

The background of the cover is a photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, there is a vast, flat expanse of snow with some faint tracks or depressions. In the middle ground, a range of snow-capped mountains stretches across the horizon. The sky is a mix of orange, red, and blue, indicating a sunset or sunrise. The sun is a bright yellow-orange orb just above the mountain range.

HANNAH ROSS

THE FROZEN SHORE

A SHORT STORY

The Frozen Shore

Hannah Ross

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Antarctica, circa 9000 years ago

The three boats were hauled upon the frozen shore by the icy wind. There was no way they could keep going, and it didn't look as if there was any further to go. This bare, desolate, icy terrain was surely the edge of the world.

Darneg climbed out first and lent a hand to the women, children and elderly - not many of those had survived this last stage of their journey, though. The men were clambering out on their own, unloading the scant supplies that remained to them. His own two young ones, a girl and a boy, clung to his legs for safety.

The children's eyes were open wide, and they were shaking with fear and cold. They really needed their mother, but Anaki was gone forever, taken away by the spirits of the sea.

His younger brother, Saygan, approached, huddling in his tattered fur parka and trying to mask a shiver.

"Where now, Darneg?" he asked in a low voice.

Darneg frowned. He had no proper answer. There were so few of them – around twenty boats had left the distant Peninsula they had called home, driven away by the violent tribe that had invaded their land. Some of their people perished at sea, others were lost in battle as they attempted to stop and settle on a lush, hospitable but, alas, already inhabited island.

Now they were here, and these shores looked empty – for a good reason. He had never encountered a more unwelcoming place. He had no idea where they were. This area went beyond the world's end as it was known in the legends of their fathers. The water and air grew warmer and warmer as they advanced to the south, until the cold gradually began to creep again after a certain point in their journey. The position of the stars had shifted – the elders have noted these changes on small stone plates. It wasn't just a foreign earth beneath their feet, but a foreign sky above.

"I don't like this place," he confessed, speaking quietly so that no one but his brother could hear. "If the people weren't so weak and the boats so battered, I would tell everyone that as soon as the sea calms down, we are going back north. But it doesn't seem we can do that."

"No," Saygan shook his head, "you're right. We'll need some time to recover from the storm, repair the boats, put up supplies... At least there's plenty of game," he added.

Darneg nodded. He, too, had observed the endless flocks of the funny, chubby black and white birds that appeared to have flippers for wings – they did not seem bothered by the cold at all, due to the thick layer of fat that made them such good eating. They had caught some of these birds at the desolate rocky islands to the north from here. He could also spot a pack of seals in the distance, stretched on the edge of the water.

"Yes. A decent hunter need not starve. But first, we need to find a more sheltered place. We'll try our luck further inland. If we don't find a refuge from this wind..." he trailed off. He didn't have to go on. No amount of food would save them without decent shelter.

As if on cue, Niri, a young woman of his distant kin, appeared to take the children aside. "Come, Rayveg, Lyhan," she said. "Your father needs to go on... We'll follow him. You are going, Darneg, are you not?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes, we all are," he confirmed. "Thank you, Niri." Acutely aware of his children's lonely, longing looks, he bent to muss Rayveg's hair and let Lyhan briefly put her arms around his neck. "Go with Niri, children. She will give you something to eat."

"I will. Come along," she gave each of the children a hand and they walked together to huddle under an outcropping of rock, where most of the survivors found temporary relief from the wind.

Much as Darneg loathed taking these sick, weak and injured people on a track across the icy terrain, there was little choice. After dragging the boats away from the shore and securely towing them, they trudged on, slowly, stumbling and swaying from frailty and cold. Those who had some strength left lent an arm to those who had none. Most of the people carried children or supplies in their arms.

Instinctively, Darneg chose paths leading down, away from the bitter wind, and after some time, they were rewarded by finding themselves in a snug passage that, though not warmer, was comparatively sheltered. The wind now howled overhead, and they could straighten and walk more freely. Rahan, the elder, caught up with Darneg and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Good going," he said approvingly. "I suggest that we break camp soon, Darneg. The people are tired."

"You're right, elder," Darneg nodded. "I just wish we had wood for a good fire."

