant transformed into molten metal.

"What's the matter, there, Frost - don't them green glasses keep the smoke out?"

There was loud laughter from the Bear clan.

Frost's eyes stung from the smoke, but he could see that Duncan had stood.

At the opposite end of the Talking Place Saltspring was also on his feet. He shouted "You shut up! Frost gots the feather!"

The smoke continued to stream into Frost's face, so he took a step away from the fire, toward the Old Frost clan. Although he still held the feather upright he twitched it in Saltspring's direction. Saltspring glared at Duncan. A worm-like vein bulged near his eye. But he was quiet.

Frost said to Duncan "On Most-darkest-day I tell about our antsisters. That's how come we're here. We're one people, and we got to know wheres it is we come from. These here glasses I got drawed on me are like the glasses that Old Frost weared. Yous all know why I got them drawed on me. It's to show respect for our first antsister. So I'm gonna keep tellin' now about all our antsisters. Anyways, Sky Hawksdaughter had three sons ...."

Duncan was still on his feet. He was about sixty, small like Frost. He wore a conical hat, a cape of pelts and a necklace of bears' claws. He said, loud enough to drown out Frost "It was Mother that sended us our first antsister, and it wasn't no Old Frost. Mother sended us Bear."

Whoops and ululations burst from the Bear clan.

Saltspring was shouting again. "Don't start with that crap, Duncan! Sit down and let the Teller tell what he gots to tell!"

Without looking away from Duncan, Frost again batted the feather toward his uncle. Saltspring stopped shouting, continued glaring, did not sit.

In her chair Oyster stared coldly at Summer, the matriarch of the Bear clan, who stared coldly back.

Duncan said "It ain't important who the most oldest antsister was. I ain't gonna argue about that. What difference does it make who the most oldest was? Maybe it was Old Frost, and maybe it was Bear. It don't make no difference at all. What's important is who it was that Mother sended to look after us, who it was that Mother sended to protect us. And that was Bear. Bear was the first real antsister of our people. And Old Frost don't mean shit."

The Old Frost clan were all on their feet, yelling, cursing. Some were trying to climb over their relatives to get into the open where they could fight. A few of the undecided between the two groups had also stood and were yelling. The man with the red beard was among them.

Oyster grunted and heaved herself out of her chair. She turned to her people and raised both arms to silence them. She remained standing, facing the Bear clan.

Frost said "Well, Duncan, looks like the onliest reason you come here today is to make trouble. Which is the onliest thing you're good at. So I'm gonna say this - to you and to everyone here, 'cause we are one people even if yous don't want us to be. Old Frost never went lookin' for a fight. And ever since, Old Frost's people never went lookin' for a fight neither, not once. Which is the bestest way to live, and the way we always been livin'. So there's no reason to change that now, when it been workin' so good all this time."

Duncan's sister, Summer Bearsdaughter, rose from the bench and spoke for the first time. Over her cloak of skins she wore a pale cape of woven yellow-cedar bark with a simple design of a bear's head. She was holding a small cedar box. She said "This here village, Zuhellum, is part of the territory of Mountain Bearsdaughter up the coast at Lady Sits. It was part of the territory of her antsisters when Old Frost's people come, and it's part of her territory now. Mountain Bearsdaughter is the Bigbosswoman. Yous all know this. Why do I even got to say it? Mountain Bearsdaughter lets us eat her clams and her fish, she looks after us with her fighters, and we give her a little stuff - smoked salmon and some nets and some skins and some baskets. And when she needs a few men to join up with her fighters, she gets them. So, Frost Oysterson, listen good. 'Cause it's the way of Mountain Bearsdaughter the Bigbosswoman that been workin' good, and not the way of Old Frost. And when we got to fight, we fight."

She remained standing, staring across the fire at Oyster. There were war whoops from her people.

Frost let the feather tilt a little. He said "And Mountain Bearsdaughter just happens to be your guys' relative. Ain't that handy, Summer!"

Standing shoulder to shoulder with his sister, Duncan said "The great-grandma of Mountain Bearsdaughter was a bear that got turned into a woman."

Saltspring yelled "What a load of crap!"

Duncan took no notice. "And why is it that Mother turned a bear into a woman? She done it 'cause she loves us - my people and Old Frost's people and all of us. Alls we got to do is

respect Bear, and Mother will look after us. Alls we got to do is respect the blood of Bear, that some of us got and some of us don't."

Frost let the feather fall a little more. He said "Stuporstition never done no one no good. Alls stuporstition ever done is make trouble and fightin' and people gettin' theirselves killed for nothin'. Alls we got to do is pay attention to what's real. That's how easy it is. Pay attention to what's real and work together and show some kindness. That's how Old Frost done it, and if we're smart that's how we'll keep on doin' it."

