

## House Inspection

By Joon Heo

I stood on the second-story landing of a good-sized suburban American house. There was something *off* about the space, but as I looked around, I couldn't quite place it. Resting my hands on the railing, I could see the stairs on my left stretching down to the foyer on the first story, a hint of the living room sofa visible through the opening on the right wall. A strange light shone from outside the window above the door. I looked around me. To my right was a single white door. The master bedroom, of course. I wondered if Joel was still asleep in there because it was what, almost noon now? To my left stretched a small hallway with three doors near the end, one on each wall. They were also closed, but I knew the door in the middle to be the bathroom, the door on the left another bedroom—the future nursery, if I remembered correctly—and the one on the right an office.

I snorted to myself. Yay, me! I could recognize the inside of my own house.

Yet, I couldn't recall when we'd decided to cover up the off-white stucco walls with forest green wallpaper. I mean, good riddance to that disgusting old stucco for sure, but forest green? Neither Joel nor I liked the color all that much, and I just couldn't understand why we would have chosen it for literally all of our walls.

I peered suspiciously at the wallpaper, and I saw that the green surface was marked with a medley of scratches and discolorations that, when I backed up, resolved into the shape of...a pine tree? Had that always been there? I noticed for the first time that the walls surrounding the brown doors and stretching down the stairs were covered in a veritable mural of conifers.

I looked back at my hands, still grasping the railing—which I realized was the same color as the doors and very rough to the touch—but they weren't there. I smiled sadly. I was

disappointed that my hands had left without saying goodbye, but there was simply nothing that I could do about it now.

I turned to look downstairs just as two strong beams of light flicked on, throwing distorted ellipses of light onto the front door and the adjacent wall. The cheap coat stand in the corner threw a gnarled shadow onto the trees behind it. The light was coming from the living room. Joel must be watching TV. Calling his name, I descended the stairs.

With every step, my bare feet sank deeper into the orange-and-brown speckled carpet, and both the railing to my right and the tree-patterned wall to my left warped and stretched as if pulled down by my weight. On the third step down, the floor under my right foot buckled and gave way with a horrifying screech of splintering wood and warping metal and I was thrown to the side. I caught the railing but it turned to spaghetti in my hands, and I only caught a glimpse of laminate before my shoulder and head smashed into the first floor. A sickening crack and an all-consuming pain exploded in my chest as the rest of my body followed.

I writhed on the floor for an eternity, unable to feel anything other than agony. I couldn't breathe. Suffering came in giant, convulsing waves to my ribs and right shoulder, and my head screamed in tandem with the blaring coming from the living room. As the pain died down to a loud roar, I felt like I was forgetting something. JOEL! Jesus, I forgot about Joel! Fuck! I needed to find him.

I groaned as I forced my body to move. I thought nothing of my pain; I needed to get to him. I would get to him and make sure he was okay and then call for help. I raised myself up on my three good limbs, my left arm shuddering like a twig against the peaty soil as I heaved myself up to my feet. I could only gasp shallow breaths of air that still smelled like burning rubber. Shit, I didn't know how I'd forgotten about him. How could I have been so stupid? He must be so

hurt, and his husband just fucking forgets about him? I stumbled down the hallway toward the living room, my head pounding with every weak throb of my heart and the pain and tears and blood blurring my vision.

I rounded the corner into the living room and was blinded by the car's headlights. I blinked and rubbed my eyes, but my vision wouldn't clear. If anything, it was getting blurrier. I shuffled forward until I banged my elbow against the—I felt around for the offending object—the left side mirror! I was right outside the driver's side door. I was so close. Letting the mirror swing freely again, I flailed for where I thought the handle might be, but it took me two swipes before I found it, further inward than expected. I yanked it with my good arm, and when the door didn't budge, I yanked it again and again. Nothing happened. I pulled and struggled. I could feel tears squeeze out of my eyes. I couldn't save Joel. Everything was going white and fuzzy.

With every ounce of my remaining strength, I strained a final time, a guttural and unholy roar spilling from my mouth. Something popped in my shoulder, but I thought nothing of it. The car door ground open, and I clawed the curtain airbag aside to reach for Joel.

Crimson seeped from under his open eyelids and streamed down the ashen contours of his face. The rivulets merged with neighboring tributaries springing from his ears, nose, and mouth and streamed down his twisted neck, past the distended jugular and the shattered collarbone, and into the great red ocean of his t-shirt.

No no no no no no. Oh God. Joel. Joel! JOEL!

“JOEL!” I screamed into the empty house. My back and neck arched backward. My hands closed around drenched sheets. The sobs came, great and heaving, and I collapsed back

into bed, drawing his pillow close to my chest as I grappled with my nightmare. The same dream had haunted me frequently this past month, but never had it been as vivid as this.

I drew a shuddering breath. I tried to replace the image of his bleeding, ghostly face with the happy one I should have known so well. I tried to remember the look on his face when we went on our first date, or the time in 2001—two years ago—when we went camping for a week in Yosemite, or even the smallest moments when we held each other or just sat with each other, doing our own thing in peaceful silence, looking up every once in a while to catch a fleeting smile on the other's face. I recalled how the setting sun caused blinding sparkles to dance across the water's surface, how we stood so high above the Yosemite Valley to peer at Half Dome through the atmospheric haze, how he always sat upright and proper in his armchair, reading all of Tolkien's works for the fourth time while I lay prone on the carpet with a cushion and *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, but in these memories, his face was nothing but a blurred haze of features that, if you stared too long, started to shift back to pale and contorted, the dead and unfocused eyes appearing next with drops of blood starting to bead at the edges.

Fresh tears pooled in my eyes. I didn't understand. Why couldn't I remember what his face looked like? We used to spend so much time together.

The phone rang.

I stopped mid-sob, my eyes going wide. What time was it?

I scrambled for the chunky Nokia on the nightstand, wincing as a sharp pain shot through my still-tender ribs. The screen flashed the name associated with the number: John Grant, my supervisor. Shit. I blew my nose and cleared my throat a few times before accepting the call, wiping the tears off my face the best I could on the off chance that John could see me through the phone or something.

“Hey—ahem.” I cringed as my voice cracked. “Excuse me. Uh, hey, John.”

“Hey, Chris,” John’s wisened but gentle voice crackled over the phone. “You said your ribs should be mostly okay by now and that you’d be starting work again today, so where are you? We were so excited to have you back after the accident!”

“Sorry, I just...overslept.” I sniffed as I felt more snot dripping from my nose. He sighed.

