



The Haunting of Crowe's Bend

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 and 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 through 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.

During his quick jaunt back to get the bag, he noticed that

Cindy had moved back beside Aiden, putting one arm around him like a mother bird protecting her baby. Aiden was allowing it, but he certainly looked more annoyed at the motherly attention than at the snowy weather. That was something, Peter thought. Aiden had developed a bit of a snow phobia since the sledding incident. He just had to get over it.

"You tell me if its too much, honey," Cindy was saying to Aiden. Peter wished she would stop making him focus on it. It would be good to get inside.

"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"

Doris's mouth turned at the sides and tightened. She clearly had something against reopening, but why? Peter wondered. He needed to find a way to get in her good graces to find out what was going on. If she had the only set of keys, that was even more reason.

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 seemed to relaxed a bit more.

"Alexander! Its been years."

Alex turned to the group, "Folks, this is Doris Delany. She's been here since the start. Husband is George, head engineer. Doris 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 Doris softly, "What's Crowe's Bend?"

"It's this whole place, sweetie. Thats what the people that live here call this area" Doris answered, crouching down to talk to Abigail. Satisfied, Abigail wandered off to explore the dark shelves and counters around them.

Peter figured he would try for some more information while Alex was around. His presence had placed a spell of friendliness over Doris. "I was expecting to talk with Lee, when we got here. Lee Weathers?"

"Oh yes, Lee," Doris said with contempt, "He's still

around. Not here, mind you, down in town. Probably drunk as usual." She stopped then decided to launch into what was probably a well practiced rant. To his left, Peter heard Cindy calling Abigail back, to stay in the light.

"George had no end of trouble with that one," Doris said turning to Alex, "You remember, dear. I got to hear all about it. Always thinking he knew best. [Find a bunch of other, potentially baseless, things to rant about. Mine related management problems] Well once the more recent problems started, he just up and shut it all down. Sent everyone home. Didn't want to deal with it I guess."

Cindy's raised voice interrupted Dorris, "Abigail, get back here. What did I say?"

Abigail was standing next to a countertop, barely visible at the edge of the lamp light. "It's fine, Mommy, look there's a"

"Right now"

Abigail wandered back to stand with Cindy, but not before giving a shy little wave to the darkness. With his daughter wrangled, Peter turned back to the issue of Lee, "I'm going to need to call him back here. He should know how quick we can reopen."

"So regular flights are back on are they?" Doris asked.

Alex spoke up at the mention of flights.

"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? 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 whats going on though." He turned to Doris, "Doris, 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."

Doris 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," Doris said. "Now that you are here, maybe you can see for yourself, and keep the site shut"

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Peter found himself back outside again with Alex. The sun was still up, but provided no warmth. The wind was as bitter as ever, blowing snow around them and into their faces. They stood just outside the door leading to the dark terminal building. Doris had taken the rest of the Fowlers with her to her car, and had taken the lamp with her.

"So you know where this shop is Doris is talking about?" Peter asked Alex. With the main complex being out of power, Doris offered to let everyone warm up at her shop, which was where she lived also.

"No, boss, I don't." Alex admitted, "But its a small town. I'm sure it will be pretty obvious. And I know the way, its not far. I mean, we might have to walk it though..." He trailed off.

"Alright," Peter said. It couldn't be helped. At least they'd be warming up and hopefully get some food. They had more pressing concerns right now with the incoming cargo plane. The two planes had been scheduled to land fairly close together. Peter has opted for the Gulfstream instead of subjecting his family to roughing it sitting in the loud, utilitarian interior of the cargo plane. The plane itself carried a small security detail of five. They also doubled as general labourers to help bolster the maintenance crew that was left behind. However, with the maintenance crew absent, and/or drunk in town, Peter

should have brought more. It also carried a full restock of food and supplies as well as machinery that expect to find need replacing; the generators in particular would be useful. They also had a couple snowmobiles, which was good since Peter doubted he could locate the vehicle depot in the depth of the dark cluster of buildings.

"So we try to get the plane moving?" Peter asked.

Alex shook his head, "First I want to try to raise the other plane on the radio. You know who's flying it?"

Peter shook his head.

"Ok, I'll get on the tower frequency and see if I can talk to them. Then we'll try to light the engines and reverse thrust out of there."

"Anything I can do?" Peter asked. He hated standing around not being helpful.

"Sure," Alex said thoughtfully, "You know if you can find any flares or something, light them in a line down the runway, that would be good"

"Great idea," Peter said. "Where are the flares on this plane?"

Alex laughed. "Nowhere on this plane. I mean, you gotta find them somewhere in the terminal." He said, then added "Boss"

"Ah" Peter said, none too happy about fumbling about in the dark on a wild goose chase.

"There has to be a basic amount of emergency equipment near

the runway. Should be there. I'd try near the tower building."

Alex said pointing.

Peter followed the outstretched finger. The tower wasn't really a tower. It was a squat 2 story building with the second story fully decked out with floor to ceiling windows. The right side of the building, on the first floor, had a large steel garage door in it that looked like the kind of place you might park an emergency vehicle.

"Alright I'll check it out" he said.

Alex gave him a thumbs up and climbed back on board the plane.

Peter started heading towards the tower building, trying to stay on the snowy part and avoiding the sheer ice. His feet hadn't really warmed up when they were inside, and now they had started hurting again. He wished he had thought to grab his winter boots from the luggage, but he didn't know how much time they had. Alex hadn't seemed rushed but better not waste time. He pressed on.

He only slipped on some hidden ice and fell into the snow twice, once with his bare hands before he remembered his gloves. Arriving at the garage door, Peter gasped the two handles at the bottom of the door and pulled it up. Of course it didn't budge.

Looking down along the side of the building the garage door was on revealed no other entrances. Peter walked along the wall to the corner and looked down the side of the building. The wind

was howling extra strong here where it had to squeeze between the two buildings. It looked like there was a door, though. He pulled his hood tighter around his head and run down to check it. The door was open, and revealed a pitch black room inside. The door itself was quite heavy and had an strong mechanism on it that pulled the door shut if he let go of it. How was he to find anything in there? First he had to find something heavy enough to keep the door open. At least get a little bit of light inside.

Peter stepped into the room as far as he could while using one foot to brace the door open. There wasn't much to see in the dark room, and nothing within reach. He'd have to let the door shut and feel around in the dark. Not a very attractive prospect.

Returning to the brightly lit outdoors, he let the door shut and looked around at the snow covered acres around him, and the tall mountains beyond, considering his options. His gaze happened to fall on the crest of a low hill where a dark figure was standing, clear against the white of the snow. The person was too far to see many details. They stood legs apart, wearing gray winter gear. Peter couldn't tell if they were facing towards him or back to him. He assumed it was towards. He raised his hand in a friendly gesture.

The person must have taken notice of Peter, since as soon as Peter dropped his arm, the figure raised his own hand, which

held a long stick or staff of some kind. Peter could just make out the figure pointing the staff at him. Was it a rifle? Peter quickly yanked the door open and moved behind it just in case.

He waited behind the door for a few seconds. No sound of a shot came, no whine of a bullet missing or impacting the door. Cautiously he peek out from around the edge of the steel door. No one was there.

Peter shoved the door open hard so that it provided the most cover as it closed, and ran out of the alleyway between buildings. He hurried all the way back to the plane.

Alex was outside behind the right wing where the rear of the engine was. He was trying to scoop snow out of it with his hands. The end of the wing still buried in the drift.

"Any luck?" he ask, hearing Peter's laboured breathing and footsteps.

"No, too dark." Peter said. "Listen, I saw a guy out there. Someone with a rifle I think."

Alex nodded, "Probably local Inuit hunter. They still live around here, they move around but they've been here for ages."

"Huh," Peter replied. "I guess, could be. How's the plane?"

"Bad, it wouldn't light. I'm gonna try one last time. Hear that?"

Peter became aware of a droning noise that he had been hearing for several minutes, which slowly was getting louder.

"Is that the other plane?"

"Yep. I told them about the conditions. Just gotta hope for the best. Move out of here."

Alex ran back to the plane's open door and disappeared, shortly followed by the sound of the left engine starting to spin. Peter turned and ran back past the plane's tail down the runway, through the snow.

The thrum from the left engine got louder and steadier. Two large panels that made up the top and bottom of the engine housing came loose and moved on hinges to block the rear opening of the engine. No sound or movement came from the right engine.

Slowly the plane started twisting and rotating backwards, driving the tail to the right and deeper into the snow. The left wing and engine were no more free than before. The droning hum in the air kept getting louder and Peter could see the larger Airbus hanging in the sky, lined up with the runway.

Alex jumped out of the plane's door and ran across the runway towards the shelter of the buildings on the other side. Peter considered joining him there but then thought the better of it and moved a bit further into the deep snow on his side of the runway.

In the sky, the cargo plane engines were screaming louder as the plane got nearer, until the sound abruptly quieted as the pilot cut power to them. The plane seemed to get bigger and bigger, hanging just a few feet above the ground until it suddenly dropped, slamming its wheels into the ice covered

runway. The engines roared back to life as they tried to slow the plane with reverse thrust. The larger plane shimmied left and right on the ice but by either the pilot's skill, or just by being heavier, they made it across the icy patch.

Peter watched the Airbus roll past him, approaching the spot where the Gulfstream was stuck. With a tremendous sound of tearing and crushing metal, the larger plane's right wing neatly sliced off the top foot of the smaller plane's fuselage and destroyed the one working left engine.

#

The gods above had blessed the earth on this day with a clear, cloudless sky, calm winds and firm snow which was good for walking. Three travelers that trekked out in the wilderness were very pleased with the way the day was going. It made for easy traveling.

The first traveler was a tall man, wearing gray furs around his shoulders and torso, but a windbreaker underneath, and jeans. He wore faded Kodiak boots that were serviceable but had seen better days. A bag was slung over his shoulder and he carried a hunting rifle in his right hand.

Behind him came a woman, also fully covered in furs, only longer reaching below the knee. Under the furs, just visible,

she wore a corduroy dress and the same Kodiak boots. Her black hair was tied up in a bun, pinned with a wooden hairpin adorned with an image of a moonlit night sky.

The third traveler was a young boy, no more than seven years old. He wore a blue parka with a fur trimmed hood, and had to take quick steps to keep up with the other two. Often he would lag behind to look at a plant or maybe some animal tracks, then run to catch up. He was full of youthful energy still.

The land through which they walked was a wide open, snow covered plain. Stretching from the north to south was a dark mountain range capped in white, which was their intended destination. Between the travelers and the mountains, the snowy field rose and fell over small hills, their windward sides holding back deep snow drifts.

The boy seemed to have grown tired of searching for the odd rabbit track or wolf trail in the snow and ran up to walk along side the man leading the expedition.

"Father," he said, "This place seems very far. Are you sure this is the right way?"

The man smiled down at the boy and said "Yes, this is the way. Does it seem far? I thought we had only just set out."

The boy continued jogged along to keep up with his father's long stride. "But how do you know? I've never known you to come to this place before."

The man nodded and a hurt expression flickered over his

face. The boy had unknowingly shamed him with his innocent words, but the man continued humouring his son.

"It's true, I have not come this way for a long time, which was wrong. We have neglected our duty to the ancestors and must work to make amends. I have made this journey many times as a young man. My own father showed me the way, as his father had shown him. And now that you are old enough to be your own man, I am showing you."

He slowed his pace to address his son more directly, "This will be the first of many times we make this trip, but you need to note the path. Mark the stones and hills in your mind as best you can. It's important that you do not forget the way, now that you have learned it."

"I won't, Father," the boy said, feeling the seriousness of the moment. "But how come we are the only ones? Does no one else have duty to the ancestors?"

"A good question. It shows that you are thinking." The man patted his son on the head. The boy, in turn, smiled, pleased with himself. The boy's father continued with a sigh, "The others must perform their duties to the ancestors as they see fit. Sadly, I fear we are the last family to hold to the old traditions, which is why it is so important that you remember, and be sure to tell your son what must be done."

