

Rachel Shepherd – Mother of None

Chapter I

Arctic Sarcastic

February 14th, 2025

Baffin Island, Northern Canada

“Dash here. I found it, Zaid! Syringes... just like the intel said. You were right... The Inuit lied... Most of these are old... Like Nazi-lab old... sealed in wax. And there are Japanese markings too... I’m in the right place... And other syringes have new labels... VE... numbers... Someone’s been here... I’m sending you the coordinates now... Something’s moving... Wait... wait...”

The radio crackled.

A low growl cut through the static.

Then a roar... massive, guttural.

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A scream began to form, cut off before it could finish.

Silence.

Not even the usual hiss of background noise. As if the man's radio had been crushed to dust.

Rachel Shepherd was watching the horizon, belting joyfully "Tequila Kiss" by Jay Elle at the top of her lungs, the wind stealing half the words.

Rachel loved that song. It was her anthem for the lonely places, her go-to track when the horizon stretched too far and silence pressed too hard. She always played it loud in her wired earbuds...

*"...I'm leaning for the kiss
and it's just pure bliss,
I finally get to taste all the salt,
All the salt there on your lips,
From your tequila kiss... tequila kiss..."*

Then the man's voice tore through her receiver, frenzied, electric... and suddenly gone.

She stood on the sled runners, barreling over the snow, channeling *Emma Peel*, if *Emma* ever traded her Lotus for fourteen furry engines and zero brakes.

She pulled on the reins.

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The dogs slowed instantly, obedient, sensing the shift. Rachel brought the sled to a stop, yanked out her earbuds, pulling on the wire, and grabbed the radio mic.

“Hello? Are you okay? Where are you?”

Nothing.

Only the same vast emptiness she’d been riding through for hours, just her voice, her dogs, and the wind, until the man’s voice broke through, wild and distorted.

“Puppy in a basket!” Rachel blurted, her go-to expression of surprise. “What the hell was that? Sorry, Jay Elle. Sing-along postponed.”

“Old Nazi lab... Syringes? Japanese markings?” she murmured.

Her first time in the Canadian Arctic had been full of awe. Now, it felt uncertain. Tense. Like something old and waiting had stirred beneath the snow.

High above, the sky stretched in a deep, endless navy, gearing up for sunrise. A faint silver-blue halo clung to the eastern horizon. Stars freckled the fading darkness, still sharp as glass.

“Way to start the day!” She said out loud, looking up. “I was thinking lips, real ones.”

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Kissing at last... maybe even love... Should've known, just salt... again... always salt.”

Rachel imagined a drone, way up there, would see a single thread scratched across the tundra, her sled slicing the snow.

Fourteen shapes in motion, black-and-white blurs kicking up glittering crystals as they raced. Now, at a standstill.

The terrain was a quiet expanse of treeless hills and wind-sculpted drifts, broken only by the sled surging toward the Angna Mountains to the sound of her singing. There was no sign of the man in any direction.

Rachel stood still behind the dogs—tall, composed. A body-worn camera secured to her chest. Another mounted on her helmet. Both recorded constantly, audio and video, logging every mile, every breath, just in case...

She'd edit out the “Tequila Kiss” karaoke session later. That part was just for her and the dogs.

But the man's message...

A tranquilizer sidearm holstered at her hip. A sled driver by necessity. A soldier by past. A singer when alone, or under a loud shower. A nature documentarian by trade, on a very special

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assignment. And perhaps, today, a damsel coming to the rescue of a gallant in distress... A modern Valentine's Day tale.

###

Rachel had thought her original outfit, bulky, down-filled, expedition-grade, was up to the task.

Then Kate saw her and nearly fell over laughing.

"You're not riding a dogsled in that thing. Not unless you want the dogs to die laughing," Kate had said, practically in tears.

"I'm thinner than I've ever been. The fabric's not heavy. Just fluffy. It's technical gear. Rated for negative forty," Rachel replied.

"You didn't give me much time to prepare," she added.

"I was in the Amazon rainforest when you and your Vastan Energy execs started blowing up my phone, begging for me to come up to the Canadian Arctic and shoot footage for their PR campaign."

"I ordered from Amazon... from *the* Amazon... Does that even count as a pun? Anyway, this was the only thing Prime could get to me in time."

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“I apologize for the rush,” Kate said. “Vastan Energy operates like most corporations: they sit on their hands for weeks, then demand everything yesterday. The higher the stakes, the dumber the deadline. That’s the Vastan way. Just... don’t end up resenting me for this trip, okay?”

She gave Rachel a once-over, smiling. “I’m sure your outfit is warm. That’s not the issue. You look like the Michelin Man and the Doughboy dancing cheek to cheek.”

Kate laughed and continued.

“Even if they were polite enough to look the other way, those poor dogs would still collapse trying to drag your overstuffed ass across the tundra. You’d catch every gust of wind in that get-up. You can’t slow the dogs down, Rachel. Speed could save your life.”

Rachel turned to the full-length mirror. She blew out her cheeks, then tilted her head side to side, conceding with a smirk that Kate might be right about the outfit.

“Tell me again... what party did you go to where you saw the Michelin Man and the Doughboy dancing cheek to cheek?” Rachel asked.

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Rachel shimmied a little in place, a mock-sensual salsa move, boots squeaking faintly on the office floor. She winked at Kate through the mirror.

Rachel continued:

“What happens in the igloo stays in the igloo?” Rachel added as she raised an eyebrow. “Alright then. What do you suggest?”

Kate handed Rachel something else, sleek, state-of-the-art Arctic gear. Insulated but tailored. Reinforced at stress points. Light, but nearly impervious. The thermal catsuit looked like it had been designed by James Bond and Q Branch while downing martinis mixed by Giorgio Armani: water-repellent, heat-sealed, and fitted just enough to hint at confidence without inviting frostbite.

Kate leaned against her desk, arms crossed, watching as Rachel peeled off her outer layers down to her underwear, lacy, red. No longer the standard-issue Army fare she had seen Rachel wear in the past.

No longer hiding what the Army had left behind. Scars that ran like old roads. Tattoos that looked like they might still be speaking.

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New tattoos surprised Kate. Intricate. Purposeful. They looked like stories waiting to be told. The new scars too...

“I see you’ve ditched the tactical granny gear,” Kate said, raising an eyebrow.

“Tomorrow’s Valentine’s Day,” Kate added. “Did you manage to book a date with one of the three eligible bachelors on Baffin Island? Spill.”

Rachel didn’t look up right away. She unzipped the Arctic suit Kate had given her, ran her fingers along the inside seams, sleek, warm, aerodynamic. Then she glanced over her shoulder with a half-smile.

“Kiss but don’t tell,” Rachel said softly. “Wasn’t that your motto? Who said it was only one of the three? Who said *bachelors*?”

Kate smirked, but didn’t answer. She just watched as Rachel stepped into the new suit. The fabric hugged her frame like it had been tailored for her alone.

“Now *that’s* better. *Arctic Emma Peel*,” Kate said, grinning with satisfaction.

Kate wasn’t done. She tossed over to Rachel a pair of insulated combat boots—low-profile, lace-free, with magnetic fasteners and clawed traction soles.

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“For ice. And impact.” Kate said. “Expect lots of both out there.”

“Are you still referring to my Valentine’s Day plans?” Rachel asked. “Is that what passes for dating around here? I hope the ice is in a glass and the impact is when dancing cheek to cheek.”

“Let’s discuss Arctic romance later, over a tequila,” Kate said. “Still your favorite? It’s hard to find up here, but I have a guy. Samuk. He owns the sled rental place. He can get anything...”

“The one across from the inn?” Rachel asked. “I almost killed one of his customers today. Nearly ran over a guy who forgot his receipt. Sorry, I’m not used to driving on ice. Your truck is fine.”

Kate raised an eyebrow, half-amused.

“I’ve got all sorts of insurance on that truck. No worries.” Kate replied.

She returned to handing over the new gear.

Next came the gloves—touchscreen-compatible, reinforced knuckles, snug at the wrist. Matte leather, with a gleam of steel thread tracing the seams.

Not built just for warmth. Built for control.

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“Raise your arms,” Kate said.

Standing behind her, Kate wrapped a utility belt around Rachel’s waist, a modular, magnetic-clip system holding a multi-tool, spare batteries, a flashlight, and a collapsible thermal blade.

Kate’s hands faltered. The belt slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor.

She crouched quickly, face suddenly level with Rachel’s waist.

In the mirror, their eyes met. Rachel arched an eyebrow.

“Is Emma Peel making you nervous?” Rachel asked.

Kate rolled her eyes.

“I’ve killed cuter,” Kate responded.

Kate stood up and secured the belt around Rachel’s waist, a little too tightly.

Finally, she handed Rachel a pair of wraparound snow goggles with mirrored lenses and a comms patch on the side, more CIA than filmmaker.

Rachel, standing in front of the full-length mirror, adjusted the fit of her new jacket. She tried the goggles on and then removed them and handed them back to Kate.

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Kate stepped back, put the goggles on her desk, and crossed her arms, admiring her handiwork.

Then she moved behind Rachel, both of them facing the full-length mirror. She adjusted the fabric draped over Rachel's shoulders, then let her hands glide down, pausing at Rachel's hips, before moving back up to the collar.

"Turn around for me," Kate said.

Rachel turned, standing at ease, just like during field inspections back in the day.

"How did you know this outfit would fit me so perfectly?" Rachel asked.

Kate fiddled with the collar, tugged the sleeves. Tiny, precise adjustments.

"I have a good memory," Kate said. "And I just saw you online in the Amazon, wearing very little, I might add. The Vastan execs got an eyeful. I figured the camera adds ten pounds. Did the math. Here we are."

Rachel smiled.

"How is it possible that cameras *still* add ten pounds? With all the filters, avatars, and A.I. body swaps out there, you'd think someone would've invented a slimming camera by now."

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Rachel paused. “Then again, it would kill the body-tuning app market. This economy needs more apps, not less.”

“Please look down for me, Rachel... just for a second.” Kate said softly.

Rachel obeyed.

Kate leaned in and adjusted the collar. Her fingers brushed a small tag near the seam, stitched with the word **Vastan** in fine black thread. Kate’s fingers paused, just for a moment. A flicker of calculation behind her smile. Gone in a blink. She pressed it lightly.

A faint click... so soft it might’ve just been fabric shifting.

Kate’s fingers lingered. Then she stepped back, checking Rachel one more time.

Rachel looked up. “Something wrong?”

“Not a thing,” Kate said with a quick smile. “Now that’s more like it. You look like you’re about to kick ass and quote Oscar Wilde at the same time,”

Rachel faced the mirror.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I have no plans to get close enough to a polar bear to kick its butt. That’s what zoom lenses are for. And I

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doubt the dogs pulling my sled want a lecture on the human condition.”

Rachel paused and then said.

“They might prefer: ‘*The more I see of men, the more I like dogs.*’ Was that Oscar Wilde? No... wait. It was Germaine de Staël. The French philosopher. I imagine you’ve met a few French people since you’ve been here?”

Kate handed Rachel a handgun.

“Loaded with tranquilizer darts soldier... in case your fancy undies attract the wrong kind of animals.”

“You don’t mean French people?” Rachel asked, deadpan.

Then she continued with a perfect French accent, and a wicked little smile...

“*Les Français? Des animaux?*” She shrugged. “*Mais oui, les hommes, bien sûr.*”

“Another conversation over tequila,” Kate replied. “And I want to hear about the new tattoos too... and the new scars... and your meet-cute...”

“More like meet-crash,” Rachel said.

Her eyes opened wide.

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“That man was French! It’s coming back to me now. *Monsieur Jacques*. That was what the rental shack owner called him, *Monsieur Jacques*... Do you know a *Monsieur Jacques* Kate? Rachel asked.

Rachel looked up, thoughtful.

“Tall, handsome. Smart eyes.”

Kate returned to her desk and glanced discreetly at her laptop.

A light blinked once.

Then twice.

She smiled at Rachel. Just a half-second too late.

“Can’t say that I do. *Monsieur Jacques*?”

She paused.

“Nope.” Kate said.

Rachel hadn’t argued with Kate about the outfit. She trusted Kate with her life...

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“Leave it to Kate to dress me like *Emma Peel* in the Arctic...” Rachel said out loud.

The gear clung like a second skin—armored and elegant. It moved with her, not against her. It

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was designed for a woman ready to take on the elements and possibly charm or outwit whoever might answer on the Arctic party line.

She lifted the radio from her belt again.

“Hello? Come in. You still there?”

Silence.

Rachel stepped off her dogsled and took a few cautious steps toward the front, where fourteen Canadian Inuit dogs were already sinking into a well-earned sprawl across the snow, stretching, preparing to rest.

She pulled off her helmet. She untied her long dark hair, grown well past her shoulders since she'd left the Army five years ago, and shook it loose, letting the cold air hit her scalp.

There was something effortlessly sensual about the motion. Of course, the dogs didn't care.

One of these moments in life... when feeling and even looking beautiful goes unnoticed.

A breeze stirred, the wind shifted directions, just slightly. Somewhere, far off, the faint groan of shifting ice, low, hollow. Almost like a breath.

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Rachel adjusted the camera mounted on her helmet, making sure it was still secure and still recording.

“There are more chips on this helmet than in my army-grade laptop,” she said, addressing the dogs.

She rested the helmet on the sled.

She attempted one more time to reconnect with the mystery man who sounded like he had met with trouble. No luck.

“Hello? Hello? Where are you?” Rachel repeated.

It was probably time to stop anyway. Three hours of bouncing and gliding had earned Rachel and the dogs a break.

Rachel’s back had started begging for it a while ago. It gave a crack of protest as she ventured further toward the front of the sled. She arched backward, hands on her hips, and groaned.

She tilted her head further back, scanning the fading constellations still filling the sky like old lovers she didn’t quite trust but looked superb from a distance, as always when you’re alone.

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“Valentine’s Day. Of course. Even the cosmos is showing off. Look at them stars cuddling up in constellations...”

Then, without warning, her boots slid out from under her...

“Whoa! Puppy in a basket!”

Rachel felt the ground being pulled from under her feet, as if some invisible Arctic deity yanked on the huge snow carpet that was covering the grounds in every direction.

One second, she was upright, the next... flat on her back.

And though she had just thought lying down under the stars would be nice, she realized that, under the present circumstances, the position was not quite as restful as she had imagined.

“Happy Valentine’s Day to me...” she muttered, breath puffing white. “Just as soon as I can get back on my feet.”

“As the saying goes, you’ve got to sit before you can stand. Not as easy as it seems around these parts.”

Rachel squirmed and flailed, elbows and hands skidding on the ice, scrambling to find support.

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Eventually, she managed to sit up on the cold icy ground.

She found herself facing the entire dog team. They stared at her, all perfectly still.

She addressed the pack in a serious tone, narrowing her eyes. She thought they all seemed very interested in what she was about to say.

"Why are you all laughing at me?!?"

"I would never fall if I were on all fours all the time!"

Rachel's eyes opened wider. Her head tilting slightly to the side, moving forward. Her voice lowered, warningly.

"Don't you even go there..."

A few of the dogs mirrored her head tilt.

Rachel's face twisted into a selfie-worthy blend of pain and embarrassment.

A distant creak echoed from the ice behind her. She paused. Listened. Nothing. Just the dogs, watching.

"Didn't realize my legs would be so stiff from riding this long."

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She was still addressing the dogs who looked more and more interested in what she had to say, hanging on every word.

“Listen to me... I’m one of these people again. Talking to dogs. Haven’t done that in a long time.”

She stretched her arms forward, reaching for her feet.

“You know, some of the nuns in the orphanage where I grew up used to talk to Pearly quite a lot. Pearly was a beautiful Australian Shepherd... though not a purebred. Definitely part Collie. I got my last name from her: Shepherd.”

Rachel stretched out one stiff leg, then the other. Then she tried to touch her feet with her hands again. The dogs didn’t look away, waiting to hear more about Pearly, no doubt...

“You probably never saw a dog resembling Pearly up here. I’ll show you pictures on my phone when we’re back at the station.”

“I used to talk to Pearly too. About boys...”

“One of the nuns told me Pearly was found in a basket at the church door. The Church of Our Lady of Sorrows.”

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“Same as me. I was left in front of that same door, in a basket too, or so the story goes.”

“Different basket.”

“Guess my mom and Pearly’s mom had better things to do. And both owned baskets...”

“I don’t blame them. New York City. Lower East Side. 1991. The year Freddie Mercury died.”

The pack kept staring at Rachel.

“The nuns talked to Pearly more than they’d talk to us kids. I don’t think they were whisperers or anything. They just... believed animals understood humans.”

“Pearly might’ve even understood those Bible quotes better than I did. She certainly understood when I talked about my crushes.”

Rachel let her shoulders drop. Her face softened, the hint of a sad smile forming.

“And Pearly understood at least one word from the Bible for sure.”

Rachel gave a half-smile.

“You guys ever heard of the Golden Rule?”

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“Treat others the way you want them to treat you.”

Fourteen heads snapped to attention. Ears perked.

“Ah. So *that’s* the word you caught.” Rachel laughed.

“Treat... of course.”

Rachel rolled onto her side, then pushed herself up onto all fours. A move she learned from Pearly. She lingered there, grinning at the dogs, couldn’t waste the perfect “*told you so*” moment.

A low chorus of snorts and one perfectly timed sneeze rippled through the pack. Rachel squinted.

“Don’t even try to play innocent. That was sarcasm, and you know it.”

“Artic sarcastic... times fourteen.”

“Where were we? Ah... treats.”

She had been pushing the dogs hard, aiming to reach her destination just before daybreak.

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In February, on Baffin Island, daylight is a rare luxury. If you waited for the sun to get to work, you'd never get anything done.

By Rachel's calculations, the dogs had done their part. They were close to their destination now. Time for a break. And a snack.

"Still laughing at me?" she asked.

To be fair, she wasn't quite sure the dogs were laughing. But she was convinced that they were smiling. All of them. That expressive, unmistakable grin dogs put on, pretending to be panting when, clearly, they think you are a clown or, most certainly, you are acting like one.

"All right. Who's going to help me up?"

A pause.

"No volunteers?"

Rachel laughed, a dry chuckle that warmed her chest.

"You, Black Paw. I saw that wink when I mentioned being on all fours."

Black Paw was the leader of the pack. White coat, one jet-black front paw, the left, black up to the ankle. Hence the name.

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He was the only one whose name she remembered.

She'd promised herself she'd learn all fourteen.

Thirteen to go.

It might take a while. After years of Catholic school, she still wasn't sure she could name all the apostles.

She forgave herself instantly. After all, she'd joined the U.S. Army the moment she could. And the Army had crowded her brain with practical, often-repeated information—stuff that came up every day more frequently than “Amen” in a convent.

Not soul-saving, maybe. But life-saving? Absolutely.

She rose slowly, careful not to give the dogs another show. Once upright, she dusted snow from her pants with deliberate dignity.

She pointed a gloved finger at the pack with theatrical flair, mimicking one of the drill sergeants who had put her and the other newbie recruits through hell during training.

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“Go ahead,” she said, addressing the dogs. “Show me how long *you* can walk on two legs without falling on your fanny.”

She wondered if the dogs could sense the edge in her voice, that tightness she masked with humor, like armor.

Humor had worked for her at boot camp, when laughter had been the last defense between composure and collapse. She found out that it wasn't as effective in the field when real bullets were fired at her.

The radio call that had interrupted her ride still echoed in her mind, too raw to joke about for sure. It didn't sound like a drill...

“Let me tell you doggies. You have it easy. The army, in the end, wasn't so different from the orphanage. Though the nuns didn't curse nearly as much as the soldiers. At least not in front of me.”

Rachel often found herself alone in the wild. It gave her plenty of time to revisit the past.

Should she have become a nun, caring for orphans, instead of enlisting in the Army? Was this—defending animals, fighting for life on

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Earth—her real calling? Or just atonement dressed up in camouflage?

She grumbled as she reached for the bag of treats tucked in the front of the sled, grimacing, still occasionally rubbing her bruised backside.

“Bloody ice... I’m afraid this Artic mission is going to ruin my hair,” Rachel said in her best *Emma Peel* voice: crisp, arch, and unmistakably upper-class British, like she was about to dispatch a villain with a judo flip and a quip.

One of the lead dogs huffed, unimpressed. Clearly the treats were not coming fast enough.

“*Emma* would have done it all in heels. And much faster. Without tripping. Got it.”

She handed out treats, one by one, to each of the dogs.

She rubbed her lower back.

“Forget ruining my hair. I’m going to be bruised all over.”

Addressing the dogs.

“In my imagination, sledding meant snuggling under fur blankets while someone else

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did the work. Downing a bottle or two of Veuve Clicquot, of course.”

“If I must face danger, I’d rather do it with bubbles.” Rachel said, lifting an imaginary glass to the dogs, imitating *Emma Peel*, “To danger and looking good while outrunning it.”

She caught Black Paw’s stare. He was studying her. If he rolled his eyes, she wouldn’t blame him.

The rest of the pack stared at her too, clearly unimpressed.

“You’ve probably pulled cocky tourists, influencers chasing *likes*, puffed-up hunters, and couples trying to impress each other, thinking nearly freezing to death is romantic.”

“Bet most of them didn’t last the day.”

“Bet the couples didn’t last the ride back.”

“I’m one to talk... thirty-something. Still single. On Valentine’s Day. On a date with fourteen dogs... no champagne... And I’m the one treating... And bruising without any kisses to show for it...”

“Did any of the tourists even bother to learn your names?”

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With their snouts buried in snow and treats, the dogs ignored Rachel completely.

A *Far Side* cartoon flashed through her mind, the one where dogs hear nothing but, “blah blah *food* blah blah *walk*.”

Rachel checked her GPS. According to it, she was about fifty feet away from where a pregnant polar bear’s den had been spotted.

Rachel was here to film the bear. That was the mission, the reason she found herself in this remote, frozen stretch of the world.

She’d worked in hostile terrain before, though rarely anywhere this starkly beautiful.

Radio silence was expected this far out, but the message she intercepted suggested the man on the radio might be nearby. And so was whatever had cut him off.

Backup was hours away. Hopefully, she wouldn’t need it. Hopefully, the dogs would prove just as reliable as an army unit, steadfast, instinctive, and loyal.

She caught herself missing that feeling: being able to count on a team. She’d chosen to work alone since she left the army, to escape. And she could handle it. She always had.

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Better yet, maybe all she had to worry about was capturing fabulous shots and reels of a happy mother bear and her playful cubs.

Rumor had it the bear had dug into a cave at the base of a nearby mountain, ready to give birth. Maybe already had.

With a slow breath, Rachel narrowed her eyes at the snow-covered ridge ahead, the final barrier between her and the mouth of the cave.

Somewhere beyond it, nestled between the rocks, a bear was sleeping. Or maybe already stirring, stretching, preparing to emerge.

“I’d better get the equipment ready.”

The dogs? Finished eating. Back to smiling.

The first slivers of sunlight crept across the horizon, sharp, pale, and cold.

Rachel saw Black Paw perking up.

Then it came... a scream.

Raw. Primal. Gut-wrenching.

It ripped through the silence like claws through hide.