“Yeah, well, not like I can pass judgment on you like I haven’t slept through a single alarm in my life.”

I sniffed again, much deeper this time, trying to flush all the mucus down my throat and out of existence. I rubbed my tired and puffy eyes.

There was a pause on the line.

“Chris, have you been crying?” he asked.

“What? No. I’m just kind of sick, I guess.” I could hear the cogs turning in John’s head. He wasn’t buying it.

“Chris—how do I say this...oh geez, I’m not very good at cheering people up.” He paused to think for a moment. “I’m sorry for your loss. Losing a friend is always hard. Close friends especially. But when you’re feeling lost, it helps to have a sense of purpose. The only reason I’ve been on this mortal coil for so long is that hard, useful work takes the edge off the pain, and if it’s appropriate for me to do so, I’d like to say that if the reason you’re not coming to work is because you’re sad, or lost, or any combination from the set of all miserable attributes, you should try coming back, if only just for a day. Just get out of that damn bed you’ve been lying in for the past four weeks and do something different for a while. I promise it helps, okay?”

“Okay.”

“So, was I convincing enough? Are you coming or not?”

“I guess.”

“You guess? Come on, man. Have I told you that our new site is right up your alley? I’m not going to spoil it, but you should come to work if only to admire what we’ve done to the place. And for once, we’ve been sent to a site you don’t have to fly halfway around the country to get to.”

“Okay.” Despite myself, I started to smile. I’d completely forgotten about the new site in Boulder. I’d read a few reports while bedridden, but I hadn’t thought of it in at least a few weeks.

“Also, I don’t want to make you feel guilty or anything, but Alpha Team put together a special welcome back party for you this morning and they’re sad that you missed it. They had to get to work, but there should still be some hot dogs lying around somewhere if you want some.”

I was indeed very hungry.

“Fine. You win, John. I’ll be there in an hour.” I weakly brushed the damp covers aside and stood up. “You’re awfully convincing, you know that? If HECA ever starts to become boring, you should consider a career in the CIA.” We laughed together, although my smile quickly waned as I noticed how stiff and unused my facial muscles were.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. I’m too old for that interrogation shit. Also, HECA is miles above the CIA in terms of morals, competence, and having a healthy level of respect for empirical thinking. I’ll never turn traitor to those pigs.” We chuckled.

“Okay, I’ll see you soon. And thanks for the pep talk. I feel a lot better after that.”

“Anytime. See you soon, Chris. I’ll be waiting outside the site. Oh, and it’ll be cold inside the site, so bring some warm winter clothes.”

\* \* \*

The ancient Ford pickup creaked a little as I merged onto the highway toward Boulder. It was the only car left in our garage; Joel's Honda had been destroyed in the accident and I'd had to sell my Toyota to pay my medical bills.

I'd gotten it for dirt cheap after I started working at Yeti Hiking Supplies, a struggling hiking supplies store in Downtown Leadville, Colorado. This was where I'd first met Joel in 1996. As our talks over the store counter became more frequent, I'd become steadily enamoured by this man who loved the outdoors, speculative fiction, and sitcoms as much as I did.

The transmission crunched as I put it into a higher gear, and the little tabs of peeling blue paint flapped ever more violently in the wind. This truck was the only vehicle I could afford at the time. It was easy to forget just how hard life had been before I started my new job at HECA.

Every day, Joel and I would come home exhausted from our dead-end jobs, Joel from his desk job doing data entry for the DMV and me from behind the counter of Yeti Hiking Supplies. Sometimes, after dinner, we would watch a movie or read books, but mostly, we would sit around in the living room and just *talk*, about anything and everything: what zany characters we'd come across on our shifts, a new TV show we'd heard about, and any number of random topics; but our conversations invariably turned to what our future would look like, what we would do when we got out of our rough financial situation and this dying old mining town; how we'd travel the world and eat some nice food for once; where we'd settle down, get fulfilling jobs, and finally start to live a decent life. It was all talk, of course, but it was talk that made us feel just a little less alone in our struggles, and reminded us that we had something to hope for.

Everything changed in the fall of 1999 when a single job offer arrived in the mail, the first any of us had gotten in months. It promised a very high salary and full benefits in exchange for working in potentially dangerous and unpredictable working conditions and having to live

on-site for some time between two weeks and two months. The sender, the Hazardous Environments Containment Agency, or HECA, was known for aiding other government agencies like FEMA, the EPA, or the NRC in navigating and conducting search and rescue operations in areas potentially dangerous to people. They were especially well-known for their involvement in the cleanup of Love Canal and Three Mile Island in the late 70s and early 80s.

I didn't care how dangerous it was; it was our way out. Joel protested at first, but he too realized just how much we needed this opportunity. I took the job.

At the regional HECA office in Denver, I learned that the agency hid away most of its actions and personnel away from the public eye, sending researchers and support teams to investigate places that could only be described as *weird* to determine if they were safety or security threats to the United States. The employees briefing me were reluctant to reveal specifics for security reasons, but they did hint that mining operations were underway inside something called the Permian Basin Superorganism and that the Sedona Vortexes were real. I wasn't sure if I could believe them, but when they handed me a heavy booklet of contract information and nondisclosure agreements, I gladly signed every page.

Everything was a flurry after that. I emerged ragged from physical and mental training, and the equipment usage and first aid classes. After a two week break, I was whisked away to my first assignment to contain a rampant bug infestation in Armonk, New York.

There were tears at the airport and again as I tried to settle into life in an unfamiliar place. It was the first time I'd been outside Colorado, and the first time in nearly three years that I hadn't been able to see Joel every day. It wasn't until I got to the site, after a long flight and an even longer bus ride, and into my slightly misshapen pop-up tent that I realized just how lonely and afraid I was, and how long the next month would be.



But things got better. I adjusted to the harsh and austere living conditions. I quickly grew close with my teammates, Sally, Matt, and Julio, who had also recently emerged from training. As a part of each site's Alpha team, the first ones on site to do preliminary exploration and safety assessments.. Sometimes we were joined by other four-person groups, and sometimes not, but we always worked with each other on every assignment.

For the first time in my life, I felt the work I was doing actually mattered. I was doing a service to my country. I was helping to advance humanity's knowledge of the unknown. I was forging ahead and keeping everyone following behind me safe. I enjoyed—no, not just enjoyed—I loved my job.