The mountains had grown closer as they walked and the land had become much more hilly as they approached the foot of the

range. The sun had lowered in the sky, but there was no fear that it would set. Not at this time of year.

Before long, the woman traveler, who was clearly the boy's mother, spoke up. "Husband, perhaps this is a good spot for the hunt? We are getting close, after all."

"Yes, I think you are right," the man replied. "It's best that you wait here while I search for tracks. If I don't find anything soon, I'll return and we can try closer in."

The man quickened his pace and ran off over the snow covered field in search of animal tracks that might be nearby. The woman reached out for her son and called to him.

"Come, kuluk", she said. It wasn't his name but it was what she called him, "Lets sit and have a snack while we wait."

The boy walked over and sat down hard beside his mother, trying to show his annoyance.

"I want to go and hunt also."

"I know you do, kuluk. But this is a special hunt and we only have the one rifle."

"Why is it special?" the boy pressed, "I helped father on hunts before"

The boy's mother opened a bag and pulled out some dried meat while they talked. The boy took one eagerly and chewed on it.

"Your father doesn't hunt for meat, or furs. It's not for us he hunts, but for the ancestors. For this, he needs to only

capture the prey and bring it back. He has to be careful not to kill it, that's why its special. It takes a special skill that your father hasn't shown you yet."

The boy continued eating his meal of dried caribou meat and accepted his fate to miss out on the hunting. His mother gathered him close and spread her furs around the two of them to keep warm while they waited. Her husband was a fine tracker and they didn't have to wait long before the crack of a rifle sounded the snow, echoing off the nearby mountain sides.

The pair dozed for a time under the first, saving energy until the husband's return. In time, he became visible in the distance walking through the snow, carrying a bundle over his shoulders. His rifle was slung and bounced against his left side as he walked. He found his family and sat down in the snow beside them, placing his burden gently on the ground. It was an adult wolf that he brought back, its front and rear paws bound together with rope.

He roused his family in order to resume the journey to the mountains. His son saw the wolf and his face lit up immediately.

"Did you kill it, father? You can't kill it" the boy said excitedly.

"You are right!" the father said, proud that his son had learned some of what their duty entailed. "He's just sleeping for now"

"But I heard a shot"

"Just to scare away the rest of the pack. I caught this one and put him to sleep. We'll have to watch in case he starts to wake up."

The woman had gotten up as well and collected her bag, preparing to resume the trip. "It's a fine one" she said, looking at the wolf.

"Come, its close now" the man said, and together they headed across the snow to the mountain range.

After a while, the snow started to give way to loose rocks and pebbles. Evidence of past rock slides and avalanches that were common in this part of the hills. The melting snow poured down the mountain side in streams, during the warm months, that often disturbed the ground and made it fall. The hills got much steeper as they entered the foothills.

"This is the difficult part, son." The man said, kneeling down beside his son. He directed the boy's gaze around the cliff sides and fallen stones. "The door to the place we are going to is always in the same spot, but it gets hidden by all the falling rocks. We need to look carefully and find it."

"What does it look like, father?"

"See that cliff there with the sharp edge. Use the edge as a guide and follow it down to the ground. It will show you the location we need to search."

"I see!" the boy cried. He ran towards the spot at the base of the cliff face that his father had identified. The ground in

that spot was very rough and covered in large and small boulders, and smaller rocks that rolled down hill when stepped on.

The boy's father went to the spot, followed by his mother, who was now carrying the unconscious wolf. He bent down and started moving some of the smaller boulders and brushing the smaller rocks away with his hands. His son joined in and they laboured to remove the rock fall under the watchful gaze of his wife. It was tiring work and took longer than it should have but no one had made the journey in some many years. Soon the rocks revealed a cave entrance that went off into the darkness beneath the mountain.

"Wow! Is that it? We found the place?" the boy asked.

"That is it, " his father replied. "Now, I will slide down first, then your mother with the hunt, and finally you slide down and we'll catch you."

He glanced at his wife, who nodded and prepared to slide down the rocks incline into the cave with the wolf. The man swung his feet in to the cave hole and pushed off, sliding down the rocks and stones into the dark. The only light coming from the sky visible through the cave entrance.

Next the woman sat at the top of the incline with the wolf laid across her lap. She pushed off and slid quickly down into the cave where the man caught her in open arms.

Almost as soon as her feet hit the ground, the rumbling

sound of a rock slide could be heard reverberating through the cave entrance. The man and woman shared a panicked look and they raced back to the steep incline that lead outside, the wolf forgotten on the ground in the cave.

"Father!" the boy yelled from outside.

"Run, boy! Get away from the rock slide!" the man yelled hoping his son would be able to hear and get clear. His wife was still scrambling up the rocks ahead of him when the first boulders became visible bouncing past the opening.

They were nearly reaching the cave entrance when a large boulder forced its way into the cave and rolled towards them down the incline. Following behind it came a great many more stones, dirt and rocks that filled the empty space and blotted out the light.

The rock slide had sealed the cave entrance again covering the motionless man and woman in darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

Survey

Peter stood in the snow and stared at the debris strewn all over the snow banks and runway with detached amazement. The corporate Gulfstream jet that he had signed out, and was responsible for, had been pushed farther off the runway and now sat with its fuselage open to the sky. The larger cargo plane, seemed no worse for wear though.

He was still in a daze, absentmindedly brushing snow off of his pant legs as he walked back onto the slick runway, when Alex strolled over from the far side of the tarmac.

"Well," he said, a bit too cheerfully, "Could have been worse"

Peter nodded. Alex slapped him on the back, trying to get him moving.

"Come on, boss. See if everyone's ok"

"Ya, right," Peter said, regaining a little composure. He

had never seen anything like the roof being torn off a plane before. The amount of wreckage scattered around was astounding. He quickened his pace to catch up to Alex, trying not to fall on the ice.

By the time they got near the rear of the larger plane, the rear gangway was already lowering, offering a glimpse of the vast hollow interior of the cargo hold. After a few seconds, the ramp hit the icy ground with a clang. Five people wearing matching black winter coats with fur trim, descended down the ramp. They all bore the LingWei/Stein Security logos on the arms. The lead person was an imposing fellow with a brown beard and sunglasses. He got to the bottom of the ramp and stopped to look around, hands on his hips.

"Fuck me," he said, sounding impressed at the sight of the metal and plastic carnage around him. The rest of his team had reached the bottom of the ramp and stood nearby, taking in the views. There were two other men, both shorter than Peter, clean-shaven, and a woman. All of them were dwarfed by the large man that lead them.

"We sure got the devil's dick up our ass, don't we?" the bearded man said. He looked over to Peter and Alex and offered his hand. "Snake."

Peter took the big man's hand, "I'm Peter Fowler, the"

"I know who you are," Snake said indifferently, cutting off Peter's introduction. He gave Peter's hand one strong pump and

released it.

Alex stepped forward offering his own hand which Snake took. "Alex, the pilot. Used to be" he said with a grin.

Snake let out a loud single laugh. It burst out like a gunshot, and as just as loud. "Serge, teach this prick how to land a fucking plane"

Behind him, Serge gave a mock salute. He was the one with curly dark hair and the earring, Peter noted. Alex chuckled. "Thanks for the heads up on the radio," Serge said to Alex, "Sure is weird. You know what's going on?"

"No idea," Alex replied. He nodded towards the big plane's right wing. "You wanna check for damage?"

Serge agreed, "We better do". The two men headed towards the underside of the wing, careful to step over and around the debris that covered the ground.

"Well, those two can handle this dog's breakfast. You guys really don't know what's going on here?" Snake asked.

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "We just got here an hour or so before you, as planned. No one's around. The whole place is shutdown. The caretaking team isn't on site. Let's get settled and get the power on at least."

"Ok, so you gonna give me the tour?" Snake asked Peter, "We got a lot of shit to unload"

"We haven't had time to fully acquaint ourselves yet. Currently the only access to the site is that door over there"

Peter said indicating the metal door they had been using to enter the dark building.

"Right," Snake said looking in the direction Peter indicated, "Forest, lets do a sweep. Check this son of a bitch out. Cheung prepare for unloading" He started walking without looking back.

Forest ended up being the woman's name. She left the post she had taken up at the base of the ramp and walked past Peter, following her boss. As she passed, Peter couldn't help asking, "Is his name really Snake?"

"I doubt it," the woman replied without breaking stride.

Peter watched them go for a moment before deciding that he better go with them and try to get a better understanding of the facility's condition. He had never worked with Snake or a security team before, not directly. Given the nature of the site, it was decided to play it safe and send a team along to give Peter some extra help. Better safe than sorry and all that.

He caught up to the other two at the door. Forest was holding the door open with one hand and shining her flashlight in the dark space inside. Snake stood a pace behind her.

"Let's walk around the perimeter of the place before we go and get lost in there." He said.

They stomped through the snow covering the ground, following the wall to the corner. As they rounded the turn, a familiar group came running along the side of the building ahead

of them.

"Daddy!" Abigail cheered waving her hands. Aiden and Cindy trailed along behind her, though not as cheerfully.

"Fucking hell," Snake said, "Why are bloody kids here?"

"It's my family, they tagged along," Peter explained. "Get out, have some fun, you know"

Forest seemed to be holding back a grin, but finally lost the battle and smiled at the situation, enjoying the absurdity of it.

"Better watch the mouth, King Cobra" she shot at Snake, slapping him on the arm.

"Fucking hell," Snake muttered.

Peter crouched down to accept a hug from Abigail as she ran into him at full speed. Cindy stood nearby with her hands in her coat pockets, shoulders raised to combat the cold wind.

"We heard all the noise up here and came to see what you've done now," she said.

Abigail added, "It was a huge crash!"

"Ahh just a small problem with the icy runway. But... did you walk here?" Peter asked looking around for any evidence that they didn't walk. That would be a long cold walk, no wonder Cindy looks so upset.

"Doris drove us, she went inside to set up some lights." Cindy said.

"I see", Peter said, "Well yes. This is our security team

who came with all the supplied in the other plane. This is Forest" Peter gestured to the woman beside him, "And uhh... Snake."

"Cooooool!" Abigail said, looking at the big man like he was her favourite new toy. She went over and stood directly in front of Snake with a big grin on her face. "I don't know anyone named Snake!"

Cindy scowled and asked, "Really? You expect us to call you Snake?"

Snake, returning the scowl while placing his large hand on Abigail's face and pushing her back a couple steps, said "Only if you expect me to answer, lady"

Peter jumped between them, "Alright now, we're walking around the site to check the condition. You can come along or wait inside, though I guess it wont be any warmer in there."

"Walking is better than sitting still and freezing, I guess" Cindy said. She moved to walk with Aiden and put an arm around him. Abigail walked along beside them.

"Maybe I'll see the boy again", she said to her mother, who paid no attention. "Daddy, I saw a boy out in the snow" she said to Peter once she noticed Cindy wasn't listening.

"Oh ya? A boy from town?" Peter asked.

"I dunno!"

Snake resumed the perimeter walk, taking the lead, and said, "Great, its a fucking parade." Peter and Forest fell in

behind him, followed by the other three.

The troop continued walking through the snow around the buildings. Cindy kept near Aiden and seemed to be whispering things that Peter couldn't hear. She really babied him too much, Peter thought. He would be able to get over this recent snow phobia, if you could call it that, by babying.

Every building they passed looked the same, dark and closed. Undisturbed snow lay all around, save for the access road Doris used to drive in and out of the site. Her car, Peter noticed, was a blue LingWei/Stein company Hummer. It was great in the snow with its snow tires and the 4WD. He assumed once the site was effectively shut down, equipment went up for grabs. He'd have to address that with her, and with Lee if he every made an appearance.

They rounded another building and started heading back towards the runway. The area in front of them was a wide open courtyard with a massive circular hole in the center. The hole was obviously man made, about eight meter across, and tiled with stone tiles, and ringed with a chain link fence. An opening in the fence allowed access to a steel staircase leading down, bolted into the wall of the hole, with no hand rail on the inward side. The stairs looked rather old and rusted, being open to the weather.