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The dogs froze. No longer smiling. Their eyes locked on the ridge, ears forward, hackles raised.

Rachel drew the pistol from her waist in one practiced motion, pointing toward the sound.

“Fried jelly fuck fish...” she whispered.

A massive polar bear, foaming, blood-soaked as if something was leaking from inside it, appeared at the top of the ridge and charged toward Rachel and the pack. It closed to within thirty feet, then abruptly reared onto its hind legs. Another roar tore from its throat, raw, guttural, final.

Rachel’s finger twitched, but her body froze.

The bear’s mouth was wide open. Its eyes wild.

Then...

The bear’s chest detonated. Blood burst into the air like mist, then rained down over the mangled carcass, which crumpled into the snow in a heap of shredded bone and muscle.

Rachel had aimed at the bear but hadn’t fired.

“Puppy in a basket!”

“What the f... was that?”

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Chapter II
Way off Script
February 14th, 2025
Baffin Island

Rachel glanced at the gun in her hand, then at the dogs, stunned.

“I did not shoot. Wasn’t me.”

“I’ve got tranquilizer darts in this puppy! Pardon me, in this gun... Not bullets. No bullets I know, no barrage of them, could have done *that!*”

She stared at the steaming, shredded remains.

She looked at Black Paw.

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“You saw that coming, didn’t you? What are you boy?” She asked.

She instinctively sniffed the air. No smoke. No chemical burn.

“It looks like a bomb went off inside the poor thing... a silent bomb.”

“How’s that possible? Manmade? If it was, it wasn’t made for humans to survive...”

Rachel holstered her gun, still wide-eyed, then jumped onto the sled and snapped the reins. The dogs lunged forward, charging toward the fallen bear.

She halted the sled a safe distance from the steaming remains. The last thing she needed was for one of the dogs to get curious and take a bite or lick bear’s blood.

“One treat is enough guys,” she muttered. “I know it’s Valentine’s Day. I hope you’re enjoying this date so far... Not sure I am... But don’t think you can take advantage just because I’m single.”

“She eyed the pack. ‘Laugh it up. But you’re in the doghouse now.’”

She circled the bear’s mangled remains. The cam on her chest was always rolling, but she also

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pulled out her phone, filming the carnage from different angles.

She narrated in a calm, clinical tone. More forensic pathologist than wildlife documentarian. Detailing the bear's injuries like a coroner walking through an autopsy.

"The head and paws say bear, but the rest?" Rachel murmured into the mic.

"Blood-soaked. Hardly any of the fur is still white, almost as if the blood had been seeping through the skin before the chest blew out. Internal organs appear melted. Liquefied."

"This almost looks like the bear was wearing a suicide vest," she muttered.

She steadied the camera and continued narrating.

"An extra-large vest... That's a lot of bear! Liquid... bear."

She'd seen this kind of carnage before... limbs torn, torsos flayed. When bombs went off close to a body... or were strapped to it. The unmistakable signature of an internal blast.

During her deployment in Syria, Rachel added a fresh list of atrocities to the mental catalog she'd been building since she joined the U.S. Army.

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After basic, she was placed with one of the Army's Battlefield Surveillance Brigades, units that were almost always first to arrive after a carnage and more often before one.

Rachel clearly remembered entering a Northeastern Syrian market square in 2015.

It had been torn open by fire.

The explosion had taken place minutes before Rachel and her unit arrived.

Smoke curled upward in ghostly tendrils, filtering the harsh sunlight into a haze of gray and ochre. The ground was scattered with the remains of stalls and awnings, mangled carts and baskets overturned, crushed beneath the weight of what had been a moment of ordinary life and was now a scene of horror.

Bodies lay strewn across the square. Some torn apart entirely. Shredded limbs. Flayed torsos. Faces contorted in agony or frozen mid-scream.

A child's sandal clung to a severed foot. The scent was unforgettable, charred meat, diesel, blood, dust.

Rachel stood in the middle of it all, frozen in place. Her fatigues were streaked with soot and

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blood that wasn't hers as she had checked bodies for survivors.

Her face, younger then, just twenty-four, was caught between disbelief and fury. Her helmet sat askew, and her knuckles were white where she gripped her rifle too tightly. Her breath ragged. Smoke clinging to her eyelashes. She was blinking back tears, trying to stay composed.

A few yards away, Kate stood like a statue, her Canadian flag patch scorched at the edges from always getting in on the action. The corners of her mouth were tight, her gaze sharp and clinical.

Whereas Rachel's eyes were wide, taking everything in, Kate's were narrow, almost blank.

They locked eyes. Neither spoke. There was nothing to say. Only the silence that followed the blast, and the slow realization that they were too late... again.

Rachel would never forget that moment. Or the look in Kate's eyes. Not pity. Not even anger. Just calculation. Distance. Already gone somewhere else.

And something else Rachel wouldn't be able to name until much later.

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The wind whipped sharply, jarring Rachel back. Black Paw growled.

Rachel blinked, the Syrian market fading.

“Some things don’t leave you... they just wait...” She murmured.

She tightened her grip on the phone and turned her attention back to the bear’s remains.

“I’m moving in for a closer look,” she said, her voice steady into the camera.

Rachel zoomed in on the bear’s head.

The jaw hung open, frozen mid-scream.

What remained of the creature’s face was stretched in a grimace of agony, its final expression locked in something beyond pain.

“Glass shard in the teeth,” she narrated. “Rounded edge... looks like it came from a vial. Or maybe a syringe.”

Rachel stepped back from the remains.

She paused her phone camera, slipped it into a front pocket of her suit. The body cam kept rolling.

The silence around her deepened.

The wind howled.

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She glanced at the dogs, ears flat, low whine. None of them were moving. Even Black Paw stayed put.

“Did I hear you guys say: *‘You go first Rachel?’*” She asked.

“What a surprise... When in doubt, send the tourist...” she murmured.

She drew her gun and followed the blood trail toward the cave.

She moved slowly, fog spilling from her breath, every step deliberate, doing her best to stay silent. But the snow betrayed her, patches of fresh powder released deep muffled groans beneath her boots.

Near the cave’s entrance, she spotted footprints... fresh ones. A single set. They approached from behind a small ridge on the right, outside the cave mouth, the stride uneven, as if the person had slid partway down the incline before regaining their footing and continuing into the cave.

Resuming her narration for the chest cam, Rachel whispered:

“Someone came down this ridge and entered the cave... before the bear came out.”

She glanced at the horizon.

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“Sun’s rising but not doing much. I’ll need a flashlight.”

She unhooked the flashlight from her belt, clicked it on and took two careful steps past the entrance.

“The cave splits into two sections,” she murmured.

Her head moved slowly from side to side, eyes adjusting.

“Right side’s a narrow tunnel. Looks like it ends in a tight little cubbyhole.”

She dipped her head slightly; gun angled toward the dark opening.

“Left side widens into a larger chamber.”

Then she froze. Listening. A drip of melting ice echoed off the walls.

She was still close enough to shoot and bolt if something lunged from the dark. But once fully inside either chamber, retreat would be far harder... no clear line of sight, no room to maneuver.

If it came to a fight, it wouldn’t be at range. It would be up close. Hand-to-claw?

She wished she had bullets to replace the tranquilizer darts.

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As she waited, ears tuned to the silence, Rachel's thoughts drifted to how she'd ended up here in the first place.

"I should've prepared better," she muttered to the camera. "Well... thanks for the gig, Kate. You forgot to mention a few things... like bear exploding... Is that what you meant when you said '*Don't end up resenting me for this trip, okay?*'... And tranq darts? Yeah, I'd feel better with real bullets right now... even if it means maiming the three Arctic's red-panty chasers you thought I might set a date with..."

There hadn't been much time to brush up on polar bear behavior before Rachel flew to Canada to meet her old friend Kate, the same Kate she'd served with in Syria.

Back in 2015, during the coalition push against ISIS in Syria, the Canadian military ran joint ops with the U.S. and other allies.

Rachel and Kate crossed paths constantly, sometimes on missions, sometimes over lukewarm beer and endless rounds of cards.

Patrols by day; black humor and bad whiskey by night, good tequila when they were lucky, often mixing both. That's where they started.

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Rachel couldn't say exactly when they became friends. Somewhere between a sandstorm briefing and a hangover confession.

Kate was now chief of security for Vastan Energy, an international mining consortium trying to burnish its image.

Publicly, they claimed a deep respect for the Arctic environment, even as they expanded operations. Hiring a wildlife documentarian was part of the campaign.

Kate had recommended Rachel. The company's PR team pitched her over video call.

"Make us look green," they'd said.

"Well... white," they laughed. "Cuddly bears. Moms and cubs."

"We know polar bears depend on a habitat that's literally melting as temperatures rise," one of the PR reps said.

"They may be the most vulnerable species out there, considering the changes we've seen lately." He continued. "And honestly, we don't want our facilities underwater either. So, what's good for the bears is, more or less, good for us."

Another PR rep chimed in, condescending smile included.

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“You see, even a one-degree rise in global temperature could raise sea levels by six or seven meters. That’s twenty to twenty-three feet higher than today!”

He gave a meaningful pause, as if delivering a punchline, clearly pleased with himself.

“We’re all in the same boat, so to speak.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow. *Mansplaining and metaphors?* Impressive. A full-service briefing. An image flashed in her mind. The two men in a row boat with a big polar bear... She smiled.

She glanced at Kate, who looked like she was silently counting to ten.

Rachel was genuinely proud Kate hadn’t already strangled the entire PR team with their own branded neck lanyards; IDs still attached for easy identification...

Rachel had always weighed the ethics of working with conglomerates. Most of her gigs were for Greenpeace and similar groups. But she wasn’t quick to judge. And this time, she hadn’t dug too deep into Vastan Energy’s background.

She trusted Kate to have signed on with a reputable company. And the execs were in such a rush that they were willing to pay very well.

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“So much for white and cuddly,” Rachel whispered.

Blood streaked the cave floor and walls, still wet, still glistening... as if the bear had tried to shake it loose.

“I’m way off script...” she added.

“Lotta red in here, Kate... lotta red.”

“In this situation,” Rachel whispered to the camera, “Sir David Attenborough would remind us that a mother polar bear does not share her den with anyone, except her cubs. No other creature would be welcome. I’m gonna bet there’s no adult bear brave or stupid enough to crash her crib.”

Rachel took another step forward, slow, deliberate. She even lifted her nose slightly, like a predator, sniffing the air, trying to detect any trace of animal or human presence.

“Also, very unlikely that a wolf, or a whole pack, wandered in carrying syringes,” Rachel added.

She followed the blood trail with her eyes.

“Clearly, the footprints outside the cave didn’t belong to a yeti either,” Rachel muttered.

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“If there’s something to fear... it’s what’s left of a very unlucky hunter.”

“Not a creature was a stirring,” Rachel muttered, slipping into her best New York City Lower East Side accent, grinning.

“Eeny, meeny, miny, moe... follow the blood and... off you go.”

She dropped to all fours and crept into the left chamber.

“If only the dogs could see me now...” she whispered.

“If anything, man or beast, comes near the cave entrance, give me a heads-up, boys. Treats for days,” she murmured, fully aware the pack couldn’t hear her from this deep inside the cave.

Rachel straightened once she was inside the chamber.

She swept the space the way the Army had drilled into her, quick, controlled, automatic.

But her breath was shallow. Yet too loud. The bear, the scream, the trail of blood... they all crowded in at the edges of her focus.

Her scan was textbook. But it wasn't complete. Not really. She moved too fast. Too

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distracted. There was no one at her six now, and for once, she felt it. She ignored the feeling.

She'd gotten used to carrying cameras, not guns. Not even tranq guns. Used to the safety of documenting nature, dangerous, yes, but indifferent. Predictable, in its way.

Becoming a soldier again wasn't like riding a bike on some coastal trail. It took effort. Force of will. One could be in shape to run, to drive a sled for hours, barely, but that wasn't the same as being ready to kill or stay alive. That took a different kind of fitness. One she hadn't trained in for years.

She didn't want to re-enlist. Not even in her mind.

Still, she holstered her weapon, pulled out her phone, and activated its camera.

The flash provided just enough illumination to capture what she saw and to light the scene for her body cam as well.

Satisfied, she clipped her flashlight back to her belt.

She began scanning the chamber.

“Severed head,” she muttered. “Still partially wrapped in a balaclava and gas mask. Torn clean

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from the body beside it. Recently, from the look of it.”

“White male. Blond beard,” she observed quietly. “Balaclava and gas mask torn in multiple spots... neck partially exposed.”

“Torso and legs shredded. Pattern’s consistent with bear claws.”

Rachel noticed a broken syringe in the corpse’s hand. She picked it up carefully. Inspected it. Turned it slowly under the phone’s light beam.

Nearby, an open case lined with foam. More identical syringes inside, sealed in wax. Etched Japanese markings and swastikas on the side.

“The syringes are filled with a clear liquid. Looks like the man removed one... deliberately. But not in self-defense.”

“Most are sealed in wax. Two are newer it seems. Tagged. VE followed by numbers. They are empty.”

She noticed a machine gun lying just beyond the man’s reach. Next to it, a smashed radio, battered, its casing cracked open like a dropped egg. And inches away, a broken flashlight.

“Is this the man whose transmission I picked up earlier?” Rachel wondered out loud.

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“Hello Dash...” she said softly.

This wasn’t the plan, Rachel thought.

This trip was supposed to be a puff piece. A glossy shoeshine for the muddy boots of a mining consortium, caretakers of life in the Great North, or so the pitch went.

A glossy puff piece about environmental responsibility, native partnerships, and cuddly polar bears reclaiming ancestral dens.

Instead, she was going from a dead bear to a dead man, from silent snowdrifts to blood pools, syringes and broken radios.

“What’s next?” she thought. “Becoming a soldier all over again? Re-enlistment? Sure. That’ll go well...”

Rachel held her phone steady, still filming, eyes scanning for more, all while describing the events that unfolded in the cave.

“The man opened the container... and realized too late the bear had him marked.”

“The bear either heard or smelled him from the next chamber?”

“Or maybe mama bear was out hunting for breakfast, and he thought the cave was safe?”

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Rachel slowly panned her phone camera from the chamber entrance to the man's remains.

“He didn't have time to grab his gun. Looks like he jabbed the syringe into the bear as a last resort.”

“But it wasn't enough, fast enough. Why would he have thought the content of the syringe could even do the job? Why did he not go for his machine gun? The bear tore into him... ripped his head clean off.”

“Man with a tiny syringe versus polar bear. Call it a draw? Who would've thought... What kind of fried-jelly-fuck-fish cocktail was in that stinger?”

“The guy's in white camo. But I don't think he was some lost hunter who stumbled onto a bear's den. He wasn't scavenging. He came for the syringes. A hunter would've been way more careful.”

Rachel paused. The man's voice echoed again in her mind, like a ghost transmission: “...Syringes, just like the intel said...”

“He knew exactly what he was looking for.”

Rachel moved deeper into the chamber, careful not to block her body cam as she swept the beam of her phone's light for clear footage.

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Ahead, three figures sat frozen in time.

She jumped, heart hammering. For a split second, she thought she wasn't alone. Thought she'd had an audience all along.

“Puppy in a basket! You scared the hell out of me...” she said aloud. “I am definitely in need of retraining...”

She told herself she was alone in dust, stone, and silence. Maybe a little too quickly. Maybe a little too defiantly.

Then she saw it... the brittle tension of limbs, the waxy hollowness of flesh. These people hadn't walked in behind her.

She took a step closer, raising her phone. The beam washed over the seated figures, three of them, cloaked in decades of dust and frozen air.

Motionless, clothes intact but skin paper-thin and drawn tight over bones. Their eyes long gone. Their mouths frozen open in what could have been screams, or maybe gasps. Rachel couldn't tell.

Her first instinct was to sweep the chamber again, gun drawn, like she should have done the first time. She could not take her eyes off them.

“They're mummified...” she whispered. “They've been here a long time.”

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For a moment, the cave wasn't just cold, it was ancient. A tomb. Something that had been sealed and forgotten. And she, a trespasser. One of them.

A flicker of shame rose in her chest. She'd missed them earlier. Too fast. Too noisy. Too unsettled. And if these weren't just bodies—if they were clues, witnesses, or warnings—she almost walked right past them.

“Get it together...” she whispered.

She focused the phone's camera on the first mummy.

A woman, knees bent, her arms still wrapped around a small bundle, a baby, swaddled and pressed to her chest. Her face, sunken and darkened, retained the outline of youth. The contours of her face suggested Asian heritage, soft cheekbones, a high forehead, and narrow, upturned eyes. The child's form, heartbreakingly still, had shriveled but remained whole.

It looked to Rachel as if the woman had just given the child a kiss.

Opposite them, a man sat slumped, legs outstretched, one arm draped limply across his lap. His skin had pulled tight across his bones, dark and papery. Faded cloth still clung to their

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bodies, stiff and brittle, the remains of old military-issue wool and leather.

Between the woman and the man stood four old-style lanterns, showing little sign of rust, dust-choked relics from another era.

Rachel lowered the light slowly, respectfully.

Then she returned to filming the man, woman, and baby.

“Looks like syringe guy wasn’t the first to die in here,” Rachel muttered. “Not by a long shot.”

“Check these mummies,” she said to the camera as she filmed the man, woman and baby. “They have been here for a long time.”

She turned her attention back to the headless corpse behind her.

Rachel pried the broken syringe from the decapitated man’s hand and slid it back into the open container.

She carefully placed the two newer empty syringes, marked VE next to the others.

She sealed the lid tight.

She turned the box over in her gloved hands... no markings, no labels. Nothing to hint at where it came from, or why it was here.

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She rifled through the headless man's pockets. Nothing. Not even lint. That felt intentional.

“Odd. No ID, no paper, no money, no phone... nothing.”

Her voice was low, flat, alert, not rattled.

“Whatever's in these syringes... it's nasty. Leaving them behind isn't an option.”

She swept the phone light one more time through the shadows.

Two old backpacks sat near the mummies, worn, faded, unmarked. One partially unzipped.

Rachel crouched beside it and eased it open the rest of the way. Inside, nestled in a bed of decaying fabric, was another metal container.

She lifted it carefully, testing the weight. Then cracked it open, slow and cautious.

“More syringes,” she muttered. “These ones filled with something darker... meaner-looking. They are sealed in wax. Japanese markings and swastikas.”

“Judging by the wear, this pack probably belonged to the mummies.”

She placed this latest metal container back into the backpack and tucked the one the

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headless man had opened on top of it. Cinching the pack shut, she moved on.

The second pack near the mummies unfastened with a slow, deliberate tug.

A brittle leather pouch sat on top. Beneath it, another container, more syringes. She slid it back inside.

Her attention returned to the pouch. Its cracked straps barely held it closed. She hesitated before opening it. The leather was old.

Inside were only documents. She unfolded a loose page; her eyes caught the black outline of a Nazi cross. Japanese kanji. The first paragraph was written in German.

“Not that I can translate much of this,” Rachel murmured, eyes scanning the page. “But from what I picked up during my time stationed in Frankfurt... Yeah, no doubt. It’s German.”

She flipped to the next page.

“This one... might be Japanese.”

She’d spent time in Japan. Once filming a short documentary on the aftermath of Fukushima. Picked up just enough of the language to be polite: hello, goodbye, thank you. Her bow was decent, though her lower back didn’t always cooperate.

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She set the documents aside.

“Too many questions, not enough answers... Bedtime reading...” Rachel said while turning to the mummified man. “Mind if I check your pockets?”

She searched the pockets of the mummified man. Inside one of them: a wallet. Cash in both Canadian and American Dollars. Old cash. Pre-war print. Coins, too. She rubbed one clean: 1942. Papers that Rachel thought would be best examined later.

Nothing in the pockets of the Asian woman. She did not search the baby.

Time to pack up.

The wallet. The backpacks. The machine gun. That was it.

She squeezed the wallet in one of the backpacks.

The mummies weren't going anywhere. Neither was the headless man... nor his head.

Rachel switched on her flashlight and gripped it between her teeth, wrapping her lips around it. She tucked away her phone, then drew her sidearm.

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The last thing she needed was to exit the chamber and run into a curious bear, a pack of overly concerned neighborly wolves, or another syringe-chaser.

And now she had to haul two backpacks and a machine gun out with her.

“What a day,” she muttered.

The flashlight in her mouth made her sound like an amateur ventriloquist.

“Short daylight hours up here, but damn, they’re dense. Puts New York minutes to shame.”

Rachel crawled out of the left chamber and stood up.

She set the backpacks and the machine gun down near the entrance of the cave.

She took the flashlight out of her mouth.

She knelt and stared into the right chamber, listening. Nothing.

She exhaled.

Then, once again on all fours, she crept into the right chamber.

Once inside, Rachel stood upright. Flashlight in one hand, gun in the other.

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For the first time since entering the cave, she felt a flicker of ease.

The space was smaller than the first chamber, almost intimate. She scanned it with care, her eyes sweeping every shadowed corner.

“Smaller chamber. Almost cozy. No blood. No chaos,” she murmured. “Just a few mummified remains—a pair of feet, boots still on, half-buried in loose rock.”

She paused, sensing something subtle.

“Little drafty in here...”

She holstered her weapon, pulled out her phone, turned on the camera light, then turned off the flashlight and clipped it back to her belt.

She crouched beside the exposed boots, aiming for a close-up. She started filming and narrating again.

“Strange,” she muttered. “Looks like the rest of the body’s buried under the rubble. I’d guess this guy got crushed around the same time the couple and the baby died.”

She continued scanning the space, filming with both her phone and her body cam. A tuft of white fur twitched... barely. Her hand snapped to her gun.

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Then she spotted them: three tiny cubs, curled up together, eyes shut. Sleeping.

“Well, hello there... cubs,” she whispered.

Her smile faded into something harder. Not fear. The cubs were no threat. It was life. The kind that clings, demands, fails. Some creatures are born knowing how to survive. Others just get dragged along until they can’t anymore.

And sometimes the kindest thing you can do is show that special mercy... before the world finishes the job far too slowly. The kind of mercy God forbids, but Rachel had once heard whispered in the prayers of a few nuns. Mercy killing...

She still hadn’t figured out how to live with that idea and so many others.

Sometimes it felt like she’d downed half the tequila on Earth, alongside some of the *most brilliant minds* you could meet in a bar, and still, life and love refused to sleep in the same bed.

“Why can’t I be like people who believe the same things throughout their entire lives? Like the nuns? Why can’t I just settle down, period?”

“No tequila today. What a shame.”

She glanced at the cubs.

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“Should I smother you now? Mercy and all that... I don’t know you enough to say that I love you that much...”

She sighed, shook her head.

“Yeah. Didn’t think so. Let’s go, furballs.”

“I’m not here to be kind. Certainly not soldier kind. I’m here for a PR campaign. Imagine for a moment what the execs at Vastan Energy would say if I tried to explain that eternal sleep was a better choice for you given the circumstances...”

“Or, better yet, I left the cubs in front of a church in a basket... I don’t think I’ve seen a church since I’ve been here.”

She laughed.

“Kate would be pissed!”

She unzipped her coat, easing the cubs in one by one, against her chest, as if she could replace what they’d lost...

One stirred, lifting its head for a drowsy glance before nestling deeper into the warmth.