It was always weirdly disappointing to come back home every month or so for a two-week break, even after we were able to scrounge up the money to move out of Leadville and have enough left in our checking account after all the bills and taxes to visit the places and do the things we'd been dreaming of for the longest time. There was no hard work, no sense of unyielding purpose to distract me from the feeling that I was leading two lives. I hid my relationship with Joel from my teammates because I was scared they wouldn't react well, and rather than put in the effort to twist the truth or make up lies, I preferred not to talk much about my life, earning me a reputation for being quiet. Going back home, I was always disoriented by an unexplainable feeling that nothing was the same as I'd left it, least of all Joel, and it pained me to see this reaction mirrored in him as we cautiously got to know each other again for the first day or two of my return.

Over time, it became easier to keep the two parts of my life separate. I didn't complain.

For all my qualms, the money was flowing in and I was enjoying the work. Things were going well at home, too. Joel went to college to get a degree in Education. We got two new cars

and started to grow a vegetable garden in the backyard. On a road trip to Yosemite in early 2001, Joel proposed to me. We got married later that year.

Things were looking up, perhaps for the first time in our lives. Then Joel died.

\* \* \*

Gravel crunched under the truck's tires and my suitcases bounced in the back as I turned onto Ash Mountain Lane, stopping in front of a chain link fence gate. I rummaged inside my heavy winter coat with the HECA wordmark stitched on the back and produced my ID to the guard, and before long, I was speeding towards a collection of tents and vehicles surrounding an unassuming two-story rural house nestled between two small foothills of the Flatirons, the boundary where the treeless Eastern Plains of Colorado abruptly ended and enormous, jagged mountains loomed up to the cloudless blue sky, seemingly miles away and right in front of my face all at once. It was beautiful. I pulled into the one unoccupied parking spot I could find—right next to an enormous and very loud generator—and went off to find John.

He was in the mess tent chatting with Julio, Sally, and Matt from Alpha Team. Behind them, a banner with the words WELCOME BACK, CHRIS! hung lopsidedly from the supports. A wave of guilt washed over me.

John waved me over.

"Look who it is!" As I sat down, he handed me a plate with a hot dog on it and a can of soda. "Here, we saved one for you. Julio thought you weren't going to come and was just about to eat it."

Julio shot me an awkward smile.

"Sorry. These hot dogs are kind of small," he said.

“No, no,” I said, “I’m the one who should be sorry.” I sighed, gesturing at the banner hanging behind them. “You guys planned a surprise party with hot dogs and soda and a fucking banner and everything and I just didn’t show up.”

“Well,” Matt spoke, “you’re here now, and to me—and to all of us, hopefully—that’s all that really matters. Better late than never, right? We’re just glad you’re back.”

Sally, Julio, and John nodded solemnly.

“Thanks,” I replied. I felt very tired all of a sudden. I had no more words to say, so I stuffed the hot dog into my mouth and waited for someone else to start talking.

“I heard about your friend,” Sally said, quietly. “I’m very sorry for your loss.” Everyone concurred.

“Thanks,” I said. This was the last topic I wanted to talk about right now.

“Were you two close?” Matt asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess.” The hot dog tasted like cardboard in my mouth.

John spoke up.

“Now, I know all of you want to show your sympathy to Chris, but let’s not forget he’s been through a traumatic experience, and if he doesn’t want to talk about it, we shouldn’t make him. Agreed?” Everyone nodded awkwardly, staring at the table, and I nodded at John. He continued.

“Okay. I think we should discuss the agenda for today with Chris. We’re running a bit late, but that’s completely fine. We’ll just push whatever we can’t complete today onto tomorrow’s schedule.” He turned to me.

“I know we sent you a report containing some of the preliminary findings on the site a week or so ago. Did you have a chance to read it?”

“Parts of it, yeah,” I said.

“Can you tell me what you know? Just a quick rundown.”

“Well, I think I’ve only read the police reports so far, but I know that there’s a giant, dark maze of hallways behind one of the doors in the house. Some kind of small expedition organized by the residents of the house to explore the hallway went missing or something? Sorry, I didn’t read the entire thing.”

“No, no. You got most of the important parts. To be honest, this particular site is a bit on the boring side, and you’ll quickly learn all there is to the place after a day or two. But don’t be fooled. The hallways are still plenty dangerous.” He paused, looking excited.

“The walls *shift*, Chris. It’s amazing! If they’re not lit up brightly enough—somewhere below 1-3 lumens per square meter, per our current estimates—the walls can start to rumble and shake”—he gave a visceral demonstration of the concept with his hands—“and they form entirely new combinations and layouts pretty much instantaneously! We’ve been trying to observe it in action, but it’s become clear to us that a single lumen over a square meter isn’t much for our eyes or cameras to work with.

“Now, I know that sounds scary, but we’ve never seen this happen in spaces that have been illuminated properly, and it also seems that some of the larger rooms, including the Great Hall, where Base Camp and the Grand Staircase are located, seem to have a constant position and volume and aren’t affected by shifts. Just make sure not to leave important items unattended in the dark. There’s been a concerning number of reports about things disappearing overnight.

“So, that’s basically it for this site. Any questions?”

“Yeah. Why’d you tell me to bring heavy clothes?” I asked.

“Oh, yes. It’s just very cold inside. Internal temperature seems to fluctuate around 32 degrees at all times, I think going up to 40 and down to 24 at times. That’s part of the reason I’m mostly staying topside this time around—I’m afraid my doctor told me to stay away from freezing temperatures after I got pneumonia on that site in Utah last winter.” He smiled sadly. “Although, I will be coming down every so often to check up on you guys, so, don’t worry; you won’t be getting rid of me that easily.

“Well, if you don’t have any more questions, why don’t you head down to our base of operations in the hallways? You can settle down and relax the rest of today, maybe meet the other group of four on Alpha Team this time, and we’ll get you out and working first thing tomorrow. Sound good?”

“Sounds good.”

“Okay, Matt, Sally, and Julio, if you could take Chris to Base Camp and help him settle in, that would be wonderful. Sorry, guys, I’d love to be down there with you, but I have a meeting I absolutely cannot be late to in thirty minutes. The perks of being middle management. I walk so you can run and all that, yeah? I’ll try to reach you on the radio at 1700.”

We said our goodbyes, and John ran off to prepare his notes while the rest of us prepared to enter the house. I lugged my two giant suitcases onto a cart, along with other knick-knacks that we would have to transport to base camp and slung my backpack over my shoulders. Matt handed me a helmet with an attached headlamp and a toolbelt from the equipment shed, and I put them on. I also stuck a flashlight, a radio, and extra batteries in the belt. Before long, Sally stretched the last few bungee cords over the pile of stuff on the cart and we rolled it up to the house.