"Burn some of the rendered fat for warmth. Tomorrow, after we've had some rest, send out hunters to catch more of those fat birds."

Tomorrow, the elder had said, but this was hardly the proper word. The sun did not set, only lingered briefly closer to the horizon, to rise again without plunging. Darneg could not understand this. They had some long days where they had come from, too,

but no such perpetual light, and besides, it was the wrong season. "I don't like this," he muttered to himself in the makeshift shelter they had made from rock and oiled hides. "It is wrong." All packed together, the people found some relief from the cold, and soon, despite the light outside, fell asleep.

The next morning, they discovered that another of the elders had drifted off to a peaceful death in his sleep. It was as though the man, who had lost his homeland and all his family in the journey, simply gave up the fight. They had no tools to dig a grave with, so they built a cairn and stood there for a while, heads bowed, while someone beat a monotonous mournful tune on a small drum, and Rahan recited some verses directed at the spirits to accept this man's soul and lead it to walk among the stars for all eternity.

In the meantime, daily needs were not to be ignored. Some hunters went off to the shore, and soon returned with a brace of the fat birds, which were utterly unafraid of men. *If we hunt often, though, it will not be this easy anymore*, Darneg thought.

The burial, hunting, cooking and eating took a few hours, but when he looked up to the sky, he saw that the sun hardly moved. "It is an ominous sign, elder," he solemnly told Rahan. "The sun is meant to rise and set."

"You young ones," Rahan scoffed with a good-natured laugh. "I had traveled far, far north in my youth, Darneg, and had seen places where the sun acts much the same – there is half a year of light, and half of utter darkness, when the spirits dance across the sky in beautiful lights. It is the same here, I guess, only the seasons are reversed when you cross some magical point in the journey south."

Darneg sucked in his breath. "So this is summer?" he said in a hushed voice. "With these winds and this accursed cold?"

"Now, now, Darneg, do not despair. It isn't as bad now. The storm has stopped, the winds have softened, and this sheltered place seems warmer than the shore, at least to me. See, there are some lichens growing on the side of the rock. Lead us further, and let us see what we find."

“I am not good at this,” Darneg muttered, bowing his head. “Not fit to take my father’s place.”

Rahan’s expression softened. “It was the will of the spirits to give you the leadership,” he said. “Losing your father was a harsh blow for us all, but we must go on. The Anai people look up to you now, Darneg.”

The following hour brought a pleasant surprise. The air felt suddenly warmer, and as they looked around, it was easy to see why – steam was rising up from a crack between the rocks, spreading a faint mist of tiny droplets. The area was covered by a carpet of rich moss, the greenness of which was welcoming to the eye that had rested on nothing but rock, ice and snow for a long time.

Darneg had seen such things before. The breath of the underground spirits, funneled through cracks in the coat of the earth, would come up in jets of hot water or steam. In milder areas, this was merely a curious display, but here, in this cold, barren desert, it could mean warmth and life and a respite from the vicious bite of icy air. *If this source of steam is here year-round...* people approached the warm vapors, stretching their hands forward and thawing them, chatting and laughing excitedly. Others said it’s the perfect place to call it a day and break camp.

“No, let us go further,” Darneg said. “See what we find. We can always come back later.”

They went on and, if Darneg’s imagination wasn’t deceiving him, the air grew steadily warmer. He shrugged back the hood of his parka, something he hadn’t done in weeks. Then, miraculously, he heard a sound he had nearly forgotten – that of running water.

He gasped, and those who stood closest to him did likewise. Turning the last bend of the rocky path, they found themselves on the edge of a river, wide but slow-moving, and looking shallow enough to wade across. There were even some rocks jutting up from the water, which could possibly be used as stepping-stones.

Darneg approached and looked closer, down into the glassy, dark ripples. He saw his own reflection, slightly distorted by the movement of the stream. He hardly

recognized himself. His sandy-yellow hair was dirty and matted, carelessly held back with a strip of leather. An untidy growth of beard covered his hollow cheeks. His sharp blue eyes were sunken and red-rimmed with tiredness and distress.