“Whatever happened here, eighty years ago or thirty minutes ago, these cubs won’t make it on their own.”

She pulled her coat tighter. “I’ll take them.”

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Thanks to Sir David Attenborough, Rachel knew just enough to keep the cubs alive, at least until she could reach a vet.

Most of what she remembered boiled down to a single rule: *stay away from a mother bear and her newborns*. Sadly, the mother wasn't a problem anymore.

Rachel felt the familiar pinch in her chest, right where the cubs were resting, the ache of abandonment, of being left behind. That hollow space where a mother should've been.

She looked down at the tiny cubs bundled against her body, their warmth fragile, their breaths soft and slow.

"Sorry, guys," she murmured. "Bad news. You don't have a mom anymore."

She hesitated, her voice nearly breaking.

"That makes you orphans. Just like me."

"Good news... you're going to be TV stars. Internet sensations!"

She turned her flashlight on and put away her phone.

Cubs bundled tightly, Rachel crawled out of the chamber, gun in hand, flashlight in her mouth.

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Once outside the chamber, she rose, put her flashlight on her belt, slung the machine gun over her shoulder, grabbed the backpacks, and stepped into the daylight, gun in hand just in case.

She rejoined the dogs. They perked up instantly, sniffing with keen curiosity, staring at her chest.

Rachel carefully unzipped her suit and, one by one, eased the cubs from the warmth against her chest. Their tiny bodies stirred at the shift in temperature, noses twitching, paws flexing.

She cleared a space in the sled, lining a sleeping bag deep into the well between her gear.

Gently, she nestled the cubs inside, tucking them close together, wrapping the bag snugly around them, leaving just enough space for air, warmth, and no room to jostle free.

“No flying lessons today,” she murmured. “You’ve survived this long. You’re riding first-class all the way back. Still, the ride gets bumpy... hang tight.”

She secured the gear, backpacks, machine gun, into compartments on the sled as well.

Then she climbed aboard, steering the team in a wide arc around the mother bear’s body,

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skirting the blood-soaked snow as they looped
past toward the cave's entrance.

She wasn't done yet.

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Chapter III

Maybe One Day

February 14th, 2025

Baffin Island

Rachel aimed the sled toward the ridge, where footprints suggested the decapitated man had first appeared before making his way into the cave.

She wanted to follow his trail, see where it led beyond the ridge's far side.

The dogs surged forward, finding their rhythm, cresting the ridge with practiced ease before gliding down the slope beyond.

Twenty feet down the slope, the tracks ended at a snowmobile. Rachel recognized the model and the markings. It was the same kind she'd

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seen lined up at the rental shack near the Vastan Energy mine.

###

The prior day, on her way to meet Kate at the security station, Rachel had passed a snowmobile rental shack and a roadside motel, both options she'd briefly considered. The first to rent a snowmobile. The second for a place to crash.

As she was approaching the shack, a man burst out, waving a pink sheet of paper and shouting:

“Monsieur Jacques! Monsieur Jacques!”

Rachel's eyes flicked toward the scene. In doing so, she lost track of the road.

Coming straight from the Amazon, where everything was green, to Baffin Island, where everything was white, her vision hadn't caught up yet. The Arctic felt like a hallucination.

“I'm tripping,” Rachel heard herself say a few times on the ride from the airport.

Kate had parked her Ford F-150 Raptor, white, fully equipped, built like a beast, at the airport for Rachel to drive.

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“I’m leaving my wheels at the airport,” Kate had texted before Rachel landed. “Can’t pick you up. But I’ll leave instructions in the truck for the drive to the security station near the Vastan mine. I’ll be there when you arrive. Promise. xo”

Rachel had half-expected the vehicle to have a turret with a machine gun mounted on the passenger side. It certainly looked like Kate drove her “wheels” like a tank, and not a trophy.

Clearly, Kate had the truck prepped to haul a sled team or a mobile morgue.

And Rachel was about to get her first Arctic roadkill.

She slammed the brakes, yanked the handbrake, and cranked the wheel in whatever direction her panic allowed.

The man with the pink paper was in no danger.

But the man he was chasing, *Monsieur Jacques*, barely escaped taking a grill to the face.

The truck skidded sideways, finally groaning to a halt. Rachel hadn’t been in control. Not really. Never was.

She stepped out.

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Jacques had rolled just far enough to be staring up at the left front wheel, inches from his nose.

He stood. Brushed off snow and slush with a grace that made it seem choreographed.

“Puppy in a basket! I’m so sorry,” Rachel said. “I didn’t mean to...”

They locked eyes.

Jacques smiled.

“Puppy in a what...”

But before he could finish the shouting man, Samuk, the owner of the rental shack reached them.

“Your receipt Monsieur Jacques. You forgot your receipt.” Samuk said smiling.

He handed Jacques the pink paper. Then, looking at Rachel:

“Absolutely the opposite of what you do on ice. You never slam the brakes. It locks the wheels. Then you skid. Then you can’t steer. Then you kill someone. Or... yourself. Not as bad if it’s just yourself...” Samuk explained.

Rachel looked at the man with wide eyes, thinking that she was really tripping after all. She pinched her cheek.

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“If you come rent from me,” Samuk added, pointing toward the shack “I’ll give you a dog sled. Dogs do the braking. You don’t kill anyone. You might still kill yourself.. What is your name?”

Rachel blinked. Jacques had already vanished.

“Rachel...” she said.

She turned to apologize again, but *Monsieur Jacques* was gone.

Back behind the wheel, Rachel glanced once more at Samuk. He grinned and waved.

“See you soon Rachel! Come and rent from me.” He said smiling.

Rachel smiled politely, waved back.

Kate was in charge of operations for this “mission.”

Rachel had thought about renting a snowmobile and renting a room in a local hotel, out of habit, being on her own all the time, but she knew Kate would have everything lined up.

Kate knew Rachel would always choose a dogsled over a motor, not because Rachel was going to run over bears and caribous, but because it was the “green” thing to do.

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And Rachel thought right. Kate had prepped a spare room for Rachel at the mine's security outpost so they could catch up in private.

It had been six years since they'd last seen each other.

They'd kept in touch, sure, trading grainy video calls and the occasional encrypted message. But that wasn't the same. Not after everything they'd lived through.

They'd become blood sisters on the battlefield. And, for a time, something more.

###

Black Paw yawned. Rachel looked at him.

"I wish we could all take a nippy... not just yet." She said.

Rachel's attention returned to the headless man's snowmobile.

She dismounted the sled and began a methodical search of the snowmobile.

In the rear compartment, she found a backpack, standard issue, black, weatherproof.

Inside, a walkie-talkie, a cell phone, a satellite phone, a small drone, a handgun, and ammunition for both the handgun and the machine gun he'd brought into the cave.

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In one of the side pockets, she pulled out a clear plastic bag. It held a passport and a credit card, both issued to a man named *Wolf Dash*.

“Wolf Dash... great name... what’s your story Wolf Dash?” she muttered. “Or, Dash as you used to call yourself...”

Another pocket held a folded map and a metal compass. The map detailed Baffin Island, with an inset zeroing in on the Angna Mountain region and the exact location of the bear’s cave, marked in faded red ink.

“Old school,” she said. “But considering how flaky my GPS has been... not a bad idea.”

The map was crowded with precise, spidery handwriting, some of it in a language she couldn’t immediately place.

The paper had yellowed with age, its edges soft and feathered. It smelled of oil, mildew, and something metallic. It felt like it had survived a war.

Rachel was refolding it when a distant hum reached her ears, low, mechanical, getting closer.

The dogs stiffened. Ears perked. Noses high.

She didn’t hesitate. She grabbed everything that looked useful from the snowmobile—

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several bags packed with supplies, including the man's pack she'd just searched.

Moving quickly and efficiently, she strapped the cargo to her sled with brisk, practiced hands.

Then she brought a gloved finger to her lips and locked eyes with the team.

Not a sound. Not a breath.

She wasn't sure if the dogs understood the gesture. But they felt the tension in her body, the urgency in her eyes. And they obeyed. Still as stone.

She climbed the ridge carefully, staying low. At the top, she flattened against the ice-crusting ground and scanned the horizon.

Eight snowmobiles cut through the landscape below, gradually slowing down. About a hundred feet out, the riders stopped.

The lead figure raised binoculars, surveying the area.

They all wore white camouflage, identical to what the headless man had on. Every rider was armed with a machine gun. Balaclavas. Gas masks. Anonymous and ominous.

The leader pointed toward the cave entrance directly below Rachel's position. She didn't

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flinch. She barely breathed. She was calculating. Could she keep herself, the cubs, and the dogs hidden?

“Puppy in a basket! That’s a lot of firepower... Can I keep you doggies and cubs hidden... safe?” Rachel thought.

Instinct took over. First question: friend or foe? You don’t shoot at friends... most of the time. And you don’t shoot at enemies unless you’re damn sure you’ll be the one walking away.

She watched the riders with hard eyes.

But this wasn’t just about her.

The cubs, warm against her chest, the dogs, alert and loyal, all flashed in her mind.

"If I go down, no one feeds you treats doggies... you might even eat the cubs... I’m it” Rachel murmured.

She was the thin, fragile thread holding their lives together.

Whatever was coming... She had to survive it.

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Two of the snowmobiles broke from the group and sped toward the cave.

Rachel slid back from her observation point, careful not to expose herself.

The pair of snowmobiles approached the spot where the mother bear lay dead.

They slowed, steering clear of the remains, and continued toward the cave's entrance.

The two riders stopped a few feet short and dismounted.

One of the riders pulled off her gas mask and peeled away her balaclava.

Rachel tensed, eyes narrowing.

The woman beneath was Asian, late twenties, maybe early thirties, with sharp cheekbones and a beauty made more arresting by the contrast of jagged scars slicing across her forehead.

Her head was shaved smooth, revealing intricate tattoos that spiraled over her scalp like fragments of a secret map.

From Rachel's vantage point, the inked patterns were unreadable, but the effect was unmistakable: this woman was marked by something... ritual, rebellion, survival.

Maybe all three.

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Pretty, Rachel thought. But hard. The kind of pretty that's seen too much and stopped caring.

“Dash?! It's Juju. Are you in there?” the Asian woman called out.

Rachel recognized the woman's accent.

“Japanese... hmm,” Rachel thought.

“Dash? Zaid got your radio message... But you got cut off... You found the cave! That's great. Where are you? Did you find the stuff?” Juju asked.

Juju turned to the rider standing next to her and, pointing her machine gun at the cave's entrance, ordered him inside.

“Go in. Go in. He probably can't hear anything in there.”

The second rider stepped into the cave.

“Cut off!... Oh, you're in for a treat, geisha lady...” Rachel thought. “Dash poked... The bear sliced... And you lady? You brought gas masks and guns... Hope you packed scrubbing brushes and bath towels from the bath house... Though you don't strike me as the loofah and lavender bath salts type... I'd say I'm looking at foes. No doubt about it.”

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Rachel didn't need more intel. What she'd just seen and heard was enough.

“Time to go.”

She eased back from the ridge, moving slow and low, careful not to make a sound.

She made her way down to her sled, climbed onto it, put on her helmet, and as if her thoughts were tethered to the dogs', the pack began pulling her away from the ridge, gliding over the icy, uneven ground.

Rachel hoped to circle around the mountain above the cave and disappear from view.

She glanced down at the bundled sleeping bag nestled in the sled.

“Hang in there, furballs,” she murmured.

She focused back on the horizon, guiding the team along the mountain's curve, aiming to vanish behind the ridge.

“Once geisha lady finds out Dash is dead, she'll search for his ride... same as I did.” Rachel said softly to the pack.

###

Juju slipped into the cave behind her companion, impatience growing with every silent second. It had been too quiet for too long.

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Her boots crunched faintly on bloodied snow.
Her breath clouded the cold air.

“Where are you guys?” Juju called out.

She did not hear any sounds coming from the left chamber. Just the moan of wind beyond the rocks. She flicked on her shoulder-mounted flashlight, its beam slicing through shadow. She walked further into the cave.

As she crouched to crawl into the left section of the cave, the rider stumbled out, shoving her aside.

“Dash is dead,” the man blurted, his voice tight with shock. “Decapitated.”

He staggered past Juju and doubled over outside the cave mouth, barely able to remove his gas mask and balaclava before retching into the snow.

Juju blinked, the words barely registering.

Outside, the rider's retching echoed off the ice, then faded into silence.

“Dash headless... this, I've got to see for myself,” she murmured.

She ducked into the left chamber, eyes adjusting fast.

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Dash was there... or what was left of him.

The headless body lay twisted on the frozen ground, neck a raw, open stump. Blood had pooled, already crusted black in the cold.

Juju had never liked Dash. Though she barely knew him. As far as she was concerned, Dash was an outsider. Seeing what was left of Dash stirred nothing in Juju. No anger. No pity.

“Guess you did get cut off... I always liked you better quiet anyway,” Juju murmured.

She backed out of the chamber, jaw tight. She glanced quickly at the entrance to the right chamber. She listened for a moment. Heard nothing. She walked out of the cave into the frigid light. She tapped her comm and keyed into the private channel.

“Zaid, this is Juju,” she said into her comm.

“Dash is dead... decapitated. No sign of the cargo. Cave’s clear. You can move in.”

The leader responded with a curt acknowledgment.

“Coming over!”

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He gunned the engine and led the rest of the riders, like a white swarm of wasps, toward the remains of the dead bear first.

Zaid arrived ahead of the others, easing his snowmobile to a stop near the blood-soaked patch where the mother bear had fallen.

He removed his gas mask and balaclava.

He studied the carcass from a distance. There was no shock in his eyes, only confirmation. As if this outcome had always been part of the plan.

He nodded once. Not in horror, but in something resembling respect.

###

Zaid had been hired by a shadowy international arms dealer known only by a codename: *Hector the Vector*. Zaid didn't ask questions, and Hector didn't elaborate much.

Hector gave clear orders. That was it.

Zaid had gathered the team in the back meeting room of the inn, just across from Samuk's rental shack, a day earlier.

"Hector believes the last remaining samples of a long-lost Nazi-Japanese bioweapon are

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buried somewhere in the Canadian Arctic. Around here.” He had shared with the team.

“The pay is generous. The reward for successful delivery? Even better.”

Zaid had told his team almost nothing. Not even Juju, his second-in-command, knew the full scope.

“If local folks get curious, just say that we’re hunters,” he had instructed. “Dismiss.”

He had dispatched Dash ahead to scout the area, warned him that whatever they were looking for was volatile. Dangerous. Strict orders: *don’t touch anything*. Just confirm the find and report back.

“Should I start where the Inuit told us to go? You think he was lying to us, don’t you? You want me to go west instead? Right?” Dash had asked.

“The Inuit is lying. Stick to the ridge as planned,” Zaid had responded. “But trust your instincts. If anything looks unnatural, it probably is.”

###

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Zaid took one last look at the bear's remains. Dash had brought them to the right place.

He restarted his snowmobile and led the team toward the cave, waiting until each engine fell silent, one by one.

The stillness that followed was a relief. The roar of machines in a place this sacred grated on him.

Zaid closed his eyes, sitting motionless in the saddle.

No one dared make a sound when Zaid closed his eyes. He was thinking. Planning. Whatever it was, if you were on Zaid's team, you'd been told: wait quietly. He would let you know when he was done.

What few people understood was that when Zaid closed his eyes, it wasn't just to think. It was to recharge... by summoning his own version of paradise. A private reel of memories. Most often, he'd recall pacing around a victim tied to a chair, calmly delivering a monologue on the nature of pain... just before proving his thesis...

###

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Zaid recollected standing in front of one of his victims, a man, bruised, bound to a metal chair. Gagged. Blood crusted to the side of his head.

"I have always admired the ingenuity humans bring to killing, but I prefer quiet methods to loud solutions. Death comes for everyone, my friend. Why make so much noise delivering it?"

Zaid loved to set the scenery just right. A dim, claustrophobic space. Stone walls stained with time and blood. A single light bulb swinging for the ceiling. Flickering, casting long, shifting shadows.

"Peace and quiet... those are luxuries. Few get to experience them. Fewer still get to hold onto them. One should at least *pursue* silence whenever possible."

Zaid circled the man while talking, slow, measured. Taking his time. He crouched down. At eye-level.

"Fuck peace... kill them all. But kill them quietly... so you can hear them scream."

Zaid plucked a small blade from the tray.

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“There’s something about final sounds, animal or human, that stirs me. You feel it too? I bet you do...”

He held the blade delicately, like a violinist adjusting a bow.

“Dying has its own music. Not the racket of killing machines, but the real sound: a soul tearing loose. A first and final performance. A one-time aria. Always unique. Always... beautiful.”

“Men. Women. Children. Animals. Doesn’t matter what language they grew up speaking. When death catches their breath, their voices carry weight. That is, if they don’t cheat and die quietly in their sleep... or before I’m finished.”

Zaid set the blade down and picked up a small recorder.

"I often imagine the breathy voices of modern pop divas rising into final, broken crescendos, something operatic, something primal, as they approach their deaths. Violent deaths. Deaths I would inflict to each and every one of them. My personal compositions. Actually, collaborations? Like Captain and Tennille? Not modern enough. Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars?"

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Zaid hit play. A soft pop song began. A woman's voice singing about heartbreak.

Zaid grimaced.

"I've grown weary of the endless stream of broken-hearted lamentations flooding the airwaves, girls bemoaning boys who can't do anything right by them. Three-minute therapy sessions disguised as songs, all broadcast with righteous fury. The never-ending overflowing of diary confessions delivered with the same throat-fry and righteous whispered teary affectations. Do you keep a diary?"

Zaid turned off the recorder.

"I don't believe in conspiracy theories. I *am* the conspiracist, and never theoretically. I write them. In blood, not ink."

"Still, no matter what playlist I craft for myself the algorithm manages to deliver these same songs and singers over and over. Ever wonder why that is? Something in my online profile?"

The man moaned softly.

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“It grates on me. Aren’t confessions meant for a private room, not global playlists? Don’t die on me just yet my friend.”

Zaid pressed a vial against the man’s cheek. Cold. Glass.

“I look forward to hearing the last screams of pop stars, politicians, preachers and most of their followers. Hear them drift across a dying world in the key of... poison? That would be a great playlist, don’t you think?”

“One vial, one rupture, and it wouldn’t matter who wrote the lyrics, the speeches or the sermons, or programmed the playlists algorithms. Everyone would be singing the same song...”

Zaid picked up the blade again.

" And I *cannot wait* to hear it.... but first... let me hear you...”

###

Zaid opened his eyes slowly.

“Maybe one day,” Zaid said softly, almost to himself.

Juju glanced over. “Maybe one day *what?*”

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“Some voices deserve to be silenced... after one long last scream.” Zaid responded. “If what we are looking for in these frozen hills is real, if Hector the Vector is right, then lots of voices will let out their last screams... very soon.”

“Well... Dash is definitely quiet now. Don’t know if he screamed. His radio is smashed.” Juju said.

“Then we’re making progress... tell me more.” Zaid probed.

Juju thought Zaid looked like a dead ringer for Omar Sharif, mustache and all.

She’d seen Doctor Zhivago dozens of times. She had a thing for old movies. The way people died in them, so dramatic, so clean... so fake. The dying just as fake as the kissing.

But there was nothing romantic about Zaid, even here, surrounded by snow and silence like a scene from some frozen epic.

When he had pulled off his balaclava and gas mask, Juju actually did a double take. Somehow, the Arctic air played tricks on her, or on him. There was no doubt, Omar Shariff was alive... and on Baffin Island.

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Zaid's features were soft, almost gentle, until you met his eyes. Cold, unreadable, shark eyes. Deadly in their stillness.

Juju heard Zaid shift beside her, a subtle exhale, the signal she'd stalled long enough. He was waiting for her to continue the briefing, come back from her daydreaming.

Juju straightened. "Dash is inside, in the back of the cave. Decapitated. Nothing in sight. No bags, no containers... We heard him talk about syringes on the radio. Didn't see any."

Juju had come to the same conclusion Rachel had reached when piecing together what had happened to Dash.

She shared her theory with Zaid as they walked over to the bear's mangled body.

The shard of broken glass lodged in the bear's mouth seemed to confirm it had been poisoned by the content of a syringe.

Zaid had been thoroughly briefed by Hector the Vector, and he understood the consequences of mishandling what they were here to recover.

He let Juju speak, offering no comment. Just listening. Measuring. Calculating.

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"Powerful weapon," Zaid said acknowledging he had been listening to Juju.

"Bravo Hector..." he whispered.

Zaid pulled a plastic bag from one of his pockets and opened it. Juju grabbed the syringe shard out of the bear's teeth and put it in the bag.

Zaid inspected the shard like an archaeologist staring at a museum artifact, precise, cold. He glanced at the bloodied snow, then at the bear's torn throat.

"The bear fought back. Beautiful." Zaid whispered.

"Yeah... beautiful." Echoed Juju.

"Bring me a jerry can. And a flare," Zaid ordered over his radio.

One of the riders ran toward Zaid and handed him a small red metal can full of gasoline.

Zaid poured gasoline over the bear's remains.

"There should be no trace of the weapon left behind" he said addressing Juju.

"There will be other ways of proving what it can do. Soon."

"Hector will not tolerate loose ends."

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Hector was a dealmaker, pure and simple. He didn't care about gods, ideologies, or noble causes. He sold to anyone with the means to pay. Between transactions, he vanished on one of his yachts, floating luxury retreats, taking him to remote islands, away from the people he called his customers.

Zaid took the flare the rider had brought along with the can of gasoline. He cracked it and tossed it into the bloody mess, skin, bone, fur, and whatever was left of the bear. Flames caught fast. He watched, uncertain. Fire might not be enough.

Whatever had been in that cave could have seeped deep into the ice beneath the carcass. The compound wasn't airborne, but it didn't need to be. Contact was enough. It spread through the body like necrosis, like flesh-eating bacteria.

Bears weren't immune. Zaid doubted anything alive would be.

"Where's Dash's snowmobile?" Zaid asked Juju.

Juju turned and scanned the area, realizing she hadn't thought to check.

Zaid and Juju returned to the entrance of the cave.

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By now, everyone on the team had made it to the entrance of the cave. Pretty much covering what footsteps would have been those of Dash with their own and their snowmobiles, churning the ground into slush.

With no sign of Dash's snowmobile nearby, Zaid moved toward the ridge flanking the cave.

It didn't take him long to spot the tracks: one set of larger boot prints leading down, a smaller set heading up and down.

A dogsled trail had been pulled up the ridge as well, its grooves still sharp in the snow. Around it, a flurry of paw prints.

Zaid crouched, scanning the tracks. At least ten dogs. Maybe more. That kind of team could cover serious ground. Fast.

Whoever got out of here wasn't just running. They were already gaining distance.

Smaller footsteps heading up and down... A woman?

Zaid studied the footprints heading up and down the ridge again.

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“Light, but purposeful, precise. Someone trained. Not a tourist. Not a fool.” He shared with Juju and the team.

“Who are you, lady? Where are you going? I think you took something that belongs to us... Hector won't like it.”

Zaid paused. Closed his eyes. Then opened them again, sharper now. He'd heard her voice... he was sure of it.