The outside was as blue as a robin's egg and had white trimmings. It looked old, and leaned ever so slightly to one side, but the door, windows, and paint all looked like they had been lovingly redone. The porch creaked as we pulled the cart up the aluminum ramp placed over the stairs and into the house.

The interior was a mess, with bundles of wires spilling out of adjacent rooms overflowing with computer equipment and even emerging through some of the windows before snaking their way across the hardwood floor into the living room. Sally explained that a lot of these were redundant power cables from the huge external generator outside, providing the primary source of electricity to Base Camp, and the rest of them were data cables to both connect the computers inside to the Internet and to allow for radio communications between Base Camp and topside. This was necessary because although Base Camp was not too far away, it was only accessible through a series of snaking and turning hallways that were exceptionally good at absorbing most wavelengths across the electromagnetic spectrum. These umbilicals were the only connections Base Camp had to the outside world.

Because the ground was littered with cables, we had to lift the cart over them and into the living room, and I caught my first glance of the hallway. All the wires in the room funneled into its depths, which were lit every dozen or so feet by a halogen work lamp hanging from the left hand corner. Weirdly, this didn't do much to light up the interior, as the walls, floor, and ceiling remained a matte black. The door and its frame that had covered it up had been fully ripped off the wall, presumably to make the doorway slightly wider to accommodate larger crates, and were now resting on their side next to the hallway, creating a ragged hole in the wall leading into darkened unreality. And unreal it was, as Julio informed me. Apparently, this space was

physically impossible, as there wasn't any indication on the exterior of the house to suggest that there was ever a hallway or even a door on the other side.

Zippering up my coat, I took my first step inside. Cold, dry air enveloped me and I pulled the coat tighter around my neck. The lights were harsh and blinding, but I could feel a slight warmth radiating from them, a pleasant foil to the sudden cold. I turned back and helped the rest of my team carry the cart into the hallway.

Thankfully, the bundles of wire had all been consolidated and attached to the top left edge of the space with large hooks, meaning that we could roll our cart around without any problems. We started to walk deeper into the hallways. Everything was silent except for the intermittent squeaking coming from the one bad wheel of the cart, letting me process the extraordinary environment I was now in. Reaching out to run my finger along the walls, I noticed they were extremely smooth. They were surprisingly warm compared to the temperature of the air.

We came to our first corner after a solid minute and our first intersection after another five. The turns and forks grew more frequent as we followed the trail of lights deeper. Sally and Julio struck up a conversation about the recent invasion of Iraq, while Matt and I pretended to be interested. Starting our own bit of small talk, I asked Matt about his new daughter, Rosa, and he showed me a picture of her in the hospital. He asked how my ribs were doing and what it felt like to lie in bed doing nothing for a month, and when I struggled to get this morning's dream out of my head and deliver an answer, we lapsed into an awkward silence. After ten minutes of walking, we finally arrived at Base Camp, which, as Julio had mentioned sometime during the walk, was approximately half a mile from the entrance portal.

The hallway ahead of us opened up into a massive chamber of an indeterminable size. The ceiling wasn't visible, and the walls seemed to extend upward into absolute darkness. A sea

of HECA standard tents carpeted the ground, lit up by powerful floodlights suspended on a central tower made of scaffolding, which Matt called the Lighthouse. We'd arrived at Base Camp.

We walked past the mess tent and the Lighthouse and stopped at a tent pitched near the edge of Tent City, where the rest of Alpha Team had their tents. My stuff was quickly unloaded from the cart and tucked away inside the tent, and in a moment, I was left alone as the three went off to tackle their other errands.

I was happy to see that the tent interiors had been improved over the previous site we were at. You could almost stand up if you stooped your head a bit, for one thing. There was a cot in the corner on which I could place my sleeping pad and sleeping bag, and there was a flimsy-looking rack for my clothes and a tiny nightstand next to it. All the creature comforts one could ask for.

As always, unpacking was a grueling process, but within the hour, I had my bed set up, most of my clothes hanging from the rack, and my alarm clock on the nightstand. There was still a lot of stuff inside my suitcases, but I shoved them under the cot to worry about later.

I rummaged through my backpack and brought out my bags of toiletries and my aluminum canteens. I would have to check where the bathroom and the potable water were later. I reached back in to pull out the folder of preliminary reports I'd received two weeks ago when my fingers brushed against a familiar object. My stomach dropped. It couldn't be.

I lifted the small picture frame from my bag, and my heart sank. From inside the frame, Joel's smiling face shone next to my own, our arms around each other's shoulders as we posed in front of the Crater Lake caldera. In my hurry this morning, I'd neglected to empty my bag properly.



I stared at Joel a while longer. He kept grinning back. He looked so strange and unfamiliar in the photo, even though it had been taken less than three months ago. Was I forgetting him already? I sighed and sat down on the cot. Only three months ago. Only two months before the accident. I could still vividly picture the final moments before the pickup slammed into us at an intersection. He'd been talking about how he would rather fight a horse-sized duck over a hundred duck-sized horses, or something equally as stupid, and he had just opened his mouth to say something, perhaps to drop another pun if the glimmer in his eye was anything to go by, when the truck had screamed out of a blind corner and smashed right into the driver's side. There had been a deafening bang as the car crumpled and the airbags inflated, and everything was chaos and screeching noise for the next ten seconds as the car spun across the asphalt and into a ditch on the side of the road. I remembered pushing my door open and falling to my hands and knees to throw up, but the rest was gone, aside from the bits and pieces I could piece together from my discombobulated dreams.

Tears welled up in my eyes. How could he be gone so quickly? What I would give to live this life again with him, to be happy with him just a while longer.

Off in the distance, something rumbled and chattered, a haunting sound that echoed loudly off the walls of the Great Hall and shook the floor beneath me. I jolted in pure terror. Something was here, ready to kill me. I was near the edge of Tent City. It would get to me first. I hugged the photo to my chest and waited to die.

Footsteps approached my tent. I cowered.

"Yo, Chris," said a voice. It was Matt. "Are you still in there?"

"Oh. Hey."

"How was your very first rumble?"

I felt stupid. John had told me about the walls rumbling as they moved, and I should have made that connection. I quickly stuffed the photo back into my bag and unzipped the tent flap to step outside.

He stared at me in shock.

“Damn,” he said, “you look like shit!” I struggled to come up with a reply.

“Wow. Thanks.”

“Huh? No, no. That wasn’t to make fun of you or anything, I mean, like your face is all pale and sweaty. Are you okay?”

