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THE HAUNTING OF CROWE'S BEND

by Alistair Pope

CHAPTER ONE

Intro

It was mid afternoon when Tiguaak decided that Ikiaq had died. The sound of her ragged breath still filled the small iglu they shared. At times it would stop, as if Ikiaq's body had finally used the last of what strength it had left. Tiguaak dreaded these periods the most, since she had not yet been prepared to travel to the ones above, and that was his fault. But, after a short eternity, another breath always managed to claw its way out, and he was thankful that there was still time.

Aside from their bedding of hides, the iglu only contained a qulliq, a stone oil lamp, that cast flickering shadows on the snowy walls. He stared into the flame, searching for some kind of sign from the ancestors that they would welcome her, at last. However, the ancestors chose silence.

Decision made, Tiguaak squatted next to Ikiaq and gingerly lifted her up in his arm, like one would hold a baby. She had

been ill for so long, she weighed no more than a newborn doe at this point. Two large caribou hides were wrapped around her to keep out the cold, though he doubted she was aware of such earthly concerns anymore.

Ikiaq's body spasmed in his arms as he moved her and a weak cry left her lips as her head rolled back, long black hair spilling out of the hides. Hearing the sound, Kallik lifted the entrance flap and looked inside. Seeing Tiguaak standing with his life partner in his arms, Kallik nodded. It was time.

Tiguaak ducked under the flap, held open by Kallik, and emerged into the cold darkness outside. The land would not see the sun again for many months yet. The chill wind forced him to squint as he looked out at the small village. It consisted of a number of other iglu, both large and small, and one long building built from hides stretched over whale bones.

A few of the others stood nearby in a solemn line, though many stayed focused on their assigned tasks. Cleaning the days catch, preparing spears and tending to the boats. There was little time to squander for The People, especially in the winter periods. To see that this many of the others took the time to honour Ikiaq was a welcome sight to Tiguaak.

Ikiaq was much loved in the tribe. She had been a good wife and friend to Tiguaak, and had bore them three sons, two with Tiguaak. She had been a strong member of the women's circle, unafraid to speak her mind and worked for the good of all. The

illness had taken one of the best from them, and it time to ensure that she succeed in her journey to the ones above. It was the only thing left that they could do for her.

Tiguaak carried her past the on-lookers, snow crunching under foot, to where a sled was already prepared. The dogs were restless, sensing the coming journey, they were eager to run. Though the people had to move frequently to follow the herds of whales on which they relied, they were never very far from the sacred place. The place that Tekkeitsertok told them about about, and where he now waited for Ikiaq to make her second to last trip.

Tiguaak laid his small burden down on the sled and got the dogs moving. At this time of year, the place wasn't very far and he hoped to be back in time for the evening meal. He pointed the dogs towards the mountains that loomed in the distance, to an opening in the jagged cliff face that lead into the sacred place. He had never been inside the chamber within before this day, but he knew where to find it. They all knew.

Before long, the sled arrived at the entrance. It was a wide cave entrance that lead down into the mountains. The people had discovered it in his great-father's time, and the shaman of the tribe had been used as a resting place for the dead to make their final journey for generations. Tekkeitsertok was one of the current shaman. He was the one that had unlocked the full

sacred purpose of the place, showing the rest of them the power it held, for with Tekkeitsertok's wisdom it had become a grand shrine to Anguta, the god of the dead, the Father, and creator of all. Called by some who dare to whisper it, the man who cuts.

Tiguaak stopped outside the entrance and stuck a stake in the snow to tie the dogs to. They were already lying down in the powdery snow, happily panting and wagging their tails.

He knelt beside the frail form laid on the sled. If she had already been sent on her way, it would all be for nothing. He placed his head down next to hers and listened. Ikiaq still breathed.