Right after Dash's radio cut off, a woman had responded. No one from Zaid's team. Her radio must have picked up their frequency.

“I liked your voice lady... I bet you will sound great when I send you off. Even better than a pop diva would...” Zaid whispered.

Zaid climbed the ridge. From the top, he spotted Dash's snowmobile down the hill. He raised his binoculars and scanned the hilly landscape.

Zaid saw nothing. Only wind, rising steadily, whispering across the ridge.

He swept the horizon, scanning each hill in turn, eyes sharp and methodical.

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Far off in the distance, the sky had begun to thicken. A blizzard was coming. Still hours out, maybe, but coming straight for them.

Zaid had spent time in the Siberian wilderness, but he didn't trust himself to read weather patterns in the Canadian North.

He was a man of deserts, used to heat, to dust, to charting the slow crawl of sandstorms across the dunes.

Snow moved differently. And it didn't forgive mistakes.

Suddenly, about a quarter mile out, Zaid caught movement, dogs cresting a hill, their bodies low and fast against the wind. Then the sled appeared, trailing behind them.

They were heading straight into the storm.

“Ballsy move lady,” he whispered.

He spun and raced back up the ridge and then down toward the cave, urgency sharpening his every step.

He ordered loudly:

“Juju! Dash's snowmobile is right on the other side of the ridge. I bet there's nothing left

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in it. Check, just in case. Then take it inside the cave. Remove the GPS. Take another look around the cave then seal it with explosives.”

“Make sure no one can get back in there... ever. Then catch up with us!”

He turns to the rest of the squad.

“The rest of you, with me! We’re going hunting.”

Zaid leapt onto his snowmobile and powered up the ridge, the others right behind him.

They rode standing, knees bent, weight shifting instinctively with every rise and dip of the terrain. The machines snarled as they climbed, dipped, and surged, racing after the sled like a pack of steel-toothed wolves.

###

Rachel’s sled crested a new hill, moments from disappearing down the other side. The roar of engines made her glance back. The riders had seen her. She turned to the dogs and said:

"Okay doggies! Lots of treats if you get us far away from here... fast. Some mean people are on our tail.”

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She looked down at the three cubs, still curled into one big, drowsy fur ball, and murmured:

"Don't worry, cubbies. You'll be just fine."

The same cub that had barely opened its eyes back in the cave, the littlest of the three, lifted its sleepy head, blinked at Rachel for a moment, then nestled back between its siblings' legs and drifted off again.

Rachel wasn't sure if she was steering the dogs toward the white cloud swelling on the horizon or if they simply knew it was the only way forward.

Either way, the storm felt like the safer bet. She, the pack, and the cubs had better odds against an ice tempest than a hail of machine-gun fire.

Adrenaline-fueled instinct doesn't give your brain much time to second-guess a plan. Especially when you're the one giving the orders.

She rode low on the sled, bracing for the staccato crack of gunfire to split the wind at any moment.

###

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Once, in Syria, she'd objected to an order: evacuate the team, leave the civilians, a mother and her two children, behind in the ruins of a village as ISIS fighters closed in. The call came fast. The decision came faster.

Rachel had followed the command. She had obeyed.

And she regretted it, every day.

Some days, it hit like shrapnel. Sharp. Sudden.

Other days it just sat there, dull and heavy, like a stone she couldn't cough up or swallow.

Tequila helped. Until it didn't.

Nothing silenced the memory. Not orders. Not rationalizations. Not time.

They could've saved them. Or at least tried.

The good of the many? The good of the few? The interests of a nation? The grand strategies and noble ideals?

Each soul is a universe. Unique. Irreplaceable.

Rachel Shepherd – Mother of None

But isn't it easier, sometimes too easy, to live by orders? Whether they come from a man with more stripes on his sleeve... or a book passed down from on high, pages filled with certainty.

No room for questions. No room for doubt.

She'd followed orders. And now she lived with the ghosts.

###

Now it was her call. Her cargo. Her responsibility. The dogs. The cubs. Hers to lose or protect.

One hand gripping the sled, she yanked her radio from her belt and keyed the mic.

“Mayday, mayday... This is Rachel Shepherd. Traveling southwest from polar bear den... I'm in serious danger. Being pursued by multiple armed riders... Repeat... mayday... Does anyone copy?”

Static... Gusts of wind were rising, slicing through her goggles in icy shards.

“OK, let's do it my way...”

They rode into the white... Then it happened.

Rachel Shepherd – Mother of None

Chapter IV

Light Reading

February 14th, 2025

Baffin Island

Gunfire. The rattle Rachel knew too well. She had been under it. She had returned it in kind.

###

Zaid knew the odds of landing a lucky shot were low. He only hired good shooters, but firing from a snowmobile, in crosswinds like this, wasn't about accuracy. It was about pressure. Intimidation. Make the target flinch, hesitate.

But the figure leading that sled? Whoever she was, she didn't flinch.

Professional, by all indications.

Rachel Shepherd – Mother of None

He barked out commands. Two riders to circle right. Two to the left. The last two would stay with him, tailing Rachel's trail directly.

The storm was closing in faster than Zaid had calculated. What had looked like hours was collapsing into minutes.

The only real expert in Arctic weather had been reduced to two frozen pieces on the cave's floor. Dash Wolf, soon to be sealed forever in a tomb of ice. Perhaps Juju found something worth salvaging from what was left of him.

###

Deep inside the bear cave, in the larger left chamber, the flashlight clipped to Juju's shoulder lit her face in profile, sharp, unreadable, the inked lines of her temple catching the glow.

She crouched beside Dash's remains, methodically checking his pockets.

Nothing.

Nothing in the snowmobile either.

She had smashed its GPS with the butt of her machine gun after dragging it into the cave. After that she had stripped the machine down. She did not find anything in it, not even Dash's papers.

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“Nothing... Nothing left in your snowmobile Dash. You got robbed blind. By a woman too... I don't know what's most embarrassing... getting your head cut off by a bear twice your size or getting robbed blind by a woman?” Juju said out loud, staring at Dash's severed head.

“If it's any consolation, Zaid's after her. You know Zaid... He won't stop until she's tied to a chair listening to one of his tirades... Right before she screams her lungs out.” She added.

Juju stood and scanned the chamber.

She hadn't noticed the mummies when she first came in the chamber earlier. So surprised to see Dash in two pieces, she had looked around for syringes, bags, containers. She only noticed Dash's smashed radio. She didn't notice the mummies. Then she had left to report to Zaid.

“Well, hello there... kon'nichiwa...” Juju said out loud.

The mummies amused her in a detached way. She studied them for a moment, head tilted, as if weighing a joke she chose not to make.

“I didn't see you when I came in to visit Dash earlier... Seeing him in pieces got me distracted...” Juju said.

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The shape of the woman's face, the slope of the eyes, Asian. Japanese, maybe.

“Hello sister...” Juju murmured.

She knelt and began checking the woman's pockets, then the man's... methodically, almost gently. Then she froze.

“What were you carrying?” she murmured, eyes on the baby. Then, a smirk. “If you were my kid, you'd be useful at your age.”

She began to unwrap the mummified child, her movements slow but unbothered.

Tucked deep in the folds of the cloth, she found a bracelet, small, tarnished.

A name etched into the metal, almost erased by time.

Kato, maybe.

On the reverse: a string of numbers.

She pocketed the bracelet.

She stood up, faced Dash's body and raised a middle finger.

“Goodbye, Dash,” she muttered with a smirk.

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“You’re in good company...”

She looked through the chamber again.
Nothing.

She crawled out and crossed into the right chamber.

At first glance, it looked just as barren. But as she turned to leave, something caught her eye, boots, barely visible beneath a tangle of rocks. A mummified pair of feet.

Juju knelt and began prying loose the debris. Bit by bit, the mummy emerged, legs, hips, torso.

She worked carefully, confident that side of the cave wouldn’t collapse but wary all the same.

After all, something brought down all these rocks on the mummy. As she followed one of the arms, her hand froze.

A small landslide of stones clattered free.

She held her breath, listening. Waiting. Nothing moved. The dust settled.

Gently, she cleared more rubble and then saw it: the corner of a metal briefcase.

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Her pulse quickened. If anything valuable had survived this long, it would be in there.

She dug farther, revealing the full case. Beneath it, half-buried in soil and shards of rock, was a collapsed backpack. She tugged it free.

Quick check of the mummy's pockets... nothing.

She glanced upward, uneasy. No more digging. The weight above looked unstable now. The briefcase and backpack would have to be searched later.

Juju retreated from the chamber and emerged into the cave's central mouth, standing tall and brushing the dust off her sleeves.

She placed the briefcase and backpack at her feet.

Suddenly, part of the right chamber's ceiling collapses, a cloud of dust escaping into the cave entrance, as if chasing after Juju.

She retrieved the satchel of explosives she'd brought with Dash's snowmobile.

She began lining the cave walls, her movements efficient, almost clinical. Detcord

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snaked through cracks and around stones, linked to a detonator synced with her phone.

She keyed her radio.

“Zaid, this is Juju. Getting ready to blow this pop stand.”

A short crackle, then Zaid’s voice returned.

“Hold off. Big storm inbound. We’re still in pursuit, but if we get buried out here, you might be the one taking over the chase. Stand by.”

Juju looked disappointed. She exhaled. She eyed the metal briefcase and backpack she laid out earlier. The chance to redeem herself... delayed.

She muttered to herself:

“I should’ve thought of searching for Dash's sled... Zaid's gonna think I'm losing it...”

She crouched beside the items, tapping a finger against the case.

“Dangerous to disappoint Zaid... never ends well... though sometimes...” she murmured.

###

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Juju had known Zaid for years. Knew what those eyes meant. Knew better than to ever cross him. He was patient, methodical. But he didn't feel pity. Neither did she. That's why they worked so well together.

Only once had Zaid surprised Juju.

He was known to settle accounts immediately. If people couldn't pay what they owed, they were never given a chance to make it up later. In those cases, he took everything they had on them. And if that didn't add up, he took their lives, slowly, painfully.

He had a true talent for making people scream. In fact, he preferred it if they couldn't pay up or give him what he wanted right there, on the spot.

Once, in Syria, in a makeshift torture chamber, he brought a bound woman to the brink of death, carving his initials around the most sensitive places on her body, careful not to let her bleed out too quickly. Just as she was fading, she whispered something in his ear.

Zaid froze.

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Then he wiped his blade clean, ordered her untied, and told Juju to see that her wounds were closed.

The only thing Juju heard him say to the woman was: “You’re in my debt. Never forget.”

He then turned to Juju.

“See that she lives.”

The woman’s face was battered, cheeks mottled, eyes swollen nearly shut.

Bruises bloomed across her features, the aftermath of the beating that came before the carving. Her hair, short, was matted with blood.

“I’m surprised you’re still alive,” Juju whispered.

“I’m only a good nurse when patients are really, really nice to me. Will you be nice to me?”

The woman nodded... faded... passing out.

###

Juju crouched over the detonator. Still. Eyes unfocused, caught in memory. She exhaled. Low.

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“You always remember the ones that get away... not too hard when so few ever do...” she murmured.

She steadied her hand and reached for her radio again.

“You got it Zaid... holding off on blowing the pop stand.”

###

Zaid stood on his snowmobile at the head of the pursuit team, scanning the horizon as the first violent gust tore across the ridge.

Zaid’s latest call on the weather had been wrong. A violent gust ripped through the ridge, reshaping the approaching white mass into something almost unimaginable, a rolling, flat avalanche of airborne snow.

Almost simultaneously, both flanking teams radioed in to Zaid.

LEFT FLANK (RADIO): “Do you see the dogsled? We’ve lost visual!”

RIGHT FLANK (RADIO): “Same here. Total whiteout.”

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Zaid had also lost sight of Rachel. One moment, Rachel and her sled were racing the wind in front of his eyes... then the storm had swallowed them whole.

He paused before keying his mic.

ZAID (RADIO): “She’s still out there. And she’s got what we came for. No package, no pay. No bonus.”

The reality settled in. He would need a new plan.

ZAID (RADIO): “Dig in and wait. No one moves till I say. She’s out there, somewhere, buried in this blizzard like the rest of us. When it breaks, we hunt.”

###

Rachel didn’t hear Zaid’s words, but she felt them. Men sent to retrieve bioweapons didn’t just turn back because the weather got rough.

She put her trust in Black Paw, who may have winked at her during treat time but hadn’t blinked once since diving into the storm. A true leader.

The pack was in its element now. The dogs were home.

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Rachel no longer felt like just a passenger.

She felt like the guest of honor.

She couldn't see where she was going...
Black Paw was in charge.

She couldn't see what was behind her either.
If the men chasing her were only a few feet
away, she wouldn't know it. She might not even
hear the engines approaching over the wind.

Rachel had never experienced a whiteout.
Kate had warned her it was a real risk.

“The weather can turn fast up here. Be
careful,” Kate had said.

Rachel remembered their last night together,
poring over maps of Baffin Island on Kate's
tablet, the firelight flickering as Kate walked her
through the terrain.

###

“You know this used to be all fur territory?”
she said. “Inuit communities traded pelts, mostly
fox and seal, with whalers and European traders.
That was their whole economy until the mid-
1900s.”

Rachel nodded, eyes still on the map.

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“The fur trade collapsed after World War II,” Kate continued. “Too many animals pushed out. Too many people moving in. Mining took over. Zinc, silver, even uranium. Companies came up here in the '50s and never left.”

She zoomed in closer to the Angna range.

“By the '60s, they were digging deeper. Bigger machines. Settlements started to form. Families moved into prefab housing. Dogsleds gave way to snowmobiles. All of it in the name of progress.”

Rachel glanced at her. “And the animals?”

Kate shrugged. “Gone, mostly. The noise, the sprawl... it broke migration routes. The caribou vanished. Bears started denning farther north.”

Rachel leaned back. “So, this isn't exactly untouched wilderness.”

“Nope,” Kate said. “It's been touched. Branded. Extracted from. Since at least the '40s.”

Kate glanced up from the screen. Rachel met her gaze.

For a moment, neither said anything. A flash of memory passed between them, gear checks in dim tents, the weight of rifles slung across backs,

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whispered jokes before sunrise patrols in Syria. Dust, sweat, adrenaline. Trust built in silence.

“Just like the old days... the two of us prepping a patrol,” Rachel said.

“No kidding. From sand dunes to snowdrifts. Then came the Cold War,” Kate said, sliding her finger across the map. “NATO built a chain of radar stations across the Arctic, coast to coast. They were meant to catch Soviet bombers flying over the pole. The DEW Line.”

“DEW?” Rachel asked.

“Distant Early Warning. Basically, a nervous system for the West. Giant steel nerves stretched across frozen nothingness.”

Rachel squinted at the ridges Kate had just traced. “You’re saying there were radar stations here? On Baffin?”

“There still are. Most are abandoned, but they’re standing. Rotting out in the snow. Antennas, bunkers, collapsed towers... some frozen in time, some repurposed.”

“Repurposed how?”

Kate hesitated. “A few are used by weather teams, survival schools, climate researchers. But some?” She shrugged. “Hard to say.”

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Rachel raised an eyebrow. “You think someone’s using them?”

“I think if you needed to hide something, equipment, records, people, it’s easier when everyone assumes the place is empty.”

That landed. Rachel looked back at the map... really looked this time. The DEW Line wasn’t just a relic anymore. It was a breadcrumb trail. A chain of hiding places strung across the Arctic.

Kate tapped one of the old outposts on the screen.

“Oh, and, almost forgot. One of these, closer to the coast, is being remodeled into a kind of Arctic zoo.”

Rachel arched a brow.

Kate continued.

“Some billionaire decided a luxury resort in sub-zero temperatures would be a hit with the extreme sports crowd. They’ve started construction, but nothing happens during the winter. Skeleton crew up there, holding down the fort.”

Rachel squinted and asked.

“Extreme sports? You mean some hedge fund cowboys trying not to freeze to death teeing

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off on a tundra golf course? Or maybe it's 'Safari on Ice', shooting at polar bears from heated igloos? Billionaire's bullseye?"

Kate gave her a look, dry, deadpan.

"Doubt you'll need to go that far for your bear footage. Unless you're into pacing wildlife behind plexiglass. Not exactly what Vastan wants for their wilderness rebrand."

Rachel smirked.

"Well, at the rate the ice is melting, that resort might start competing with a Mediterranean Club Med by next summer."

Kate gave a half-laugh, then Rachel's expression shifted.

"Have you had a chance to explore the region?" she asked. "If the cave the Vastan execs flagged is empty, where am I supposed to find polar bears?"

Kate nodded, turning the screen slightly so Rachel could follow.

"Good question. I didn't go around knocking on cave walls to wake up bears, but I've done patrols in most of the area, part of keeping the mining sites secure."

She leaned back.

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“But the dogs I picked for you? They know the land. Been everywhere with me. And with Samuk, their master, and loads of visitors. They tend to pull toward the smelliest dens.”

Kate smiled at the memory looking at the dogs lying nearby.

“I figured you’d want a sled team. Quieter than a snowmobile. *Green*. And way more dependable. If you’re caught in a whiteout and your GPS fails, the dogs won’t. They’ll find shelter. Trust them. Let them lead. They’ve got a weird fondness for the old fur trading outposts... what’s left of them.”

###

Rachel realized now, Kate had been right.

She still couldn’t see the path ahead, but Black Paw led with unwavering confidence, his nose slicing into the wind.

The sled slowed beneath her. Then stopped.

The storm was unrelenting. She could barely see the sled’s front from where she stood. Wind whipped in every direction, a cyclone of white noise and disorientation.

She hesitated. If she stepped off and the dogs bolted, she'd never catch up. The thought was chilling.

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Then, like a ghost emerging from the swirl, Black Paw appeared. He trotted back to her, the rest of the pack trailing him in a graceful arc.

Watching fourteen dogs pull a U-turn in a blizzard felt surreal, like a dream she wasn't quite part of.

Black Paw pressed against her left leg and whimpered, nudging her gently, urging her to follow.

Rachel stepped off the sled. She unhooked Black Paw from the harness.

She looked behind her. Around. No sign they had been followed. She was hopeful the men chasing them were lost or worse.

Black Paw started walking, pausing often to look back and make sure Rachel was following.

Seconds later, partially hidden beneath a drift, she saw it: a wooden door nestled between two snow-packed mounds. Only the top edge was visible, like the hatch of a buried shelter.

She swept the snow away with her gloves, revealing a crude wooden handle. No lock.

Shouldering into it, she pushed.

On the third try, the door gave way with a groan, opening into darkness.

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She looked at Black Paw, who stood calmly beside her.

“Shelter. Thank you boy.”

“Let’s go and bring everybody in before the storm eats us alive.”

The door hadn’t been sealed tight. Snow had drifted in, covering the floor of what Rachel had first assumed was a cabin. She switched on her helmet light.

A wide corridor stretched ahead, vanishing into darkness. Just a few feet in, steel rail tracks gleamed beneath the frost... this wasn’t a cabin. It was a mining tunnel. Wide enough for her, the dogs, and the sled.

She backed out while looking at Black Paw walking at her side.

“You are way more loyal than the past lovers I can still remember Black Paw,” Rachel said. “Don’t get too clingy. I wouldn’t want to break your heart.”

Within minutes, the sled team, still harnessed, pulled the rig into the shelter of the mine. Rachel shut the door behind them and wedged it closed with chunks of timber, splintered lengths that had once supported rail.

“Time for treats everyone!”

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The dogs perked up, crowding around her.

“Double rations,” she added with a weary smile.

She let the moment linger, watching the dogs devour their reward. She took her helmet off.

She wasn’t hungry herself. But she wasn’t alone.

“What do bear cubs eat? Not dog treats, that’s for sure. Milk? Maybe... condensed milk?”

Rachel rummaged through her supplies and pulled out a small carton.

“Well, no bottle. No teat.”

She glanced at the cubs, still fast asleep, bundled together like fuzzy embers under the sleeping bag.

“You don’t look like it’s dinner time anyway.”

Carefully, she lifted them from the sled, keeping them swaddled and warm.

Then, reaching for the satchel she’d taken from the cave, she unbuckled the flap.

Time to read.

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Rachel sat cross-legged on a folded sleeping bag isolating her from the cold stone floor, the cubs nestled on her thighs in their own sleeping bag.

One by one, the dogs surrounded her, pressing close until she was wrapped in a circle of warmth.

Black Paw lay by the door, still and alert. Watching. Guarding. Always the loyal leader.

Rachel opened the satchel and began to sort the printed material, separating the German from the Japanese sections...

###

About a mile away, Juju stood by the cave's entrance, watching the whiteout descend like a wall of smoke.

She brought her snowmobile inside the mouth of the cave and parked it next to Dash'. She pulled a tarp from her snowmobile. She retreated deeper inside to the left chamber, carrying the tarp and the metal briefcase she had found earlier in the right chamber.

She covered Dash's body and severed head with the tarp, then sat beside the mummies and opened the metal case.

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She couldn't read German, but some words stood out. And the unmistakable swastika confirmed it.

“Definitely Nazi,” she murmured.

She flipped through the documents, scanning diagrams and typewritten pages. Her fingers paused.

She saw something familiar... Kanji. Japanese characters.

She froze. Her eyes narrowed.

“No way...” she said.

She separated the Japanese pages, spreading them carefully.

A faint rumble echoed from deeper inside the chamber. She looked up. Listened. Nothing. Just her breath. And the silence of the dead sitting next to her.

She glanced toward the mummified infant, swaddled in decay.

Then, quietly she began to read.

###

Somewhere between the cave and the abandoned mine where Rachel had taken refuge, Zaid sat alone in his tent. Wind clawed at the

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fabric, bending the poles, trying to tear it from the ground. The canvas flapped like a trapped bird, loud, relentless.

His men were in their own tents nearby.

He tried hailing Juju on the radio. Just static. A hiss, like a snake coiled in the speaker.

He smirked.

“I haven’t heard a cobra in a while,” he muttered. “Almost wish it was nearby. I’m ready for hot sand.”

The Arctic cold pressed in around him, deafening in its stillness. He missed the heat of Syria, the clarity of desert missions.

His mind drifted to the woman who had slipped through his fingers. Who was she? And how had she outpaced him?

He closed his eyes and tried to picture her. Not just her face, but how she moved. How she *decided*. There was something deliberate in her actions. Something trained. Not fear, not luck.

"How had she gotten here?"

He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and retrieved a folded map, worn thin at the creases, protected by waxed canvas. He

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smoothed it across his lap, eyes narrowing as his gloved finger traced the terrain.

"Where would she go?" he muttered.

She hadn't just fled... She'd *chosen* her route. Into a storm. Into white oblivion. That wasn't desperation. That was strategy.

He'd seen fugitives jump from buildings to avoid capture. Because they knew who he was. Because the idea of what he would do to them was worse than death.

He stared into the flickering shadows of the tent, voice low, curious.

"Is it possible... that you know me, lady?"

###

Inside the mine, Rachel lifted her head. The cubs lay curled against her. The dogs were sprawled all around, forming a wall of heat and fur.

Rachel kept track of time, logging everything on paper. All the tech in the world meant nothing without batteries, and eventually, hers would die.

She looked toward the entrance.