But more wondrous was what opened beyond the river. It was a valley, snug and narrow, bordered with tall walls of rock, and it was all lush and green. There were rich mosses growing on the shores of the river, and tall grasses swaying beyond, and even little dwarf trees. A bird soared overhead. Some small animal scurried among the grasses. A shoal of silvery fish distorted the smooth, glossy surface of the river for a moment. It was a land of abundance and warmth, and it was easy to see how that came about – more jets of steam rose up not far off. The breath of the spirits had created an oasis in the frozen desert, and its discovery was timely and merciful.

People ran to the water with shouts of excitement. They pointed across, some with tears of joy in their eyes. “Let us cross! Let us cross!” they demanded. Many clapped Darneg on the back, their bitterness and grumbling and fear and mistrust of the past months apparently forgotten.

The path of rocks leading across the river was easy enough to step across. The men crossed first, carrying the supplies, then doubled back to help the women, children and elders. A couple of people slipped and fell into the water, but as it was not very deep, it only caused more laughter. They would be able to dry off soon, if they broke some branches off the shrubs to make a good fire.

Darneg raised his arm, calling for everyone’s attention. “The spirits have been merciful,” he said. “They led us to this place, which appears to have everything we need to live in peace. It is warm. It is sheltered. There’s plenty of fish in the river, plenty of game back at the shore – hunters can come and go easily. I say we stop here. This shall be the land of the Anai.”

A wave of cheering met his words, and the elder Rahan lifted his arms up to pray for the blessing of the spirits, for the survivors of the journey, and for the souls of all who were lost.

The next few days were busy with feverish activity. They cut off some of the long grasses and used them to make temporary huts. In the meantime, Darneg, Saygan and other men were already busy laying the foundation of a longhouse made of rock and sticky local mud, which would shelter them during the long dark winter – for, if Rahan was right, a long season of darkness would inevitably follow the light. Hunters came and went, bringing seals and birds, and the women got busy drying the meat, rendering fat and curing hides to replace the shabby, battered clothes that were nearly falling apart at the seams. The children ran barefoot, weaving reed baskets and collecting grass berries. Niri discovered that the sticky mud, when burned, hardened into excellent clay to make pots and cups.

Apart from the larger animals brought from the shore, and fish from the river, the valley itself abounded with smaller game as well. There were rodents and funny fat waterfowl that made good eating, and Saygan itched to explore the whole extent of this lush warm area, but the men were kept much too busy at the camp. Preparing for winter was their uttermost priority. It would determine the final outcome for all the survivors. There were just about a hundred of them left, a fraction of those who set out, and Darneg felt the heavy responsibility weighing upon his shoulders. His people counted on him, and he would not disappoint them.

He now lived in a grass hut with his children and his brother. Niri often came around to help with the cooking and tidying and to watch over the little ones. She also took the clothes to wash in the river. With the water nearby, and with the soap they made from rendered fat, they soon became as clean as they had been back home.

One evening, though – Darneg called it evening, though the sun had barely lowered – Saygan approached him with a look of secrecy and a frown. “Come with me, brother,” he said. “There is something I must show you.”

“Where have you been all day?” Darneg asked, displeased.

“I’ve been exploring.”

“Well, I hope you had a good time, because we have been hauling rock all day.”

“Don’t be like this, Darneg. It is important.”

Saygan led him deeper into the valley than he had ever gone before, and stopped before a wide stretch of black mud. “See these tracks?”

Darneg’s eyes widened in astonishment. “It looks like the tracks of a fowl… a waterfowl.”

“Yes, but imagine the size of a bird that would leave tracks like these. It would be many times larger than you or me!”

Darneg felt a chill creep down his spine. The image was unnerving. “These tracks lead somewhere,” he observed.

“Yes. I know where. Come on, Darneg.”

Before long, he heard the gentle sound of bubbles, and a cloud of silvery vapor rose ahead. It was a pool, a wide, almost perfectly round pool, evidently filled by hot water from the underground streams. To Darneg’s surprise, his brother stopped behind a group of mossy rocks and pointed forward.

“A good place to wash,” Saygan observed. “Very pleasant. That is… if you don’t happen to share it with one of those.”

It took Darneg a few moments to understand what his brother referred to. Then, an ugly, scaly head broke the water’s surface. It was not the head of a bird. It was not like anything he had ever seen. The head, and the long, swaying neck it was attached to called to mind a giant snake or lizard. The gigantic beast splashed around in the warm water, evidently enjoying itself. Then it yawned, showing a mouthful of long, sharp teeth, and waded out.