"Jesus," Snake said at the sight of the opening, "guess we found this place's asshole." Behind him, Peter heard a giggle

from Abigail. "Won't catch me going down there"

The group walked up to the fence around the opening and took a closer look. Beyond a few meters down, the hole was pitch black. There was no sign of the bottom. Peter recognized it from a layout of the site he had folded up in his satchel back in the building. However, seeing it in person was something else entirely. It made him uncomfortable to be standing close to the edge, even with the fence. He couldn't imagine people used to use those stairs.

"Oh guys," he said, "Its just an old access entrance to the mines, and allows for ventilation. We don't need to mess with it, it wasn't being used anymore anyways."

The rest kept looking at the depths of the hole, staring into the abyss. It certainly had a way of drawing in the eye.

Peter clapped his hands. "Lets keep moving!"

One by one, the others pulled themselves back and resumed the walk. The last was Aiden who remained looking at the hole, grabbing the top of the fence with both hands. Peter went over to him, as did Cindy.

"Lets get moving, buddy," he said, "we'll get something to eat" He clapped Aiden on the back which finally pulled his gaze from the hole. Aiden looked around as if just noticing where he was.

"Ya, cool." he said.

Together the three of them resumed walking. Ahead, Snake

seemed to be trying to out pace Abigail who kept running beside him, and Forest followed behind. They were nearly back to the first building next to the runway when they heard a loud, piercing scream coming from inside the building, which abruptly got cut off.

#

Snake got to the door first, follow by Peter, with the rest close behind. Inside, the dark room was dimly lit thanks to four electric lamps placed around the room on shelves and counter tops. Serge and Cheung were already here crouched down, gathered around something on the ground. Alex stood back looking unsure how he could help.

As Peter got closer, he could see that the two men were attending to Doris who was laid out on her back on the floor. Serge has obtained a cloth from somewhere and was holding it against the back of Doris's head. It was stained red in places.

"What in the bloody shit is going on here" Snake snapped and strode up to his men who were trying to wrestle Doris into a seated position.

Before Serge or Cheung could reply, Cindy inhaled sharply and called out, "Don't move her, what are you doing?" She ran up to Doris's side and knelt down shooing the men away. "You don't know if its safe to move her, and with a head injury at that!"

"Darling," Snake said placing a hand on Cindy's shoulder,

"My team does have medical training and"

"Well they sure aren't using it, are they!" Cindy snapped back at home. She shrugged his hand off her shoulder.

"No no, watch out... where is he" Doris said in a shakey voice full of panic, effectively defusing the argument before it got heated. She struggled to raise herself. Cindy placed a hand on her chest to keep her down on the floor.

"Doris, doris" she said softly, "don't try to get up. Where is who?"

Doris's eyes darted around the room, looking from Cindy first to Snake then Serge before finding Peter. "I'm ok, just let me up," she said.

Cindy removed her hand and allowed Doris to sit upright, slowly. Cindy got to her feet and helped Doris get her feet under her as well. Serge took her hand and placed on the back of her head where the cloth was.

"Here, hold this," he said. Doris did so.

Peter spoke up, seeing the situation was more or less under control.

"Doris, what happened, who are you talking about?"

Doris continued glancing at the security detail apprehensively, but finally focused her attention on Peter.

"I was placing the lights I brought from the shop. Just brightening up the place a bit, when I turned around and saw... a man" she said.

After a pause, Peter prompted her, "A man? Was it one of these guys?" he asked gesturing at Serge. Serge and Snake both started to say something when Doris continued.

"No, not them." She said slowly, still gingerly rubbing her head, "He was wearing a winter coat, but also furs over top of it. He must be a local man, but I never seem around town or anything."

"Well, I turned around and saw him coming towards me, and he had a knife in his hand."

"What kind of knife?" Snake asked.

Doris looked at Snake, still not sure who these newcomers were. Finally she shook her head, "I dont know. He just had a knife, and he came at me. I screamed and tried to back away from him. "

"I must have tripped and hit my head. I don't know what happened after that"

Snake swung into action, once Doris had finished her story.

"Right, Serge, Forest, take one of these lamps and have a look around for this fucker." He said, ignoring the glare from Cindy at his choice of words. "We'll look around in here," He waved Cheung over and the two men started a sweep of the room.

Forest grabbed a nearby lamp and went to the far side of the room where a door lead out into more dark halls and rooms. Serge unzipped his coat as he brushed by, and Peter noticed for the first time that the security team was armed. Well, of course

they would be, he chided himself.

Cindy was helping Doris sit down on a stool at one of the counters. The room indeed seemed to be a large store of sorts, as Alex has alluded to earlier. The counter the women were at was a checkout with a cash register. Just at the edge of the lamplight, Peter could see rows of shelves heading back into the dark. Most shelves were bare, but a few cans and boxes were evident here and there. The place had been cleaned out pretty thoroughly. In the near corner of the room was a hot food station complete with a cooking surface, sink and glass display case (empty). Aiden had moved back to peer down some of the shelves, looking for any left over snacks, Peter figured. Abigail has also wandered off to do her own exploring. He could hear her high pitched voice giggling and talking to herself somewhere. She always was good at entertaining herself.

"Pete, we need to think about getting her help" Cindy said, "Really, this trip has not gone how you said it would. This isn't what we agreed to"

Peter sighed, "I know things are... wierd. But its been a few hours. Lets see if we can get the power up. I still have a job to do"

"What job, Pete?" Cindy demanded, "No one's here. Who are you going to work with? I don't like it"

"Alright," Peter said, "Lets just get settled here and we'll figure it out." Cindy graced him with an eyeroll.

"Thanks for the lights, Doris," he said to Doris, "It helps a lot. Now we just need heat and water."

"The water should still be on, its all insulated pipes, doesn't need power." Doris said. She gestured at the sink in the food station. "Just open the valve"

"Oh ya?" Peter said, not expecting to get good news about anything at this point. He went over behind the counter and jumped with a start. Abigail was crouched down in the cooking area.

"Geez, you surprised me, Abby" Peter said, "What are you doing here?"

"Hide and seek!" Abigail said happily.

Peter knelt down to look under the sink for the valve, "Hide and Seek huh?" he said idly, "with who?"

"The boy of course."

"The boy?" Peter asked half paying attention. He located the valve and gave it a turn.

"Ya see, right there," Abigail said pointing to a spot beside her. "Look he has a little bunny. Isn't it cute?"

Peter looked but of course no one was there. Another one of Abigail's games. He hadn't known her to have imaginary friends but he had been away a lot. As Cindy keeps reminding him.

"Oh, well, hello there" Peter said, waving at the empty space.

He stood up and tested the sink taps. After a few spurts

and loud bangs, a stream of cold water came out of the faucet.

"Water!" he said to the room, triumphantly. He caught some water in cupped hands and brought it to his mouth. He spat it out into the sink. It was the hardest water he ever tasted in his life.

"Ugh!"

Snake and Cheong had returned during his efforts to get the sink working and Snake came over to try it for himself. He copied Peter's action and took a drink from his cupped hands.

"Christ almighty, that tastes worst than my old granny's tits." Abigail giggled loudly at the odd outburst. A smile flickered over Snake's face but was quickly banished, replaced with his usual scowl. He dumped the rest of the water in his hands back to the sink.

Everyone else had made their way over to the counter by the sink, drawn in by the commotion with the water. The other security man, Cheong, had an amused look on his face. Cindy stared at the sink like it had just spat on her and she was not having it. Alex continued to hover in the background, looking like he'd rather be somewhere else.

Doris leaned on the counter top and explained, "Its a bit hard but perfectly fine. The water filtration is probably not working right now"

"This is the only water we have?" Cindy demanded, not pleased at the prospect of drinking the hard water.

"There should be plenty of water on the supply plane," Peter reassured her. "That's it's entire job. Right?" He looked at Snake hopefully.

Snake snapped as if the query was a personal insult, "Of course there's fucking water. Two days of fresh water for six people. However, someone decided to bring their whole family along"

Peter nodded, "That's fine. We should be fine then" he said trying to be reassuring.

Snake pressed on, "Of course the site was supposed to be not all shut down..." he looked around the dimly lit room suggestively.

"Peter, really," Cindy started to say.

"Let's just bring the water in from the plane. We'll offload the generators and get some heaters in here. I'll find Lee, bring him back here, and we'll get the power on" Peter decided. Cindy only glowered at him. It was all necessary tasks that had to be done, given the state of the buildings. He hadn't expected to find the site shutdown but he had to work with what they had. It's not like they could just turn the cargo plane around to go home. They still needed power to refuel it, if there was fuel. Cindy's unhappiness would have to wait, as much as it hurt him to admit. He always prided himself on his ability to find a way to keep everyone happy but this was testing him.

Cindy watched Peter gather up the rest of the men and head back out to the cargo plane. 'To check on supplies' he claimed. God knows how he was going to find this Lee person. Typical Peter to leave her to do all the work, again.

This terrible idea for a family trip was all Pete's idea. His way of trying to find a compromise between work and home life. What a joke. Of course it was all going wrong, just like everything Pete touched. She had had enough. No, she had had enough years ago, but there was no way out for her, that didn't make her look like the bad guy.

If this going bad enough, she thought, Peter can finally be the bad guy and then maybe she'll have some ammunition to use against him.

For now she was stuck here, playing homemaker, trying to settle in to a freezing old used-to-be store, of all places.

Doris spoke up, oblivious Cindy's grim thoughts that placed the frown on Cindy's face. "I also brought some blankets and things, until the power gets back on. They are in the car." She looked at Cindy expectantly.

Don't look at me, lady, she thought.

"Aiden," she snapped, "Help Doris with the things. What are you doing there?"

Aiden had found a bag of Doritos was helping himself to a few. He dropped the open bag on the shelf with the other bags and sighed heavily. "Ok"

Suddenly something tickled in the back of Cindy's head.

"Where's Abigail?" she said in a raised voice. Aiden looked around himself uselessly.

"I dunno. She was..." He pointed at the hot food counter where the sink sat.

"Abby!" she called out loudly. Why were all the men so useless? She ran over to look behind the counter with the sink, but it was empty.

"She can't have gotten far", Doris said trying to sound helpful, but only succeeded in being annoying. She didn't notice Abby leaving? What has she been doing?

"Go find your sister!" Cindy yelled at Aiden. She picked up one of the remaining three lamps and rushed through the back of the store checking the shelves and aisles, calling out Abby's name, with Doris tagging along. She worked her way back toward the door that lead to the rest of the dark building.

Behind her, Aiden shrugged and went back outside through the only other door, the one that lead back to the runway.

#

The snow crunched under Aiden's feet as he placed his sled at the top of the hill. It was a bright winter day, where the sun bounced off the snow and shone into your eyes. All around, kids were laughing and yelling as they made their way up and down the hill in their own sleds. It was a very popular hill due to its height and long clear runs. At the bottom a few trees

dotted the fields the hill led to.

The bigger kids always built a jump halfway down the hill. He could see them hitting it as they slid down a ways off to his left. Aiden was always wary of the jump. He had seen it destroy many sleds that couldn't hold up to the impact of the jump and then the landing. The worst was not knowing where the jump was and just hoping you didn't hit it when you did a run.

"I wanna be in front!" Matt yelled, rushing forward to take the line from Aiden. Matt was in Aiden's class and his best friend.

"Ok, Matty go in front and then Aiden go in front after, is that ok guys?" Matt's dad asked.

Aiden nodded. He just wanted to go! Sledding was the best part of winter.

The two boys piled into the sled and got their feet and hands sorted out. It was a long silver sled with plenty of room and a front that curved up where the line attached. The sled lurched forward under their weight but it was held back by Matt's dad. Matt gave the line a shake and yelled "Go!"

"Ok guys, here it goes!" Matt's dad called out, and let go.

The sled started moving, slowly at first but quickly gaining speed on the steep hill. The cold wind blew so hard, it was difficult to see, but Aiden tried to shelter behind Matt's back. He could feel the bumps and grooves of the snow passing by as they sailed over the well worn sled track. In front of him

Matt was screaming in delight. They were zooming so fast! The sled was racing straight and true, they hadn't wiped out yet. They might end up going the farthest ever!