Black Paw was still awake, alert, motionless, watching the door like a sentinel.

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She blinked, pulled back into the world of ink and secrets.

She recognized many of the German words, but some sections were beyond her, chemical experiments, complex formulas, dense with jargon.

There were faded pages. Pictures, too, some barely legible, others disturbingly clear. Even for her, they were hard to look at. Human beings can do that... to each other. That's the way of the world.

She understood there were three separate chemicals meant to be combined for "*ultimative Ergebnisse*," ultimate results.

Whatever that meant.

She remembered the syringes she'd taken from the cave, half filled with a clear liquid, the other half dark. And of course, two new ones, empty. No wax on them. Tagged.

According to the documents, there should've been a third liquid component? Perhaps not in syringes, perhaps in vials? She wasn't sure.

If only she could access the Internet.

What she could make out was enough though: each of the three mixtures was a potent poison on its own.

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Her German was basic, patchy at best, but one phrase stuck with her: “*Zerstörung der Blutzellen.*” Destruction of blood cells.

One compound appeared to melt organs from the inside, attacking cellular linings and bypassing natural defenses.

There were photos of concentration camp prisoners receiving injections, followed by images of decomposed flesh and exposed bone.

Just like the bear.

The second liquid, the darker one, didn’t need to be injected directly into the bloodstream. It was designed to spread through water supplies.

Only trace amounts were required.

Why was it in syringes? Could it be hidden inside a body? That would allow someone to carry it undetected, deliver contamination from the inside out, like passing on a cold to someone?

The warnings were numerous. While none of the three compounds were airborne on their own, they became aerosolized when mixed under the right conditions.

And of course, there were two syringes tagged VE, followed by numbers. These looked brand new. But they were empty. There did not

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seem to be any references to them in the document.

Rachel rubbed her eyes. She had been reading under the dim glow of her phone's screen for too long.

What she had learned was enough: the men chasing her weren't going to stop. Not until they found her.

She kept an eye on the storm's progress. As long as the entrance door, guarded by Black Paw, kept rattling and letting in flurries of snow, the weather hadn't improved.

Rachel stood up and walked toward Black Paw.

"Thank you, Black Paw," she said as she knelt beside him and ran a gloved hand over his head. "As long as the wind keeps howling through that door... we're safe. But not for long, I fear..."

The wind finally dropped.

Rachel cracked the door open.

A blinding whiteness greeted her, silent, wind-swept, still. A wall of snow erected against the entrance, heavy but holding. Above it, just enough space for a clear view of the horizon.

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Rachel scanned the vast, frozen silence.

"The worst is over," she murmured, glancing down at Black Paw, now standing beside her, ears forward, watchful. "What do you think?"

Black Paw snorted softly.

"They're gonna be back on our tail soon," she added smirking. "No pun intended..."

The men would be coming soon. Or maybe they were already moving.

Either way, she had to plan like pursuit was a certainty.

Her eyes lingered on the blank horizon a moment longer. She eased the door shut.

In between deciphering German instructions for poisoning humanity, Rachel had reviewed her options as the storm raged on.

She didn't think the riders were local. Kate had said very few people were. Still, they might have a good guide.

They wouldn't find much in the way of tracks, not after the storm, but they'd scan the horizon as soon as visibility returned, hoping to spot her sled on the ridgelines.

Hard to camouflage a fourteen-dog team, no matter how white most of them were.

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She glanced down at her own gear. All black.

“Thanks, Kate,” she muttered. “Did Emma Peel ever wear a white catsuit? I wonder if Amazon Prime delivers this far north... I can’t wait for drone deliveries to become a serious option... in all weather conditions... that’d be some drones...”

She smirked faintly, almost laughed.

She had tried to contact Kate, but no luck. The storm had scrambled the airwaves.

Even standing right by the mine’s entrance, the door open, she couldn’t reach the security station or Kate’s satellite phone.

And her batteries were running low. Even top-tier gear had its limits. She was close to running out of power now. She needed to conserve what was left.

She looked down at the rails and then at the darkness farther into the tunnel.

“Where do these rails lead inside the mine?” she asked Black Paw.

She had tucked the cubs back into the sled. The pack was resting peacefully.

“Keep guarding the door,” she told Black Paw.

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Rachel decided to follow the rail deeper into the mine.

As she walked, she tried to recall what Kate had explained about the area's history, how, after the radar stations were dismantled, the mining consortium repurposed some of them as storage depots and extended railway lines underground.

And of course, one of them soon to be a kind of Artic zoo.

“Whatever happens to a brain once it realizes it has sled-loads of money?” Rachel said softly, shaking her head.

A few minutes in, she came upon a flat shuttle cart resting quietly on the rails, likely once used to haul supplies through the mine.

Rachel stepped closer and ran a hand along the frame. It looked solid. Heavy, but intact. If she could hoist the sled onto it, the cart might just save them all some effort.

“I bet Black Paw and the rest of the doggies could pull the cart with the sled on it...” she murmured. “Let's see how well this cart rolls on the rail... the wheels don't look rusty.”

“No rust. That's promising. Let's see how you roll, *chéri*.”

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She gave the cart a push. It moved surprisingly well... It was lighter than it looked, yet solid beneath her hands.

But the risks of going deeper underground piled up in her mind.

The tunnels could be blocked. She might have to backtrack. There was no way to know if it was safe.

From the dust and silence, it was clear no one had been down here in a long time. How long could the cubs survive? What was she going to feed them?

If this potential escape route turned into a dead end, they'd be even more cut off, no radio contact, dwindling supplies, no easy exit.

Her mind spun, caught in loops of doubt and planning.

Analysis paralysis.

The other option? Head back outside. Run like hell. Hope the dogs could outrun the snowmobiles, avoid getting shot, and reach the security station. But that was on the other side of the mountain from here, and there was no retracing their original path.

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Rachel turned back. She pushed the flat cart toward the mine's entrance, to where the dogs and the cubs waited.

Using old planks, she scavenged from along the tracks, she fashioned a ramp and managed to hoist the sled onto the cart. Then she tied the dogs to it, securing their harnesses in place.

Black Paw stepped up, taking his position at the lead without needing a word.

“How are you at seeing in the dark?” she asked.

Light was going to be a problem.

“Let's hope we end up out in the sunshine soon.”

Rachel walked back to the entrance and eased the door open just a crack.

From the outside, there was no sign her sled had ever arrived here. The wind and snow had erased everything.

She quietly lifted a gloved hand in a soft wave to the horizon, a silent goodbye to the open world, to light, to any sense of direction.

She closed the door and secured it with planks.

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Rachel inspected their resting spot one last time.

There could be no trace. No gear. No prints. Nothing to say she, the cubs, or the dogs had ever taken shelter here.

The air still carried their scent, but not for long. The tunnel was drafty enough to erase that too.

She checked the sled again, making sure the cubs were secure.

She'd been so focused on keeping the dogs and cubs safe, and later, on reading the documents she'd taken from the cave, that she'd nearly forgotten about the bags she'd grabbed from the headless man's snowmobile.

She remembered finding a map back then. Dash had been prepared she had remarked.

Rachel dug through Dash's bags and located the folded map and the compass she'd glanced at while searching his snowmobile.

Kate had offered Rachel a copy of the route map they'd studied the night before on her tablet, plotting Rachel's journey to the bear's den.

In her usual effort to avoid waste, Rachel had declined the printout, asking instead for a link to

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a digital version she could access on her phone. Not exactly helpful without a signal...

Now, between Dash's old-school paper map and her memory of Kate's digital one, she hoped she could triangulate where they were and where they might go if they followed the rail deeper underground.

But the compass was acting strange. And the map didn't seem to show any mine entrances or anything suggesting underground routes.

"You're not helping, Dash," she muttered.

Then: "Oh. Wait... Look at what we got here..." Rachel said, in her New York City Lower East Side accent.

She rummaged through the other two bags she'd salvaged. One held food. The other, flashlights, batteries, and several plastic snap-glow sticks.

"Hey, doggies! We're not going to be blind after all."

She turned to her team.

She strapped the green glow sticks to three of the dogs' harnesses, Black Paw included.

"Much better," she murmured. "Time to head into the abyss."

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She placed one hand on the sled's frame.
“Slow and steady, guys.”

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Chapter V

It's Couteau not Cousteau

February 12th, 2025

Ar Raqqah, Syria

An explosion rocked the earth. A mortar landed nearby. Dust rained down on two men. Neither blinked. They casually brushed grit from their jackets.

“Who are these folks, Igor? Future clients?” Jacques asked.

“No worries. Their aim is awful,” Igor said, flicking dust from his coat. “Perfect customers.”

Jacques was a spy. An independent contractor, discreet, expensive, and indifferent to which country hired him. French intelligence used him frequently.

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Technically, he worked in counter-industrial espionage: uncovering leaks, insider theft, and stolen research for corporations and governments.

It was a quiet war, fought in boardrooms and server farms, and it had earned him more enemies than medals. Especially among the criminal networks and disgruntled insiders he'd exposed.

No one knew his real name, or age.

He went by **Jacques Couteau**, sometimes a business consultant, other times IT. Once, he'd even posed as a musician.

He had multiple passports. Lived in a crumbling château in France. Traveled constantly. Whatever he told people was just cover.

The château was falling apart long before he bought it.

On his days off, he patched stonework and rewired electrical systems, trying to fix what his American father had dubbed "*La ruine de mon garçon.*" The ruin of my boy.

It was a money pit. But Jacques didn't care. It took his mind off work. Though he didn't have to take just any job to pay for the *ruine*. He still

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made plenty of money when taking only the interesting ones.

He'd never married, much to his French mother's chagrin.

Perhaps she hadn't expected much from her firstborn, but she'd certainly expected grandchildren.

On a bright sunny day in February, the French government called, interrupting his latest attempt to patch the roof above the upstairs bathroom.

They had intel. Hector the Vector, a notorious arms dealer, was chasing a long-lost chemical weapon. They wanted Jacques to investigate. Was the weapon real? How dangerous was it? Should we bid for it?

The assignment was thin on details. But Jacques knew Hector. They'd crossed paths before, not dramatically, but enough to leave a mark.

Worse, Hector had access. The Russians had granted him, for a substantial fee, a permanent library card to their most sensitive world war II-era archives. Hector had deep pockets, asked few questions, and left no trail.

Jacques knew he had to be careful.

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If Hector caught wind that he was poking around about a chemical weapon, things could get complicated fast.

There were few people Jacques could trust, fewer still who wouldn't immediately tip off Hector.

Jacques needed someone discreet, dangerous, and morally flexible.

That's why he had called Igor Stogoff.

Igor wasn't just a mercenary. He was a broker of death.

Jacques had worked with him before. He trusted him... mostly. But Igor couldn't leave Syria. He was, in his own words, "*in the middle of a deal.*"

So, Jacques flew in.

"They're young, these ISIS fighters," Igor muttered as the two ducked into a shallow trench between crumbling buildings.

"Promised life under Muslim rules, the strictest application of Sharia texts. They were promised land, power, women, and money. Now they're not even sleeper cells. Just ghosts with guns. But they stole cash. Gold too. Lots of it. I'm selling them firepower before they die. I want that gold, Jacques. That's why I'm here."

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“Let’s move further along the trench,” Igor said.

“As I said,” Igor continued, “I’m working on a deal with these guys. They’re still on the fence. Maybe you can talk to them, on my behalf? You’ve got a charming way with murderers, Jacques.”

“Of course,” Jacques replied. “Once they get to know you like I do, they’ll trade their mothers for whatever you’re selling.”

Igor sat down beside a stack of ammunition crates, leaned back, and lit a cigarette.

“Welcome, Jacques! Welcome to my humble abode, as they say. Thank you for making the trip,” Igor said with a smile. “They can keep their mothers... I take cash or gold only.”

“You are welcome,” Jacques replied. “I do have a question though. Shouldn’t you be selling weapons in Ukraine and Russia right now?”

“Great question Jacques. Too many people pushing weapons in Ukraine right now. There is demand of course but way too much supply. I don’t have to tell you. Everyone and all their little sisters are trying to sell the latest and greatest coming out of their weapon factories. The eyes of the world are glued to the place. Too much competition. Who wouldn’t want their

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latest fancy weapons to be the one credited for having ended the war? The publicity would be priceless, maybe even a Noble Peace prize for the inventors? I don't like to be in the limelight Jacques. We are the same you and I. We work in the shadows. People in the shadows last longer. There isn't much on the news about ISIS anymore. I don't care about headlines, certainly not for myself. And I don't care about ending wars. That would mean the end of putting bread and vodka on my table. I want wars to last a long, long time. I want guns and ammunition purchases to be ongoing, monthly annuities. I am like the makers of home office printers my friend. I live off the selling of replacement ink cartridges. Sell more and more often and at a higher price. I swear ink cartridges have less and less ink in them. The cartridges I sell always have the same number of bullets in them. I've got to learn from home office printers' manufacturers..."

Igor stopped talking for a moment rubbing his chin, pensive. Then he continued.

"It's too soon for me to sell in Ukraine. Another year, maybe two. In the meantime, I've got these ISIS fools, my next favorite customers. You should really talk to these future clients of mine. Just introduce yourself. I've heard you do it. Igor imitates a thick French accent. "My name

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is Jacques Couteau. Then, as everyone does, they'll say, Jacques Cousssteau? We thought you were dead!" Igor laughed.

Igor Stogoff was a Russian mercenary by reputation, but in truth, more of a gun broker, a man who trafficked in favors, almost always paid for in firepower. He didn't care who pulled the trigger, so long as it wasn't aimed at him.

Jacques had never seen Igor behind a desk. Igor was always in the field: smoking a cigarette, selling weapons, or shooting at someone. He and Hector the Vector had crossed paths before. Same battlefield, same filthy business. Jacques called it the "war and death economy."

Jacques smiled and said, "It's *Couteau*, not *Cousteau*. Jacques *Louis* Couteau. *Couteau* means knife in French. You can call me Jack the Knife, if you'd like."

Igor laughed. He loved hearing Jacques correcting people who misunderstood his name.

Then Jacques added, "And yes, Jacques-Yves Cousteau is no longer with us. Great man. He had everything..."

Another mortar exploded nearby. Dust and grit fell over the two men again.

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“I don’t think your future clients know who Cousteau was,” Jacques said. “They don’t strike me as the type to care much about the oceans, or the future of the planet, for that matter.”

“You should spend more time in the trenches,” Igor said, gesturing for Jacques to sit beside him. “Men talk when they’re about to die. You hear real things down here.”

“I don’t disagree,” Jacques replied. “I’ve heard Al-Qaeda’s waiting on something new. Something deadly. Theatrical. Are you involved, Igor?”

“You know they won’t get anything that can’t be traced before they use it.” Jacques added.

Igor didn’t respond right away. He sat there, eyes narrowed, as if weighing whether Jacques was truly an ally, or just another variable to account for. Igor didn’t play chess. He found the board too limiting. But he *did* think in moves and sacrifices. Trust was a luxury. Information was currency. Timing was power.

There was more to gain by keeping Jacques close, at least for now. Better to feed him pieces of the truth and study his responses. If Jacques proved useful, he’d remain an asset. If not, there were other ways to keep tabs. Igor already had

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someone in mind. Someone Jacques wouldn't suspect. Someone who could get close and report back.

“Not this time,” Igor said. “Not this time. No one has this weapon. No one.”

He paused, drew a long breath. Just as he opened his mouth to continue, another blast cut him off. Sand and dust rained down over the trench.

Jacques brushed off his jacket.

Igor coughed.

“This is between you and me Jacques. Can I trust you?” Igor asked.

Jacques nodded.

Igor continued.

“When the Red Army took Straubing, in Lower Bavaria, they seized some files, sealed for decades. Just declassified. Or rather, let's say our mutual friend Hector the Vector *helped* get them declassified.”

Igor gave Jacques a knowing look.

“You ever been to Bavaria, Jacques?”

“Many times.”

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“If you’re truly interested,” Igor said with a grin, “there’s a chemical weapon waiting for you... in Canada.”

Jacques blinked. “Canada? Weren’t we just talking about Bavaria?”

“Bavaria to Canada. You’re going to love this story, my friend.” Igor smiled.

Then he handed Jacques a sleek, unfamiliar machine gun.

“You might need to return fire once or twice. Keeps my future ISIS clients engaged. Just aim high. Don’t hit them!”

Jacques examined the weapon.

“Modified Israeli Negev,” Igor explained. “New trigger system, digital sensors. Computer-assisted platform. Great with moving targets. Once they stop playing with their toys and themselves, I’ll give them the full demo.”

Jacques raised the weapon and fired three crisp rounds high into the sky, neatly over their attackers.

“Sure,” Jacques said.

“You remember I used to work for Russian intelligence?” Igor asked, grinning.

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“Of course.” Jacques gave the gun an appreciative glance. “Nice upgrade.”

“Then you’ll enjoy this.”

Igor launched into his story as if they weren’t being shelled at all.

“Dr. Munchen. Nazi chemist. Ran labs across Germany, one right near Dachau. Human experiments. The worst kind. In January ’44, he left Straubing. Took his Japanese assistant, rumored to be his lover, their baby, a young lab tech, and three SS soldiers. Quiet exit. Very hush-hush.”

A mortar landed close to them. The trench shook.

Igor, unfazed, popped open a crate and tossed Jacques a fresh magazine. Then he reloaded his own weapon, a different make, but also computerized. Sleek, lethal, and far too expensive to be anywhere near this trench.

From another compartment, Igor pulled out a battered bottle of *Eau-de-Vie*, Water of Life, a clear, fruit brandy, and two dented steel shot glasses. He set them down like it was a picnic.

He tilted his head, lips moving silently as he counted the seconds between bursts of gunfire from their unseen ISIS attackers.

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Then he poured.

“Here’s to doing business with bad shots,” Igor said with a grin. “It’s so good to see you, Jacques.”

Jacques smiled. “To you, Igor.”

They clinked glasses. Drank. Re-shouldered their weapons.

“Munche made it to the northern coast. But he didn’t last,” Igor said. “Dropped dead of a heart attack near Nienhagen. The soldiers buried him quietly. The lab tech bolted, vanished. But the woman, the baby, and the SS guards boarded a U-boat.”

Igor looked at Jacques and asked.

“It took me a while to figure out where they went. Want to guess?”

Jacques arched an eyebrow. “Let me guess. They went to Canada.”

“No, Jacques,” Igor said. “They went to Greenland.”

He poured another round, letting the moment breathe.

A burst of gunfire zipped overhead.

Both men reloaded, almost in sync.

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“Then to Canada,” Igor said.

It was lucky Igor carried some of the finest *Eau-de-Vie* Jacques had ever tasted, otherwise Jacques might’ve politely asked him to skip the theatrics and get to the point.

“Firing the latest tech on a live battlefield is a lot of fun Igor” Jacques said, adjusting the strap on his rifle. “Fun times, Igor. Fun times. Just curious: when these things jam, do you take them to the Apple Store?”

Igor burst out laughing.

“Great question! I miss the old days, Jacques. You could grab a rifle by the barrel and beat a man to death. Now? These beauties are so light. Break one and you don’t even have a paperweight left. Sure, you can stream tutorials... if you’ve got the time. Someone on YouTube will show you how to fix these things. But I sell. I don’t service. There’s no money in service. Try to get your home office printer serviced. Fat chance.”

“Smart man,” Jacques nodded. Then, shifting gears, he asked: “Where in Canada?”

Igor leaned forward, lowering his voice as if his future clients might be listening between shots and explosions.

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“Well... things get a little fuzzy the closer you get to the North Pole,” he said.

Igor checked his magazine, then continued.

“On February 14th, 1944, a German U-boat left a covert weather station on Greenland’s west coast and crossed to Baffin Island in Canada. They radioed in a few hours later: mission accomplished. But the sub never returned.”

Jacques listened intently.

“That same night, the Canadian Air Force lost contact with one of its planes in the area. No wreckage. No pilot. Next day, a blizzard rolls in... three weeks of whiteout.”

Igor continued.

“They had real storms in those days... the kind that erased men and machines. Search parties came up empty. And the Allies? They were busy prepping for D-Day. No time for mysteries, especially involving just one plane.”

Igor paused.

“Do you know how many Allied aircraft supported the D-Day invasion Jacques?” Igor asked.

“No?” Jacques responded.

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“Twelve thousand aircraft. That’s a lot of wings, Jacques.”

Igor smiled.

Another mortar barrage from the ISIS cell sent tremors through the trench. Igor muttered in Russian, as if scolding rowdy neighbors.

“Dayte nam peredokhnut’, idioty,” he muttered. (*Give us a break, you idiots.*)

Jacques squinted toward the source of the fire, then turned back to Igor.

“So why aren’t you in Canada chasing after this weapon yourself? Or did you already find it and now you’re sending me on a wild goose chase?” Jacques said.

Igor laughed. “No chasing wild geese for you, my friend. I swear. You might get chased by a polar bear or two or wolves. Wanna take one of these machine guns with you?”

Jacques fired a short burst toward their assailants, suppressive but non-lethal.

“Doesn’t seem like business is booming for you here, Igor.”

“I have faith,” Igor said with a grin. “And anyway, Hector gave the contract to someone else.”

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“Hector hired Zaid,” Igor said. “Sent him on a winter vacation in the Great North. I don’t know why. Zaid loves camels. I hear he loves them very much... desert heat. I can’t stand the heat, Jacques. You like the heat?”

“I prefer cold,” Jacques replied. “Hmm... Zaid. Did he bring Juju?”

“You know Juju?” Igor asked, raising an eyebrow. “Beautiful girl.”

“Yes. Beautiful. And deadly,” Jacques said. “Don’t get your hopes up. She prefers women... I hear.”

“Well, you never know, Jacques. You never know...” Igor said.

“Forever the optimist. I love you, Igor.” Jacques smiled, then steered him back. “So, how do you know so much about this trip?”

“Great question, my friend.” Igor grinned. “I’m good at my job.”

He opened another box, full of grenades. Casually pulled a pin, lobbed one toward the distant gunmen.

“Just noise,” Igor said, handing another grenade to Jacques. “Don’t throw too far.”

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“You’re very good at your job, Igor,” Jacques said, pouring another round of *Eau-de-Vie*. “That’s why I’m here. Not just for the drinks and entertainment.”

They downed their shots. Jacques pulled his pin and tossed the grenade just far enough to satisfy the show.

“Excellent form,” Igor said. Then, after a pause, “You remember I was telling you about the young lab assistant who vanished after Dr. Munchen’s heart attack?”

“Yes.”

“He ran. Deserted. Must’ve been spooked by something,” Igor said. “I tracked him to Demmin. That’s in Pomerania, northeast Germany. You ever been?”

“Many times,” Jacques said. “Fascinating place. After news broke that Hitler had offed himself, a bunch of townspeople followed suit. Couldn’t imagine living without their Fuhrer.”

“You don’t see that happening these days,” Igor added. “Do you think some Russians will off themselves after Putin dies?”

Jacques smirked. “Just about as many Americans will kill themselves when Donald Trump dies...”

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They laughed, sharp, bitter, knowing.

“To the die-hard tyrant lovers!” Jacques raised his glass. “May they follow their heroes into the grave sooner rather than later.”

They clinked glasses.