The cave tunnel was lined with oil lamps. Where the shaman had gotten the oil, Tiguaak couldn't say. The old man had not been seen at the village for over a week, which was not uncommon. Perhaps Anguta himself had come and provided the oil and food, blessing his most devoted priest. Perhaps Anguta still knew how to hunt. Tiguaak scolded himself. It wasn't the time for one's mind to wander.

Gingerly, he lifted Ikiaq one more time and began walking into the cave entrance, casting long shadows that danced on the wall in the flickering light. The ever present wind that chilled him outside lessened and he found the tunnel to be quite pleasant. The tunnel was at least ten spans wide and tall enough that he could see at least three inuksuit standing guard along one wall. They were statues of stone, as tall as a man and built

in the shape of a human figure. The inuksuk had long been a marker to remember the people that had been here, but now were on their journey to the ones above.

At the end of the tunnel, the cave system opened up into a grand cavern. Also lit by flickering oil lamp light, the cavern ceiling and far side were still hidden in darkness. Many more inuksuit stood in groups in the cavern, proud testament to the ancestors that had already left them. That already resided now with the gods, through Anguta's blessing.

Near the center of the cavern a man stood next to a stone block that served as a work table. The man wore the same caribou hides sewn in the style of the village crafters, but Tiguaak didn't need to rely on the clothing to know who it was. It was Tekkeitsertok, it could be no other.

"Come, friend," Tekkeitsertok called to him, "It is time"

Tiguaak slowly continued carrying his wife through the chamber. It seemed wrong to rush, as if moving too fast would shake the life from her bones and everything would be ruined.

The inuksuk he passed by now had bundles of cloth and hides at their feet. Strands of rope and bones could be seen under the material as he got closer and passed by. It was his first time coming face to face with the tribe's ancestors. Even knowing what to expect, it was still unsettling. No, the ancestors guide them and this was a place of honour and joy. He settled himself.

Beside the stone table, Tekkeitsertok waited patiently, and

smiled on the small procession. Closer to the center now, the inuksuk here still played host to the more recent ancestors, their journeys surely complete, or nearly complete. Dry, desiccated bodies remain lashed to the large stone figured with ropes. Their skin turned to leather by the cold and the wind. Their underclothes barely able to cling to the bony bodies they covered. Tiguaak forced himself to look them in their eyeless faces, silently thanking them for their guidance.

His father was in here, somewhere. And his mother. He was only a boy at the time, and didn't come to the sacred place then. Maybe the one he gazed at now was her. There was no way to know.

Approaching the table now, Tiguaak saw Aput lashed to his inuksuk. The cuts were still fresh and blood had run down the stone figure, pooling at the bottom. Aput had been injured in the hunt some weeks ago, and now went with Anguta.

"Aput journeys well," Tekkeitsertok said, noticing Tiguaak's gaze, "Do not fear for him."

Tiguaak nodded.

On the center worktable, Tekkeitsertok had prepared the drink. Water that ran through the cavern was sacred and held much of the power of this place. It was part of the reason why the tribe never ventured too far from the sacred place. Tiguaak accepted the cup of water and together, they drank deeply, relishing the earthy taste it bore.

Tekkeitsertok gestured to a waiting inuksuk nearby. It was new and clean. Tiguaak gently held Ikiaq up against the stone figure while the old priest wrapped lashings around her and bound her to the stone. When he let go, her head lolled forward and caused her breath to become more raspy. Tiguaak stood back and looked with affection and pride at his wife, standing tall one last time, preparing their place with the ones above for when he would eventually join her. It would be a happy reunion.

The old priest took his place in front of Ikiaq. From the worktable, he had retrieved a long bladed knife. Cut from a whale bone, it was one of their finest, shapest knives.

"Anguta, hear us!", he began, his voice booming off the walls of the cavern. "This one's time has come and she needs your help on the journey ahead. Usher her in to sit with the ones above, as you taught us, as through your daughter Sedna, as through the cutting of the flesh."

Tekkeitsertok raised the knife in his hand and slashed down across Ikiaq's chest. Blood poured down and dripped off her feet, staining the stones. Tiguaak collapsed onto his knees.