Suddenly with a bump Aiden felt them leave the ground. A ramp. It was a second ramp built at the bottom of the hill! Impossible to see from the top. The two boys screamed as the sled took the jump. It couldn't have been airborne for more than a second, but to Aiden it felt like eternity, waiting with his heart in his throat, wide eyed in panic. The small ramp was enough to veer the sled off course when it touched down again, popping it out of the established snow groove.

The sled continued its race in this new direction, carving a new path through the snow, headed directly at one of the trees that dotted the field at the bottom of the hill.

The sled slammed into the trunk of a large oak tree. Matt was sent flying out of his seat and smacked head first into the rough bark. Aiden felt himself pushed forward into the curved front of the sled. The aluminum edges slashed his coat and cut him badly on the arms and face. There was the sound of a tree branch snapping. Everything was still. Kids yelled and laughed in the distance.

Minutes passed. Aiden got himself untangled from the sled and the ropes. He sat on the snowing ground looking at his cut bleeding arm. Matt was still laying on the ground not moving. Suddenly Matt's father was there, covered in snow, sliding and

falling in the snow as he rushed to get his son. Matt's father was yelling his name over and over. He picked Matt up, and Matt's head flopped over at a strange angle. There was a lot of blood. Matt's father was crying.

Aiden sat in the snow, alone and ignored, arm and face bleeding.

It wasn't the first time the memories came flooding back since they got here and it probably won't be the last. Aiden let the metal door close behind him and tried to push the past back into the past. Tried to turn off his feelings. Better to not feel at all, if it makes the past more bearable.

Outside, the snow had really started to pick up. Large lazy flakes drifted down to the ground all around. The wind hadn't lessened and constantly pushed some snow into Aiden's face. If Abby came out here, he didn't see any foot prints leading away from the door. But he didn't know how quick the falling snow could cover them up. It was all probably a waste of time but he didn't mind getting away from his mother for a bit. She had been so bitchy lately, always complaining about everything. Not that he cared. Well, might as well started wandering around. Abby was probably inside having a tea party with her imaginary 'boy' that she kept on about.

He walked aimlessly through the blowing snow, around the side of the building. Now and then, the wind caused the

snowflakes to streak towards him, just like on that day with Matt, hurtling down the hill. He pushed it away.

No sign of Abby yet, but it was hard to see far. If she was out here, she must be curled up somewhere to stay warm. He imagined her sitting in the snow by herself. Was she playing out here? Was she waiting for help? He trudged on through the snow.

He knew what it was like to wait for help when no one cared about you. He remembered sitting in the snow himself, waiting, until finally, after Matt and his dad left with the ambulance, a police man noticed him and took him home. No one had thought to check on a bleeding boy sitting by himself. He pushed it away.

Aiden found himself walking past the large open pit with the stairs down. He stopped and looked at it. If Abby went in there, well, he wasn't going to check. But it was compelling, somehow. Maybe she was just sitting there on the steps, just below where you could see. Maybe he should go see. Maybe it was nice down there.

He took a few steps towards the opening in the fence. Just a quick look to check. He was supposed to find Abby, after all. He moved closer and the far side of the hole came into view through the snow. With a sudden start, Aiden noticed a figure standing not far from the far side of the hole. He was little more than a silhouette and looked like a man dressed in grey winter gear, and a hat. One of those ones with the ear flaps. He was leaning on a walking stick. No, on closer look perhaps it

was a rifle?

The man seemed to be staring at Aiden, and as their gazes met, he felt that the man was nodding at him slowly.

Aiden's breath caught. He quickly took a step back from the fence and turned to run. He hurried back across the plaza and around the corner of the building that he had come from. Suddenly through the blowing snow flakes, there was Abby standing like everything was fine. She waved at him.

"Hi Aiden!" she said happily.

Aiden stopped, bewildered. "What? Where did you come from?" he asked, looking back to see if the figure was following them.

"I was following the boy. He wanted to show me something."

"What boy? We have to get out of here" Aiden said quickly, grabbing her hand.

Abby just laughed as if Aiden had told a joke. "This boy, silly. Look at his bunny!"

She pointed and Aiden followed her finger with his gaze. His stomach tightened a bit, as if it knew something he didn't. There, a couple meters in front of them stood a short little boy, about Abby's height, dressed in a fur winter coat and, was that snowpants? The boy was grinning at the two siblings. In his hands, he held a small furry animal close to his chest. Aiden could only see the animal's furry body and couldn't tell what it was.

"Holy shhh..." he said, pulling Abby closer. He dragged her

backwards a step.

The boy kept grinning at them for a moment, holding their gaze. Then he opened his mouth, and raised the small creature higher. He bent his head down and bit into the furry belly of whatever animal is was in his hands. Abby's hand tightened in Aiden's.

The strange boy twisted his head a bit from side to side and succeeded in pulling away a chunk of fur and flesh from the animal. Strands of skin and tissue tore free and dangled down from the boy's mouth as he chewed. Blood ran down his chin and dripped in steady streams from the mass of red fur in his hands.

"Let's go" Aiden called out and yanked Abigail along with him as he ran back around the building to the door.

"Why did he do that!?" Abby demanded as they ran.

They got back to the door. Aiden grabbed it and pulled the door open. They quickly ran inside. Abby toward mom intending to tell her what she had seen. "Mommy!" she called.

Cindy inhaled sharply at the sight of Abby and grabbed her in a big hug.

"Don't you ever run off like that!" She yelled at Abby, "What are you thinking?! Do you know how dangerous this place is? Oh my god"

Cindy gave Abby another tight hug. Aiden moved off to go lean against the counter, his thankless job done. Maybe they'd leave him alone now. He considered mentioning the man he saw,

and the weird boy. Probably just locals that came up from the town, or something. Now that some time had passed, he didn't see how bringing them up would help with anything.

It wasn't long until the steel outside door banged open again and Peter entered the building carrying a large space heater. An electrical cord dragged on the floor behind him and out the door, passing through a gap between the door and the ground.

"We set up one of the generators outside." He said with a smile. "We'll get this heater going and warm everyone up" Peter placed the heater on the ground next to the door.

Snake and the other man came back in looking pleased with themselves. They fiddled with the heater until it was noisily blasting out hot air.

"Hey boss!" a voice called out from behind the group. Aiden turned to see the other two security people striding in from the dark end of the room. He couldn't remember their names.

Snake went over to meet his teammates.

"You guy's find the power room" he asked.

"Ya, sure did. But there's something else." The man reported.

"Well?" Snake snapped impatiently.

"Well, there's a room full of dead bodies out there." The woman said.

#

The man awoke in the pitch black darkness of the cave. It was impossible to know how long he had laid unconscious. The rock slide had sealed the small entrance shut so completely, it was also impossible to know what direction lead to the entrance.

Cautiously, the man reached out his hands around him to get a sense of the space. He felt that the area around him was open, the ground mostly clear of rocks and stones. Above him, empty space, meaning it was safe to sit up.

"Amka!" he called out in the dark, but there was no reply. Somewhere, the soft sound of loose pebbles shifting could still be heard.

Gingerly he sat up, always reaching out around him, wary of any outcroppings or low roofs that he might run into. Once sitting, he began to check for injury, running his hands over his legs and feet, checking for bruising on his body. He was in remarkably good shape, all things considered.

Turning over on to his hands and knees, the man started to explore the space around him. Slowly, always reaching out and feeling the ground ahead, he groped in the dark, searching. He found a wall, finally, and started to follow it, not knowing if going left or right would end up taking him deeper into the cave

system.

He continued inching his way along the wall's length, spidering his fingers in and out as he went, feeling the surface, trying not to miss anything. Finally, his fingers latched onto something that was not dirt and rock. It was a leather strap that belonged to the pouch the woman was carrying.

"Amka!" he called again more urgently, but still no reply came.

He felt the length of strap, letting his fingers slide along it until they hit stones. The pouch was buried under the rockslide. He pulled on it, and stones released the pouch from its tomb.

The man fumbled in the dark to find the opening of the bag and reached in. He found what he had been searching for at last. He grasped the flashlight, pulled it from the bag and snapped it on. The cavern around him exploded into view.

The cavern was actually a natural tunnel leading deeper into darkness as it sloped down at a gentle grade. The man found himself crouching at the base of the rockfall that had spilled into the cave mouth, which was three or four meters up. The pouch that contained their food and other supplies was directly in front of him, still partly buried. Beside him, an arm reached to the right, an arm clad in caribou-hide reached out from the rubble, silently calling for help.

"Amka!" the man cried out, and rushed over to uncover the

woman. Her head and torso were covered in small stones and pebbles, easily brushed away. Her face and hands had small abrasions on them, but nothing that concerned the man. He gently brushed hair out of her face and caressed her cheek while calling her name. He could feel her shallow breath on his hand, but she didn't stir.

Larger rocks had fallen on her stomach and hips, which he bent to clearing away. Below the hips, however, a great boulder had rolled down and crushed her legs. Here, blood was visible soaked into the hides she wore. He put his hands to the front of the boulder but it was far too massive to move.

The man sat down with his back against the rock wall and splayed his legs out with a heavy sigh. He buried his face in his hands and hung his head down for a time. How long he stayed this way was hard to tell, for time had no meaning in the dark cave.

Soon he looked up again and resumed clearing rocks and stones from the woman, from Amka, as best he could. A large stone that he managed to roll aside revealed a mass of fur and two paws jutting out of the rocks. At the sight of it, he kicked at the dead wolf in frustration. After being so careful to capture the wolf and bring it to the cave alive and breathing, all for nothing. The man sat back down next to the woman waiting for her to wake, leaving the wolf to its fate.

After a time, a small shower of stones comes rolling down

the inclined rock fall, drawing his attention.

"Father!" a voice called out from high above. It was the voice of the boy. "Father are you alright?"

The man stood up and tried to locate the source of the rocks, and the voice.

"Son! Can you hear me?"

More rocks came rolling down from the top.

"Father, I'm here. I'm digging you out" his son called.

Faintly at first, but growing stronger, a light appeared near the top of the slope of rocks. The man scrambled up the rocks, careful not to dislodge any that much fall and hit Amka. Near the roof of the cave there was a small tunnel about a meter long which light was pouring through, no bigger than a few cm in diameter. The man started clawing at the hole with renewed energy, trying to make it bigger.

"I'm here, boy. Can you see me?" he asked through the hole.

The light at the other end was blocked out as his son's eye peered in the hole.

"Father! I found you! Is Mother there?"

"She is here, down below." he said, "can you move any more rocks?"

The boy only shook his head. "I don't think so. Its too heavy"

The man shone the flashlight around him to get a look at the rocks on his side. They were all large slabs of hard stone

and quite immobile.

"It is the same on this side," he told his son.

"Father, I'm afraid."

The man replied after a moment, "You have to be brave now, son. Being afraid will not serve you. We will find another way out of these caves, but until then, you must be the warrior and survive the wilderness as I taught you. I have something for you."

The man scrambled back down the rock slide and scanned the tunnel with the flashlight, looking for something. He found the hunting rifle where it had slid out of his grasp and came to rest farther down the tunnel. He quickly grabbed it and returned to the hole where his son's eye was still peering through.

"Here, take the rifle and do your best to find food. You know how to shoot, you can do this." the man said. He passed the rifle, butt first into the small opening. It just barely fit through. His son managed to grab it and pull it the rest of the way through.

"You only have a couple shots, so take care." He continued.

"Ok," his son said, voice full of uncertainty.

"Look around the area and come back to tell me what you see."

"I will, Father" his son said.

"Go now, I must see to Mother."

His son's eye vanished and the sound of footsteps crunching through rocks and fallen snow drifted away as he left. The man

slid back down the rocky incline to the pouch the held their supplies. He pulled out a plastic cup from the bag. It had a crack down on side where it was crushed but was still serviceable.