“That’s good stuff,” Jacques said, inspecting the label on the *Eau-de-Vie* bottle.

“There’s more to the story, Jacques,” Igor said.

“I meant the *Eau-de-Vie* is good,” Jacques replied.

“Yes, very good, very good. I’ll give you a case.” Igor said. “How do you like the machine gun?” he asked Jacques. “Fun, right?”

Jacques nodded, already reloading. “How much do you charge for the cartridges?”

“Free for you my friend,” Igor replied.

Igor leaned forward, eyes a little glassy, but voice steady.

“So, I search and search and search,” Igor said. “And finally, I find a diary. The lab assistant’s. Damaged, worn, but some parts still legible.”

Igor continued.

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“The lab rat wrote about what it was like working with Munchen’s team. Not much about the experiments, just bits. Some of the secret stuff, but incomplete. Mostly daily routines. Munchen’s team tested chemical weapons in Sachsenhausen, Natzweiler, and Neuengamme.”

Igor chuckled darkly. “One entry says he walked in on Munchen having sex with the Japanese woman, the other assistant. Must’ve been awkward... maybe not...”

Jacques let him ramble. He knew Igor got more talkative with each shot of *Eau-de-Vie*, and he wasn’t about to stop pouring.

The machine gun purred in Jacques’ hands. He fired a short burst, reloaded smoothly, and refilled their glasses.

“The final diary entries describe their trip from Bavaria to the Baltic coast. They were meant to board a submarine. But when Munchen collapsed, the assistant panicked, and ran.” Igor said.

Igor lobbed two grenades in quick succession. Dull thumps followed. Then he raised his glass.

“To people who keep diaries. Makes my life easy.” Igor said.

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“To Anne Frank,” Jacques added, meeting the toast.

Igor leaned into the story again, barely missing a beat.

“Hitler’s top chemist. Munchen was sent to strike North America with something new, something terrifying.” Igor explained.

“According to the lab rat’s notes, Dr. Munchen tested the chemical thoroughly. Prisoners died in agony. If the dose was strong enough, or applied to the right place in the right way, death came within minutes...” Igor added. “And then... the bodies exploded.”

Jacques raised an eyebrow.

“That’s what he wrote, Jacques. The bodies exploded!” Igor said.

Igor waved his arms. “Boom! Jacques.”

Just then, a mortar exploded nearby. Dust and grit rained down.

Igor didn’t even flinch. He kept talking while Jacques wiped dust from his empty glass, clearly annoyed.

“Aren’t you nervous these future ISIS clients of yours have drones that will soon hover above

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our heads and drop more than dust in our shot glasses?” Jacques asked.

“You can’t get drones around here, Jacques. Just about every single drone coming out the factories is shipped directly to Ukraine. Plus, the ISIS guys are old fashion. I have sold more Japanese swords around here than I thought would be possible. Put a lot of vodka and bread on my table selling Japanese swords Jacques. These ISIS guys all fantasize about chopping some poor bastard’s head off. It’s a rite of passage for them. They don’t score as many points with their God taking their enemies heads off with drones.”

Igor poured another round and returned to sharing his findings with Jacques.

“Small amounts of chemical resulted in hours of suffering. There was no stopping the chemical from burning through blood vessels. It acted like an acid poured on flesh but no amount of washing with any liquids could stop its effect. Dr. Munchen was thorough. His team tested every liquid known at the time from water to gasoline, to schnapps, etc.”

Jacques didn’t interrupt.

“They had enough to annihilate Toronto and Detroit. After that, the plan was to produce more,

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hidden away, protected by three SS commandos. Lean and mean.”

“A first strike,” Jacques murmured, almost to himself.

“Exactly.” Igor nodded. “Psychological and biological warfare. No safe water. Just blown-up bodies everywhere.”

Jacques’s brow furrowed, a rare thing.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Igor said, with a sly grin. “You want the name of the Asian woman.”

“That... and a few other things,” Jacques replied. “Like where the hell this weapon is.”

“No name for the Asian lady. Sorry. But the child... a baby boy. Name was Kato. Cute, no?”

Jacques raised an eyebrow. “Charming.”

As if on cue, the two men raised their weapons and fired skyward, bursts of harmless warning fire above Igor’s jumpy future clients.

“So, back in 1944, the lab assistant ran. The town was bombed. The Red Army found his body and the diary. No one ever connected it to what was seized in Bavaria or Dachau,” Igor said.

He smirked.

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“I got there before Hector the Vector did. I have good contacts too.”

Igor finished his *Eau-de-Vie*. Jacques did the same.

Igor continued.

“You know, Jacques, the Nazis destroyed records systematically, especially around human experiments, especially when private companies were involved. Some of these companies are still in existence today... You might have worked for some of them, or you might soon.”

Igor added.

“Orders were oral. No paper trail. Our lab rat died. His diary survived.”

“*C’est la vie*,” Jacques said. “*La vie vas te tuer*... Life will kill you...”

He leaned back, gun resting on his lap, and added:

“Back then, a journal was the only way to preserve your story. Now? Smartphones. Uploads. Podcasts about pain, streaming in real time.” Jacques said. “There was a time when you knew you had to grow up if you hadn’t already. Your mother no longer crowded the fridge door with your artwork under cute magnets. That was it. You were an adult. No more “ooh” “aah” ...

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Now, people upload their artworks on giant fridge doors called Instagram, TikTok... X... whatever... forever young... forever artists... forever seeking attention... getting none... paying for the fake kind...

“Can you imagine how World War II would have played out if every person had a smart phone then? A TikTok account?” Jacques asked.

He smirked.

“You’d probably advertise on Instagram Igor...” Jacques added.

Igor looked amused at the thought.

“Selfies of all sorts...” Igor laughed.

“We’re not any safer for it,” Jacques added.

“You might capture and upload massacres faster, but the missiles fly just as fast. You might not get to hit ‘upload’ in time.” Jacques said.

“Can you mount your smartphone on this thing?” Jacques asked, nodding at the weapon. “Livestream your kill count?”

“I like the way you think Jacques,” Igor grinned. “The ISIS kids will love that. Good for recruiting. Though they will want it mounted on their Japanese swords first of course.”

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By the time the sky lightened, the gunfire had stopped. Igor's future clients had either worn themselves out, or run out of ammunition.

Jacques stood, dusted himself off, and shook Igor's hand.

"Thanks for the *Eau-de-Vie*. And the fireworks."

"Thanks for not killing anyone," Igor replied. "Time for me to pull out my white flag and pay them a visit. I think they are ready to buy..."

"I'd say bring some of that amazing *Eau-de-Vie* with you but I don't think they drink..." Jacques said.

"Take my plane, Jacques," Igor said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "I won't need it for a few days. And honestly? I envy you. The cold up there in Canada, real cold. It clears the mind."

"Thank you, Igor. Good luck with your new customers," Jacques replied. "I'll send you a video of the Canadian Arctic."

Igor grinned. "Make sure I don't see you in it, means you're still alive."

Jacques smiled.

"Good luck to you too!" Jacques said.

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Jacques stepped into the same car that brought him to Igor the evening before.

Igor's driver dropped Jacques at the airport, where Igor's sleek private jet waited on the tarmac.

Inside the jet, a bottle of the same *Eau-de-Vie* was waiting in the seat beside him. Later, a beautiful young woman presented Jacques with a box, neatly wrapped in paper and ribbon.

“Is today your birthday?” she asked with a smile.

Jacques looked into her eyes.

“Early Valentine's Day gift... Igor is a special friend...” Jacques said.

Inside the box: one of the sleek, computerized machine guns Jacques had used in the trench.

“Your gift also came with four cases of *Eau-de-Vie* to take with you when we land,” she added. “Shall I keep pouring?”

She leaned in, voice playful. “Happy early Valentine's Day Jacques. Can I call you Jacques, Mr. Cousteau...? I thought you were...”

###

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Jacques looked at his watch. They had been travelling for over twenty-six hours. Refueling took longer than expected. Ground staff needed reminding that Igor Stogoff owned the plane. Without that name, they'd still be waiting on a tarmac between Syria and Canada.

The young woman who had welcome Jacques on the plane, Mariam, a stunning Pakistani woman in her mid-twenties coordinated everything without missing a beat.

Jacques had come to learn she was Igor's executive assistant, meaning, in her case, *chargé d'affaires* and then some. A diplomat heading missions in the absence of the ambassador, Igor.

She kept everything moving smoothly.

Jacques never had to show any of his passports, American or European.

Mariam poured herself some of that amazing *Eau-de-Vie* Igor had sent along. Jacques and Mariam drank to Igor's health and traded stories about him.

The plane touched down at Kimmirut Airport on Baffin Island, if "airport" was even the right word. The runway felt more like a frozen luge track than a landing strip. But Igor's crew specialized in impossible landings, often under fire, so this was tame by comparison.

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As Jacques stepped out into the wind-swept cold, Mariam who had kept his glass full and the conversation lively during the flight leaned in with a reminder.

“The crew will leave the four cases of *Eau-de-Vie* with your luggage, Monsieur Couteau.”

Jacques smiled, nodding. “Merci, Mariam. Please call me Jacques...”

He’d been to Baffin Island before. On more than one occasion, he’d accepted covert assignments to investigate mining operations for corporate clients. His work often involved unearthing what companies weren’t putting in their press releases. That kind of digging made friends, and enemies.

Now, he planned to reach out to both, friends first of course. Cautiously. Discreetly. He’d ask around: any unusual deaths? Any strange foreigners passing through? Odd behavior?

He would also visit his old friends, an Inuit family who had welcomed him warmly in the past.

They had their own distinctive way of welcoming friends, humorous skits, little reenactments of embarrassing or joyful life moments. The goal was simple: everyone should

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leave the celebration with a smile. It worked every time.

This time, the family invited Jacques to stay with them again. Neighbors were called, and the celebration grew.

At one point, a very old man was carried into the room in a chair. He had a permanent smile, barely moved, and didn't speak. But when Jacques greeted him, he sensed recognition, a warm, silent connection.

The man's name was Igaluk. The word around town was that he was over a hundred years old. He had lived through it all, children, grandchildren, great- and great-great-grandchildren. His presence alone seemed like a blessing, but it was more than that. To his family, he was a living shelter, a quiet dome of protection beneath which they all breathed a little easier. When Igaluk was near, the world felt less chaotic, less dangerous. His silence carried weight. His gaze, reassurance. It was as if time itself respected his authority and offered peace wherever he stood.

Later, some of the young men carried Igaluk and his chair into the center of the hall. He was going to be part of one of the skits lined up for the evening, a moment everyone anticipated with reverent joy.

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Jacques had brought three of the four Eau-de-Vie cases Igor had gifted him. The crowd drank heartily.

Naturally, Mariam had arranged for the alcohol to be declared as medicinal supplies at the airport. The border attendant hadn't asked many questions. He was sick himself and earned two bottles of Water-of-Life for his troubles.

A much younger man stood beside Igaluk and announced that while the old man rarely stood these days, he always rose for this particular skit.

Despite visiting the family in the past, Jacques had never met Igaluk or seen the performance. Tonight, would be his first.

Sure enough, Igaluk stood slowly, but proudly, and held perfectly still while the younger man next to him danced in a lopsided, limping fashion, flailing his arms for balance.

The crowd howled with laughter.

Jacques couldn't help but smile. It was genuinely funny.

One of Igaluk's great-granddaughters, Margaret Amka, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks, leaned in to explain between fits of giggling:

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“Igaluk loved to tell the story of a man he once guided to a secret rendezvous with a submarine, in 1944” she said.

“Igaluk barely made it out alive. The submarine was sunk, and the man he’d led disappeared into a cave with others who’d arrived on the submarine, never to be seen again.”

She broke into more laughter, then struggled to her feet and shouted:

“Time for more medicine!”

The crowd cheered.

“Thank you, Igor,” Jacques thought.

However dangerous the submarine visitors may have been, Igaluk never tired of recounting how the man he guided tried to warm himself by hopping on one foot and flapping his arms, thanks to a bum leg.

Any excuse to reenact that absurd image was seized with glee.

Later, Jacques quietly questioned several of Igaluk’s relatives. A few of them still remembered the location clearly. For many years, Igaluk had been able to describe every detail of his journey to the coast and the strange visitors that had come out of the submarine.

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But the area had changed drastically since World War II. Everyone agreed the search should begin at the new mining building, the one with the security station on its grounds. From there, Jacques would need to rent a snowmobile.

How much trust could Jacques place in an old tale, retold countless times, often through a haze of alcohol?

While most pointed to the mining facility as the starting point, others, slurring their words, claimed the site lay much farther north, some even insisted it was on the coast of James Bay, not even on Baffin Island.

With no better leads, Jacques had little choice.

The following day, on February 13th, Jacques rented a snowcat. It was the fastest and safest way for him to reach his first destination, the mining station.

###

Five hours after leaving Igaluk's village, Jacques passed the mining facility and the adjacent security station. He didn't stop.

His first stop was the inn just as some in Igaluk's clan had recommended. Clean, quiet,

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and close to the mining station. There was no other accommodation in the area.

Jacques parked the snowcat and made his way to the inn's front desk. He rented a room. He brought his suitcase, and the last bottle of Igor's *Eau-de-Vie* he had left.

He set the bottle beside the bed.

"Saving this one for a special occasion," he murmured.

According to Igaluk's granddaughter, the terrain ahead would get rough.

"Get a dogsled," she'd said. "Snowmobiles won't get you everywhere."

Jacques had nodded. "Good, I prefer dogsleds over snowmobiles anyway."

Jacques crossed the road to the sled rental shop, Samuk's Rental, where the smell of fuel and dog fur mixed in the cold air.

"Hello. My name is Samuk. How can I be of assistance?"

"Hello. I'm Jacques. A very beautiful lady with an amazing singing voice, Margaret Amka I believe her name is, told me I could rent a dogsled from you?"

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“Margaret Amka! One with a friendly spirit. Of course, my wife. You heard Margaret sing?”

“I was invited to a party where I met an older gentleman named Igaluk. Margaret took the time to explain to me why Igaluk was standing still while another gentleman was jumping up and down next to him. Near the end of the evening, Margaret sang a beautiful song: ‘The Life I’ve Lived’. Gorgeous voice.” Jacques said. “Margaret said you would help?”

“Of course, of course,” Samuk replied. “You want a dogsled. That’s good because I don’t have any snowmobiles left. I rented all nine of them this morning to a group of hunters.”

“They weren’t regular hunters,” Samuk said. “Too quiet. Not drinking. Foreign hunters always drunk.”

He went on about his other customers...

“I’ve been very busy today. The head of the mining security team, Kate, had already reserved a dogsled with fourteen dogs, which she took to the security station. Very pretty lady Kate.” Samuk said.

“Very friendly lady. Very friendly. Kate always wants to give me a tip!” He laughed. “I told her, don’t tip Samuk, that’s me. Tip the dogs. I sell treats. I’ll add it to your bill.”

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“All I have left is a smaller dogsled. Eight dogs. They are fast, but you can’t load too much.” Samuk added.

Samuk, sized Jacques, looking him up and down.

“Good thing you’re not too big. The dogs are in good shape but you can’t carry too much. What brings you around here?” Samuk asked.

“Sightseeing,” Jacques responded.

“Perfect! When are you leaving?” Samuk asked.

“Tomorrow morning. Is that ok? Will the dogs be ready?” Jacques asked.

“Sure. Where are you staying?” Samuk asked.

“The inn across the street.” Jacques pointed toward the modest building across the road.

“Nice place. Good choice. The best!” Samuk said. “The dogs will be ready. And their treats.”

He laughed and added, “I’ll put it on your bill.”

Jacques stepped outside, feeling confident. He preferred dogsleds over motors, silent, dependable, adaptable. The kind of transport that didn’t scream.

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He started crossing the snowy road, already thinking ahead. Once in his room, he'd draw out a map, merging Igaluk's oral accounts with the topography Igor had supplied. No electronics. Just pen, paper, and instinct.

Behind him, he heard Samuk shouting:

“Monsieur Jacques! Monsieur Jacques!”

He turned, puzzled, and then saw it. A white pickup truck barreling toward him. Fast. Out of control.

Jacques lunged. Rolled.

The truck skidded to a stop just inches from his face. The scent of rubber filled his nose.

He lay there for a second, staring at the truck. He hadn't been under one in a while.

He stood up and brushed himself off, still focused on his plan for the next day.

A woman had stepped out of the truck. Flushed, breathless. Saying something, apologizing, maybe.

“Puppy in a what...” Jacques thought.

But before Jacques could respond, Samuk appeared, holding a pink paper.

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“Your receipt, Monsieur Jacques!” Samuk said cheerfully, handing it over. Then, turning to the woman:

“Absolutely the opposite of what you do on ice. You never slam the brakes. It locks the wheels. Then you skid...”

Jacques accepted the receipt with a nod. He turned and walked away as Samuk carried on explaining what to do and not to do when driving a truck on icy roads.

Jacques had other priorities.

In his room at the inn, lying flat on the bed, Jacques pulled out his notebook and pen. He began sketching. Positioning. Calculating.

He reviewed what he knew, what Igor had told him, what Igaluk's family had shared.

The players. The movements. The stakes.

And then he thought about the woman in the truck who almost killed him as he was crossing the road.

“Beautiful woman... Was her name Puppy?” Jacques thought.

He drifted into sleep.

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Chapter VI

Hello? Hola? Salam? Moshi Moshi? Алло?
Sukoon? Bonjour? F*ck, F*ck, F*ck...

February 14th, 2025

Baffin Island

Kate...

Kate hadn't expected to hear from Rachel again until it was time for her to return, hopefully with enough polar bear footage to satisfy Vastan Energy's PR team. The clock was ticking.

Rachel had told Kate her personal life was a cycle of cursing at her phone between doomscrolling posts from hateful politicians and psychopathic CEOs, and then going off-grid into nature. No phone. No electronics. No plugging of any kind.

To which Kate had said:

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“You are in the right place. Not much plugging around here. Whatever color your undies may be. But remember you have a deadline.”

Rachel’s phone would be turned off.

Her radio would be off as well so as not to alert bears of her presence. At least once Rachel got close to the cave.

Kate knew Rachel would treat this Arctic shoot like a covert op. No pings. No noise. No signs.

Kate would do the same. The two of them had been part of covert ops while in Syria. Kate, a member of the Canadian Special Forces and Rachel leading her own small unit attached to the U.S. Army Battlefield Surveillance Brigades. That’s how they met.

When you have experienced living the life of a soldier and have volunteered for so many life-threatening missions, you don’t go back to living life any differently. You prepare, you think through every eventuality, you plan, you play out scenarios in your head. What could go wrong? What if?

Rachel might have softened her approach to life a little, Kate thought.

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After all, the red lace undies Rachel was wearing were unexpected... But even if Rachel wasn't as prepared as Kate had known her to be when they were on Syrian battlefields, she knew Rachel would catch up fast. And that she would be a tough adversary for bears and humans alike.

Kate had been in her office when she was alerted that a sudden blizzard had formed and was headed toward the mining station and the surrounding area.

Her second in command, John Glenn, had walked in.

“Is your friend okay? The storm's heading straight for the station. Does she know?”

Kate glanced up.

“She'll be fine.”

Kate wasn't worried, not because Rachel wasn't safe, but because she didn't want Rachel to be found. Not yet.

She knew Rachel to be a smart, resilient soldier who could take care of herself. She was not likely to call in to be rescued. The dogs were often way more reliable than a team of rescuers when it came to making it through a storm on Baffin Island and getting you safely to the nearest “niche”.

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In any case, visibility would be near zero or less and no communications would be possible.

Kate tracked the storm. As she had expected, Rachel must have felt it full on based on where she was heading. Still, she wasn't worried about her friend.

Kate looked up to make sure no one was approaching her office.

A glass wall facing the main area where her team had their desks, including John Glenn, in the open, did not give Kate as much privacy as she wanted at times.

She moved her laptop slightly so that no one passing by her office could see the screen.

She turned on an app that displayed the storm formation and its progress.

She looked disappointed as if she expected more information.

Her cell phone buzzed starting to dance on her desk. She did not recognize the number.

The phone buzzed again.

She looked at it pensively. Did she not remember Rachel's number? Could it be Rachel? Did her friend need help? Wasn't she in the middle of the storm by now?

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Kate reached for the phone. The buzzing had stopped. A text flashed.

“Why wasn’t I told?”

Kate put her phone face down on her desk.

She checked her laptop again.

Kate sat up. She changed from her standard security uniform, plenty warm for daily duties involving spending little time outside her office, or within the many mine buildings, to her own catsuit, almost identical to the one she gave Rachel.

She packed her laptop and left her office.

“I am headed out,” she told her team. “I’ll be in touch.”

She checked her text messages as she walked away. Then she dialed:

“Hello?”

###

Hector the Vector...

Hector stood on the upper deck of one of his superyachts, savoring the view.

The sun was blinding out here, but his sunglasses were, as always, up to the task—each lens cut from a different designer frame. One

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slightly oversized, cobalt blue; the other sleek and tinted amber. Not from any single brand. He'd combined them himself, merging a pair of Dolce & Gabbana and a pair of Prada into a singular, off-kilter creation.

He wore them not for style, but because of an eyesight issue that had ended his shot at a professional soccer career. The lenses corrected his vision just so, especially under harsh sunlight. Mocking the fashion houses while getting exactly what he needed. That was just a bonus.

His t-shirt followed the same logic—half Hugo Boss, half Dolce & Gabbana, stitched down the center and branded, unofficially, as Dolce Boss, *Sweet Boss*. It had become something of a signature, even if he only wore it on the boat.

He rarely altered garments for business meetings, but here, he preferred his own line of twisted tribute.

The seamstress who crafted his split outfits, paid generously and anonymously, was the daughter of a woman who'd worked with Hector's mother back in the day. A quiet nod to the woman who raised him and died too young of breast cancer.

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He had yet to decide which bathing trunks deserved to be *Frankensteined* next. He was still weighing the aesthetic risk of combining Tom Ford with Versace.

He spent most of his life aboard those sleek, 200-foot vessels now. He owned four, identical in design, and moved between them mostly by helicopter.

He also owned an icebreaker, a luxurious icebreaker. It was waiting for him off the coast of Baffin Island. All of his boats could accommodate for the take off and landing of one of his Harrier Jets. All capable of taking off and landing vertically, of flying at over 700 miles per hour. Hector could be where he needed to be when he needed to be.

The boats were stationed strategically around the globe, never far from American, Russian, Chinese, or other major powers' warships.

He always kept a safe distance from his customers, but never so far, he couldn't close a deal quickly.

He could anchor anywhere in the world and either take a short walk on a beach or fly off in his helicopter if a rendezvous called for it.

Most off the time he would connect via Zoom alternating meetings with dips in the

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yacht's pool. Today, the view was *La Plage De Calvi*, in Northern Corsica, Napoleon's birth island.

He had assembled what he thought was the best team possible to acquire a weapon that was created for one of his idols, Adolf Hitler. He believed it was only fitting to bring the weapon back to life.

Hector had always been fascinated by how Hitler and his followers pioneered so many "solutions", as he liked to put it. In his mind, weapons were solutions, just that. He always thought that Nazis and Japanese armies and scientists should have worked together closely. What great solutions would have come out of that, he thought.