"We join above, we cut the flesh," Tekkeitsertok intoned, again slashing the figure tied to the inuksuk, across the arm this time. More blood. Ikiaq's head twitched but no sound came forth.

Tiguaak collapsed lower, resting his head on the ground. It was too much to bear. His head was pounding. No one told him it

was like this.

"We join above, we cut the flesh," Tekkeitsertok intoned again, his monotone voice echoing through Tiguaak's head, making it spin. Another slash sounded, but Tiguaak couldn't look, though he felt the shame of it. A rivulet of blood trickled across the floor and wet his forearms. He looked up.

Before him, Tiguaak saw Tekkeitsertok surrounded in a hazy purple glow which spread and engulfed the inuksuk holding his wife. Every time the knife fell, with every slash, the purple glow grew more into the shape of a man. The glow caressed the dying woman and faded.

She was on her way.

CHAPTER TWO

Arrival

In all his years, Peter had been a passenger during many plane landings, smooth ones and rough ones, but he had never been a passenger during an ice landing before now.

"How's it going, Alex?" Peter asked the blond man in the pilots seat. He leaned on the pilot's seat to squint out the window at the ground below. The sunlight bouncing off the snow made it hard to see. Alex was a professional, he had brought sunglasses.

"Well, Mr Fowler," Alex said cautiously, "I'm pretty sure that's it ahead of us. The gray spot there" He pointed straight ahead but Peter only saw white.

"Pretty sure?"

Alex nodded. "I've done this run before. A long time ago, though, but it feels right." He paused before going on, "I dunno, something isn't right, Mr Fowler. ILS is down and we

really should have hit the outer beacon by now."

Alex was young, only in his mid thirties, but he came highly recommended as a pilot. Peter made sure to always request him for his business trips, since becoming Director two years ago. Peter didn't understand a lot of the jargon, but this was the most unsure Peter had ever seen Alex.

"Have you been able to talk to the tower?" Peter knew that much.

"Tower isn't talking. Nothing is talking down there." Alex threw a confident look back at his boss. "I'm sure its fine. This girl can handle anything."

The girl, in this case, was a medium of the line Gulfstream private jet. Officially, it was a corporate asset belonging to LingWei/Stein, but unofficially it was reserved for use by the Director of Operations, which was Peter Fowler. Peter had no idea what the girl could handle.

"Ok, I'll leave you to it. You might end up with that \$20 yet!" Peter said with a laugh. Back in Vancouver, Alex had made a bet that they'd end up landing on ice.

Leaving the cockpit, Peter had only taken two steps when he was attacked by his little five year old daughter, Abigail. She ran up and grabbed his legs in a bear hug.

"Daddy!" she said looking up, "There so much snow outside. Its just white!"

Peter pulled her of him and sat back down next to him wife,

Cindy. "I know! It's like we're in the arctic!"

"We ARE in the arctic, Daddy!" Abigail yelled excitedly. She ran back to an empty row to continue looking at the snow. Including Aiden, his son, Peter's family were the only passengers on board.

Cindy looked at him, unamused. She hadn't really smiled once for the whole flight. Peter gave her what he hoped was a reassuring pat on the knee.

"Come on, Cin, this will be great. I'm really glad you all could come this time. It's gonna work out fine."

"To the arctic, Pete," She said, "The arctic?"

Peter sighed. It was this conversation again.

"I know I haven't been around much," he said to her, "I heard you. But I do have a job to do still. At least they let you guys all come along this time so we can be together."

Cindy nodded he knew she still wasn't thrilled about the situation. He pressed on, "And it's not even that big of a job. I'll be with you guys most of the time. It's like a holiday."

"If it's not a big job, why can't someone else do it" Cindy asked.

"It's not a big job, but it's important" he replied.

Cindy turned a bit in her seat to look at Peter. "But Aiden, Pete. You know..."