The man checked on Amka one more time, but there was no change in her condition. Gasping the cup firmly, as if his life depended on it, he stood and followed the flashlight's beam deeper into the tunnel into the cavern beyond, where the light played over the tall forms of several inuksuks that stood like sentinels in the dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call

"What do you mean 'a room full of dead bodies'?" Peter demanded of Forest with a raised voice, walking purposefully toward the woman. Dead bodies? Just sitting out in the building? There must be some mistake.

Snake intercepted him and pushed him back with a hand against his chest. "Slow your roll there, white collar. You're out of your depth here." He said with an air of authority. "Give us a report, Forest"

Forest looked at her partner, Serge, before launching into what they saw. "We were engaged in a sweep, going room to room, looking for the power supply. No sign of any guy running around, by teh way. The place made up of multiple buildings but they are all joined together with these hallways so you don't need to go outside.

"We were a couple buildings over, mostly passing through

machine rooms, equipment rooms, you know. We finished with the sweep and went to the hallway to the next building. The door looked messed up, like dented. Serge noticed that the floor was stained with old blood. Anyway, pushed on the door and it wouldn't open. Seems like there's a lot of bodies piled up holding the door closed." She finished with a shrug. Serge nodded.

When she was finished, Snake said, "Fuck my old boots." He turned to look at Peter. "Is there another way in there? Otherwise we just need to brute force that fucking door."

Peter held up his hands. "Ok hold on. First things first." He turned on Doris who was hanging back near the heater, away from the group now gathered around Forest and Serge. "Doris, do you know anything about this? Is this true?"

Doris studied the floor, not saying anything.

"Doris!" Peter yelled at her.

"Things happened," she said quietly.

"What things?" Peter asked.

"Things... happened." She looked up, staring at Peter.

"Lee, well. Look. Things happened, we handled it, everyone left. We shut the place down. That's it."

"You handled it? Leaving people dead, piled up in a room?" Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"It was just me and Lee left. What could we do? Everything's frozen outside. Now its freezing inside. So they

just... stay there. Frozen." She ended her defense with a defeated sigh.

"You should have told us, right away. Should have reported it"

"There's no way to reach anyone from here. I was hoping you all would just ... leave. Leave us alone." She sounded very tired suddenly and hung her head.

"And where is Lee? Its high time he show up and explain all this." Peter said.

Doris stood up and started doing up her winter coat. "I'll take you to him."

Cindy was the first to speak up at this, "Peter you aren't leaving us here? With dead bodies?! This is the worst thing you could do to us. Why don't we just go?"

Peter rubbed his forehead before answering her. Didn't she see it wasn't that easy?

"Just you guys try to get some rest. Snake will bring in the sleeping gear from the plane." He looked at Snake pointedly.

"Nothing better to do" the big man muttered.

"Its warming up here. The bodies are in a whole other building, and frozen. These guys will watch over you"

Cindy didn't say anything but shoot him a look of contempt. Peter didn't have a good solution to satisfy her right now and he needed answers from Lee, if he could be found. One thing at a time.

He gestured for Doris to lead the way.

"Hey, I'll take a lift into town, too" Alex spoke up and fell in line with Peter, as if nothing unusual was going on. Just another day at [mine name].

It was nearly morning when the door to the old store, now sleeping quarters, banged open and let in chilly blast of wind and snow. Along with the cold wake up call came Peter, Doris and between them, a short stocky man wearing a blue company jacket. Peter pushed the newcomer towards the counter which the man leaned on with his elbow, bending forward over the countertop.

Snake was keeping watch at the moment pacing up and down the dark aisles near the far door. At the sight of the small entourage, he stopped his pacing near the hunched over newcomer.

"Shit on a biscuit! Is this the fucker we're all waiting on?" he asked. "Looks like dog vomit"

Behind him, Cindy and the kids started stirring, woken up by the commotion.

"Yep, this is Lee [last name]," Peter affirmed, gesturing at the groaning man doubled over the counter. "Drunk as a skunk. We had to wait until he was vaguely sober. Still a ways to go I think" He walked over to the miserable Lee. "Isn't that right, Lee?" He shot at the drunk man, hitting him in the back of the head.

Everyone was up now. Peter saw that they had no choice but

to sleep in their clothes. They did manage to bring in more blankets and sleeping bags from the plane though. None of them looked very refreshed after a rest, but he couldn't blame them. God knows he didn't look much better. He could only grab a short nap sitting in a chair in Lee's place.

"Mommy I'm hungry" Abby said sleepily. Aiden had chosen to bed down in the aisle near the Doritos, wisely, and grabbed a new bag of Cool Ranch.

Cindy picked her up and gave her a hug, "We'll find something to eat, baby" she reassured the girl, then put her down again. "Peter, we're not spending another night in this terrible room." She looked at Peter with daggers in her eyes, "Can we just go now? Who is this?"

Peter turned to Cindy. Now that Lee was here, he hoped to get some answers to what happened, get the power on, and then, yes, finally get out of here. Hopefully that would satisfy Cindy for now, but he could tell she would be angry about this trip for a long time. He had really hoped it would be a fun get away all together, but nothing seems to every work out.

"This is Lee, the site manger who was supposed to be overseeing the caretaking team, and NOT drunk out of his mind for the last year." Peter explained in a tight voice. He was trying his best to not appear as mad as he felt.

At the sound of his introduction, Lee gave a short laugh and muttered, "care taking team...". He seemed to find his

intended role amusing.

Snake gave him another slap in the back of the head, then grabbed him and spun him around, making Lee's eyes roll in his head. "Ok you, lets get some answers shall we?" He had to keep holding Lee up to make sure he didn't fall over. Lee just giggled a bit.

Peter wasn't sure how useful Lee would actually be, but he had no choice but to try to get some information out of the man.

"Lee," he said, trying to sound friendly, "What happened here? Why are there bodies left in one of the buildings?"

Lee only shook his head and stared at the floor. Snake gave him a shake. "Answer him!" the big man demanded.

"Bodies..." Lee whispered in a tired voice, "Bodies, not good. So hard..."

Peter didn't know what that meant. The man's brain was clearly still pickled. He decided to try a different approach.

"Lee," Peter placed his hands on Lee's head and lifted it, forcing Lee to look up at him, "Why is the power off? Help us turn it on"

"Power...", Lee said, his eyes seemed to actually focus a bit better now, "No one left, no need for power. Shut it down"

"Why was no one left, Lee? What happened?" Peter asked.

Lee gathered himself and shook off Snake's grasp so he could stand on his own. He looked around the room at Cindy and the kids, then back at Peter. His face was hard to read, as he

was still feeling the effects of the alcohol.

"Better to show you," he finally said. "Outside, show you. What happened." He started walking back towards the door that lead outside, still using his right hand to steady himself on the counter as he went.

"Show us what, Lee?" Peter asked. He wasn't thrilled about stomping around in the snow following the whims of someone clearly not in his right mind.

"Come, you will see" was all Lee said.

Behind him, Cindy had her coat on and was buttoning up Abby's coat. Aiden stood nearby also ready to follow along with the group.

"Hey hold on," Peter said raising his hand, "Everyone doesn't have to come"

"Oh no, we aren't staying here, with dead bodies, and a strange man running around still. " She said forcefully, making it clear there would be no discussion. "Beside, it will be safer with him" Cindy gestured at Snake.

Peter knew his wife well enough to know that there was something else on her mind that she wasn't sharing but he wasn't going to press the issue. If she wanted to trek out in the cold snowstorm instead of stay warm, then he wouldn't stop her. She'd just get more upset.

"Fine," he said harshly, "Lets go Lee"

In front of him, Snake stood behind Lee and grabbed him

around the neck, pushing him forward. He marched Lee out the door, keeping a grasp on the drunk man's neck.

Outside, the group began walking around the left side of the building, single file behind Lee and Snake. It was really snowing quite a lot now, but the wind had died down. In the distance, Peter could see two of the other members of the security team working on something near the plane. They had the big garage door open on the next building over and cables running into it from the plane. He vaguely wondered if they had found any flares in there after all.

They continued walking around the corner in silence. Snake kept Lee moving forward, as well as keeping him on his feet when he stumbled. Lee's walk still meandered side to side. He led them past the rear of the building and into the large plaza behind it.

They passed by the large ventilation shaft and kept going past it. Peter could only see swirling snow beyond the fence that surrounded the gaping hole.

"Lee!" he shouted ahead, making Snake jerk Lee to a stop ahead of them, "Where are we going? Nothing is here"

Lee nodded his head excitedly, though he nearly fell over doing it. Once Snake hauled him back onto his feet he said, "Oh yes, its here. In the mine."

"The mine is back there" Peter called back, pointing to the buildings behind them.

"The old mine" was all Lee said.

Peter looked back to see how the rest were doing. Cindy had her hood pulled tight and was glaring at him. Abby was shuffling her feet through the snow trying to spell her name and showing it to Aiden who was trying to ignore her. It looked like they could afford to follow Lee for a little while more before giving up and taking him back.

He nodded to Snake, and the procession continued.

Soon Peter realized they were headed straight for the base of the mountain. The blowing snow and dim light had hidden it until now. As they got closer, a dark spot through the snow got bigger and bigger, eventually resolving itself into a old timber framed mine shaft, about 3 meters tall and 3 meters wide. It was pitch black inside.

"Here, here," Lee said excitedly. "Here, everything is explained in here." He twisted in Snake's grasp but the big man held him firm.

"Cool!" Peter heard behind him. Abigail ran past him to take a closer look at the mine entrance. "A secret tunnel! Can we check it out?" she said jumping up and down.

Peter waved her back before she got too far ahead. "Just wait." He told her, taking her hand. "We don't have any lights or anything. I didn't think we'd be going in an old tunnel." Peter looked at Snake "We'll have to come back later"

Snake switched which hand was grasping Lee around the neck

and rummaged around in his coat. He pulled out a flashlight and snapped it on.

"Yay!" Abby yelled immediately, seeing the flashlight, "I'm on Snake's team!" She tugged her hand free, ran over and gave Snake a big hug around his waist. Snake's face contorted in a look of disgust.

Snake shoved Lee towards Peter and said, "Here take this fucker" Peter barely had time to grab a fistful of Lee's coat before the drunk man stumbled into him. He managed to keep Lee standing. Snake used his free hand to pull Abigail off of him and keep her at arms length.

"Not a chance," he said.

"But you have the light!" Abby protested, putting on a pouty face.

In the mine entrance ahead of them, a yellow glow appeared and flickered on walls of the tunnel. Lee pulled hard in Peter's hands.

"Looks like its not the only light," Peter said pointing at the mine with his chin. His hands were busy holding Lee.

"Come," Lee said still pulling, "I'll show you"

Snake held the flashlight in his left hand and pulled out his gun with the other. "You all just stay well back, I'll take the lead" he said and headed towards the mine shaft. Peter fell in line a few paces back, along with Lee. Cindy and Abby came next and Aiden last.

"Where are we going exactly, Lee" Peter asked. Lee had stopped trying to pull away now that they were moving again.

"We found something," Lee said, "It will be easier to explain there"

The tunnel entrance was eerie in the faint light from the flashlight and the glow from deeper in. Large wooden beams framed the entrance, now covered in ice and snow. Peter had no way to know how old they were or how effective they were as supports. Inside, the rock walls were rough and irregular, as if dug out by hand tools instead of modern machinery. More wooden support frames decorated the tunnel at regular intervals. At least they were out of the snow and wind in here.

After a few hundred feet, they came to a T junction and Peter noticed the glow ahead of them was much brighter, coming from the left. Snake quickly ducked his head around the corner and pulled it back, weapon ready. The way must have been clear because he then calmly rounded the corner and waved Peter forward.

When he turned down the next tunnel Peter saw three men about 30 feet ahead of them. Two carried large pickaxes over their shoulder and the third stood between them holding an old fashioned lantern aloft. The lantern threw flickering light on the walls of the tunnel. They wore no helmets and grey coats, not LingWei/Stein company issue.