“I guess the sound just got to me. I didn’t realize it would be this loud.”

He sighed in relief.

“Yeah, I feel you. You get used to it after a while, or that’s what everybody tells me at least, but it just gives me the fuckin’ heebie-jeebies every time. Especially the big ones like this one.” He shuddered. “I’m glad you’re all right, though. I thought you were having a heart attack or something. That would’ve been bad.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

“Well, I gotta get going. They’ve left me a damn *mountain* of responsibilities to tackle before dinner tonight. It’s going to suck, but at least I’ll go to bed feeling accomplished, huh?”

He laughed. “You take care now.”

“You too.”

He walked away, disappearing into a space between the rows of tents, and I was left alone. I could hear the faraway bustle coming from the mess tent and the recreational areas, but there was no one around me. I looked around at the impenetrable and complete darkness surrounding Tent City, starting just a few tents down from where I was, and I was suddenly very

scared. I didn't want to be outside alone for any longer than I had to, so I stepped back into my tent and zipped the flap shut.

The radio in my belt crackled to life.

“Alpha Team, this is John Grant. If you hear me, switch to channel 20, over. We're going to be starting our daily meeting soon.”

I switched to channel 20, and after John confirmed that everyone was present, he started the meeting.

“I hope everyone enjoyed that massive Spontaneous Rearrangement Event, as the higher-ups like to call it. We got word back from the seismologists down at Base Camp and they've said it was the second largest one we've ever recorded, so I hope you didn't sleep through it!” He chuckled.

“Okay, onto more important matters. First of all, I want to say that I'm very sorry that I can't be meeting you today in person. I know getting everyone together on radio is an exercise in tedium, but I've had a big fight with the director of HECA over funding issues, and let's just say I have a lot of business to finish topside before the day is out.

“Let's jump right to the main topic of this meeting, which is, of course, the agenda for tomorrow. You're all departing, 0900 sharp, down the Grand Staircase for mapping duty. We've basically only been down there to install the radio repeater and some lights—Infra is truly doing the Lord's work, I swear—so it's all virgin ground, as some might say. Carrying all of your backpacks and supplies, we estimate the walk down to take around three hours or so. Just know that there are a million billion steps, so you won't be coming back to sleep in your Base Camp tent tonight. Pack accordingly. You will sleep around the radio repeater at the bottom of the Staircase, which is conveniently lit up nice and bright. Make sure to check in with us on channel

two by 2200 every night or we'll have to send a rescue team down to get you guys. Oh, and before you leave, there'll be some cool new equipment and food and water waiting for you at the start, so take that with you.

“Speaking about a rescue team, make sure to keep an eye out for members of the lost amateur expedition. We have reason to believe they got lost down there. They're definitely long dead by now, but I'm sure their family members will appreciate it if we find their remains.

“And finally, I know you're all ants-in-your-pants to get away from all the infrastructure setup that happened this past week and using the specialized skillset that we pay you big bucks to use, but make sure to be prudent and vigilant, and make sure to listen to each other. Heed each other's warnings. This is a dangerous place, or else they wouldn't have sent us here.

Understood?—ah, well, don't repeat that back to me 'cause we're on radio, so I'll assume that you do understand that. Now, if no one has any further comments or wants clarification on anything...”

He paused and waited.

“Wow, you guys are usually a lot more talkative than this, but I guess this is just how radio meetings go. Since there aren't any further comments, I'll end it off here. Find us some cool shit down there tomorrow, you hear? Grant out.”

\* \* \*

Tired, I went to bed at an unreasonably early time like a bitter, old man, and for once, I slept normally. I feared that such a dark and surreal environment might add fuel to my nightmares, but no horrible dreams of car crashes and bloody eyes accosted me that night. In fact, I had no dreams at all. I woke up bright and early the next morning, surprised to find myself feeling well-rested and alive.

Tent City was bustling when I finally crawled out of my tent. On my way to breakfast, I passed hordes of people I'd never seen before as they scrambled to prepare for the first day of major research procedures. I walked into the mess tent to find that it was already packed full of people.

At breakfast, I finally got the chance to see all eight of my comrades on this reboot of Alpha Team. I powered through their *I'm sorry for your losses* and their *hope you get well soon*s, and eventually the conversation turned to the much lighter topic of the day ahead.

Julio had already picked up the package John had left for us, and as we ate, we oohed and aahed as Julio lifted from the box high-tech gadgets provided courtesy of the US government. The first was merely a safety precaution: a personal always-on emergency radio beacon that could help us find each other if we got separated in the hallways. We set each device up by inputting our names and setting it to broadcast to channel 10, which was specifically reserved for the beacons. Next were two 1000m and one 2000m spools of wire that had tiny LEDs attached to them every five meters. Julio plugged the end of the wire into a spare extension cord that he'd found, and we were shocked to discover how bright they were. Every day, we would have to unspool the wire as we explored an area, and the LEDs would trail behind us, lighting up the hallways so the walls wouldn't shift before we could make our way back. If we found a notable landmark or other point of interest, we were instructed to leave the spool where it was and follow the trail back to the Staircase so that we could find it easily later. The third item was an experimental radar gun operating on the narrow range of frequencies that wasn't completely absorbed by the walls. When the trigger button was pressed, the device printed out a depth map of our surroundings to a small screen attached to the back end. We were assured that visibility would never get bad enough that we would need such a tool, but DARPA had needed people to

test their new toy out in the field, so here we were. The last gadget was a simple hammer and chisel, and a set of plastic sample bags for everyone. We were to take small, frequent samples from the walls, floors, and ceiling as we explored. Everyone was annoyed that Julio had chosen to introduce this supposed “gadget” last.

We split at 0835 to pack our bags, fill our canteens, and use the bathroom one last time. I spent a long time mulling over whether to take the Crater Lake photo with me, but I eventually decided against it. I left it on the nightstand, facing the wall. I didn’t want to feel Joel staring at me as I finished packing my bag.

I would have to lay it to rest in a box somewhere when I got home. I would slowly forget about Joel—a thought that generated a pang of sorrow in my chest—and I would be fine, eventually. But I would work my ass off and experience new lows in this damned place, so that I would be ready to start living a normal life again by the time I got back topside.

At 0900, we met at the top of the Grand Staircase, which was a massive, circular hole about fifty feet wide punched into the foundations of the Great Hall. I’d missed it as I’d entered Base Camp for the first time, and it was easy to see why. The only indication that the Staircase existed was a blinking set of warning lights indicating its edge and a backup generator sitting on the other side of the opening. I peered in. As was everything in the hallways, everything was pitch black. The interior curve was ringed with wide steps that spiraled down into the darkness.

