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THE HAUNTING OF CROWE'S BEND

by Jeremy Vanseader

CHAPTER ONE

Intro

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beside the stone table, Tekkeitsertok waited patiently, and

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

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

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

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

Tiguaak nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

was like this.

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

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

She was on her way.

CHAPTER TWO

Arrival

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

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

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

"Pretty sure?"

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

really should have hit the outer beacon by now."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Peter sighed. It was this conversation again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I guess," she conceded.

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

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

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

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

Peter stood and made his way back to the cockpit.

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

"A fly over? Is that normal?"

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

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

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

Turn back?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

wait long.

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

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

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

"Aaahhh! Daddy!" Abigail screamed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know" Alex replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ok, ya"

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

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

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

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

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 wanted 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 snows 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. Behind it followed a great many more dirt, stones 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

CHAPTER FOUR

The Call

CHAPTER FIVE

Storm

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