"Aiden will be fine," Pete cut her off, "We'll be with him. He's been fine hasn't he?"

"I guess," she conceded.

"I'm doing my best here for everyone," he said, "It's gonna be fun"

Peter felt his ears pop as the plane pitched down in a steeper descent. Behind him Abigail let out a squeal.

"OK, only a few more minutes until snowmen and making snow forts!" he called out. Abigail cheered happily. Glancing over at his son, Aiden had his head pressed against the seat in front of him and his eyes shut. Before Peter could get up to go check on him, the airplane's engines screamed back into life and the plane pitched up again.

Abigail screamed in delight. Beside him, Cindy looked at him anxiously.

Peter stood and made his way back to the cockpit.

"Sorry, Mr Fowler," Alex said without looking back, hearing Peter enter. "Didn't mean to alarm you, just had to do a fly over"

"A fly over? Is that normal?"

Alex shook his head, "Nope, but we got no beacons, no ILS, no tower. No lights either. I swear its a ghost town down there. If it was night time we'd be rather screwed.

"Had to do a low pass to get a look at the place. Spotted the runway, but I don't like it. There's snow build up, definite ice. I have no idea what the crosswind is"

Peter's pragmatic mind went to work. "What's the options?"

Turn back?"

"No, can't turn back. The flightplan was only to get here. Not enough spare fuel to get anywhere else. Its pretty barren out here"

The site they were headed to was a mining facility that belonged to LingWei/Stein. It was supposed to have a fully staffed airport with ample fuel and other supplies.

"Right..." Peter said, "I trust you can do it. I'll get everyone strapped in."

He made his way back to the seat next to Cindy. "Everything's fine. Just doing a flyover" he said flashing a smile around the cabin.

The plane rolled as Alex turned around to take another approach at the runway.

"Everyone get your seatbelts on," Peter called out, "Abby that means you! Sit down somewhere"

"Ok!" she called out from several rows behind them, followed by a metallic click.

"Aiden? You good, bud?" Peter asked.

Aiden muttered in a quiet voice, "It's on"

Peter's ears popped again as they got lower. Outside the window, the snow covered land was zipping by at a good speed. The roar from the engines changed as Alex applied the flaps. The plane descended to meet the snow. Peter waited, insides tied up tight in knots, for the thump from the wheels. He didn't have to

wait long.

The wheels hit hard and everyone was push forward as the plane started slowing down. The screaming engine noise dropped in pitch as the engines slowed down and the plane tried to stop.

Peter had a distinct sensation of moving sideways, of twisting maybe. It was a sensation that you shouldn't be feeling during a plane landing. Looking past Cindy and out the window, he saw that they were certainly sliding at an angle. Outside, he could see some small buildings and larger warehouses passing by, and small section of the ice covered runway, shining in the sun.

Abruptly the plane stopped moving and everyone was jerked hard in their seatbelts.

"Aaahhh! Daddy!" Abigail screamed.

Peter got himself up and looked around. "It's ok Abby! That was a hard stop but we made it." He hurried back to his daughter to check on her. Aiden still looked the same, no worse than before anyhow. That seemed promising.

Alex came rushing back in the cabin from the front, a concerned look on his face. "Everyone ok in here?" he asked, "Sorry, boss. Sorry." He moved to give Cindy a hand in standing up.

"We're ok, Alex. No problem. Good job, by the way" Peter assured him.

Alex nodded, clearly relieved at the news. He went to the cabin door and put his hand on the latch. "Everyone get your

coats on, we're getting out of here."

"Daddy my coat!" Abigail called out, the landing already forgotten. She was eager to get out to the snow. It took a few minutes for everyone to get up and bundle themselves in their winter gear. Aiden reluctantly stood up and shrugged his coat on with a glum look on his face. Cindy went to stand next to him, and placed an arm around his shoulders.

