

Praise for

ICE APPRENTICES

'Ice Apprentices is an extraordinary fantasy debut. Oswin is endlessly curious, hilariously funny and wonderfully kind – he became my new favourite hero within a few sentences.'

A.F. Steadman, author of the Skandar series

'Spine-tingling monsters, unlikely friendships and a hero to root for from page one. North's debut is bursting with adventure and vivid characterisation.'

Fran Gibbons, author of *A Clock of Stars*

'An enchanting debut, sparkling with adventure and magic.'

Natasha Hastings, author of *The Miraculous Sweetmakers*

'Oswin is brave, curious and seeks to uncover the mysteries of his own past and the skills he has been born with. Such an exciting novel, I can't wait for the next book!'

Nazima Pathan, author of *Dream Hunters*

‘Epic magic, brilliant monsters and a completely unforgettable new hero. Jacob’s a really exciting new writer and as soon as I finished the book, I wanted to read more.’

Zohra Nabi, author of *The Kingdom over the Sea*

‘Chills and thrills in this fantasy epic that brims with frosty magic! We’re in great hands with Oswin: fantasy’s most exciting new hero.’

Alex Foulkes, author of *Rules for Vampires*

‘Take me to Tundra! Jacob North has created a sparkling triumph of a world, with a hero readers will want to be best friends with. I loved it.’

Rachel Morrisroe, author of *Felix and the Future Agency*

‘A magical frost-filled adventure with a brilliantly unconventional hero. An enchanting, electrifying start to a new series. I was gripped from the first page – Oswin Fields is my hero, and I’m desperate for more.’

Lizzie Huxley-Jones, author of *Vivi Conway and the Sword of Legend*

JACOB NORTH

ICE APPRENTICES

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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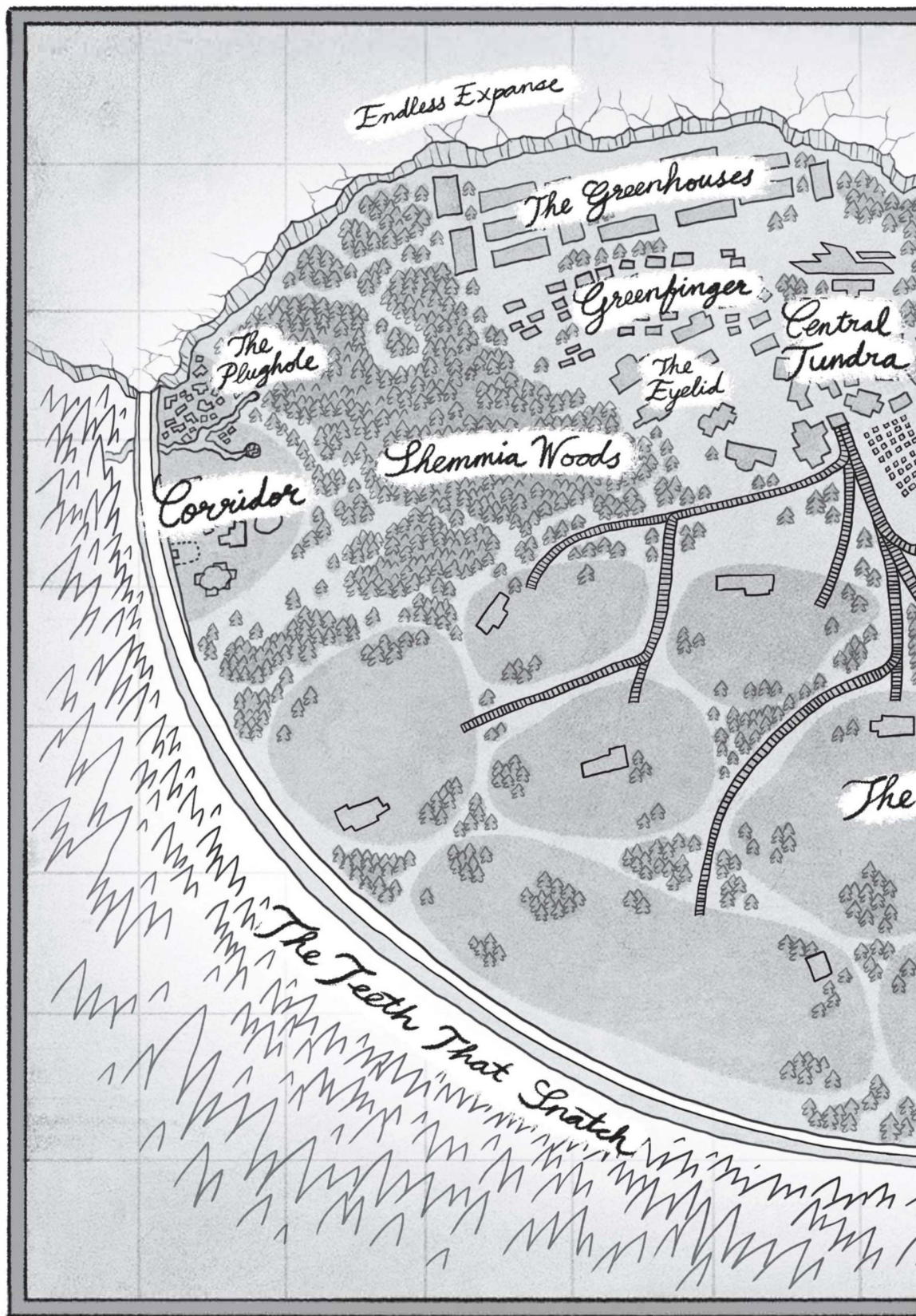
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To Mum, Dad and Sophie



