

"All the ingredients of a perfect fantasy adventure."

KIERAN LARWOOD, author of THE LEGEND OF PODKIN ONE-EAR

A DARKENING OF DRAGONS

SONGS OF MAGIC

S.A. PATRICK

THE ICE BEAST



The screams of the children brought the villagers running.

The little ones often played among the tall pines at the southern edge of Patterfall. This high in the mountains, winter was always hard; the pines offered shelter from the icy winds that blew through the valley.

As the villagers ran toward the sound, the panicked children emerged from the trees and came rushing through the snow. The first to reach them was Frer, the eight-year-old son of the baker.

“It’s come! It’s come!” said the boy.

“Steady, child,” said Greta, the village Elder. “Tell me what it is. A bear?”

He shook his head. “No, Elder. It’s the Ice Beast!”

With that, he ran past them to safety.

“The child is just scared,” the Elder told the other villagers, because the Ice Beast was a legend, nothing more. A legend as old as the village itself, about an extraordinary creature formed of snow and ice—a creature that absolutely *did not exist*.

There *were* extraordinary creatures in the world, of course. Some, like dragons, were at least as intelligent as humans; others, like basilisks and manticores, were terrifying monstrosities.

But there was nothing like that anywhere *near* Patterfall. Dragons lived on a different continent, far to the east. As for the terrifying monstrosities, they were thankfully rare and limited to the remotest parts of the world.

Only those foolish enough to get lost on the valley roads in deep winter ever claimed to have seen the Ice Beast—people who were exhausted and frightened, seeing things that weren’t really there.

Yet the villagers could see movement a short way inside the forest.

Something large. Something white. “*No*,” the Elder said aloud. “It can’t be!” But it was.

The Ice Beast was the height of a large man and seemed to be made entirely of snow. Its legs and arms were as thick as tree trunks. The head was a featureless white ball, but every villager could imagine where the terrifying mouth was, fangs dripping, ready to sink into the flesh of anyone who got too near.

Its slow steps drew a heavy *crunch* from the snow underneath. From its head came a steady moaning.

And the villagers kept moving toward it.

“Go!” they called to the children as they passed them.
“Run to your homes!”

There was one child left, though. One small boy too frightened to move, standing directly in the creature’s path—Hap Werner, only four years old.

“Little Hap,” called the Elder. “You go home now! Go on with you!”

But Hap shook his head, rooted to the spot. The creature was getting closer to him.

With no time to waste, the Elder raised the shovel she was carrying. “I’ll have you, Beast!” she cried, and ran toward the creature. The other villagers followed, wielding what weapons they had—hoes, pitchforks, brooms.

The Elder was first to reach it, and she swung her shovel hard, hitting the Ice Beast’s head. The creature made a strange noise before falling to the snowy ground with a *thud*.

There it lay, motionless, as the villagers surrounded it, ready to hit it again if it moved even a fraction.

But where the shovel had hit its head, a few chunks of ice and snow were now gone, revealing something underneath. The villagers stared at what they saw: a very cold, very red nose, and below that, a very human mouth.

“Ow...,” the mouth groaned.

For a moment the villagers looked at each other in shock. Then they began to scrape away what they could of the ice and snow that clung to the stranger. With each chunk removed he was smaller, lighter, yet what they found underneath was a curious giant, the legs and arms unnaturally thick. Only when more ice was cleared did it make sense to them.

Clothes.

Layer upon layer of shirts and trousers: dozens, perhaps more. The stranger's neck was thick with a hundred scarves, the hands and head puffed out by gloves and hats. Torn strips of material were densely wrapped around the face, gaps left only for the mouth, nose, and eyes.

Too heavy to carry, they dragged the unconscious stranger to the village, his legs and feet still ice-bound. In the village hall a fire was roaring, and they propped him up in a chair in front of the blazing logs, then began cutting and unraveling the layers with care. In one corner of the hall, the pile of discarded garments grew, while the unconscious stranger shrank, until all that was left was a thin figure slouched in a chair, with a long coat over his simple clothing.

It was a boy, his hair dark and scruffy.

"Look how young he is, he can't be more than thirteen!" said a villager. "How did he survive his journey?"

"A good question!" said the Elder. "To emerge from the forest where he did, he must have come through Andig's Pass. An icy hell this time of year."

“It’s certain death for anyone crazy enough to go that way!” said the villager.

“And yet this boy made it through,” said the Elder, thoughtful. “There must be more to him than meets the eye!” She reached inside the boy’s coat and searched the deep pockets within. After a moment, she slowly pulled out her hand. With it came a wooden flute, the length of her forearm. Those watching gasped as they saw.

It was *not* a flute, of course. The small finger holes were far more numerous, the layout much more complex, than on any flute they had ever seen.

This was not a flute. It was a *Pipe*.

The Elder lifted it up. “The Piper has come,” she said in awe, and the people cheered. The doors of the village hall were flung open, and the news was passed on to those waiting outside. Everyone took up the call:

“The Piper has come! *The Piper has come!*”