Darneg had to clasp a hand over his mouth to refrain from making a sound. The beast was enormous. Its body, elongated and flexible, nearly curled around the entire pool, which could hold fifty people. Its powerful hind legs ended with flippered feet – no doubt the source of the tracks they had seen. The front paws had curved, steel-sharp claws, like those of a bird of prey. But worst of all were the ugly leathery wings upon

the beast's back. As Darneg watched, the wings stretched and flapped, and the beast took flight, retreating to a farther part of the valley.

"I have observed these monsters for some days," Saygan said. "Apparently, there is a colony deeper into the valley. There they make nests and lay eggs and take care of their young. And there are different beasts, too – giant serpents and giant lizards. Those cannot fly, though."

"Have you found out how they sustain themselves?" Darneg asked.

"I have crept close enough to see piles of scattered bones – fish and seals and birds. They fly away to hunt, probably to another part of the shore, not the one we came from. That is why we had never seen them before."

A muscle in Darneg's jaw twitched. "I should have known it couldn't be this easy," he said. "We had been too careless, assuming there are no predators in this valley. If these beasts discover our camp and decide that we are easy prey... we will have to place sentries, Saygan."

His brother nodded. "That's just what I was about to suggest. I hope nothing bad will happen, though. If we keep to our part of the valley, the monsters might never discover us. They appear to be creatures of habit, and not very bright."

This, Darneg thought, however, is too much to hope for.

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For a while, life at the new settlement went on peacefully. Stores of fish and game were put up for the winter. The women had discovered a sort of strange, fast-growing wheat, and the golden kernels were collected and stored in grass-weave baskets. The builders, in a stroke of inspiration, connected the back wall of the longhouse to one of the larger, more comfortable caves in the vicinity – it would provide extra storage space and, if needed, shelter from the enormous beasts native to the valley. There has been no attack yet, but two giant winged lizards had been sighted in the sky not too far from the camp, which had caused some disquiet.

“Once upon a time,” Rahan the elder said, “these giant monsters ruled over land and sea and sky in all parts of the world. That is what the legends of the elders say. But this displeased the spirits, and so they stroke the monsters down with lances of ice and fire thrown down from the sky. This valley in the midst of a frozen land is probably the last place that remains to them. It might be a test from the spirits, putting us here, face to face with these beasts.”

These words made Darneg toss and turn in his furs in the twilit night. He drifted in and out of sleep, though the night was quiet, and the grass hut was filled with the sleepy breathing of his children. Saygan was out, on sentry duty.

If he had a choice, he would lead his people away, to a place far from the giant monsters. But there didn't seem to be a place to go. The scouts he had sent out all brought back the same news – their valley was the only oasis of warmth as far as feet could walk and eyes could see. Here was life; going away would be certain death. And they could not possibly survive another journey across the freezing sea in their rickety boats. They had no choice but to stay and stand their ground.

Through the shallow haze of sleep, Darneg felt soft arms wrap around him. Someone nuzzled his neck, and he inhaled the flowery scent of a woman. He smiled in his sleep. “Anaki,” he muttered, turning towards her. Then a sliver of consciousness penetrated his mind, and he recalled that the mother of his children was dead, taken away by exhaustion and cold and hunger. The sea journey had been too much for a pregnant woman, even one as brave as Anaki. He opened his eyes, and realized he wasn't dreaming.

“Niri!” he exhaled in astonishment. “What are you doing here?”

“Shh,” she pressed a finger to his lips. “Don't wake the children.”

She snuggled closer to him beneath the furs, and the unfamiliar curves of her body pressed to him through the sleek sealskin tunic she had made for herself.

“Niri, this is not right,” he whispered.

“Why? Your hearth needs a woman. Your children need a mother. Is there anyone you would rather have but me, Darneg?”

*A woman.* The word jolted him with sudden realization. When he was seeking a mate, Niri’s father had jokingly offered her to him, but Darneg dismissed this notion, as Niri was no more than a skinny girl with knobby knees and a chest that barely showed its first buds. She was a woman now, though, all woman, with eyes of warm spring green and a lush mane of fiery hair, and a body soft and warm and inviting.