"Hey you there!" Peter called out to the men. Snake, ahead

of him, quickly held up his finger and shushed him. The miners didn't react to the shout and kept walking, causing Snake to shrug and wave him forward. The rest of Peter's family made their way around the turn and got a view of the mysterious miners.

"Someone's there", Abby said from her place next to Cindy. She snuggled in to her mother a little closer.

"Who are they, Peter?" Cindy asked, voice full of uncertainty.

"Found something," Lee was muttering to himself, "Found in the mine"

Snake started moving again with the flashlight, forcing everyone else to follow suit. The men weren't moving very fast. They continued to follow the tunnel which sloped downwards and continued straight into the darkness, well past the reach of the lantern they held.

"Are we trying to catch up to them," Peter whispered to Snake. He wasn't sure why he whispered when they ignored his shout.

Snake opened his mouth to say something when a loud rumbling sound filled the mineshaft. Peter didn't feel anything different about the ground, no vibrations at least, but the sound was very unnerving.

"Daddy whats that?" Abby called from behind him. Lee had resumed giggling under his breath, and Peter tightened his grip

on the man.

"I don't know, honey" he said honestly.

Up ahead, the three miners heard it also. They were looking around, up and down the shaft though Peter couldn't make out their faces. One of the three, one of the pickaxe wielders, turned and pointed directly at Peter and Snake, then started running straight at them. The middle man dropped the lantern that hit the ground, but kept illuminating the tunnel.

"Go back guys, they know something we sure don't", Peter suggested. The group started taking steps back, Peter and Snake keeping the running miners in sight as they did. They had almost backtracked to the T junction, and miners were close enough to see the panic on their faces when the wooden beam above them split and spilled a piles of rocks and dirt down upon them with a terrible noise of falling stone, burying the men. The rockfall ended quickly and didn't reach as far as Peter and Snake's position. Behind him Cindy screamed.

"Oh my god" Peter exclaimed.

"Fucking hell," Snake agreed. "What the shit..."

"Oh those men! Help them!" Cindy yelled. She rushed past and crouched down at the edge of the rocks now filling the tunnel. Snake slowly walked up to inspect the rocks as well and was shaking his head.

"Shit's not right" He said quietly, then louder turning to Peter, "These rocks have been here a while. They didn't just

fall. There's no dust filling the air, choking us." He played his flashlight over the rocks, so Peter could see.

Peter took a step forward. He was right about no dust in the air. He ran a finger along one rock and found it covered in dirt but he didn't know how you could tell if its old or new dirt. Something in the light beam caught his eye.

"Bring the light back over here." He said. Snake complied and the light shone on a single glove sticking out of the rock pile. "There is someone in there" he said. "Help me move these rocks!"

Snake stood back ignoring Peter's request but keeping the light on the glove. Cindy and Aiden came forward and wrestled some of the rocks loose and helped roll them down to the floor. After a few minutes of moving what they could, more of a man's arm was visible. The sleeve of the coat was torn and tattered. Together Peter and Aiden took a step up on the rock pile to reach some of the higher rocks and brush them away.

Peter yanked free a baseball sized stone which released a few more small stones which all rolled down on to the floor, revealing the empty eye sockets of a human skull looking out from inside the rock fall. He took a step back in surprise. His foot came down on a loose stone and he fell to the ground.

Snake hadn't moved during the entire excavation, but spoke up now. "Been here a while", he said.

"But.. We were down there," Cindy said in a shaky voice.

"We ran back... from down the tunnel"

Peter stood up and finally realized something else that wasn't right about the current situation.

"Guys, where's Lee?"

#

"How hard is it to hold on to a fucking drunk guy" Snake yelled angrily, dropped the flashlight and ran back down the tunnel in pursuit of the missing Lee.

Peter sheepishly picked up the flashlight and used it to locate the rest of his family, who were all waiting nearby.

"Well, I think we're done here." He said, "Lets head back"

It was only a few steps to the T junction, and then a left turn back to the outdoors. Straight ahead at the junction, another passage led further into darkness. More wooden beams stood every 10 feet or so, promising to hold back the dirt and rocks, but Peter no longer trusted their lies. The walls shown signs of hand tools, like the other walls. The floor was worn smooth by the many feet that went up and down, hauling zinc and lead ore out of the earth by hand. How long ago was this an active mine shaft? How deep did the shafts go and what mysteries

might be down there.

Peter abruptly became aware of Aiden standing next to him, also contemplating the dark tunnel. It wasn't like him to get distracted so badly and lose his train of thought like that.

"Come on, pal," he said and gave Aiden a light slap on the back.

Cindy and Abby were ahead of him now, emerging out the mine entrance into the dim light. It was impossible to tell what time it was when the sun didn't set. As he got closer to exiting the mine, he heard the sound of raised voices. The snow had picked up even more that before and filled the air with fat snow flakes.

Outside, Peter saw that Lee hadn't gotten very far. He was bent over with his head held in a headlock by a newcomer. His coat and clothes were disheveled and covered in snow, showing signs that he had been in some kind of a scuffle.

Snake stood near by. He had holstered his gun and was standing with his hand outstretched, palms out. "Drop the drunk asshole and tell me who you are", he said to the person holding Lee. The stranger swept Lee's feet out from under him, causing him to fall face down into the snow and ice covered ground with an oof.

"This one should not be out here," the stranger said forcefully. Peter realized it was a woman that had been fighting Lee. She was covered head to toe in winter gear made from tan coloured hides. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a braid.

To punctuate her statement, she stomped on Lee's back with her boot.

"Especially not here, not in this place." She continued.

Snake approached the woman and used his impressive size to intimidate her into backing off, which she did. It seemed like she wasn't interested in fighting anyone but Lee. She certainly knew something of what was going on here, Peter thought.

"Now who the fuck are you?" Snake asked again.

Peter stooped down to lend a hand helping Lee stand up. "And why are you out here accosting my people? Don't tell me you are out for a walk in this" he waved a hand at the blowing snows.

"I should ask you the same. Your people? You know this piece of shit?" She lunged forward at Lee, trying to grab him again, but Snake held her back.

"I won't ask again" the big man said.

The woman backed off again, face full of rage, unable to get past Snake. "Nuliajuk." She finally spat out. "I belong to this land"

Lee laughed at her declaration. "Eskimo utchuk" he said derisively. Nuliajuk lunged for him again, swinging wildly but not able to get her hands on him, thanks to Snake still standing between them.

Peter figured he better try to defuse the situation with calm diplomacy. "This man is my employee. My company owns this

site. Why don't you tell us what you are doing here and what is your history with Mr. [last name]"

"No one owns this place," she replied, "It is forsaken. 'Mr [last name]' saw to that" She said his name with mock respect. "You should leave, go back to where you came from. Leave this one to drown himself in whiskey"

Lee continued to giggle quietly to himself.

"Why? What happened here?" Peter pressed.

"Don't trust him. Nothing good comes from this one." She said, refusing to elaborate any further. She looked from Peter to Cindy and the kids. "No one is safe here."

"Everyone is safe" Lee said between giggles, still drunkenly slurring his words slightly. "All safe." He raised his head to look Nuliajuk in the eyes. "All safe. Katik kilak"

Nuliajuk moved with amazing speed, all of a sudden. She ducked under Snake's outstretched arms that separated the two and ran at Lee. She drove her shoulder into his chest, knocking him down. Lee's head bounced off the ground, but instead of crying out in pain, he only continued laughing.

Nuliajuk jumped on the downed man placing a knee on his stomach. She had produced a hunting knife from under her coat and held it over Lee's face. Her face was a mixture of fear and anger as she raised the knife in a two handed grip.

Snake reacted the quickest, but at the sight of the knife in Nuliajuk's hand, he paused, waiting for the right moment.

Lee's eyes stared at the knife but he made no move to fight back to push her off of him. "Sek uvinik" he said smiling. Nuliajuk, who had looked so angry before, now only looked fearful. She hesitated, allowing her raised arm to drop a bit.

Snake used her moment of hesitation to strike, planting his meaty right fist into the side of her head, knocking her down. The knife fell and clattered on the ice. She laid still on the ground.

#

Aiden wandered back down the dark mine shaft by himself, running his hand along the cold, rough stone, feeling the bumps and edges left by the tools long ago. Behind him, he could still hear the sound of raised voices and heated demands. No one needed him there. He walked without purpose, just walking. Because it felt right.

Though he had no light, the tunnel wasn't completely dark. Enough ambient light came in the entrance and bounced off the walls to let him see his way. And he had the walls to guide him.

He wondered if anyone noticed his absence yet. Everyone was so worked up about that woman fighting that other guy, they probably didn't care about him. He was used to it by now. Accepted it. He knew he wasn't worth caring about. His mind often turned to these thoughts, unbidden, as if it enjoyed the

feeling of being abandoned, discarded by life. But he hated it, really. He hated himself for being this way.

He reached the T junction again and continued running his hand along the wall, rounded the corner and heading down the right side passage. He didn't have much light to see around the bend, but didn't need it either.

It wasn't always this way. He did have some memories of being happy, of laughing, carefree and loved. That was before. Those memories felt like souvenirs of another life. Another time that happened to someone else maybe.

Before his best friend snapped his neck on a tree trunk and died in front of him.

Oh they had cared for him then. His mother didn't let him leave her side for months. It was the only time his father took days off from work to stay home with him. It only took his best friend dying. It only took him bleeding in the snow covered in cuts, bruises and scrapes. Eventually they went back to ignoring him, but while he was hurt, they cared. They smothered him with it. He hated every suffocating minute of the attention. It was wonderful.

But in the dark cave he was alone. That was true wasn't it? There was no one there to ignore him, no one to care for him. It was perfect, wasn't it? Wasn't that true?

In the darkness, walking, his foot kicked a stone on the ground. He bent down and felt the area in front of him. It was

the rock fall that had almost trapped him along with those miners. Or not... he wasn't sure what happened, really. Was what really happened real. What was real?

The rocks were real. He had scraped up his hands digging in the rocks when they were looking for the miners. They still hurt in places, but no one had asked him about it. No one cared, even when it hurt.

He felt around on the ground and found a small rock shard that had splintered off a larger one when it fell. It had a sharp edge.

They were supposed to care for him when it hurt. That's how it worked, wasn't it?

He dragged the edge of the shard across the palm of his hand. It hurt. Was it bleeding? He didn't know. The bleeding would make it better. That's when they cared for him.

He pressed the rough stone edge against his skin again and felt it scrape the skin on his palm, down to his wrist. Harder. Harder was better. It felt right.

He cut himself again. It hurt, and if he waited long enough, someone would come. Someone would come and care for him.

#

Entombed deep beneath the snow covered mountains, the man walked carefully through a dark open cavern. He picked his way,

step by step, between the stone figures that stood guard in the room. The light from his flashlight played over their rocky legs, their outstretched arms. Several of the figures held out their offerings of ropes and tattered cloth, but the man is not interested in any of this.

The man crossed over to the left side of the chamber where the sound of babbling water could be heard. The water originated high in the mountain top, as melting snow trickled down through the cracks and fissures in the mineral rich rock, only by chance bursting out of the stone into the cavern. The man's path will take him directly to the water stream with unerring confidence, as if he knew exactly where it would be.

The man took the plastic cup that he held in his left hand and scooped some water. The cracks in the sides bleed water drops, but the man cradled the cup tightly in his hand, holding the cracks together.

He brought the cup to his lips and took a sip of the water. He closed his eyes and grimaced with a frown and a small shake of his head. His actions give away the unpleasant taste of the water, which has picked up the essences of the minerals it has traveled through.

He forced himself to take another drink of the water before refilling the cup again. Holding the cup in the left hand and the flashlight in the right, the man made his way back through the array of inuksuk that filled the cavern. The flashlight

making the figure's shadows dance on the floor and walls as he passed by.

Down the rough stone passageway, the man eventually emerged into the blocked head of the tunnel where the rock slide filled the entrance of the cave. He rushed over as quick as he dared and knelt down by Amka's side. Her condition hadn't gotten any better. Blood continued to seep out of her leggings and pool on the stone floor, but she was still breathing.

