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Yukon Madness

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

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ITAUK THE MADMAN, stalking across the bitter wastes, squinting with slanted eyes over the backs of his twelve-wolf team, stared into the blackness toward the snarling flares of red and green and white which shot into the indigo winter sky—the aurora borealis. Itauk the Madman, a horror in the raw north of Hudson Bay, spreading death with sharp steel and throwing the shattered bodies of men to his slaving team.

Twelve wolves as black as the winter sky, glittering teeth as sharp as the white ice which jutted through the dry snow, mouths as red-flecked as the borealis, tugged at the sledge traces. And Itauk laughed—a piercing, grating laughter which splintered the great silence.

Tommy McKenna heard the laugh, though it was far away. And Tommy McKenna shuddered under his red coat and sealskin parka. He could see nothing, but he heard. The cold barrel of the Lee-Enfield was hard under his tight fingers. His eyes—gray eyes as cold as arctic ice—closed to lines.

That was Itauk. The sound came far through the ebon chill. That was Itauk and Billy Simmons was back at camp alone, sleeping. Or was he sleeping still? Had Itauk struck again in the Yukon Territory?

Tommy McKenna raised his snowshoes and struck out

in a rapid lope for camp. He had forgotten the bear tracks he had seen earlier in the day. He had forgotten that he and Simmons were almost out of food. He remembered only his charge to “get his man.”

“Get Itauk!” the lieutenant had ordered at Post Ledoux. It had sent McKenna and Simmons on a five-hundred-mile trek through blackness, through acid cold, across uncharted seas of snow.

And now Itauk’s laugh out of the ebon cold. Tommy McKenna’s snowshoes rapped the dry crust in a steady tempo. His lean, weathered face—handsome before it had been too long exposed to screaming winds and silent mountains of white—was almost buried in the fur hood. It was fifty-five below and a man’s breath froze in his nostrils and stayed there, freezing his lungs.

He came within a hundred yards of the camp and stopped. He called out, his voice clear as a trumpet, “Simmons!”

No answer. Heavy, throbbing silence. The flare and flash of the northern lights as they shot spitefully up at the stars. A wolf howled out in the cold alone, dismal and quavering. Answering the call.

Calling “Simmons!” again, he listened intently.

Tommy McKenna threw off the safety of the Enfield. His mittens were clumsy but he dared not take them off. His hands would freeze to the barrel of his gun.

“Simmons!”

Uncertain now. Knowledge as icy as the half-year night told Tommy McKenna that he would never again hear Simmons’ voice. With that sixth or perhaps seventh sense born in men

who stand eye to eye with danger and the raw North, Tommy McKenna already understood.

He advanced slowly. The fire was a red glow against the blue darkness. The flame had died down. A shadow lay against it, a shadow queerly limp and empty.

Tommy McKenna stared at the patch of scarlet cloth. A bright warm stain was growing in the dry snow, spreading out slowly and steadily.

Simmons' face had been torn away as though by claws. Nothing remained but the broken, red-shredded skull. Tufts of his parka lay black against the white. Blood was scattered far.

Tommy McKenna's voice was stiff, unreal. "He . . . turned his wolves . . . to feast . . ."

Anger blocked out the body, blacked the northern lights. Tommy's hands shook with rage. He looked north and his eyes were chill.

The unwritten law of the Mounties: Swift death to those who would kill one of us.

Itauk would die. With either bullets or steel or bare hands. No trial for Itauk now. He had committed the unforgivable crime, punishable by instant death on sight. He had killed Simmons of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. No wooden gallows in the Yukon Territory headquarters, with a priest to see Itauk through death's door; it had to come when—and as soon as death could!

Tommy McKenna looked back at the fire. The torn fur and scattered bones of the sledge dogs told a swift story. Tommy knew that he was on foot, that he would have to live from kill to kill—unless he met Itauk.

The garish flame of the northern lights showed up the trail. The large pads of Itauk's wolves had left their plain print upon the snow, and over the pads was the print of a *kamik*-covered foot. That was Itauk.

Picking up a bundle of supplies from the ruin of their outfit, Tommy struck out. His snowshoes rasped over the dry cold surface and the weight of the Enfield was hard against his arm. No time to bury Simmons now. The pause might lose him his quarry.

Slogging through the never-ending night, Tommy heard the sounds of the North: the crackle of ice under terrific stress; the moan of sharp wind across the great reaches; the shivering hunting cry of the wolf.

For hours the trail was straight, leading into the very heart of the borealis. Itauk the Madman was traveling fast and far, lengthening the road which was milestoned with blood.

Tommy's breath was ice on his lips and his lungs burned from exertion and freezing air. The Enfield grew heavier. The revolver under the parka banged with steady monotony against his thigh.

His squinted eyes did not leave the trail. The sound of his snowshoes was like the staccato flicking of sandpaper across a drumhead.

He stopped, still looking down, his practiced glance reading the story.

Someone had intercepted Itauk's trail. The sledge had stopped. Then a pair of shoes led off at an angle, traveling west.

It seemed to Tommy that the second prints were lighter,

but he did not think that Itauk would desert his team—nor did Tommy think that any man in the North could drive the twelve wolves except Itauk.

He followed the sledge runners again, quickening his pace. The wind was stronger, sending whirlwinds of dry snow rocketing up toward the black sky.

Two months until morning. A hundred miles to the first Mountie post. Tommy felt alone and cold and weary. But his eyes held the trail.

The northern lights flared higher and higher until they covered the entire dome of the sky. The world stood out stark and bitter like the ocean seen through a lightning flash. Far ahead against the rim, Tommy saw a string of dots.

As he quickened his pace, he thought that perhaps he would have a showdown now, even though Itauk, riding his runners, would be fresh.