There were cheers from the Old Frost faction.

Duncan had to raise his voice to be heard over the hubbub. "Come on now, Frost Oysterson, everyone knows how come the Good Times finished. The Good Times finished 'cause people stopped respectin' Mother. So Mother made up her mind it was time to start all over again, and she put a end to the Good Times. And after a while she turned a bear into a woman. That was Bearwoman. And we got to respect Bear. And we got to respect Bearwoman, that was the great-grandma of our Bigbosswoman, Mountain Bearsdaughter up in Lady Sits. 'Cause it's Mother that give us Bearwoman, and we don't want Mother gettin' mad at us and sendin' sickness and tremblers and takin' the fish away again."

There was jeering in the ranks of the Old Frost clan. Saltspring called "Sit down, Duncan! Talk alls you want, we ain't never gonna respect your lyin' ass."

Now it was the Bear clan who were climbing over one another, ready to fight. Summer turned to them and silenced them with a gesture. She said to Frost "Yous better stop sayin' all that ugly stuff about Bear and Bearwoman and about our blood. 'Cause Bear is listenin'. Bear is everywheres, OK? And Mother is listenin', and Mother is everywheres too. How come she sended that trembler last night? How come she knocked over your guys' Old Frost pole? She done it 'cause it's a warnin' about what's gonna happen without yous put your respect wheres it belongs. And up in Lady Sits Mountain Bearsdaughter is listenin' too. You better believe it. Mountain Bearsdaughter gots long ears and she's listenin' real good, Frost Oysterson. She's listenin' real good, Saltspring Noorson. She's listenin' real good, Oyster Noorsdaughter."

Everyone in the Old Frost clan made guttural sounds of disgust. They made gestures of dismissal and started leaving the Talking Place. Some of them spat.

The tip of Frost's feather was almost touching the ground.

Duncan addressed those seated between the two clans. "Maybe some of yous ain't decided yet whose people it is yous want to join up with. Maybe yous think yous can just keep on without joinin' up with no one. Well, yous can't. 'Cause our Bigbosswoman, that is Mountain Bearsdaughter up in Lady Sits, she knows who yous are. And she knows wheres it is yous put your respect. And of course Mother knows, that made the sky and the saltchuck and the mountains and the rivers and all the animals. So, without yous join up with the Bear people, awful things are gonna happen to yous."

Some of those addressed by Duncan had risen, preparing to leave. But now they listened and appeared afraid.

“Mother will kill your childrens, that’s for sure. Then whiles yous are cryin’ about your childrens she’ll knock your houses down on your heads and finish yous too. Alls ’cause yous don’t respect her. But it don’t got to be that way.”

At the other end of the Talking Place two men of the Old Frost clan were trying to restrain Saltspring.

Duncan continued “But if yous join up with us Bear people sickness ain’t never gonna touch none of yous, and your childrens are gonna grow up healthy and rich and good lookin’. And all kinds of good things are gonna happen to yous. Yous are gonna get rich and fat, OK? Because Mother’s gonna love yous. Mother and Bear and Mountain Bearsdaughter. Yous are gonna get all kinds of good stuff. Mountain Bearsdaughter, our Bigbosswoman, will take care of that. And if any of yous men are brave enough to help out Mountain Bearsdaughter when she sends out canoes on raids, maybe yous will even get yourselves a slave or two.”

Duncan looked at his sister. She nodded. Two men of their clan went behind the benches.

Frost finally hoisted the feather again, waving it as he shouted to the undecided faction “Don’t yous listen to him! It’s bullshit, nothin’ but wheelin’ and dealin’!”

The two Bear men returned from behind the benches. With them were three people, two men and a woman, all young, dressed in plain cedar bark. The three knelt at Duncan’s feet with their heads against the ground.

Duncan said “I’m a old man. But this old man was brave enough to go on a couple raids when Mountain Bearsdaughter asked for my help. I got blood on my hands for her - for her and Bear and Mother. I helped get canoes for her, and boxes and baskets and skins and lots of plastic stuff and smoked salmon and slaves. And because I done that, Mountain Bearsdaughter give me enough stuff to make me the richest man in Zuhellum. She give me these here slaves, for one thing. And she give me this.”

Summer tilted up the lid of the box she was holding. Duncan reached into it and took out a knife with a white plastic handle and a metal blade.

“This here is a knife from the Good Times. It’s the onliest metal knife in the world, and it’s mine ’cause Mountain Bearsdaughter wanted to give me somethin’ for helpin’ her out. And now I’m gonna show yous how rich yous can be if yous join up with the Bear people. Maybe yous can be rich enough to do what I’m gonna do now and not even give a damn.”