“Still,” he struggled, “I… I had not asked you to make a hearth with me. I had not even thought of it.”

“Then think of it. Ask me. *Ask me*, Darneg. Do you think I would say no? I had loved you from a girl, but you were a man grown, and I was too young. I kept thinking of you, even after you had made your hearth and home. But now you are alone, and I am here. I am here,” she repeated with a catch in her throat, sliding her hand down the mass of frizzled golden hair that covered his broad chest, down his belly, around his waist.

Darneg cupped her cheek, and felt moisture at the tips of his fingers. He gently wiped away the salty tears and, unable to resist any longer, tugged at the leather tong holding Niri’s tunic at the waist. With a great sigh of longing, she shrugged it off. Her skin was milky white where the sun had not touched it, so much that it shone pearly white in the twilight. She pulled the furs over them both, and for a while, all was sweet oblivion.

Darneg drifted off to a gentle doze, then woke again. Niri slept, her back pressed to his chest, her hair tickling his cheek. He put an arm around her waist and, unconsciously, she snuggled closer into his embrace. *Yes*, he thought with sudden joy. *I will bring Niri to my hearth. She will be my woman and the mother of my children.*

His eyelids grew heavy, and he was ready to sink back into sleep. Then, all of a sudden, he was jolted awake by sudden noises outside – the warning cries of men, and vicious snarls and shrieks that surely weren’t human.

“Stay here with the children,” he told Niri in an urgent voice as they both bolted up. He dashed outside, pulling on his tunic. Nearly all the men of the settlement were out, running about and aiming throw-spears at the giant winged lizard that was circling overhead. Darneg had never seen it in flight this close, and was stunned by its size. The wings, black against the sky, cast a shadow that covered all the grass huts. Its rippling yellow underbelly, devoid of hard scales, gave off a dull glint. The throw-spears failed to reach their target, and only a few of the men had bows – many were broken or rotted through during the journey, and they hadn’t gotten around to replacing them, as hunting was easy enough with spears.

Finally, Darneg grabbed one of the remaining bows from Rahan and aimed. The arrow just barely grazed the beast’s wing, but it was enough to make it shriek with fright and fly away. He let out a long, shuddering sigh of relief and lowered the bow. All around, men were wiping their sweaty brows and shaking their heads. This was the first time one of the winged monsters was seen so close to the settlement.

“We need to make more bows,” Darneg spoke. “The little trees seem pliable enough. And maybe the arrow-heads should be bone rather than flint, it will make them lighter, and they will be able to fly further… I need to talk to Saygan.” Saygan, despite his youth, was easily the best archer and bow-maker among the men. “Where is Saygan?”

To Darneg’s dread, several of the men looked away. Finally, Marrag, half of whose face was badly scarred in an encounter with a black bear, came over and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Darneg… you didn’t see. There were two of the monsters at first. They arrived together, flying like shadows. One of them swooped down and carried Saygan away before any of us could even call out the warning. It happened too fast. There was nothing anyone could do.”

As the reality of this hit Darneg with the force of a stone hammer, he dropped down to his knees. “Saygan,” he said in a choking voice. “*Saygan!*” he cried, raising his head desperately to the sky. Apart from his children, his younger brother was all the family he had left. And now he was gone. Darneg wasn’t fool enough to believe Saygan would

be able to escape the monsters. The jaws of such a beast could easily swallow a man whole.

Rahan came over and crouched next to him. “Do not blame yourself,” he said in a gentle voice.

Darneg bowed his head so that nobody would be able to see his tears. “I should have been out, guarding the settlement,” he whispered.

“You had hardly slept for two nights. It was your turn to rest. You left brave and strong men out. Marrag is right – there is nothing you could have done.”

Darneg clenched his teeth with pain. He could not let himself get lost in his grief, however. *I am the leader of the Anai, unfit as I may be to step into Father’s shoes.*

He rose and spoke to the crowd, which was now joined by the women and children. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Niri, who was holding Lyhan in her arms. “Elder Rahan is right,” he said in a ringing voice. “These monsters are a test from the spirits, sent to see whether we deserve a good and peaceful life in this fertile valley. It is our task to battle them and drive them out, else they will never leave us alone until they pick us off one by one. We will do this. We must do this.”