In vain, we tried to estimate how far down the hole went. We shot our radar guns down, but the gadget never detected a return pulse. Shrugging at each other in defeat, we flicked our headlamps on, hefted our backpacks and boxes of supplies onto our shoulders, and started the long climb down.

It took five minutes.

A strange sight greeted us at the bottom, ominously backlit by a floodlight hanging from the wall. A massive hill of coiled...something sat at the center of the round room, and as we got closer, we realized it was insulated wire, the end of which eventually snaked into a small transformer to the side of the room, which was, in turn, connected to a smaller wire leading back under the pile. Julio went to check it out, while Matt hugged the wall and muttered something about snakes.

We groaned in frustration as we realized what had happened. Someone had sent too much wire down the hole, and it was now burying the repeater. The NO SIGNAL message on my radio confirmed this.

We spent the next hour digging the repeater out from under the coils of heavy wire. After our radios started working again, Julio tried to have a strongly worded talk with John about bureaucracy and rounding errors, but John just seemed confused about how we got down there so quickly.

Everyone was tired after digging through insulated wire for an hour, so after setting down our bags and breaking out the butane stoves, we had an early lunch. We talked about unimportant matters: how our lives were going, what we'd been up to in the two weeks after we'd cleaned up at the previous site, what jobs we were considering if Congress really decided to "reallocate" more funding to the DoD, and the like. I was on edge the whole time, anxious that anyone would bring up the accident again, but it seemed that nobody really cared, for which I was grateful.

After lunch, we split into two groups following organizational lines, each getting their own spool of 1000m LED wire. I carried our spool to where Matt, Julio, and Sally were standing, and we started spooling out our wire to the West. We had a great time running around testing our radar guns for a while until we realized all we were getting were the same, identical-looking dark

walls over and over and got bored. We took small samples from the surfaces every thirty minutes and tossed each filled sample bag into our backpacks.

Quiet rumbles sounded every so often, but always from a direction away from the Grand Staircase, so we paid them no mind after a while. I still flinched when the rumblings came from nearby, but I knew I didn't have to be scared. Our LEDs and headlamps kept us safe.

By the end of the day, we'd covered around thirty permutations of the hallways on the western side of the Staircase, and Matt and Sally estimated from the preliminary mapping they'd done that we'd completed seven degrees, or just under four percent, of the semicircle that our subteam needed to explore.

The week continued. Spool out, spool in. Day in, day out.

Wake, eat, spool, eat, spool, eat, sleep.

It was mind-numbing and physically exhausting work, and as the week went on, we started to give up on the hope that we'd find something interesting, but these downsides were tempered by the fact that I had people to talk to. Wonderful, kind people who, although they'd been slightly perturbed by my depressed mood before, showed me an incredible empathy and cracked some of the best jokes I'd ever heard. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed as hard as I did in the hallways. Admittedly, it also helped that I'd been sleeping better. I hadn't had a single dream since entering the hallways.

John was right. He'd always been, since when I'd first met him, but still. I did feel better going to work every day.

\* \* \*

"You think cold, dry air kills off germs?" Sally asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Why?"



“Well, given how freezing it is in here at all times, I expected to have caught pneumonia and died by now.”

“Jesus Christ, Sally.”

“Or at least a cold. I don’t even have a sore throat, either, even though the humidity here is like 0.00%, which really shouldn’t be possible. It’s not just me, right? That thinks this is weird?”

“Nah,” Julio said. “This can be clearly explained by the fact that the walls radiate a magic healing aura.”

“That cannot be right,” Sally said.

“Everything’s plausible until you find a counterexample,” Julio replied.

“Yeah, sure, but you said that your magic healing aura is a *fact*. *Fact* doesn’t mean something’s just plausible. That’s not what it means.”

“Are you implying that—”

The LEDs blinked off.

“What the fuck?”

There was silence for a moment. Slowly, we became aware of a distant rumble that grew into an deafening roar sweeping through the hallways, jolting the ground and vibrating my bones. It came from all directions. We fell to the ground, our headlamps swinging crazy arcs across the walls, but before we’d even reached the ground, the sound stopped. Glass broke somewhere nearby.

Cautiously, we got up, unsure of our footing. Out of pure habit, I dusted myself off, but there had been no dust on my clothes in the first place. We looked at each other. Sally seemed fine, if a little shaken. I almost missed Matt. His headlamp had shattered when he fell, and he

squinted as I shined my light across him. He was pale and trembling, his eyes wild and unfocused.

There was one more headlight missing, however.

“Wait. Where’s Julio?” I asked.

We all turned to see that a blank wall had replaced Julio.

“What the fuck,” Matt said, “what the fuck! He was just here a moment ago!” A rumble sounded nearby and we winced, but the noise faded back into silence. Matt looked back at us, his eyes wide with fear. His face suddenly contorted into anger.

“B-But our lights were on!” he moaned. “John said fucking one to three lumens per square meter!” He sucked in a breath. “It was all horseshit! John fucking knew! He had to know! And he still sent us down here! He knew about—about the wire; no, the heavy-ass cable in that fucking pile on the floor—and he *knew* that one day the walls would get wise and figure out we’d been sedating it with lights and I’m *so fucking done!* *So* fucking done! Go fuck yourself, John!” Before Sally and I could stop him, he ran down the hallway behind him and was engulfed by the darkness. Another rumble shook the halls, louder this time.

Sally and I shared a look. We said nothing, because there was nothing to be said. We looked behind us to where the darkened LED wire ran, presumably back to the Staircase but perhaps not, and started to walk. Then jog. Sally broke into a run and I followed, the beam of our headlamps streaking wildly across the walls.

I tripped over the unpowered LED wire and fell, smacking my helmet on the floor. There was a crunch and my headlamp went out, and my hefty backpack mashed my face into the floor, starting a nosebleed. Sally helped me up, wide-eyed, and after I clicked on my flashlight, we ran again. My crushed headlamp now dangled in front of my face by a wire, so I pulled the helmet

off and threw it to the side. If the walls decided to crush us, my plastic helmet wouldn't be of much help anyway.

We ran for what felt like hours. More rumbles washed over the hallways, knocking us off our feet, but each time, we picked ourselves back up, looked at each other in surprise that the other wasn't dead, and ran on.

At some point, I realized that the wire was nowhere to be seen. I'd lost the trail. I turned to alert Sally, but she wasn't there either. Shit. Another screaming roar shot through the hallways, the ground shook, and I fell. I was dead now for sure. I cringed, hoping my death would be quick, but the roar passed, and I was still alive.