Seconds were ticked away by the rasping shoes. Another flare of the lights. A hundred yards in front of him, Tommy beheld the team.

But the revelation was mutual. The sledge stopped. Tommy slowed up, watchful, walking like a cat. The dim shadow before him might rush him. The Enfield was balanced, safety off.

Still the shadow did not move. Less than twenty feet away, the wolves growled low in their throats.

Tommy, moving an inch at a time, closed the gap. The shadow was immobile. A white blur showed in the parka hood.

“Itauk,” said Tommy McKenna, “drop your gun!” His voice

was quiet, steady, more than assured, but an instant later the tone had changed: “My God!”

The shadow crumpled abruptly, pitching headfirst into the trail. Tommy, holding his rifle in one hand, caught at the shoulder.

A vibrant voice answered him, hesitant with sobs, “Don’t . . . don’t kill me!”

It was a girl!

Her face was not that of an ordinary Eskimo woman. It was finer, more delicate. Nor were the eyes slanted. Her figure was slight and although it was almost hidden under the bulk of her furs, Tommy caught an impression of a slender body, small hands, a high, firm breast.

He lifted her up, a little angry now. “Where is Itauk?”

“Who is Itauk?”

“Where is the man you met down this trail?”

She shook her head and averted her eyes. “I know no Itauk.”

Tommy’s mouth went hard. “I am McKenna of the Royal Mounted.”

“But . . . but I have done nothing.”

Tommy experienced a sudden hunch that this girl was not an ally of the Madman, that she was innocent of any complicity in his crimes. But if that were so, then why had she attempted to help Itauk out by throwing a Mountie off the trail? Or had Itauk been unaware of pursuit?

“Where is your village?” demanded Tommy. “Your igloo?”

“An . . . an hour’s travel from here. I have done nothing. Do not arrest me.” She was regaining her pride now. Something

of defiance had crept into her tone. She held her head high and looked at him.

“Take me there,” ordered Tommy.

She drew back the whip. It sizzled and cracked beside the right ear of the lead wolf. He sprang up and into the traces. The others lunged forward.

Riding the runners, the girl drove the team ahead. Tommy fell in beside her, trotting to keep pace with the sledge. In the fitful glare, he could see her high cheekbones and intelligent forehead. He did not need a second look to tell him that she was beautiful—and dangerous.

The skin *igdlut*, banked with snow and ice to keep the warmth within, were built in a depression which afforded some protection from the raking wind. Part of the icy walls had been broken away. A few people, black dots against the white, were visible. Trails of wind-shredded white smoke lifted themselves out of the huts.

A chorus of voices greeted the two and were then instantly still. Surprise showed on the faces of the men. The girl paid them no attention. She drove up before the low entrance of an *igdlu* and called out.

An old man ducked through the entrance and blinked at her, his flat face without expression.

“Tie up these wolves against the coming of The Stranger,” she ordered, tossing him the whip and dropping to her knees to crawl through the opening. Tommy followed, dragging the gun by its muzzle.

In the interior of the hut it was warm. Furs covered the

couches along the sides and a cooking pot simmered cheerfully upon the fire. She explained that part of the icy walls had been taken out recently for repairs, and he noticed the “quarried” blocks of ice and cured skins in readiness.

The girl paid Tommy no attention. She stripped off her parka and sealskin *kamiks* and laid them upon a couch. She undressed, straightened her shirt—made of dearly bought cloth—and patted her soft skin skirt until it lay smoothly along her thighs. Putting on a pair of lighter boots and pulling another fur coat around her, she held her hands to the fire, looking sideways at Tommy.

“My name,” she said, “is Kaja. This is my home. You are free to eat of my food.” Her half-white features lit up with a smile.

Tommy nodded. He pulled off his fur coat and his undercap and threw them down beside hers. She stared at him a moment, slightly dazzled by his scarlet coat and blazing buttons. Then her eyes fell to the holstered revolver and cartridge belt. A rawhide thong around his neck was attached to the butt of the revolver.

“You called him The Stranger. Why?” Tommy watched her closely, quizzically, and at the same time admiring her stunningly beautiful body.

“Because,” she paused and laughed, “because he is a stranger. He came to us days ago. He is strong, a mighty hunter, a good provider.”

“Why did you take his sledge for him?”

“Because . . . because he said . . . he said that a man was following him, and that the man would not kill a woman.”

“Does that mean you intend to marry The Stranger?”

“Why shouldn’t I marry him? He is strong, a good provider. Since my brothers were crushed in the ice, I have no one here and I find the men of the tribe weak. No one!”

Outside one of Itauk’s sledge wolves howled in hunger. The wind moaned over the hut. Tommy shivered and stepped closer to the fire. He had not shivered from fear. He was used to this untamed country. He had not shivered because of the impending clash with Itauk.

He had shivered because he had been so long away from laughter. This girl—something like an electric current seemed to pass between them. He steadied himself.

“Then you know nothing of The Stranger?”

“No,” replied Kaja. “Nothing except that he is strong, a good hunter, rich in goods. I am tired of being alone.”

She seemed to lean closer to him. Tommy clenched his hands behind his back. Abruptly he swept her close to him.

Her eyes were large, afraid, but her lips were trembling. She raised her mouth to his. He kissed her, and saw that her eyes were open. Her lips were warm and sweet. Her hands under his shoulders tightened.

Tommy heard the voices outside, heard the crunch of snowshoes. And still he could not let her go. He felt a jerk at his side. Something hard stabbed him above his belt.

The girl backed away, her eyes blazing. She had his gun! In that instant, Tommy started to snatch her wrist, but he knew before he could move that she would shoot.

A brittle voice rapped behind Tommy. “So. It is the Mountie.”