He wrapped his free hand into the hair of the female slave, tugged her to her feet and turned her to face the fire. She was about twenty. Her hair was brown and wild, not very long. Her skin was dark. Her eyes were large and blue. She closed them and grimaced as Duncan placed the blade against her throat.

Frost, Oyster, Saltspring and a few others including the red-haired man shouted “No!”

Frost charged toward Duncan. But the red-haired man, gangly and fast, bulled out of the crowd and beat Frost. As he pushed Duncan away from the slave he shouldered Summer, causing her to thump back onto the bench. He grabbed the slave by a wrist, and the two of them ran toward the Old Frost clan. Bear people surged forward to try to recapture the woman but tripped over the two crouching male slaves and over each other.

In seconds the entire Old Frost clan had gathered between the Bear clan and the girl slave with her rescuer the red-haired man. Many of them now held spears.

The two clans stood there brandishing weapons and screaming threats and insults.

Frost placed himself between the groups. He waved the feather wildly and made incoherent sounds that placated no one.

Oyster came forward, massive in her furs, dignified, forbidding. Frost gave her the feather. She stood with her back to the fire, facing neither of the clans. She waited. The clans gradually became silent.

She turned to Duncan and said "I'm the Bosswoman, but I ain't as rich as you, Duncan. I don't think there's no one this side of Lady Sits that's as rich as you. Everybody knows that already. You don't got to show us. You don't got to go killin' no slave."

She turned to her own people. "Looks like we got somethin' that belongs to Duncan. The Old Frost clan don't keep no slaves, and the rule of Zuhellum is no one's suppose to keep no slaves. But Duncan gots some anyways. I don't like it, but that's the way it is. So I think the bestest thing is, she gots to go back to Duncan."

From the Bear clan came cries of "Damn right!" and "Hand her over!" but from the Old Frost clan "No way!" and "Duncan can go to hell!" At the back of the group the slave girl hid behind the red-haired man.

Oyster turned again to Duncan. "We got to calm down here. We don't want to go fightin' each other. Fightin' each other ain't gonna do no one no good. Alls it's gonna do is make things worser. OK, that there's a wonderful knife, Duncan. We seen it now. And we seen that you got slaves. We understand how rich you are. So, if you put that wonderful knife back in its box, and if you give us your word - Duncan's good word - that you won't hurt that woman, we'll send her back over to you."

The red-haired man called "No, Oyster!"

Summer was still standing beside her brother, still holding the wooden box. The lid was open. But now she clapped it shut. She said "No one tells us what to do with our stuff, Oyster. Give that girl back now."

Duncan displayed the knife like a sceptre, exactly as Oyster displayed the feather.

When Oyster did not immediately reply, Summer addressed the undecided contingent. "Yous can see we got a problem. We got a Bosswoman that's gonna bring big tremblers on us, and sickness and death, 'cause she don't respect Bear or Mountain Bearsdaughter or the Bear people or Mother that's up in the sky. And the worstest thing is, we got a Bosswoman that makes trouble so that we ain't one people no more."

Duncan lowered the knife. He smiled. He said "It don't got to be like this. Oyster, I don't even care about that girl. Yous keep her. Her name is Oolichan. Yous keep her and treat her good. Alls I want is peace. Alls I want is for us to be one people. So, Oyster, you hang on to that girl. And Summer will take that there feather. "

In the Old Frost clan there was shocked silence.

Oyster just laughed.

Duncan kept smiling. He said “Bestest way to fix things up is if that there feather gets handed over to a Bear clan Bosswoman.”

Even the Bear people were silent.

Oyster threw back her head. Her laugh rang out deep and rich. Saltspring’s laugh joined hers, then general laughter from the Old Frost clan. Oyster wiped away a tear of delight and said “Duncan, you can kiss my ass!”

But then she recoiled as if she had been struck. She bellowed “Ah! Ah!” She pressed a hand to her neck. The feather fell, was caught by a breath of wind and spiraled into the flames.

Frost said “Momma?”

Oyster’s knees buckled. She stumbled backward and crashed onto the fire. A storm of sparks flew up. Frost and Saltspring dragged her out. She was not burnt, but her fur cloak smoked and stank.

Duncan screamed “There yous go! Mother don’t like yous!” He bounced like an excited child. “She knocked down your pole, and now she knocked down your Bosswoman! Who Mother likes is, she likes people that show her some respect!”

He turned to his people, waved his knife to urge on their war-whoops. Everything went white in a flare of lightning, and a blast of thunder shook the ground.