Tundra





Oswin



Ennastasia



Mawry



Gale & Philomena



Zylo



Cathy

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PROLOGUE

Dear Oswin,

My name is Penny Yarrow, Grandmaster of Corridor. You won't know who I am, but I know you. I fought hard so you wouldn't be thrown back to the ice where you were found. Unfortunately, my efforts to get you a different guardian were unsuccessful. Lullia can be difficult, but I hope she will find it within herself to give you a proper upbringing.

There are a few things you should know, and I felt I should be the one to tell you as, knowing Lullia, she'll refuse. Unlike your Tundran brother, you are a stray: you were not born in Tundra or to Tundran parents. As the first stray who has been allowed into Tundra in years, you will face a resentment no one has dealt with since the Great Freeze. The hatred many felt for non-Tundrans who were using scarce resources hasn't disappeared, only lain dormant while there were no strays to

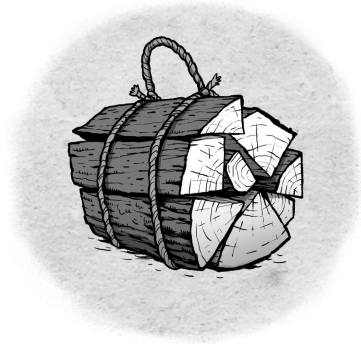
direct it towards. As the only stray here, all this bitterness will fall upon your shoulders.

To lessen your difficulties, I wanted to explain the basics. You were found on the endless ice that surrounds our settlement. Given the dangerous nature of the Endless Expanse, your parents are certainly dead. Bleak as this is, remember you have a home in Tundra, and will one day find your place in our fight for survival against the cold.

On a brighter note, I've sent some welcome gifts. The tokens can buy a few goodies at the Token Exchange, the enchanted boots will keep your toes toasty in the coldest Freeze and the paper bag contains raisins grown from iron-transmutated seeds (far tastier than the ones transmutated from copper, in my esteemed opinion).

I have written a return address on the back. If you need anything at all, you only have to let me know.

May the Thaw be warm and the Freeze be swift,
Grandmaster Penny Yarrow



1

PLANTING SPLINTERS

Six years later

The first step of growing a log was to plant splinters. Oswin Fields *could* have thought it the most difficult step. After all, the ground of the produce field was hard-packed below the snow. But the second step was also difficult: lugging the logs, now grown to the surface, to the barn. It left his scrawny limbs sweaty, and his white face flushed peach-pink. The third step – to magically charge the logs by tucking them under duvets, reading them bedtime stories or making ticking noises while moving his hands like a clock – was more amusing

than difficult. By the time the fourth step arrived, and Oswin rolled the completed logs onto a rickety cart, he barely had the strength to kick the wheels to start the self-moving charm. He'd stand, his sickly lungs huffing, as the cart rattled along iron tracks towards Central Tundra. Thirteen years of life, and all he'd seen was the produce field. Rows of logs and stretching snow were burned into the backs of his eyelids. He'd watch the cart, weighed by the fact the timber would see more than he ever would. It was *that* step, unquestionably, that was the hardest.