His rallying words were met by a cheer, but some men were frowning and shaking their heads, and the women looked frightened. They had seen two winged beasts, but who knew how many more there were in the colony? Not to mention the giant serpents that could also be deadly. Even with good bows, could they face the monsters?

“We will plan out our attack carefully,” Darneg went on. “First, I will go and explore the area close to the monsters’ lair.” He saw Niri start, turn pale, and shake her head imploringly, but there was no choice. “I will need two men to go with me.”

“I will go with you, Darneg,” Marrag said.

“And I,” said Karan, Rahan’s son.

Darneg nodded. “Good. In the meantime, all who can, start working on good bows, and arrows with as long a range as possible.”

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If he had picked his companions himself, Darneg thought, he could not have chosen better than his two fellow warriors. Marrag was an experienced hunter, able to find tracks even over an expanse of solid rock. Karan was quiet as a shadow, slithering in and out of shelter and crouching close to the ground like a snake. Together, the three proceeded in a silent trek to the other end of the valley, and before long, they could see signs of the monsters, like giant old fallen scales and heaps of scattered bones. He tried not to think of the sad remains of his brother thrown into one of these heaps. The notion made him sick.

“The colony is very close, right over those rocks,” Marrag said quietly, pointing ahead. “There they must keep their rookery.” They could hear something huge moving in the distance, in the direction indicated by Marrag, and knew coming closer was out of the question. Their present goal was to explore, not to take on the beasts by themselves.

Darneg nodded. “And what is that?” he sniffed suspiciously at some thick black substance that stuck to the sole of his moccasin. “It looks like tar.”

“Oh, it is tar,” Karan said. “I had seen pools of it behind, and it looks like there are some ahead, too. You want to be careful, Darneg.”

Darneg peered over the rocks. Sure enough, there was a row of tar pits ahead. It was as if some giant hand had set a line of traps right before the monsters’ lair.

“Curious,” he muttered. *Tar can burn. The beasts are afraid of fire, we already know that.* “I think I have an idea. Let’s turn back.”

… “It is a clever thought, Darneg,” Rahan said when he had shared his plan with his two companions and the elder. “If there is a wall of fire close to the colony, the beasts might panic and scatter out. But what do we do then? Would we have enough strength to take on them all at once?”

“We will use the fire to drive them out of the valley, into the frozen realm,” Darneg said. “Tar arrows and tar torches will help with that. We will light fires throughout the valley to blind them with fear. In the biting cold, they will not be able to survive for long… I hope. We know, at least, that they avoid cold and stay here in the warm valley.”

“To follow your plan, we will need more wood than we have,” Marrag pointed out. “Even if we cut down all the little trees, it won’t be enough… and it won’t be a wise move, either. These dwarf trees are our only source of wood here. It won’t do to remain without them for years to come.”

Darneg thought about it. “Yes,” he said slowly. “We need to keep the trees, they will be important for our future, and for our children, and their children… but we have the boats, back where we had landed.”

The men exchanged glances. “Do you suggest we burn the boats?” Karan said in a hushed voice. They all knew what this meant. The boats were their own means of sailing away. The little trees could not provide wood enough to make new vessels. Once the boats were gone, it would mean staying here in the valley forever.

Darneg straightened his shoulders. “Yes,” he said bravely. “We will not travel further, nor will we go back. This valley is our home now, given to us by the spirits to defend and pass on to our children. We will do what it takes to make it a safe place.”

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Darneg’s heart constricted with pain as the beautifully made, swift boats were reduced to a pile of kindling. *Farewell, boats. Like birds on a wing, you have carried us through the seas, past distant lands, away from a home where we will never return, and to a new one given to us by the spirits. We may never make the likes of you again.*

Piles of wood were placed in strategic places throughout the valley, and especially by the tar pits behind which the monsters dwelled. Many arrows were made in a surprisingly short time, and dipped in tar as well. The archers gave themselves not a

moment of rest, practicing whenever they could, and challenging each other in the distance their arrows could cover. Finally, it was time to act.