I jumped to my feet and hit the ground running. I turned a corner and took two steps, but my footsteps sounded off.

They echoed into the space in front of me. Below me.

Some part of my brain instinctively knew what was wrong and spurred my body into action. I let go of the flashlight and reached out as I fell forward, trying to catch myself on the edge, but it was too late. My hands caught nothing at all and I tipped forward into the darkness, tumbling and flipping, falling forever.

This time, I couldn't even catch a glimpse of the floor before my shoulder and head smashed into it. I writhed on the floor for an eternity, unable to breathe or feel anything other than agony. Suffering came in giant, convulsing waves to my shoulder, and my head screamed in tandem with the pounding of my heart.

Eventually, the pain subsided, and I was able to raise myself onto my left elbow, and with a great heave, up to my feet. The floor here stuck to my skin for some reason. Ignoring this, I checked myself for injuries. My ribs seemed to be fine, which was a relief. My shoulder was

dislocated again, and I probably had a concussion and definitely a major headache, but I was alive and on my feet. I was okay. I wasn't yet doomed to die in these halls.

I looked around. There was nothing but darkness in every direction. It was deathly quiet, except for a quiet beeping somewhere ahead of me, probably the radio repeater throwing some error. Where had I dropped my flashlight?

The cogs in my injured brain turned slowly. I assumed I was in the Grand Staircase, because if I wasn't I was well and truly fucked. What was in here? The big-ass pile of wires, of course, and the radio repea—

The radio! How could I be so forgetful? I unhooked the radio from my belt and pressed the transmit button, but I was instead greeted by the NO SIGNAL message. I was defeated. Of course. The power was out, so the repeater was dead, and I couldn't connect my radio to Base Camp or topside. But if the repeater was dead, where was the beeping coming from?

I turned the ghostly orange glow from the cheap LCD towards the beeping, but I couldn't make out anything from its weak light. I patted my pockets and toolbelt for anything that could help me navigate the darkness, and I found the radar gun. I unclipped it from my belt and aimed it at the sound, waiting as the device began to render its output on the rear screen line by line. I squinted at the image.



The image wasn't very clear, but in the background, I could see the rounded walls of the Grand Staircase and two openings that led deeper into the hallways. The pile of wire that had filled up a good amount of the space was nowhere to be seen. On the ground were two strange shapes, the one on the left looking like a heap of some sort of material and the other looking like a slightly dented block.

I stepped toward beeping, pressing the talk button on my radio and sweeping it in wide arcs, trying to find the shapes I'd seen. As I grew closer, its light briefly illuminated the heaped shape on the floor before the screen dimmed and turned itself off. I pressed the button again and pointed the screen toward it. The fabric was a piece of clothing, a heavy coat with the HECA wordmark emblazoned on it. Inside the coat was a body. The screen turned back off.

Pressing the talk button again, I edged forward, my shoes unsticking with a weird noise with each step. Soon, I was standing right next to the body. A man. In his hand was a radio, which I lifted to see that it was tuned to channel 10 and displaying my name. He had been trying to find people by their emergency beacons, and his radio was now detecting mine.

Reaching forward, I grasped his head and rotated it to face me, a motion that felt unsettlingly easy. I shoved the radio closer to get a better view and recoiled.

“Holy shit. Matt?”

There was no response. He was dead.

Pressing the button again, I saw a glint of light reflecting from his tool belt. His spare flashlight! I moved the radio closer, and it illuminated his lower body. His legs were sunk halfway into the ground, as if he were resting in a placid lake of pitch-black water. My shoes failed to unstick, and I nearly fell backwards.

The flashlight. I lunged forward, not caring how my ankles strained painfully against my shoes. I ripped the flashlight from Matt’s belt and flicked it on, blasting my surroundings with light. I shone it down at my shoes and tried to dislodge them, but they wouldn’t budge. The floor had almost completely engulfed both of my shoes.

I looked around for a divine solution, and I found it: the first step of the Grand Staircase stood to the right, just six feet away from where I stood. It was the only chance I had. I slipped my feet out of my shoes, balancing on the balls of my feet, and leaped. My right sock stuck to the ground and peeled off as I took my next hop, but I made it onto the stairs safely. I looked back to see my sock shiver and crumple as the floor slowly sucked it in.

I clambered up a few more steps just to be safe and collapsed onto the stairs, which thankfully didn’t try to suck me in. I noticed for the first time that sweat was pouring down my face and back, even in the frigid air. I took off my coat to cool off. As I came down from my adrenaline high, a wave of dizziness hit me, and my head began to pound with a newfound vengeance. My vision pulsed with dots of yellow and blue. I was probably dehydrated, and I wondered when I’d last had some water. I took one of my canteens and downed the entire thing.

After a while, I stopped sweating and the dizziness went away, but my head still hurt and I was still thirsty. Remembering I had Advil in my bag, I popped two of them and drank another canteen's worth of water. I slapped myself in the face a few times and started to climb the stairs.

Soon enough, my third and last canteen was empty as well. The ground radiated a slight heat, but it wasn't enough to keep my feet warm and my toes started to ache. I was having trouble standing up straight. I lurched from side to side as if drunk, and even though the steps were wide, I feared that I would fall back into the hole. I started to sweat again, and upon wiping my brow, I noticed that my forehead felt hot. Dehydrated and delirious, organizing a complex thought was difficult. My eyelids were heavy, and the world had turned a tint of yellow. My heart was racing. I collapsed back onto the stairs, groaning nonsense words as I fell into a stupor.

\* \* \*

Blinking warning lights pierced my sleepy eyes. I muttered incomprehensibly and clenched my eyelids tighter, but even then, the bright flashing continued to assault me. Reluctantly, I rose from my position on the floor, picked up my flashlight, and staggered away into the great dark nothingness. I needed to find the photograph. I couldn't bear to lose any more of Joel than I already had.

My vision swam and my throat burned. My hands were cold and sweaty. My knees threatened to buckle at any moment, and I fell once or twice, but I somehow still got up. I could worry about how I'd get out of here later. I just needed to get to my tent.

No more lights shone in the Great Hall, and my flashlight barely lit up the ground in front of me as I stumbled along. It was silent, save for the humming of the lonely generator growing fainter behind me and my labored breathing. Even the hallways were quiet, for once. I easily found Tent City hiding in the darkness, now in an unrecognizable state. I shuffled past tents in

various stages of collapse, carts laden with expensive equipment half sunk into the ground, and the toppled remains of the Lighthouse in the distance. Hideous shadows loomed behind corners as I swept my light across the destruction. I was almost there. I just had to hold on for a bit longer.