When he traipsed into the family cabin, forcing the door closed against the wind's onslaught, his adoptive mother was waiting with a small roast potato. Oswin stamped the sleet from his boots before noticing sunflower seeds sprinkled on top. A treat.

'Decent work today,' said Lullia, her haphazard hair a fiery mess around her white, freckled face. She made him think of melting candles.

Oswin's misery boiled into pride. He'd pleased Lullia enough to get seeds with dinner. Today was a good day, then. He may not get to see the rest of Tundra, but he had to remember how lucky he was. He'd be dead without Lullia's generosity. At least, whenever he *did* forget, Lullia was quick to remind him the debt he owed her.

Planting Splinters

He ate, licked his plate clean, then waited expectantly in case Lullia had anything else for him to do.

‘Sleep,’ she said, her tone matching the harsh weather. ‘We’ve got a long day tomorrow.’

Every day felt like a long day to Oswin, when splinters infested his hands and his muscles ached yet never had the decency to grow strong. ‘When isn’t it?’ he teased, a smirk clashing with his permanently downturned eyes. Lullia glared at him and he ducked his head apologetically. He should have known she hated teasing by now.

‘Goodnight,’ said Lullia sharply.

She was always cagey, but something felt *extra* off this evening. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘I said goodnight.’

It was time to make himself scarce, so Oswin quickly retreated to his room. It was a squeeze; the door banged against the chest of drawers, the room was so small. He wasn’t *entirely* sure what colour the floor was. He liked to think it was painted turquoise, like the lights he sometimes saw in the night sky, but it was probably the same dull wood as the rest of the tiny cabin.

It was the time of year when the snow was nasty, the sun coy and the nights black. By the time dawn was an hour away, the world outside was still grasped in choking darkness. Oswin was at his bedroom window, working on

the locks that Lullia had installed. He could easily pick the two on his bedroom door, but the further three on the front entrance made it impossibly difficult. His bedroom window had just one lock, so was by far the easiest way out to enjoy the quiet night.

Except, as he was halfway out of the window, his mother's door creaked. It took him two silent seconds to relock the window and duck back below his blanket. With a click and a clank, his bedroom door opened. Candlelight spilled into the room. Oswin hoped the horrid glow would stay away from him.

'Get up.' Lullia sounded angrily conflicted, which was a first. She was usually just angry. Oswin peeked out from under his blanket. She stood in the doorway – half shadowed-silhouette, half candle-lit displeasure. 'Pack your things.'

Oswin sat up fully, eyeing the candle's flame. 'I'm already packed.' His only belongings were what he wore. He had stones and fallen buttons that he'd found and collected from the snow, but those fitted into his pockets.

'We leave now.' Lullia grabbed a travelling cloak from a hook. 'I told you: it's going to be a long day.'

'Leave?' Oswin half-tumbled into the corridor, the blanket left messily behind. 'For where?'

'No questions. Just walking.' When Lullia pushed open

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the front door, the wind outside shoved Oswin's shoulders as he tried to pull on his cloak.

And it *was* a long day. They walked in darkness, following the iron tracks until the sun inched over a distant towering wall of ice. When Oswin asked Lullia where they were going, she told him to be quiet.

They followed another set of tracks in a different direction. By the time they were traversing empty fields of snow, the sun was overhead and Oswin's stomach was grumbling. He asked where they were going for the twenty-second time. 'If you tell me, I'll shut up.'

Lullia, worn down, turned her eyes skywards. 'Corridor.'

Oswin stopped abruptly. Lullia didn't bother to slow. With hurried footsteps, he caught back up. 'Corridor? *Really?*' Lullia's silence was confirmation enough, and Oswin's breath was stolen, he was so stunned. He'd never imagined it possible that a stray could go to Corridor, where ice apprentices were trained to contribute to Tundra's survival.

'I've answered your question; now shut up.'

Oswin only lasted three paces before bursting out, 'Why, though?'