They hadn't seen a glimpse of the winged monsters since the fateful night when Saygan was carried away – Darneg had ordered that all activity in the settlement should be kept as low as possible, to avoid attracting the attention of the cruel beasts. Once or twice, they came to circle above the grass huts again, and upon glimpsing them from afar, all the people promptly took shelter in a cave. There was another casualty when a hunter encountered a giant serpent, but the man managed to get away.

There was no night to speak of yet, but they chose the time of day when the sun briefly touched the horizon, and the sky was twilit, to carry out their plan. Hiding among rocks and tall grasses, a column of Anai warriors moved swiftly and silently toward the tar pits. Some men were left to hold the camp and protect the entrance to the cave where the women and children huddled together. Others stopped to wait in several groups along the valley.

Finally, they were all in place, and a sharp sound from Darneg's firestone penetrated the tense silence. A spark flew off, landing on a pile of wood that had been an oar. Darneg bent and blew gently, protecting the little flame with both hands, until it grew and strengthened. Then he lifted up the broken piece of wood and lit the nearest tar pit. Marrag, next to him, did the same.

Soon they heard the first anxious growl of the creatures lurking just ahead. The fire and smoke lured out some of the giant serpents that, despite their size, were promptly dispatched by the sharp flint hammers of the warriors. But the main threat was in the winged lizards, and several of the men shuddered and gasped as one of the beasts rose into the air, spreading its mighty wings and emitting a warning shriek.

"Arrows!" Darneg called out. The tarred arrows were quickly brought to touch the fire and, smoldering, shot into the air. Several had hit the beast's underbelly and, with a howl of pain, it flew away.

“Onward! Chase it away! More arrows!” Darneg called out and, armed with spears and bows and burning torches, the column of warriors advanced past the tar pits. There were more pits ahead, and they bravely lit them, though the smoke was suffocating and the heat hardly bearable. Another of the winged reptiles crouched close to the ground, unwilling to move. Karan’s arrow hit it square in the eye and, in a howl of agony, the beast finally rose, revealing the nest of giant stone-like eggs it was protecting. A shower of arrows drove it away, and Darneg lifted a mighty boulder and threw it over the clutch of eggs, smashing each one.

A few giant lizards, of the kind that had no wings, chose to move in the opposite direction – into the valley, rather than up the stony stairs into the freezing land above. This didn’t worry Darneg, as he knew they would be met by spears, arrows and fire some way onward. But then a winged monster, larger than any they had seen before, spread its wings and flew up with a mighty roar, and turned toward the other end of the valley and the settlement. An old white scar on its snout identified it as the very one which, according to Marrag and the others, had taken Saygan. A pit of worry opening wild and hot in his stomach, Daygan clutched his bow and spun around. “Half of the men, with me!” he called. “We must drive it away from our homes!”

The beast seemed intent on its direction, and they couldn’t possibly keep up with it as it was flying, but its giant silhouette was always in sight ahead of them in the sky. It was evidently cleverer and more purposeful than the others – rather than battle them, it turned to the settlement, and once Darneg and the others arrived, they encountered a scene of panic near the cave – the gigantic reptile was just barely warded off by the guards, who were nearing the end of their stash of arrows. If it came to worst, they could go deeper into the cave and hide in its narrower recesses, but Darneg didn’t intend to let that happen. With a howl of despair and fury, he lunged forward and, holding his heavy spear poised, sank it into the beast’s neck, drawing forth a fountain of blood. The monster howled, reared and flapped its wings, which were instantly pierced by dozens of arrows from Darneg’s fellow warriors.

“Torches!” Rahan called. “The fire blinds it!”

Torches and fiery arrows had nearly chased the beast away, but Darneg did not want it to get away. He wanted to crush it, to kill it, the desire for revenge burning hot in his chest. As the beast reared again, he plunged his spear deep into the unprotected yellow underbelly, and was instantly drenched in a fountain of blood. His spear broke off, with half the shaft stuck in the monster's body. It was not dead, however – realizing its defeat, it rose up into the air and flew away, in the direction of the shore where the Anai had landed.

Darneg stood there, covered in blood, blinking it out of his eyes. His chest was heaving, and he still clutched the broken and useless bit of spear. "I want that beast," he said through clenched teeth, "it is mine."