"Amka," the man whispered softly. He gently nudged her cheek, which caused her head to turn slightly, but the small disturbance did nothing to wake her. She was looking more pale as the hours went by. In fact, he didn't know how long it had been since they were trapped in the cave.

The man dipped two fingers in the cup of water and placed them on the prone woman's lips. The water moistened her dry skin and seeped into her mouth. The man repeated the action several times, before he gently pinched her cheeks together which caused her mouth to open. He then allowed a few more drops of water to drip into her mouth.

With his task complete for now, the man placed the cup of water down out of the way by the cave wall. He picked up the flashlight and switched it off before he laid down on the floor to rest and wait. Ambient light from the opening that his son had dug still illuminated part of the cave.

"Father! Father!" his son's voice echoed through the empty

cave.

The man's eyes snapped open at the sounds of his son's return. He clamored up the rocks once more to lie by the hole through the stones.

"I am here," he said, "Are you well?"

"I'm tired," the boy complained. His voice sounded strained through the hole.

"How long has it been? Were you able to eat?" the man asked.

"I walked for a long time, I don't know how long" the boy replied. "A lot of rocks and snow fell everywhere. I found a lemming that was crushed by a rock so I took it and tried to eat it.

"I didn't use the rifle," the boy added sounding ashamed.

"That's ok, son" the man said, "It's not always wise to eat that which you did not hunt, but you did fine.

"Are you able to rest?"

"I'll try, Father. Will you rest with me next to the hole?"

"Of course I will," the man answered.

And somehow, they did both manage to find some rest for a time.

"Qimmiq..." a voice barely louder than a whisper sounded through the dark cave.

"Qimmiq"

The man bolted alert at the sound of his name. Amka was awake again. Qimmiq quickly slid back down the slope of rocks to where his wife still lay crushed. At the sight of the man, visible in the dim reflected light from the hole, she managed to smile.

"Qimmiq, it hurts"

The man crouched down and softly caressed her face, embracing her as best he could.

"I know, the rocks are on your legs." He said gently, "I can not move them."

After a long silence, she managed, "What about Kallik?"

"He is still outside. He didn't get caught in the rockslide."

"That is good" she said, barely a whisper.

The two sat in silence, enjoying each other's company together for as long as they were allowed it.

"Qimmiq" she said at last.

"I am here" he replied.

"You must start the preparation"

The man's throat worked but he was unable to reply. Finally he managed "Amka. I can't"

"You must" she whispered, "what great fortune..." her words trailed off, then after a few seconds, "that we are here"

The man didn't move, but continued to sit by her side, unwilling to leave her.

"Please Qimmiq," she said.

The man sat for a while longer before getting up, his shoulders slumped a bit, standing not so tall as before. He went and returned with the cup of water.

Silently he placed his hand under her head and helped her tilt it up a bit. He placed the cup to her lips so she could drink. Some of the water dribbled over the sides around her mouth and down her neck, to the floor.

Her eyes widened, looked to his and held them. "Is... Is this" she trailed off.

He nodded sadly. "It is."

CHAPTER FIVE

Storm

Outside the mineshaft entrance, the snow had picked up in intensity and had already started covering the body of the Inuit girl on the ground. Snake shook out his right hand, which was probably smarting after that punch.

"Jesus, is she dead?" Cindy asked, looking wide eyed at Snake with new found apprehension.

"If she was dead, you'd fucking know it" Snake muttered. He bent down and grabbed the prone girl with one hand under one armpit and the other grabbed her leg. With a grunt he hoisted her up across his shoulders.

"Well, I ain't gonna stand around here waiting for a blowjob" he said to the group and started carrying Nuliajuk back to the building they had taken over for their campsite.

Peter shook his head in bewilderment. "Alright, then" he said, giving Lee a nudge, "Lets go warm up, Lee. Come on" He

decided to let Lee walk on his own, which he did, thankfully.

Cindy took Abby's hand then looked around for Aiden.

"Pete, where's Aiden now?" she said, sounding a bit panicked, "What is happening? He was right here!"

Peter stopped to scan around the area. The thick blowing snow made it hard to see very far, but it was true. Aiden was nowhere to be seen.

"God damn," he muttered.

Cindy took a deep breath and started yelling Aiden's name, taking a few steps in each direction as she did. Peter started to worry that she'd run off, and in this weather he'd have a hard enough time finding one, not to mention both of them.

"Cindy! Cindy!" He called to her. He jogged up beside her and put his arm around her waist, "We have to get everyone else back inside then I will look for Aiden. I don't want anyone else to wander off too"

Cindy threw his arm off of her with a look of anger and disgust. "I don't care what you want! I want to find Aiden!"

"I know but..."

"So find him then!" she yelled at him. Her eyes were wide with panic and she jerked her head left and right searching for him, as he might walk out of the blowing snow any second and she didn't want to miss seeing him.

Peter grabbed her and tried to sooth her with a hug.

"I'll find him."

"He's out in the snow, Pete. It's not good for him" she said, sobbing now.

"I know." He replied, "Lets get inside"

When they arrived back in the room, Snake already had Nuliajuk laid out on one of the sleeping backs. Her hands were bound with a plastic ziptie that he apparently carried as part of his security gear.

Lee was also there, leaning against the counter top near the heater trying to get warm. Peter figured the strange drunkard would take this change to run off, but maybe getting some heat back into him took priority right now.

Abby also say on the floor near the heater. She was quiet, and for once had a somber look on her face. She must know something is wrong but wasn't old enough to understand everything going on. Hell, Peter wasn't even sure he knew what was going on.

Cindy walked through the door and immediately started pacing back and forth across the width of the room.

"Ok, we're all in here now. Lets start finding Aiden" she said urgently.

"Whats this now?" Snake asked. He left Nuliajuk, satisfied that she was secure.

"Aiden wandered off," Peter said simply. "Is this really necessary?" he asked, pointing at Nuliajuk bound on the ground.

"Bet your ass, it is." Snake replied, the added, "You sire

have a problem keeping track of your kids."

Cindy turned on the big man and stormed up to him, "You have the problem!" she yelled. "What kind of security is this when I havn't felt safe once!"

She turned back to direct her anger at Peter now, "This whole trip is the worst thing we ever did. Find Aiden, and then we're leaving!"

"Yes, ok Cindy." Peter agreed. Maybe it was best to cut this visit short. The entire thing was a lost cause at this point. They'd have to arrange to sell the whole site when he got back. [expand on this]

Cindy had stopped listening to him, and had resumed pacing around the room. "Where is everyone, get everyone in here." She was shouting.

Peter grabbed her again. She was winding herself up again, which was no good.

"Cin, hey, listen." He said, trying to sound reassuring, "Alex went back to town or something. The others are getting the plane ready to leave, ok? You gotta stay here with Abby and we'll go find Aiden. Ok? Deal? "

She shook her head, "NO! I'm going to find my boy!"

"What if he comes back," Peter tried. It was a chance, anyhow, a small chance. "You gotta be here for when he comes back. And what about Abby"

Peter saw the fight drain from her face as she finally

started to calm down, "You better find him. This is all your fault. Everything."

"Ok, Cin"

"Find him. I don't care how far you go or how long it takes."

"Alright." Peter sighed. She had been getting more and more agitated at things in the past few months and he didn't know why. It was exhausting but he did his best to deal with it. He was the only one who could , after all.

"Snake, lets go look around" he said.

Snake zipped his coat back up and headed to the door. As he passed by Lee, he grabbed the shorter man and pulled him along, "Come on, you. Asses and elbows."

"We're really taking him along?" Peter asked, unsure if that was a smart idea.

Snake looked back at the two women and Abby, "I ain't leaving him here to start something. What if she wakes up? Better with me"

"Alright," Peter didn't care enough to fight it.

The three men exited the door back into the blowing snow and wind.

"Lets go back and check the mine shaft area" Peter suggested. He had to raise his voice to talk over the wind now. Snake nodded and pushed Lee along. They walked in relative silence back around the building. They were crossing the open

plaza area when Snake held up his fist and stopped the small group. He pulled out a small radio from inside his coat. It must have beeped but Peter couldn't hear it over the wind.

"What?" Snake yelled into the radio, "Say again" He listened for a few seconds then asked Peter, "The lads found the door to the fuel pumps locked. You know the entry code?"

"Maybe its back in my files in the Gulfstream" he suggested.

"Great," Snake said sarcastically. He turned to Lee, "You, whats the code to the fuel pump room?"

Lee stared at him blankly for a time. Finally he muttered something but the wind carried it away.

"What?" Snake shouted. "Five what?"

Lee gestured for the radio with an outstretched hand. Snake cursed, then handed the radio over to Lee, who held it up to his face.

"Five" Lee said loudly, pausing before the next number.

"Three" he continued, just as loud. Something seemed to catch his eye in the distance, distracting him while giving the final number.

"What?" Snake shouted again, "Five three eight? Say it again"

Lee didn't look at Snake though. He kept looking in the distance over Snake's shoulder.

"No," Lee said, then louder, "No!"

He turned and ran away from the other two men, out through the plaza.

"Fuck" Snake said and took off after him. Peter followed suit, trying to keep Lee in view and not slip and fall on the icy ground.

Lee ran, yelling the entire way until he ran into the chain link fence surrounding the ventilation shaft. The speed he was carrying caused him to flip over the top of the low fence and hit the ground on the other side.

Peter and Snake continued to give chase. They were approaching the fence, only needed a few more seconds.

Lee stood up and turned to face the two men running up after him. His eyes were wide with fright and his mouth hung open, jaw working but Peter could only hear the howl of the wind. Suddenly Lee threw his hands in the air and fell backwards into the wide open pit behind him. Peter didn't hear any thing after that.

"Holy shit, did he jump?" Peter asked, somehow not really believing what he just saw.

"All I know," Snake said calmly, "is that fucker still had my radio."

#

Cindy paced over to a sleeping bag next to the wall and plopped down on it, silently cursing Peter for putting them all through this trip. She tried to bunch up the blankets to make

leaning back against the wall more comfortable but it didn't help. How hard was it to get chairs in here, really? Damn it.

She was worried about Aiden still but not to the degree that she let on before. Sometimes a woman had to put on a little theatrics to get what she wanted from men. And she had wanted Peter out looking for Aiden. No, that wasn't true. She wanted him punished for this shitty, hellish trip. She wanted him out freezing his ass off on a wild goose chase and being miserable about it. It was so hard to make him miserable, maybe freezing to death in the snow would wipe the fake smile off his face. It would just make it stay that way actually. No winning.

She didn't really expect Aiden to come back here. If he wasn't here already, he wouldn't come. He hated the snow every since Matt. God damn Peter, he know this. What was he thinking? So that mean almost certainly Aiden would not be out wandering. The only place she figured he would go is back in the that mine shaft. Or down that giant hole's stairs. She was betting on the mine shaft.

Abby had sat herself down in the small pantry area behind the counter and was exploring the cabinets there. She was banging doors open and closed and playing with the pans.

"Mommy," she called out after a time, "Lets cook something. I'm hungry"

"We can't, honey" she said back, "the stove doesn't work."

"Yes it does, look at the lights"

Cindy stood up and rushed around the counter to where Abby was reaching up and spinning the stove dials. Sure enough the heat indicator light flicked on and off as she did so. Cindy scooped her up.

"Don't play with ovens, honey," she said firmly, "that's not safe"

"But I'm hungry."

Cindy carried her to the aisles of shelves. "Lets look for some animal crackers." She suggested. "What about these chips, Aiden found?" she pointed out the doritos.

"Where is Aiden, mommy?" Abby asked innocently.

Cindy sighed. Aiden had to be in that mineshaft. Snake had the flashlight, maybe Aiden had it with him. She had to find a way to go look for him there.

"Well, I think he's still in that mine. We should go and get him, what do you think?"

Abby looked at her with uncertainty, "In the dark tunnel?" she asked sounding worried.