Alex popped the door open and they filed out. The air was dry and cold, with a strong wind making it seem much colder. Swirls of snow spun around in circles across the icy runway visible behind the place. A few dark snow covered buildings huddled at the far side of the tarmac. There was no one else in sight, no one coming to greet them.

Alex got out first followed by Peter. Their feet immediately sunk into a couple feet of snow.

"Oh jesus," he heard Alex whisper to himself. Alex had gone to check on the state of the plane.

The plane had skidded across the icy surface and slammed sideways into a deep snow drift. It's landing gears carved long gashes into the snow until enough of the powder had built up until the plane couldn't plow through anymore. The left wing had sliced into the side of the large drift, any damage it might have taken was hidden in the snow.

"Can we get it out of there?" Peter asked.

"I don't know" Alex replied.

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The four Fowlers stood knee deep in the snow, holding their coats closed, getting their first look around and the arctic landscape. A cold wind tugged at their hoods and blew hair in their faces. Abigail had a wide smile full of childish enthusiasm on her face. Cindy stared at Peter with a sharp gaze that said 'Now what?'. Aiden stared at the snow blowing around his feet. It seemed that he found it as glum out here as he did on the plane.

Peter stamped his feet in snow in an effort to keep them warm. Unlike his family, he had come straight to the airport from the office and still had on his business casual shoes. His winter boots should be still on board in the baggage. He waited while Alex finished inspecting the plane, as best he could.

Around them, the mining facility's airstrip stretched to the left and right. Their plane had skidded off the side of the runway at about the midpoint and now sat at an angle half on the icy surface and half buried in the snowbank. Much of the runway was covered in deep snow. The wind, funneled though the gap between two large buildings, had cleared away a section of the snow, leaving ice behind, which was where they slid off.

Beyond the runway and the airfield buildings, more squat industrial looking buildings were evident, complete with snow filled roads and unreadable ice covered road signs giving directions to the unknown locations in the site. Further still,

looming over the site was the snow covered majesty of the Richardson mountains. Not as awe inspiring as the Rockies, but still an impressive sight, made even more impressive because the mining facility was tucked right in close to the base of the mountains.

"Can we get going inside, Pete?" Cindy asked in a tone that said it wasn't a question, "Why is no one here to see us?" She had moved to put an arm around Aiden, which Aiden was clearly not happy about.

"Daddy look! I'm making a path!" Abigail said cheerfully, scuffing her feet along in the snow in circles around the group.

Peter smiled at her, then nodded to Cindy. "Yes, right. That should be the terminal across the way there." He said pointing at the closest building on the other side of the runway. And if it wasn't the terminal, at least it was somewhere out of the cold snow and wind.

"Let go, and watch for the ice!" he said, the last part being directed at Abigail. "Alex! We're heading in that building!" Alex raised a hand in acknowledgment, not bothering to look at what building Peter meant.

Together they shuffled across the ice patch to the other side of the runway and along a small taxiway. It couldn't have taken much more than five minutes but the wind and snow swirls hounded them the whole way. Peter felt his toes starting to complain about the cold now as well. By the time they arrived at

the solid steel, windowless door in the side of the building, everyone looked like they wished there were anywhere but here. Even Abigail had lost her smile and was grimacing into the wind.

"Look guys, once we get in, we'll get settled, have some hot chocolate, it'll be fine. Wait til you see the VIP suites they got for us executives!" Peter said in an attempt to raise spirits.

"Just open the damn door, Pete" Cindy said curtly.

"Ok, ya"

Peter took a glove out of his coat pocket and put it on before grasping the door handle and giving it a tug. The door rattled in its lock and remained closed.

"Crap... ahhh ok, just wait a sec", he said and rushed back to the plane.

"For god's sakes, Pete!" Cindy yelled after him, followed by a more shrill five year old echo, laughing.