"Do not go after it, Darneg," Rahan said. "The monsters are defeated. Their lairs are scattered. They will not come back."

As if to corroborate his words, a dull thud was heard in the distance, followed by a rumbling moan of final agony. It was the winged monster, felled by its wounds and the loss of blood, that dropped down, never to rise again.

"It is over," Rahan said softly, and repeated, "It is over."

The elder was right. Over the next few days, the Anai warriors kept vigil throughout the valley, especially around the settlement and near the monsters' lair. Scattered beasts attempted to come back to the ravaged rookery, and were slain or driven away. The eggs were smashed and the young ones drowned in the tar pits. Several of those who had gotten away were later found frozen to death beyond the borders of the warm valley. Others disappeared, but there could be no doubt they had gone away forever, from the valley and from this world.

The losses of the Anai were mercifully few. Apart from Saygan, only two warriors were lost – a very young and reckless one, who had attempted to tackle a giant lizard on his own, and another who was brave but old and lame, and was brought down by one of the winged beasts as they were flying away. The women and children were unharmed.

It was over, truly over, and the valley belonged to the Anai. As the days began to shorten and the longhouse was all but done, Rahan called for a feast of thanksgiving, and Darneg readily complied. There was a surplus of food, and the women had learned to brew a heady drink from the local grasses. Flutes and drums were carved along the fashion of those they had at home, and everyone relished the idea of having something to celebrate.

“A good few hours of music and dancing, and hopefully, the men will be spurred on to start cutting the turf for the roof the next day,” Rahan told Darneg as the celebration area was being cleared.

Darneg nodded. “Elder,” he said, “there is something else. I had asked Niri to be my woman.”

Rahan raised his eyebrows. “Niri *is* your woman. It is no secret.”

“Yes,” Darneg said, feeling slightly hot in the face, “but I – we want to announce it properly. To ask the blessing of the spirits, and bring her to my hearth.”

“A very good notion,” Rahan clapped him on the shoulder. “Niri will make you a fine woman, and your children love her already.”

And so Darneg and Niri sat side by side that night, drinking from the same cup and accepting the good wishes and gifts of their fellow people – sealskins and bone tools, clay cups and pots, spoons made of seashells, and other utensils that would come in useful for their new hearth. Rayveg and Lyhan, who understood that Niri would now be their new mother – as which, in fact, they had accepted her long ago – clapped and danced merrier than anyone.

As the music mellowed, Darneg got up and raised his cup. “I want to thank the spirits,” he said, “not just for this woman they had brought to my hearth, but for bringing us all here, to this valley where we can live and prosper. The spirits had sent us a test in the monsters of the sky, and we had smitten them down with fire and ice, as in the legends of old. Thus we have proved our right to this land. May it be blessed for us, and for our children, and our children’s children, for all the generations to come!”

His words were received by a smattering of whoops and cheers and an outburst of livelier drumming. Darneg took Niri by the hand and led her away, to the grass hut where they were passing their last few days before moving into the longhouse. The new big house would surely be more sheltered and comfortable, but he would also miss the privacy of the little hut, and intended to make the most of it while it lasted.

“If the spirits grant us a son, I should like to name him Saygan,” he said as they slipped into their furs.

Niri smiled, looking hopeful and secretive. “I think it will be a son,” she said, placing his hand over her belly. “He was conceived on the very night when the winged beast came for the first time… when your brother was… taken away.”

It took a few moments until Darneg was able to speak again. “You had not said a word,” he finally squeezed out.

“I didn’t want you to ask me to be your woman for the sake of this child in my belly,” Niri said. “I wanted you to want *me*.”

“I do want you, Niri,” he said, drawing her close. “I want you, and all the children you will bring us… children who will grow and flourish right here, in the valley of the Anai.”

*The End*

**Author’s Note:**

Did you like this story? Are you wondering what happened to the descendants of the Anai? Want to find out all about their clash with modern civilization, thousands of years later?

Good news – *The Frozen Shore* is a prequel to a much longer, richer and more intricate tale that plays out in my science fiction novel, *The Last Outpost*. Think *Avatar* meets *The Lost World* by Arthur Conan Doyle. Check it out on Amazon:

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