While the German and the Japanese alliance rarely involved field activities, or naval operations based on his research, Hector had found that the countries' scientists had come together and shared resources and information.

Biological warfare was discussed, and information, samples, and equipment were exchanged, primarily via submarines. There were no encrypted networks back then to speedily exchange large amounts of data, especially pictures.

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This led Hector to finding surprising information when digging in Russian archives where documents seized during the liberation of concentration camps and other German facilities were made available to him.

He wasn't surprised when his research unraveled a collaboration that had been kept very secret for a very long time.

He paid well and plenty of people were pleased to pass on dusty, barely legible, decomposing manuscripts that no one had cared to look at for decades.

He took care of going through these himself, as he was fluent in German and Russian.

His first language was Spanish. He was born in Argentina and had lived in many places around the world traveling with his father who was a low-level embassy worker. His mother had died when Hector was five years old.

Hector was a fan of soccer. He had played throughout his youth until he graduated with a degree in business. He wanted to be a professional soccer player. His father wouldn't hear of it. He thought Hector should join him, follow in his footsteps, and work as a civil servant.

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Hector had been impressive on a soccer field. His aim was precise, strait. They called him *Héctor el vector*.

He was the one taking penalty kicks, corner shots, always in the spotlight, until an opponent's cleat came up high and almost blinded him.

After that, his soccer career was over. But following in his father's footsteps was out of the question.

He always thought that his nickname meant a lot more anyway. And he was right.

Hector had made a name for himself and a fortune selling arms, especially bioweapons.

In biology, a vector transmits a pathogen, a disease, like a biting insect or tick. *Hector the Tick* was not going to work out, but *Hector the Vector*... the carrier of death, that had a ring to it.

Hector had never learned Japanese. He relied on third-party contacts to track down whatever documentation still existed about Japan's wartime laboratories and their collaborations with German ones.

But he thought he should hire at least one reliable translator to join his team. Juju's

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discipline and Zaid's ruthlessness made them the ideal recovery team.

He called one of his stewards after coming out of the pool.

“Ask these ladies on the beach if they'd like to join us here for cocktails.”

He pointed to a group of young women sunbathing on the beach, *La Plage De Calvi*.

“Let's have a party. Let's celebrate!” He smiled...

“I'm in a good mood... I feel the world is about to remember who I am.”

Hector picked up his phone and dialed.

“Hola?”

###

Zaid...

Zaid stepped out of his tent, impatient, snapping his gloves on. He barked orders to the two riders with him:

“Clear the snow off the machines, get moving.”

He'd spent the storm hunched over his copy of the map Hector had given to him, a copy of the one Dash had used to find the cave. It was far

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too outdated to show recent installations or any modern infrastructure.

If he could get a connection, he'd pull updated satellite data.

He hated being half-blind.

He scanned the horizon through his binoculars. Nothing. Just the storm's afterbirth, blown snow and silence, thick as ice. He'd hoped to catch a glimpse of that dogsled again.

Just as he adjusted focus, the radio crackled... Juju's voice. He grabbed it.

"Juju."

"I've got something. I searched the cave while I waited out the storm."

"No details on the radio," Zaid said flatly.

"Dash might have attracted unwanted attention... I'm a quarter mile past the ridge, where we found Dash's sled. Seal the cave. Meet me here. I'll wait for you. Make it quick." Zaid ordered.

"Got it," Juju replied.

Zaid turned to the two riders beside him and keyed in the shared channel for all teams to hear his instructions.

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“Move out. Three teams of two. Check every ridge, every slope. Look for mine entrances, cabins, anything that could offer shelter.” Zaid said.

He added: “I’ll scan maps while I wait for Juju. I’ll send targets as I find them. Juju and I will join the search in a little while.”

“One more thing,” Zaid continued. “One of you scans with binoculars. The other stays on comms. Use your drones. The woman we’re chasing is either frozen under snow, holed up in a building, or hiding in a mine. Move.”

Snowmobiles flared to life and tore into the whiteness.

Zaid pulled a tablet from his gear. After a few failed attempts, it connected. He started scanning for sites, structures, installations, anything that could hide a woman, and a team of dogs.

His phone rang. A name flashed on the screen. He answered.

“Salam.”

###

Juju...

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Juju had pulled her snowmobile just inside the cave mouth as the storm threatened to roll in. Now the sky was clearing. Time to rejoin Zaid and the team.

She secured the metal case and the backpack she'd found. There was something to salvage from this mess, if they couldn't catch the woman who'd put the mission in peril, at least they had this. Zaid would want to see it.

She double-checked the explosives she had laid for maximum collapse of the cave, then shoved her snowmobile forward, pushing it as far out of the cave as the terrain would allow.

The storm had piled up a ridge of snow at the entrance. Juju gunned the throttle and climbed it, standing on the sled as it bucked and surged over the snowbank. Once clear, she turned and rode the slope beside the cave, high enough for a safe detonation.

She stopped her snowmobile and pulled out her phone, tugging off her right glove with her teeth.

“Bye, Dash,” she muttered.

She tapped the screen. The detonation rocked the air, louder than she had expected. The cave entrance collapsed in a thunder of falling rocks and ice.

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An avalanche tumbled down from higher up the mountainside, sealing the cave for good.

“Good one,” Juju said softly under her breath, pleased.

She kissed her phone and put it away.

Before she could turn the sled around and roar off toward Zaid, the phone’s ringer blasted *Lara’s Theme* from the movie *Dr. Zhivago*. Juju rolled her eyes and answered.

“Moshi moshi?”

###

Igor...

Igor waved goodbye to Jacques as his car took him to the airport.

Jacques was a good friend, Igor thought. He had come through for him on a number of occasions.

Usually, Igor stayed clear of Hector’s business, unless a cut of the profits was involved. Hector didn’t mess with small projects. Working with him was always worth considering.

As Igor had explained to Jacques, Hector hadn’t asked him to join the mission to retrieve the Nazi-Japanese bioweapon.

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Given the crazy, trigger-happy ISIS group he was dealing with these days, Igor thought he might want to keep a close eye on how things unfolded.

“The same *idioty*, idiot, that shot at me and Jacques might one day be able to afford Hector’s weapons, and end up lobbing nasty chemicals in my direction before agreeing to buy some more sensible machine guns and other weapons from me.” Igor said out loud. “Same deadly result. Different kind of pain... What am I going to do? Sell printers and ink? *Nyet*.”

That’s why Igor had insisted Jacques flew his plane to get to Canada. Mariam, Igor’s trusted assistant, would ensure things ran smoothly. More importantly, she would keep Igor informed of Jacques’s whereabouts at all times. And as was Igor’s habit, he would himself be ahead of the game. Igor had just pretended to be staying back in Syria. Shortly after waving Jacques off he headed to a private airfield where he arranged to be flown to Baffin Island and arrive there ahead of Jacques.

Spying on Jacques was risky. The man’s whole business was espionage. It had even earned him a castle in France. Not exactly Versailles, from the pictures Jacques had shared. The place looked like it had surrendered to

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gravity years ago. But that was the point. A crumbling estate made for a perfect cover. Jacques played the noble heir with just enough charm and clumsiness to seem harmless, probably spent more time hitting his thumb than the nails when patching up the roof. No one would suspect a spy disguised as a half-competent handyman.

Still, everyone needs a hobby, Igor thought.

“Lucky Jacques,” he continued. “He always finds time for patching... and takes very good care of every patch.”

Igor wondered:

“Who is going to pay the most? Hector? Jacques’ employers? There could be a lot of other buyers...”

Igor’s phone rang out loudly.

“Алло?”

###

Mariam...

Mariam had looked forward to wearing the brand-new parka she had received for her birthday from her mother, Sri, now living in Nepal.

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Mariam tried the garment on in front of the custom Jonathan Adler Rococo gold wall mirror Igor had installed in the jet's bedroom.

She had instructed the crew to get ready for takeoff after waving Jacques goodbye. But she never gave the order for the plane to leave.

She would soon disembark as well. She did not want Jacques to know.

She saw Jacques make his way inside the airport hangar and then drive away toward the village.

While waiting for Jacques to be well on his way, she filled the jet's tub with warm water.

As the water slowly filled the gold-plated tub, she checked how the parka fitted her body from different angles.

She was naked beneath the parka. Its lining brushed her skin with a softness that stirred the memory of Jacques' touch. Peace and affection were luxuries, rare, fleeting, and never guaranteed in her line of work.

Her job took her wherever Igor sent her. She spent a lot of times in war zones. Most armies avoided frozen wastelands. It's hard to unpin grenades with mittens. Maybe generals were learning to avoid blizzards.

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She was puzzled at the lack of common sense in the way men conducted warfare. Maybe the fact that men were in charge explained that they fought each other to death to begin with. She intended to leave them at it sooner rather than later.

She had nearly made it out. She was planning to retire before thirty. Igor paid her well, very well. She followed the FIRE philosophy, saving aggressively, investing smart: Financial Independence Retire Early.

Her dream was already taking shape: a house in New Mexico, where the sun was generous, the air soft, and comfort could be found in fabric... or in the hands of someone she chose, maybe someone like Jacques but without missions. Without masks. Including occasional trips to Paris and of course to fashionable ski slopes to show off future parkas. This time, the tundra would have to do.

For once, she would spend some time walking in the snow. It had not happened in a long time. You would think Igor would do business on the slopes of the Swiss Alps. Or, even in Siberia. Igor loved the cold weather. He mentioned how he missed feeling his face go numb, that is without drinking vodka.

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Mariam thought she'd give Jacques a long leash. Igor had warned her. Jacques is a professional. He will see you coming a mile away. The parka was white. She could get a little closer... perhaps.

While Jacques had fallen in a deep sleep on Igor's plane after ingesting a sizeable amount of *Eau-de-Vie*, Mariam did review the material Igor had sent to her about the bioweapon Jacques was after.

Jacques had been very cuddly with Mariam. She enjoyed that. And she had plenty of *Eau-de-Vie* herself.

She took a look at the crumpled sheets on the bed.

She could have used a nap. But she had to set things so she could track Jacques' progress from a safe distance and report to her boss. Igor would want daily updates at a minimum.

Mariam's phone rang. She was lounging in the tub. The last time she would feel warm before what could be hours, possibly days of very cold weather. She picked up the phone, water lapping softly around her.

"Sukoon?"

###

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Jacques...

About two hundred feet from the cave, just beyond Juju's line of sight, Jacques, in a sleek Arctic suit not unlike the one Kate had selected for Rachel, pulled gently on the reins of his dogsled.

The dogs stopped instantly. Silent. Disciplined.

He watched a plume of snow, ice, and dust rise in the distance... an explosion. He tapped his lead dog's harness, steered the team toward the source.

At the blast site, he dismounted. Removed his helmet. Stood completely still.

Nothing moved. No voices. Just the faint, fading whine of a snowmobile engine, disappearing into the hills.

He moved—quickly, fluidly, his balance precise, as if the uneven mix of snow and ice beneath his boots were no more difficult to navigate than a garden path.

He let the sound trail off before moving closer to what had once been the cave's entrance.

Now, it was a smooth slope of debris, about twenty feet high, blanketing the base of the mountain like a snow-made tomb.

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The steep rock face loomed above.

He pulled a folded piece of paper and a compass from his pocket.

“That was my cave! What did my cave ever do to you?” Jacques murmured, looking in the direction the snowmobile had gone.

He turned back to the mound of rubble. A glint of metal caught his eye.

He climbed the rubble carefully, then knelt to inspect the object.

A curved piece of metal, old, weathered. It looked riveted like a piece of an aircraft fuselage. No markings. Buried for a long time.

He pried it loose, slung it under one arm, and returned to his sled.

Fresh snowmobile tracks cut a clear path away from the blast site. He studied them, then angled his sled to follow at a distance. He didn't need to get too close.

“People who go around blowing up caves usually aren't the friendly type,” Jacques said, speaking to the dogs. “Wouldn't you agree, guys?”

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He paused, scanning the horizon, eyes narrowing as he searched for a glimpse of the departing snowmobile.

Looking at the dogs, he said:

“My name is Jacques Couteau, by the way. I don’t think we were properly introduced this morning. Sorry, I had to rush you here. Blame the storm. I wanted to get here as quickly as possible. Looks like I’m too late.”

He reached into one of the bags strapped to the sled.

“Treats! Come and get ’em.”

Jacques continued addressing the dogs:

“We’ve got a lot of running to do if we want to catch up with that snowmobile. We might have a chance to save a lot of innocent people... and puppies, of course. You don’t usually blow up a cave full of treats... You take all the treats out first.”

Jacques’ phone vibrated in his pocket.

“Mom? I can’t hear you very well. I’m working. Mom?... *Maman*?... I’ll try you later...”

Jacques pocketed his phone and hopped on the sled.

He felt the phone vibrate again.

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“Bonjour?”

###

Rachel...

Rachel checked her watch. The storm had lasted just over an hour.

The dogs pulled her and the bear cubs into the tunnel, slowly, steadily. They had started moving as soon as the wind outside the mine had died down.

She had no idea where the rails would lead.

Thanks to the lights she'd found in the headless man's bags, she could see just far enough ahead to stop the team in case of danger, as long as they kept a slow pace.

So far, the track ran flat, no dips, no climbs.

It suggested to Rachel they were moving beneath the mountain. No turns either. No sharp ones.

She checked her compass again. Still on the fritz.

No radio signal. No cell or satellite connection.

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She'd hoped to catch something, anything, from her pursuers by turning on the radio she'd taken from Dash. But nothing came through.

They probably changed frequencies once they realized she might have Dash's radio. She left it on, just in case.

There were no sounds behind her. That, at least, was good.

For now, it seemed she and the dogs were gaining distance from their pursuers.

About twenty minutes into the tunnel the dogs stopped. Rachel jumped off the cart. She pulled out her tranquilizer gun and flashlight.

She stepped in front of the dogs and continued forward a few feet. The rail stopped right in front of a large metal door. A blinking green light caught her eye.

“Is this an elevator, Black Paw? You and the doggies fetched me an elevator? We should play fetch more often.”

She pressed on the button below the light. The door opened, sliding into the tunnel's wall. This wasn't a mine tunnel. Whatever it was.

It was a very large elevator. It accommodated the flat rail cart. There were rails that allowed for the cart to be pulled inside by the dogs.

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“Get in guys.”

The dogs, led by Black Paw, entered the elevator.

Rachel stood by their side. Still holding her gun and flashlight.

Once inside, she pressed on the up button.

A light flickered above their heads. The elevator moved smoothly, very slowly.

Rachel timed the ascent. A long five minutes passed by before the elevator stopped.

The door opened.

Rachel pointed her gun out. A huge room welcomed her and her party.

It was dimly lit but left no corner in the dark.

Rachel quickly assessed that no one was there. No one and nothing. The place was totally empty. Except for rails that lined up perfectly.

The cart could be pulled into the room.

“Let’s go in”

The dogs pulled the cart inside the room. Rachel stood by the door, waiting for the cart to clear it safely.

The elevator stayed open.

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“Where are we? Maybe we can get a signal here.”

She holstered her weapon and fixed her flashlight to her belt. She reached for her phone and dialed Kate.

She walked around the room, lifting her arm up, trying to catch a signal.

“F*ck, F*ck, F*uck...”

###

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Chapter VII

The Last Dive

February 14th, 1944

Baffin Island

Ice is noisy...

In northern Canada's wilderness, along the southern coast of Baffin Island, the ice that blankets the water throughout most of the harsh winter can get boisterous. It crackles. It bangs. It pops. Snaps and rattles.

The ice will randomly fill the frigid air with drumming sounds, a symphony of guttural raspy noises stirred and carried in all directions by the glacial winds.

When they are not hunting seals, the polar bears sleep soundly through this ruckus.

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The bears are used to the ranting and raving of the ice.

They don't have to hibernate like black or brown bears, though pregnant female polar bears will come close to a hibernation state and give birth in a warmer, more isolated and protected place.

And, sometimes, a quieter one.

On January 9th, 1944, at exactly 1 AM, the ice cracked like never before to the ears of the suddenly awoken nearby wildlife.

In an isolated cove, an unmarked German Type II U-Boat broke through the ice a little less than one hundred and fifty feet from the shoreline.

First the submarine's conning tower pushed against the compact sheet of ice fracturing it wide enough to let the submarine's periscope pop through the fissure.

Then the periscope slid up above the ice's surface as high as it could go. It proceeded to complete two 360 degrees scans of its surroundings.

The submarine's captain, Dieter Von Ruden, scrutinized the horizon in all directions to ensure

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that the submarine could continue to surface safely.

The ice was sparkling, reflecting the light from the stars illuminating a dreamily clear night sky.

“Poor conditions for a stealth mission!” the captain said out loud.

He could not tell through the periscope where the shoreline began as the water and the grounds were covered by the same glittering white shroud of snow and ice.

Von Ruden had ordered surfacing as close to the shoreline as he gauged was safe given the depth of the water in the cove selected for what had been referred to as a most critical secret rendezvous by his superiors.

The fate of the Third Reich rested on this mission being a success.

After inspecting the landscape surrounding the submarine for a third time, Von Ruden gave the order to continue surfacing.

“Blow the main ballast tanks!”

Von Ruden heard his order repeated by his second in command.

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The tower resumed its upward move, arising slowly, shattering the ice around it which cracked and snapped louder and louder.

The tower finally halted its climb, having pulled above the ice half of the cigar-shaped hull of the submarine.

No doubt having awakened a few polar bears, at least for a moment.

On the nearby shore, startled by the noise, Werner Seitzer instinctively reached for his hunting rifle.

He had dozed off, sitting on his backpack while waiting for the submarine. He wore gloves but his hands were stiff, almost numb.

He tried to wrap his hands around his weapon but could not get a firm grip. He would never have been able to raise the rifle, aim and shoot had he needed to defend himself.

Thankfully he did not need to use it. He did not have to fend for his life. There were no predators threatening him. No Canadian army patrol. No hungry bear. Just ice polished to near perfection by the relentless freezing wind, sweeping snow over its surface, and, of course, the very quiet Inuit guide, Igaluk,

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Werner had hired Igaluk to lead him to the rendezvous point with the submarine. It was the third time Werner had asked Igaluk to accompany him on an expedition around Baffin Island.

Werner wanted to make sure he knew a guide well before taking him on an important mission.

Igaluk had shown he was very familiar with the area. The Inuit was reliable. Never asked questions. He was always on time. Never drunk.

After Werner was awakened by the submarine's surfacing, he glanced at Igaluk. The Inuit was still standing in the same place since the two men arrived at their destination.

Igaluk watched calmly as Werner stood up and reached for his rifle.

Igaluk did not think that he was in danger of getting shot by Werner, not even accidentally. Clearly Werner was too cold to use his weapon.

Igaluk knew he was safe, whatever nightmare Werner had been woken up from by the submarine surfacing through the ice.

Igaluk remarked in a soft-spoken voice in his tribe's dialect:

“Were you going to shoot yourself to save yourself from freezing to death?”

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Werner did not speak Inuit very well.

“Could you please translate that for me?” he asked Igaluk.

“Of course, my apologies” replied Igaluk. “Are these the friends you were waiting for?”

Igaluk pointed to the dark mass slowly rising through the ice.

“I am sure it’s them,” said Werner.

“I would not expect too many submarines around these parts.”

Igaluk had always insisted on being paid in full, upfront, before agreeing to accompany Werner on his journeys.

Guiding people around Baffin Island was not unusual, even though the world was at war. But Igaluk had sensed from the get-go that there was something strange, downright suspicious, about Werner.

This time Werner had told him that he was helping friends rejoin their families in the U.S, travelling through Canada to their final destination.

“*Ujuq!* (Unbelievable)” thought Igaluk.

Werner had showed Igaluk papers bearing what looked like legitimate seals from the

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Canadian government and he offered Igaluk a lot more money than the Inuit had received from him on prior occasions.

Igaluk's family needed the money. He had no choice but to take the job. Whatever reservations he had about helping Werner, refusal wasn't an option. Still, he made one thing clear: he was a guide, nothing more. He would not lead Werner into a crack in the ice, but neither would he save him from one. Just as a hunting rifle wouldn't stop the cold from blackening a man's nose and ears, Igaluk made no promises of protection.

Igaluk would have left Werner freeze to death if Werner had napped for much longer.

The submarine's tower emerging loudly through the ice saved Werner's life.

"The money was good but did not buy that much after all." Igaluk thought.

Werner, now standing up, started bouncing from one foot to the other, waving his arms, hoping his body would warm up.

That was quite an amusing sight to Igaluk's who stood silent and perfectly still, exerting as little energy as possible.

Igaluk had noticed that Werner had a bum leg when they first met. He was surprised that

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Werner had been able to follow him at the brisk pace the Inuit set on every one of their outings.

Igaluk had lived all of his life on Baffin Island. He was used to the cold. That didn't mean he wanted to linger out if he did not have to do so. Plus, he wasn't paid by the hour.

This journey required walking through treacherous landscapes, rarely taking a break.

Obviously, Werner's injury did not stop him from jumping up and down either. It was rendering the dance whimsical and quite entertaining.

Both men watched as the black metal tower rose steadily between the chunks of broken ice.

The cracking sounds were accompanied by the scraping noises of the ice raking its sharp edges against the metal sides of the submarine.

Steam rose around the vessel, coming from the water, between the lumps of ice now fracturing into smaller pieces, weakened by the steady push of the submarine toward the sky.

Within a few minutes the bow of the vessel emerged from under the ice, followed by its stern.

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The hull rocked back and forth a few times, tightly nesting itself in its newly formed cozy cradle of frozen white wedges.

The ice had lost the battle. But not the war.

Almost immediately after the submarine stopped its rise, the fractured ice fragments started getting sewn back together by frigid gusts of wind.

These rapidly turned the leaping water bouncing between the chipped slabs of ice into lumps, creating a tailor-made tight garment around the hull of the ship, trapping the submarine where it had stabilized.

It had taken seven minutes for the vessel to rise and stabilize.

The normal crackling of the ice resumed.

No doubt the awakened bears fell back to sleep. Way too early for breakfast.

Werner was still awkwardly dancing on the ice-covered ground, but did not feel any warmer.

Once he realized the submarine had completed its surfacing, he stopped his hopping and bopping and reached into his backpack.

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He took out his kerosene hooded lantern. He had not needed it thus far as the stars and their reflections on the ice gave off plenty of light.

His hands were still numb. All he had to do to signal his presence to the crew of the submarine was lifting and dropping the lantern's hood at regular intervals, directing the light at the submarine's tower.

But lighting the lantern took a while. The wind was picking up, blowing erratically.

Werner knelt down and walled off the lantern between his body and his backpack. The kerosene finally lit up. Just in time.

As Werner stood up, holding the lantern at his side, a silhouette appeared at the top of the submarine's tower.

Werner started moving the hood of the lantern up and down creating short and long bursts of light directed straight at the silhouette.

Werner spelled out the code words that were agreed upon to identify himself and waited for a response from the figure atop the tower's deck.

Captain Von Ruden decoded Werner's message with a sigh of relief.

"Perfect timing" he said, addressing the cold air.