A sudden fit of coughing wracked my body, and I fell to my hands and knees, tiny droplets of blood spraying the ground in front of me. I had to get up, but I couldn't. I tried to crawl forward, but I was in pain. My chest, my head. What was happening? My arms buckled and I crumpled to the side, groaning. My tent was just a few more turns away. I could... still get there and make it back out. But the ground was so warm and comfortable against my cheek...

Blinding light pierced my eyes.

Groaning, I shielded my face with my hands and tried to roll away, but I ended up banging my head on a wall. Despite the brightness, I forced my eyes to open just as something tall and heavy fell on top of me, scattering hats all over the floor.

I was lying on the doormat in the foyer of my house. Sickly sunlight shone down from the window above the door. I lifted the cheap old coat stand from my torso and got unsteadily to my feet.

"Chris, is that you?" said a voice from the living room. I froze.

It was Joel.

I stepped cautiously over the hats into the living room. Joel was inside, fiddling with the photos on the mantelpiece by the far wall.

"Back so soon? How was your day, hon?" he said.

"Alright, I guess," I said, rubbing my eyes. I was suddenly very tired. "I spent a lot of time learning how to forget about you."



“Oh, you, Chris. Your words wound me very deeply.”

“I know, I know. But I don’t *want* to forget about you!”

“You don’t?”

“No!” I shouted. “You forced my hand! You just fucking died one day and left me here in this miserable, shitty life!” I sniffled.

Joel stopped his fiddling. He snickered.

“Don’t be a silly billy,” he said. “I think we both know that we’ve been starting to forget about each other long before that.”

“What?”

He turned around, fresh rivulets of blood streaming from under his ashen eyelids.

“Oh my god, Joel, you’re bleeding! Are you—”

“Look at you, all grown up now, gone to work for the *government*,” he hissed. “Did you ever stop for a second to think about me? Your husband? When you disappeared to go work at some secret site for weeks at a time, did you ever stop to consider how *alone* I felt without you? About how *worthless* I felt knowing that you chose your job over me?”

“You—you agreed that this was the best decision! A-and you were happy for me! Happy for both—”

“We used to spend so much time together,” he snarled, “and now we don’t. Do you even remember what it was like to spend time together? Like at the boardwalk? Or Yosemite? I bet you don’t. After you took your fancy job, I see you for only fourteen weeks a year! That’s right, I’ve done the fucking math. What an absolute joke of a relationship.”

Blood started to pour out of his nostrils, then his mouth and ears. Streams of red ran past his shattered collarbone into his shirt. He was right. I’d made so many mistakes.

“I’m so sorry,” I sobbed. “I’m sorry! I-I was so selfish. HECA gave me such purpose. I felt like I was in control of my life for once, and I didn’t want to give that up!” I sucked in a breath. “But now I see how much that hurt you. I’m sorry.”

“Your job gave you purpose, huh? You know what gave me purpose? *You*. But this feeling wasn’t mutual, was it? Your coworkers tell you all about their families and show you pictures of their babies, but *you*, you’re too embarrassed to tell people anything about us. That you have a *husband*. You never come out to anybody, not to your closest friends, not even to your fucking mother. Our relationship really means nothing to you, does it?”

“Joel, stop! I’m sorry! This isn’t like you!” I felt helpless.

“And after all that, you have the balls to pour yourself into even more work the second I kick the bucket. You couldn’t even wait for your puny little ribs to heal properly before you shipped yourself off to do even more work. How *dare* you disrespect my memory like that?”

“No! It’s not like that!” Heaving sobs wracked my body.

“Now, now,” he said, his voice lowering to a sweet cadence. “That doesn’t mean I hate you. In fact, I *love* you. I love you so much that I’ll give you one last chance to choose between the two things you love the most. It’s your job or me, Chris. You can choose to stay with me here, *forever*, or you can choose your disgusting little whore job and you can regret it for the rest of your life. So, what will it be, Chrissy?”

“You’re not Joel, are you?”

Joel screeched and lunged at me.

Everything went black.

\* \* \*

“CHRIS! Chris, listen to me!”

I opened my eyes to see John Grant leaning over me, shaking my shoulders. Two medics hovered near me. I looked around to see that we were still in the hallways.

“Chris? Can you hear me?” I nodded and winced. My entire body felt as if it was fashioned out of pain and exhaustion. “Can you remember anything? Did anyone come back with you to Base Camp?”

I shook my head.

“Thank God we found you when we did. We didn’t know if we could get you out.” There were tears in his eyes. “Chris, I’m so sorry. I never should have made you come here. I thought getting you back to work would do you some good, but I probably made it so much worse—” he sobbed, and swiped away the tears rolling down his face. “I’m so sorry.” He turned away before I could say anything, and the moment quickly turned awkward.

Nobody spoke as the medics lifted me onto a stretcher and started to strap me in. When John seemed to have composed himself, I spoke up.

“What happened, exactly?” I croaked. “And why’d the power go out?” John sniffled.

“Shit, well, our main generator outside blew a fuse, and the backup generator kicked in a second later, but in that time, the walls were able to rearrange themselves and sever the power and communication cables connecting to Base Camp.”

He put his head in his hands. “We fucked up. We should have anticipated this and brought some goddamn backup cables. We sent in rescue teams and got most of the Base Camp people out, but we saw the repeater downstairs was disconnected and thought all of you were already dead. Thank God we decided to sweep Base Camp one last time. We heard your beacon ping on the radio. You were getting sucked into the ground near your tent. Your upper body—your head,

too—was almost completely under the surface. We thought you were gone, and we’d almost given up, but all of a sudden you were flailing and the floor let you go.”

The medics started to push the stretcher, and before long, we were out of the Great Hall and traveling through the hallways again. The halogen lamps that hadn’t been crushed or shunted off our path still hung from the corner of the hallway, but they were dark. Their light had been replaced by a strip of LED wire identical to the ones we’d carried down the Grand Staircase.

John cleared his throat. “You were talking a lot about Joel while you were... in the floor. Was that the name of your, uh, friend?”

I felt a wave of exhaustion. I didn’t feel like answering. Heaving a sigh, I closed my eyes.

“Oh, if you just want to rest, that’s fine too. You must be exhausted after all that you’ve been through. There’s a helicopter waiting for you outside, ready to take you to Denver Health. Just rest. Just rest.”

I let sleep overtake me.