"Yes, he's probably waiting there for us"

"Don't go in that mine," a voice said from the far side of the aisles. It was that woman, Nuliajuk. Cindy stepped out from end of the chips aisle to get a look at the woman. She as still tied, hands behind her back. She was sitting up with her back against one of the metal shelves.

"Something bad is in there, don't go in" she said again

"My son might be in there," Cindy said matter of factly.

"Better hope he isn't. " Nuliajuk replied. "I don't know why you are here or where you came from, but go back there. Its not safe"

Cindy took a step toward the woman and pointed at her, "You are the only thing making it unsafe. You attacked that man, like a lunatic"

"Something isn't right with him. With this whole place. If you son is in the mine, then he is lost."

"My son is not lost!" Cindy shouted and stormed towards the seated, bound woman. She pulled back one hand to slap some sense into the crazy woman. Nuliajuk stood up suddenly and spread her arms apart in a fighter's stance.

"I'm not going to fight you. Do what you want." She said. When Cindy didn't make a move, Nuliajuk took a couple steps sideways, never dropping her gaze from Cindy's. After another step, she dropped her arms and shook her head. She turned and walked out the metal door, back outside into the snow storm.

"Is she going to look for Aiden, mommy?" Abby asked. Abby had decided doritos was ok, and was eating some nacho flavoured ones.

"No, Abby. We are going to go find him ourselves, ok?" Cindy told her.

"Oh... kay" Abby said. Usually Abigail was excited to do anything. It was so strange to see her acting this way about

finding Aiden. Well, it didn't matter because there was no other choice available. She was certain her useless husband wouldn't bother checking the mine. She couldn't wait to be free of him. Somehow.

"OK", she said and buttoned up Abigail to go outside. The two of them went over and stood by the door, ready to open it.

"Let's see if we can find that mine again, baby" Cindy said, trying to make it fun but not succeeding.

Abby raised her hands up, "Carry, mommy, carry".

Cindy picked her up, with some effort, and backed into the door to push it open. Outside the snow was still coming down hard. She was pretty sure of the way to go, even though their foot prints from earlier were no longer visible on the ground. There was a set of recent footprints, no doubt it was that woman, that went off in the wrong direction.

They walked around the building, where the wind really picked up. Abby buried her face in Cindy's coat to stay warm. As they approached the open area with the big hole, Cindy saw someone coming towards them.

"What in the frozen fuck are you doing out here?" the person said angrily. It was Snake. "Jesus, go back inside" Someone else was with him but she couldn't tell who it was.

"I'm looking for Aiden." Cindy said firmly, making it clear that there would be no discussion on the point.

"Peter's looking." Snake said, "You can't be running around

looking with a kid anyhow"

Abby squirmed around in her arms and peeked out from inside her hood. "Snake!" she squealed. Abby was fidgeting so much, Cindy set her back down on the ground.

"I thought you were with Peter" she said.

Snake jerked a thumb to the other security person, "Had to go back to get this fucker to help out. I.." He paused, "Well, I lost my fucking radio, didn't I"

Just then Cindy had a wonderful idea. It had to work, then she could finally go get Aiden back. She would be able to save him, as Peter couldn't.

"Look, Snake," she said, "I need to find Aiden. I am going to find him. It's my duty, as a mother, you might say." She tried to use her most persuasive voice, "You know how that is, I think." She hoped he would fall for this crap, the military ones usually did.

The big man only frowned at her but didn't say anything yet. That was good wasn't it?

"Can you just take Abby back and watch her for me?" Snake started shaking his head already, "A boy needs his mother, he's not going to react well to you hunting him down out here. Please, Snake, help me. I need to find him"

"Well, I hear you but" he looked at Abby. Cindy thought she caught something flicker in his face, was it a smile hiding under the surface? She only had to push a little more.

"Just keep her safe for a bit. She's no trouble, she likes you"

"Yay! Snake and Abby!" Abigail yelled excitedly and gave the man's waist a hug. The sudden attention from Abby firmed his resolve.

"No way," Snake said, "Fuck no. Cheung!" He called to the other man, "Take the kid back." Turning back to Cindy he continued, "Cheung can watch her, I'm no bloody babysitter."

"Nooo!" Abby howled, "I'm on Snake's team!" She grabbed him tighter.

Snake placed his hand on the top of Abby's head but he didn't push her away. For a moment she was almost certain he had an expression that looked almost wistful. Perfect, there was no better place for Abby than with the strong, capable man. Even if he was a bit rough edged. He might not like it, but she was sure he'd do his job. Soldiers usually were good at that.

"I'll bring Aiden back to the store," She said distancing herself from the others, "I know where he is. It won't be long" She turned and ran across the plaza in the general direction of the mine. It was over there somewhere.

"Fuck, hey get back here" Snake yelled after her. "God damn it, Cheung go with her at least. " He told the other man.

She ran. Cheung's footsteps crunched in the snow behind her and he tried to catch up. The mine entrance became visible through the snow off to her left and she headed for it.

Somewhere in the darkness, Aiden was alone and scared. He needed her and she would save him.

#

High in the stratosphere, the cold arctic wind did its best to push the heavy gray altostratus clouds across the sky. The wind had only succeeded in pushing them up against the side of the mountain range, where they had been lingering for days, unable to move past the great stone barrier.

Water droplets buffeted to and fro by the winds bounced around in the clouds. Sometimes, two droplets would bump into each other and freeze on contact, surface tension disturbed. The two would become three, and four. Growing in the cloud. Blown by the wind. Finally, the new born snowflake would drift down to the ground. Such a small thing.

One such snowflake fell gently through the air. It was no more special than the rest of its fellow snowflakes dropping out of the sky, save for its destination. This particular snowflake landed softly on the peak of the mountain range.

The mountain was no stranger to snow. It was covered in a deep layer of snow all the time. At this height, it's rocky surface had never seen the light of the sun. The snow at the lowest part of this layer was ancient. The upper layers, however, were newer, less packed down by the layers above. Even though, the snow had stuck together just enough to allow it to keep its grip on the mountain side, which had a steep slope to

it.

The one newly fallen snow flake changed everything. It disturbed the delicate balance between snow and slope just enough to loosen the snow's grip. Slowly, at first, but relentlessly, gravity tore the snow away from the slope and the loose top layers slid.

The layers of snow fell, slamming into other layers below. Thicker, deeper layers of snow that could not withstand the forces that now pushed on it. More snow slid and began the process again and again. Entire sheets of snow broke loose and tumbled down the mountainside. Soon the rampaging snow began running into trees and tearing their roots out from the thin layer of soil found on the mountain.

Together, the snow and trees found that they had the power to move the mountain itself. Loose stones and boulders joined the fray, careening down the mountainside.

In one place, at the foot of the mountain, a number of squat buildings sat behind a flimsy fence. A wide entrance near the buildings lead into the mountain. A man and a woman were running from the buildings toward the entrance. The snow rushed as fast as it could but the pair were faster. They run into the entrance and disappeared inside just as the snow smashed down on the ground, burying the entrance deep under a massive drift of snow and rocks.

In another place, a solitary man trudged through a vast

snow covered plain. The man walked in no certain direction, tending to meander back and forth. The snow was doing its best to cover the tracks the man left behind, to fix the blemish the man was creating on the pristine covering of snow. The man was too far out for the falling snow to reach him. Instead, the snow plowed as hard as it could into the snow of the plain, throwing up huge plumes of snowflakes high into the sky, filling the air with enough flakes to blot out the light.

In yet a third place, a ribbon of asphalt cut through the ice and snow, drawing a line from the buildings to the small town that was nestled into the mountain's feet. A man and a child walked along this path. Too late, the man heard the snow's approach. He tried to hold the child close to him but the snow was too quick. It rolled over the two figures, pushing them along as it slid across the ice, pulling them apart and burying them.

Soon, the snow came to a standstill and balance had returned to the mountain.

#

Qimmiq laid on the cave floor trying to rest as best he could, but his sleep was troubled and he tossed and turned on the cold floor. He had only the hides he wore to provide any kind of comfort. Small tufts of steam that punctuated each breath revealed that the cave had started to get quite cold,

even with the light of day streaming in through the small opening in the stones, providing meager illumination to the cavern.

Beside him, Amka also laid in the cave floor, forever pinned beneath the large boulders that had tumbled down on top of her legs. Her breath was also visible in the cold air, though far fainter and far slower. How she managed to still hang on to life this long, after the shock and blood loss... it could only be due to the strength of the ancestors that supported her.

From outside, the quiet sound of uneven footsteps came through the opening. The footsteps stopped, followed by the thump of someone falling heavily onto the snow and rocks.

"Father," a small voice called weakly "Are you still there?"

Below, Qimmiq opened his eyes and gave up on his attempts to sleep.

"Father," the boy called again.

Slowly, with shaking legs, the father rose to his feet and collected himself before climbing back up to the opening at the top of the slope. "I'm here, Kallik" he said.

"Father," the boy said, "I've seen a man. He also hunts in this land. I will go to him and ask for help."

Qimmiq laid down by the opening on his back and closed his eyes, but continues to talk to his son.

"What does this man look like?"

"He is a white man, with a big beard. He wears a square hat with fur only on the sides."

"Kallik, listen to me now." Qimmiq said. He tried to make his voice firm but it still conveyed how tired he was, "That man is Alexander Crowe. You must not go near him. He is a bad man"

"Ok Father," his son replied. There was a moment of silence. Qimmiq kept his eyes shut and started to doze off.

"He hunts many animals but he does not take the meat, Father. Does that make him bad?"

Qimmiq smiled in the darkness. "You are wise, Kallik. Yes, the white man hunts for sport and leaves the dead uncared for. Do not approach him, or he will hunt you. He enjoys the killing too much. His evil is known to us"

"I see, Father", his son sounded defeated. He had been excited to present his solution to his father.

"Are you well, son?" Qimmiq asked.

"I followed the man Crowe as he hunts the wolves. After he leaves the meat behind, I went and took some of it to eat."

"Did you thank the wolf?"

"Yes, Father"

"That is good." Qimmiq's voice trailed off.

After a time, the boy raised a new idea with his father. "Father, there are more white men, not far. I see them, many men with families. They have built houses and dig in the mountain."

Qimmiq didn't answer, perhaps he had dozed off, or perhaps

he was just too weak.

"I don't think they can all be bad, Father. I will find the good men and bring back help."

Qimmiq awoke again, this time up at the top of the rock slope near the opening his son had made. He rolled over with a groan and found enough strength to get up on hands and knees. Slowly inching his way backward, he made his way down the rocks back to the bottom where Amka laid. The palms of his hands were starting to get scratched and raw. A few of the gashes were turning red as blood seeped out. Qimmiq clenched his fist and grimaced, using the pain to keep himself awake. He took a breath and did it again. He smiled.

He crawled his way over to where Amka laid, next to their pouch, also still partially buried. Qimmiq put his head down on her chest and took a moment to be with her. Her face had grown pale and even started to turn blue in the cold. The stone pinning her to the ground sat in a vast brown stain of dried blood. Occasionally, unbelievably, she took a breath.

The man raised himself back up to a crouching position and rooted through the pouch again. Rethinking his action, he grasped the mouth of the bag and pulled as hard as he could to free it from the stones on top. The bag came loose and he fell over.

Again, he righted himself and looked in the bag. Reaching

in, he took out a long bladed hunting knife. It was sheathed in a leather case for traveling, and had an inlaid ivory handle.

The man turned slightly to face the woman laying on the ground. He unsheathed the knife revealing a long smooth edged blade. Holding the knife hilt with both hands, he held it in his lap for a moment, head bowed down.

With tears slowly making their way through the dust and grime on his cheeks, he whispered in the dim light, "Anguta, hear us"

Swiftly, he raised the knife and plunged it into the middle of Amka's chest. A small pool of blood started to form around the blade of the knife.

"We join above."

The knife was withdrawn made another slice across the woman's neck. Blood burst forth from the wound and painted the ground, the knife and the man holding it.

"We cut the flesh."

The knife continued to make more cuts. Smaller, finer cuts. Strips of flesh came loose where ever the knife passed through. Finally, after an unknown amount of days, the man ate.

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