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Von Ruden did not want the submarine to be delayed above the ice. Rime was forming quickly on the submarine's sides all around the hull.

He raised a kerosene battle-lantern above the edge of the submarine's tower and responded to the signal Werner had sent from the shore.

Then Von Ruden looked down through the tower's hatch behind him and ordered down to his second in command to proceed.

“Send up the gunner's mate! Quickly!” Von Ruden said.

About ten seconds later the forward-escape hatch of the submarine sprung open quietly.

A sailor leaped out and headed toward the turret supporting the single 20 mm anti-aircraft gun set a few feet away from the tower.

The sailor readied the machine gun to fire. He pointed the weapon to the sky above the Bay, opposite the shore.

The type II submarine wasn't equipped with a deck cannon. The 20 mm anti-aircraft gun was all the armament available to the crew to repel an attack while above water.

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This part of the shore was totally covered by ice. The Canadian forces wouldn't be able to use ships to patrol the area.

An attack could only come from the ground or from the sky.

Von Ruden knew that the submarine was at risk of being spotted by aircrafts patrolling the area more so than by a foot patrol.

His best chance of returning his vessel and its crew safely to their base in Greenland was to watch the sky, be ready to return fire, and dive quickly.

He ordered for two more sailors to join him and the gunner on deck.

“Send two men to watch the sky!” Von Ruden said.

His second in command acknowledged the order.

A sailor climbed out of the forward hatch and immediately started scanning the horizon, facing west, pressing large binoculars to his eyes.

Simultaneously, the submarine after-escape hatch opened and another sailor came out to join the watch, his binoculars targeting the horizon, facing east.

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Both men scrutinized the sky systematically, following a grid like pattern over and over, regularly wiping ice particles off the lenses of their binoculars.

Once Von Ruden felt confident that he had sets of eyes where he needed them and that his gunner was ready to respond to an attack, he gave the go-ahead to his second in command to carry on.

“Tell them to come out.” Von Ruden said.

A few seconds later, another sailor came out through the forward hatch of the submarine.

He hoisted three backpacks from the inside of the submarine and placed them behind him on the deck.

He was then handed four pairs of ski poles which he set alongside the backpacks. Next, he reached down to the hatch and grabbed a black and silver metal case, the size of a small suitcase.

He handled it with care, slowly lifting it above the hatch and then placing it cautiously on the deck, between two of the backpacks.

Seconds later, a man dressed in extreme weather clothing came out of the hatch, followed by two other men wearing the exact same outfits.

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One of the men took a ski pole in each hand and stepped carefully from the submarine onto a large block of ice resting against the hull.

He tested the stability of the slab and walked a few feet away from the submarine in the direction of the coastline.

He retraced his steps and stood at the edge of the ice block, one foot on the ice, the other on the submarine's hull.

He used one of the ski poles to steady himself on the ice and pointed the other one toward the men still on the submarine's deck.

One of the two men that followed him out of the submarine grabbed the end of the pole and stepped onto the ice.

The last of the three men handed him the backpacks, remaining ski poles and the metal case, handling the object even more cautiously than the sailor had earlier.

The two men on the ice carefully laid out everything far enough away from the submarine so that none of these items could possibly fall in the water should the cracks in the ice around the hull widen.

The men stood silently, immobile.

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A minute later a smaller figure emerged through the hatch. The sailor made sure the person found its footing on the icy surface of the deck.

The two moved together toward the edge of the deck, very slowly. The three men took over and helped the figure step off the deck, onto the ice.

The sailor swiftly disappeared through the hatch, returning below deck.

Each of the three men on the ice strapped a backpack on their shoulders.

One of them picked up the metal case. It was equipped with a wide shoulder strap which he loosened to fit on his right shoulder.

The four individuals looked at Von Ruden atop the tower but did not say a word nor raise their hands. All four nodded quietly.

The gesture meant to say “thank you” and “good luck to us all,” and of course “heil Hitler!”

The party started walking toward the shore, slowly approaching where Igaluk was standing and Werner was dancing... ever so awkwardly.

Werner estimated that it would take about six minutes for the four individuals to make their way to him.

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He had been clear when communicating his plan to Berlin that there were enormous risks proceeding with this mission. One of them being the freezing temperature.

As Werner observed the off-loading, he realized the last person to come out of the submarine appeared to be a woman.

He had focused his binoculars to get a closer look at the smaller figure. In doing so, he discovered that the person was carrying an odd-looking bag against their chest.

“Is this a woman...? Is she carrying a child...?” He asked Igaluk as he handed the Inuit his binoculars.

Igaluk adjusted the binoculars. He took his time, looking carefully at each of the four individuals walking toward him and Werner.

“Hard to tell,” Igaluk said.

What Igaluk was really interested in was to find out if anyone carried weapons.

No one from the landing party appeared to carry rifles but they could have handguns, on themselves, or in their backpacks.

He scrutinized the submarine for markings as well.

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There were none. Neither the captain nor the sailors wore uniforms. He handed the binoculars back Werner.

The instructions Werner had received from Berlin were very clear, as always.

He had to prepare for a party of four men, three highly trained SS soldiers, veterans of campaigns in Russia and Finland, and one scientist.

Werner had thought through every detail accordingly.

“The plans must have been changed at the last minute,” he thought.

Werner would have been well on his way and it would not have been possible to reach him to share new information without risking compromising the mission.

Werner had everything ready to accommodate for a party of four adults, but he had not planned on making sure a baby could cope successfully with the challenges of the upcoming trip.

There was a long way to go between Baffin Island and Kingston, their final destination in Canada before crossing Lake Ontario to Rochester, New York, in the United States.

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The journey would include some long walks on snow and ice-covered grounds in freezing temperatures.

Werner had learned a lot about Canada in the past three years. Especially about the country's winters.

Werner arrived in Canada in 1941. He had joined the German SS in 1937. A year later he injured his right leg during a training exercise.

The injury barred him from serving in combat, but his flawless English, and equally fluent French, made him a natural candidate for espionage. It was suggested he serve the Third Reich as a spy.

He was sent to the western coast of Greenland to a secret German weather station and submarine base.

There he planned and conducted reconnaissance missions, tracking allies' naval operations in the North Atlantic.

In the summer of 1941, Canada ramped up its war effort and Werner was ordered to make his way to Quebec.

Provided with the necessary papers and cover, he entered the country successfully and once settled, he carried out missions as ordered,

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gathering information which he would transmit to Berlin, via Greenland.

He walked with a limp due to his leg injury, leaning on a cane or crutches on occasions. It kept folks from questioning why he had not joined the Canadian military. In fact, at times, people came up to him and thanked him for his service.

Up until three months ago his spying assignments had been limited to tracking war preparation activities and gathering whatever he deemed would be useful information.

Then in early November of 1943, he decoded new orders sent to him from Berlin. He welcomed the directives. Finally, a mission that would take him into the field.

Werner was to pinpoint a location where a small submarine could bring four individuals to Canada as early as possible in January of 1944.

The Canadian Navy and Coast Guard were on high alert along the east coast across Greenland.

It was daring of Werner to suggest sending a submarine into the Hudson Strait, to the southern coast of Baffin Island, but his plan was approved by the Fuhrer himself.

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And now here he was, waiting for the four individuals who had just left the submarine and were heading toward him.

Another couple of minutes and Igaluk and Werner would guide them to a nearby cave at the bottom of a small mountain near a ridge overlooking the cove.

Werner had calculated that they would reach the cave within three minutes. He had prepared the cave so that everyone could get some rest and spend the night in a relatively safe and warm environment.

A few hours later, early in the morning, they would all march to a cabin further inland. That is everyone minus Igaluk.

Werner planned on making the cave Igaluk's final resting place. There could be no loose ends. For the sake of the mission. He no longer needed the Inuit.

From the cabin the party would make its way to a small air strip. There, they would board one of the small aircrafts used to fly animal pelts and tusks south to a small town on the shore of the Hudson Bay.

There, they would hop on a local train, and, passing through small towns, they would continue their journey using the most

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inconspicuous modes of transportation, sometimes walking through the wilderness as needed.

All the papers were in order to fake the identities of four men but not for a woman and a child.

“No doubt Berlin thought this through,” he convinced himself, “a woman and a child might actually help the travelling party blend in and avoid being noticed.”

Werner was revising his plan mentally as he waited for the four individuals to come to him.

Captain Von Ruden watched the three men, woman, and child leave the submarine.

He was a combat veteran. He was chosen for this mission because of his achievements in the North Atlantic, having led his crew in sinking more ships than any other German submarines had to date.

He had nerves of steel, his men all agreed.

But coastal operations aboard a small size submarine was not his preferred way to wage war against the enemies of the Reich.

The Type II submarine, now under his command, was usually favored for training missions.

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It could dive quickly, if not trapped by the ice. And it was the right size for Baffin Island's coastal waters.

Unfortunately, it had little chances of fighting off an attack by enemy forces above water and it carried only two torpedoes.

Von Ruden much preferred chasing warships and torpedoing them to the bottom of the ocean from the relative safety of the U-Boat he had helmed since the beginning of the war.

Surfacing this “pocket” submarine on a clear night, to see it quickly pinched by ice that would undoubtedly slow down diving back into the water, made Von Ruden feel uncomfortable.

He wasn't too keen on the fact that there were no markings identifying the submarine and that he and his crew were ordered to wear plain clothes instead of their uniforms.

He wasn't a spy at heart, though submarine warfare might be the equivalent of wedging battle as a sniper does, albeit with much larger and much more powerful “bullets”.

“If snipers could shoot torpedoes... Well, they might one day”, he thought.

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When brought out in the open, out of his submarine, he would rather wear his colors proudly.

He wished the landing party would hurry.

He watched the three men and the woman carrying her baby walk toward the shore. He had responded to their gestures with a nod.

“Hurry up,” he murmured to himself.

Werner realized that it would take longer than he had initially estimated for the foursome to walk from where the submarine had surfaced to where he was standing with Igaluk.

The ice was thick.

The landing party was not in danger of falling through, but they had to walk slowly so as not to slip on the glassy surface, even steadied by the use of their ski poles.

And, even slower, as the smaller individual and her mysterious baggage seemed overly cautious.

He wished he could have found an isolated cove with deeper water nearer to the shore.

The submarine had risen closer than he had imagined would be possible but still even closer would have been better.

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“This captain is good,” he said to Igaluk.

Igaluk did not respond.

Werner had studied as many maps as he could find and read the manual explaining the capabilities of the Type II U-Boat. It was mainly used for training but also had been designed to conduct coastal missions and support infiltrations in enemy territory.

Werner concluded he had it easy compared to the challenges the captain and the crew faced to make it to this rendezvous and then would face until they reached the safety of their Greenland base.

The four individuals finally arrived where Werner and Igaluk stood. It became clear that the shorter person was indeed a woman.

Werner could not confirm just yet if she was carrying a baby. The bundle was so well wrapped but Werner felt quite sure the woman was holding on to a child.

He greeted the group.

“Welcome. This is our guide Igaluk!” he whispered to them.

No one said a word. Igaluk had thought that if he heard one of the individuals talk, he could have detected an accent.

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Werner spoke with a perfect Canadian accent. Still, that didn't make him any less suspicious in the eyes of Igaluk.

Igaluk discreetly scanned again for signs that the men or woman carried weapons. He could not tell.

Igaluk turned around and started walking toward the cave.

Werner invited the three men and woman to follow Igaluk simply pointing his hand toward the Inuit.

Igaluk led the walk up to the mountain's flank overseeing the Bay.

Werner brought up the rear, welcoming the opportunity to warm up, while limping, along the way. Jumping up and down hadn't been enough.

Ten minutes later the group reached a small entrance to a cave carved into the base of the mountain.

Igaluk stood outside the cave.

The three men and the woman waited for Werner to take the lead entering the cave and then followed him inside.

They took off their backpacks and sat around four lamps Werner had set in the center of the

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cave earlier, before heading down to the shore to wait for the arrival of the submarine.

It took quite a lot of research for Werner to find the perfect place for this rendezvous.

His outings with Igaluk on prior occasions were meant in part to evaluate the Inuit's abilities but mostly to pinpoint a final rendezvous point.

Werner rested his rifle against the cave's wall near the entrance, took off his backpack, set it on the ground near the lamps and then walked back out of the cave carrying his hooded lantern.

He stepped out into the cold, a few feet away from the entrance, and transmitted his final message to the submarine's commander:

“Done.”

The submarine could dive back and return to its base.

Captain Von Ruden welcomed the message from Werner.

Von Ruden had been ordered to transmit the successful arrival of the submarine's passengers on Canadian soil as soon as possible, waiting for them to be safe before doing so.

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The Greenland station crew was awaiting his transmission, ready to pass on the message to Berlin.

Von Ruden ordered his second in command to radio in a one-word dispatch to Greenland.

“Success,” Von Ruden said.

Greenland acknowledged reception almost immediately.

“The Fuhrer will be pleased,” Von Ruden thought.

It was time to dive and return to Greenland.

Transmitting messages added to the risk of revealing to Canadian forces the submarine’s presence in the area.

Von Ruden ordered his men to return below deck.

“Prepare for diving!”

He couldn’t wait to get back to sinking allies ships in the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

###

Kaya-Kaya, or KK, as his commander and other airmen preferred to call him, had flown twenty-two training missions in the past month and a half.

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He had earned his assignment to a Canadian Air Force squadron leaving for England in two days, on February 16, 1944.

He was at ease flying his Supermarine Spitfire. A killing machine equipped with two 20mm Hispano II cannons and four .303” Browning machine guns.

The newly upgraded plane carried two 250-lb bombs under its wings and an additional 500-lb under the fuselage.

Prior to leaving for England, KK was granted one last leave of absence to visit his folks in Cape Dorset, near Foxe Peninsula at the southern tip of Baffin Island.

On February 14, at 1 AM, KK was on his way back, flying over the Angna Mountains, following the shoreline, heading southeast and then turning south to cross the Hudson Strait toward his base.

The visibility was excellent. The sky was magnificent. Stars were shining brightly, undisturbed by a world war that spared almost no one on planet earth.

KK was enjoying the beauty of his ancestral surroundings, thinking that he may never see this place again or certainly not for a long time.

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He turned off his engine and challenged his plane to glide quietly for as long as possible, while he enjoyed the peaceful night sky.

Minutes later, a flashing light coming from the bottom of a mountain ridge on the left side of the plane caught his eyes. He reached for his binoculars.

He tilted the Spitfire to the left.

He stared fixedly at the point where the light originated.

He thought for a moment that he caught the reflection of starlight on the ice, but the burst of light had seemed much too strong to be a reflection.

He considered immediately radioing the sighting to his base, but he decided to take a closer look first.

“Better to be sure that something is amiss than being laughed at...” he thought.

Also, he was not in a hurry to return to the base. Too beautiful a night. A little detour could be fun.

KK angled his plane slightly to direct it to the location of the light source.

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He turned the engine back on and dove down for a closer look.

KK could not tell whether he heard the machine gun blasts or saw the fire spurting out of it first.

Tracer bullets flew by his cockpit. He was getting closer to the weapon aiming its repeated firing at his plane.

KK's plane was facing the salvos head on.

KK responded in kind, pressing on the Spitfire's machine guns trigger buttons.

The plane shook. He was aiming at the source of the deadly projectiles buzzing by his cockpit.

As he was nearing his target, he realized the machine gun firing at him was set on a cigar-shaped dark mass in the middle of the ice. He recognized the shape of the conning tower of a submarine.

He released the two bombs attached under the plane's wings before the bullets coming toward him crippled the plane's engine and shattered part of its cockpit, penetrating KK's upper chest.

The engine caught on fire. KK could feel he was bleeding and sensed he was going to pass

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out. He used all the strength he had left to attempt to radio in what had just happened.

He tried to speak but could not utter a word. He was still conscious but could not move a muscle.

He thought about jumping out of the plane and smiled.

A bullet tore through the left side of his face. He gasped. His head fell forward.

Within seconds he crashed against the mountain side right above the cave where Werner and his party were resting, before continuing with their mission.

###

Captain Von Ruden watched calmly as his sailors return below deck, starting with the ones who had been scanning the horizon with their binoculars.

The gunner would head down into the vessel next, just before Von Ruden who then would slide down into the hull, pulling down the tower's hatch and locking it while the submarine would dive down. A perfect plan...

Von Ruden heard the plane's engine as soon as it had restarted, surprised at the sound that had reached his ears so suddenly.

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There was no crescendo warning of the plane's approach. Von Ruden immediately sounded the quick dive alarm.

The gunner heard the plane's engine at the same time as Von Ruden.

Fortunately, the submarine's machine gun was pointing toward the area of the sky where the plane was coming from.

The gunner saw the plane in the crosshairs of his weapon just after hearing its engine roar.

He instinctively fired at the plane; his hands froze around the machine gun's triggers which spurted a continuous stream of bullets.

He saw the plane's engine burst into flames and heard the hissing of bullets coming from the plane as the pilot returned fire.

Neither the gunner nor Captain Von Ruden could see the two oblong objects heading toward the conning tower of the submarine.

The gunner ran and jumped inside the submarine through the forward hatch that was then quickly pulled down and shut tight behind him.

The captain slid down into the submarine and slammed the tower's hatch and locked it tightly.

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The submarine was on its way down below the ice, but it was too late.

The first bomb hit the tower at its base while it was still partially above the ice and less than a second later the second bomb hit the submarine's hull.

KK had managed to arm, release and successfully launched two of the three bombs his plane carried before passing out.

Freezing water gushed inside the vessel speeding its descent to the bottom of the cove.

No one on board escaped. Twelve crew members lost their lives. No message had been sent reporting their demise.

The ice fell back into place in an eerily quiet way.

It seemed to return perfectly to where it was laying before the submarine emerged through it less than an hour ago, like pieces of a giant puzzle.

Totally seamless.

The explosions had opened up the ice creating a giant fishing hole that shrank back and slowly disappeared.

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Hot metal debris had fallen back and melted the ice on their way to the bottom of the sea.

Their journey soon concealed by fresh ice forming on the surface of the water.

###

Werner had reentered the cave after sending his message to the submarine's captain.

He sat with the three men, the woman, and the baby. It was indeed a baby the woman had been carrying. A very quiet baby, though not asleep.

In the dim light bouncing within the icy walls of the cave Werner could see the baby's blue eyes staring at him.

For a brief moment, Werner imagined he was in the presence of the next generation of Aryans, pure, unspoiled, strong.

Then he caught the shape of the infant's eyes. Slightly slanted.

His smile vanished.

The child was not purely German. Not purely anything. That detail lodged like a splinter in his mind.

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Werner had disturbed the child from enjoying suckling on one of the woman's breasts.

Werner opened his mouth to address the party, thinking he would suggest eating and then resting, but before he could speak the submarine's machine gun fire echoed loudly inside the cave.

Werner and two of the men rushed out. They looked at the submarine and then followed the bullets through the sky to their target, a Spitfire from the Royal Canadian Air Force.

They were hopeful for a moment as the plane's engine took on fire in front of their eyes, but then they saw the explosions tearing the submarine apart.

There was nothing they could do. Their eyes followed the plane's trajectory. It was heading toward them and would hit the mountain, right above the cave in a few seconds.

They instinctively retreated inside.

The plane crashed twenty feet above the cave. The impact triggered an avalanche of snow, ice, rocks and metal debris that dropped straight down completely blocking the entrance of the cave.

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KK had armed his last bomb but did not have a chance to drop it on the submarine before passing out from his injuries.

The 500-lb bomb exploded as the plane crashed against the mountain.

Inside the cave, powdered ice, snow, and dust filled the air. The lamps were still on.

Werner felt the ice particles freeze his lungs as he took a deep breath trying to calm his body.

He turned around toward the entrance to face a wall of ice and rocks.

The two men following him inside had been crushed as they were entering the cave. Werner saw the hand of one the men sticking out of the debris, pointing toward him, immobile.

Werner walked to the center of the cave where the woman was still sitting, holding her baby against her chest.

She was breathing hard, inhaling ice and snow, drowning slowly.

The fourth man's feet were all Werner could see as the rest of his body was buried under ice and stones. He was the one carrying the briefcase. It was now buried alongside the man and his backpack.

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The cave had partially collapsed dividing it into two sections.

“Do you have a cyanide pill?” Werner asked the woman.

She stared at him for a while and concluded that there was no way to escape from the cave. She did not bother to ask.

“No,” she said.

Werner sat down by the woman and reached for his cyanide pill.

He handed her the pill. She put the pill between her front teeth. She brought the baby’s lips to hers and bit on the pill. Both the woman and the baby died instantly.

Werner could now see her face more clearly. She looked Japanese to him.

Werner turned around and glanced at the wall near the entrance, where he thought he had left his rifle.

He was going to shoot himself.

First, he thought that the weapon was buried under rubbles.

Then, he remembered that Igaluk came inside the cave at one point earlier while Werner was

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addressing the men now lying dead further inside the cave.

Igaluk had left soon thereafter, probably carrying with him Werner's weapon.

Werner smiled to himself. The Inuit had sensed that Werner would eventually dispose of him.

"Smart... for an inferior race..." muttered Werner.

That was the way the rifle could have protected Werner.

By shooting himself Werner would have escaped slowly freezing to death.

That was what Werner thought he understood when Igaluk asked him the question in Inuit, as Werner was awoken by the submarine piercing loudly through the ice earlier.

"Were you going to shoot yourself to save yourself from freezing to death?" Werner thought to himself.

Werner knew his death would be slow and painful.

Drowning. Freezing. He looked at two of the backpacks carried into the cave by the three men.

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He would never know what the Fuhrer had planned.

Maybe he could figure it out. He pulled one of the backpacks closer to him.

The lights went out, one right after the other.

The cave felt even colder.

Werner eventually drew his last breath as the walls of the cave continued to collapse around him.

###

Igaluk instinctively ran toward the shore when he heard the submarine's machine gun start firing.

Then he saw the plane diving down. By the time the plane flew over him before crashing on the side of the mountain, Igaluk had reached a safe distance.

He watched the plane end its journey flattening against the iced covered rocks above the entry of the cave where Werner and the landing party had sought shelter.

The crash and following explosion rocked the ground Igaluk was standing on.

There was nothing Igaluk could have done for either the pilot or anyone in the cave.

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He wasn't planning on saving Werner or the men in his party anyway, but he thought he would have helped the woman and her baby if it had been possible to do so.

Igaluk had stolen Werner's rifle, discretely, as soon as he could, hoping that no one else had brought weapons from the submarine.

Igaluk had a chance to check if the group carried rifles when Werner handed him his binoculars earlier, but he could not tell whether or not they carried handguns, even after they started unpacking inside the cave.

Igaluk stood still watching a cloud of dark smoke rise from the site of the crash. A sudden avalanche of snow, ice and stones covered the plane and further sealed the cave's entrance.

In a few minutes no one passing through the area would ever suspect anything had happened.

What's left of the submarine would rest peacefully at the bottom of the Bay.

The ice would show no trace of having been broken.

The mountain would have healed its scars and snow and ice would cover them, returning the landscape to its original, beautiful and peaceful state.

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Only the wind and the ice, crackling as usual
would break the silence.

Bears would return to dreaming in peace
until breakfast time.

Some of them thinking the ice had been
particularly noisy tonight...