Peter quickly retraced his steps back to the plane, cursing himself silently. This mining facility, officially named LWS-Yukon-14, had been shut down for a few years, only running with a small maintenance team. He was here this week to inspect it and get it ready for reopening, and in that capacity, they had given him keys. Keys that were still on board secure in his satchel. He quickly slung the bag over his shoulder and rushed back to his waiting, increasingly miserable, family.

"Keys!" he said with a small flourish that drew no smiles.

Not even an eyeroll. Bending to the task at hand, he chose a key on the keyring and tried it. It didn't fit. The third key fit but refused to turn. After a few tries and exhausting the complete supply of keys, the door still remained locked.

"Well. Hmmm" he said. There was the other building next to this one, perhaps one of the keys worked over there. They could also press on into the mine complex proper, assuming the entrance gate was open.

He was about to suggest heading to the next building when the lock in the door made a loud thunk noise and the door swung outwards.

"Hooray!" Abigail cheered, her spirits instantly lifted.

Standing in the dark doorway was a short woman, with dark hair and brown eyes, bundled up in a blue company parka that went down to her knees.

"Well, I thought I heard a plane" she said, "Imagine that!"

"That's us. How do you do?" Peter said pushing past her without waiting for a reply. The woman stepped outside and held the door for the other three Fowlers.

"Four of you," she stated, "and kids. That a bit unusual, isn't it. Kids on site"

Peter took off his gloves. It was still cold inside the building, but at least they were out of the wind. An electric lantern sat on a nearby counter, presumably brought by the woman, was the only light. The depths of the building were

hidden in darkness.

"I'm Peter Fowler, Operations Manager at LWS," he said holding out his hand, then dropping it when it wasn't taken. "This is my family, kind of a working vacation, you might say"

The woman clutched her parka about her and looked at them, as if sizing them up. "Is that so. Operations. You guys reopening the mine then?"

"We hope to. We're here to check it out. Kick the tires, and so on"

Just then the door banged open again, letting in a cold blast of wind and snow along with a very cold Alex. Alex took one look at the woman and laughed.

"Doris! What the? Are you still here? Jesus its dark in here." He clapped her on the shoulders with both hands in greeting. At the sight of Alex, Dorris clearly relaxed a bit more.

"Alexander! Its been years."

Alex turned to the group, "Folks, this is Dorris Delany. She's been here since the start. Husband is George, head engineer. Dorris used to run the company shop, but I guess not anymore?" he said looking around gesturing at the dark room.

"Son, George has been gone a couple years now. After the site shut, I figured I'd stay on in Crowe's Bend. No where else to go. I have a store down there now"

Abigail, listening intently, poked Dorris softly, "What's

Crowe's Bend?"

"It's this whole place, sweetie. That's what the people that live here call this area" Dorris answered, crouching down to talk to Abigail.

"So flights are back on are they?"

"Well this is a special one, got one more coming in though. That's what I gotta talk to you about, boss" Alex turned to Peter. "Plane is right stuck. Probably can get her free but the left engine is covered in snow, I doubt it will light. Gonna have to work on it. Still don't know about the wing."

Cindy spoke up at this news, "Isn't that fine? God knows we have nothing but time here, don't we" she said, aimed at Peter.

"No we don't. Cargo plane is coming in about an hour behind us and the Gulfstream is in the way."

Peter thought then said, "I'm out of my depth here, Alex. What are the scenarios here? You can't get the plane moving before the cargo plane arrives?"

"I'll try but no promises. It probably a good idea to tell them what's going on though." He turned to Dorris, "Dorris, why is there no one on the tower frequency? Where's the beacons? If we can get the tower radio up, we can warn them. That's the one frequency they'll be listening on."

Dorris shook her head. "There's no power in the whole complex. Lost power a while ago. I only came up from town because I heard the plane."

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing, "There's supposed to be a team here still, keeping things up."

"Things happened, Mr Fowler," Dorris said. "Now that you are here, maybe you can see for yourself, and keep the site shut"

CHAPTER THREE

Survey

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call

CHAPTER FIVE

Storm

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