Lullia's shoulders sagged.

By the time the sun was drooping, they were following a snow path that ribboned through the ice-floor of Shemmia

Woods. The woods lay between the Produce Fields and Corridor, the trees reaching out of the ice and scraping at the sky. By then, Oswin had lost count of how many times he'd asked Lullia why they were going to Corridor. (That was a lie. It was eighty-seven times.) She'd always maintained he could never be an ice apprentice, so the frail hope that he *might* become one was hingeing on her answer.

Lullia's response was a rant of all the things Oswin was *not* to do until they arrived. Mainly, *not asking questions*.

'But *why* are we going to Corridor—?'

Lullia growled. 'Repeat what I just said!'

'You said a *lot*.' He'd meant it as a joke, but Lullia clearly didn't care for his grinning humour. That was true even on a good day.

'I *said*, I've had enough of your questions. Stop tossing that stone you picked up and keep your mouth shut. No "How long until we get there?" or "Does Corridor have indoor toilets?" or "Will a stray like me be treated well?" What a ludicrous question. You're the *only* stray in the settlement. You should be grateful that Tundra took you in in the first place, regardless of how you're treated.'

'But I really would like to know about the indoor toilets. Walking to the outhouse on the produce field nearly froze off my—'

'Be quiet, you insolent boy!'

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Oswin hung his head. Even if he felt warm at being called a *boy*, he felt guilty for upsetting his mother. He *was* a stray after all. He should focus on being valuable, not getting Lullia to joke with him.

‘I’ll say it once more: keep your mouth shut. Don’t even *look* at me until we reach Corridor. Understood?’

Oswin didn’t need the repetition. He’d already memorized her words. Not because she’d said it before (though she had; the journey had been long and Oswin was nothing if not an asks-too-many-questions fidgeter), but because his mind hoarded information.

Lullia put her hands on her hips. ‘Repeat it.’

He attempted just *one* more joke. “‘It.’”

Lullia’s irises flickered with outrage. She stepped off the snow and onto the ice floor of the woods, marching away. It wasn’t the amused reaction he’d hoped for.

‘I’m sorry,’ he called. Nothing. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Away from your resting-sad-face and *incessant* babbling. Stay there.’ Lullia disappeared between the trees.

Oswin tossed the stone he’d found. Despite his itch to explore, he intended to do as she asked. He knew better than to break Lullia’s rules when she could find out – he preferred to break them when she *couldn’t*. But then he caught a murmur of voices coming from the opposite direction Lullia had gone.

A voice said in an unsettling rumble, 'I'll be there when you plant it. I'll ensure all goes according to plan.'

Oswin stepped off the snow path towards the voices. His boots slid on the ice, forcing him to grab a tree for balance. But he didn't slow – he wasn't going to let a few tumbles stop him. Bruises faded. Unanswered mysteries would bother him forever. He hated himself for disobeying Lullia. She'd only *just* told him to stay on the snow path – and who knew when she'd get back – but not investigating wasn't an option.

He travelled deeper into Shemmia Woods, unused to the feeling of trees and pine needles, having spent six years in a field of snow. He didn't hear the voices again, but he did gain a heavy sense of *wrong*. It settled over his shoulders, constricting his neck. He glanced behind himself. He could have sworn some of the trees' roots had moved. Were they resting in different formations than before? He thought back and grew certain of it.

Pushing down his unease, he hurried on, hoping to overhear more of the mysterious conversation. This wasn't the same as when he'd sneaked by the neighbouring field's gristles – thistle-like alarm creatures who growled when approached. This was different. Someone was up to no good, but as he trekked through the ice-floored woods, his only companion was silence.

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He *did* find lines on the ground, though, as if someone had scored knives across the ice. He was so busy peering at them that he almost missed the root snaking for his ankle. At the last second, his eyes caught the movement, his heart freezing. Quickly, he lifted his boot, just as a root speared the place his toes had been.

‘Splitting splinters!’ he breathed in disbelief. He knew wood could be magical. He planted splinters that bloomed into logs after all, but he’d *never* seen the logs *move*. It wasn’t just one root, either. As far as he could see, tendrils were inching towards him. He jumped to the only reasonable conclusion.

The roots were going to eat him.