

PART ONE

THE WRONG DIMENSION

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them.

William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*, Act 3 Scene 1

PROLOGUE

And still there was no sign of the *Atlantis*. There was nothing but the grey fog closing in on them from all directions. The craggy silhouettes of the nearby islands had disappeared, and Fareøya, the small island at the southern tip of the Lofoten archipelago, had become isolated from the rest of the world.

The northern lights that had occasionally illuminated the sky during the night had faded away. Only the moon provided a diffuse glow – almost full, but beginning to wane. And the sun would not rise again for another two weeks.

Of course, this winter darkness was their main ally, possibly the only ally they had left. Yet time was running short. Nine days already into their mission ... At this point, they should be approaching Scotland. But despite their meticulous preparations, things had not gone as planned. Now, instead of nearing their destination, they were back, almost where they had started. And all he could do was wait and hope and keep the faith in his men.

Most importantly, however, he had to keep his nerves. He owed that to the crew. This was not the moment to allow himself to fall apart. He had to focus on the difficult task that still lay ahead – delayed, but not abandoned. He knew that, should also their second attempt fail, they would not be given another chance.

In the meantime, they were stuck on this godforsaken island, all their plans suspended. Only the sea remained in motion, as wave after wave came running up the bleak shoreline, or eddied around the submerged rocks with relentless determination and persistence – taunting him in his helpless inaction.

Already, with the fog ascending from the dark water, it felt as if the sea stretched out cold clammy hands, bent on smothering him, or trying to pull him down into the rising tide. As if it knew that, without their boat, they had no chance of escaping; that without it, they were not going to leave the island alive; that they were going to die there, even before the enemy got to them.

The enemy ... who exactly was that? Or, more importantly, who were their friends? Friend or foe – these distinctions had seemed so obvious at the beginning of the war. But now, boundaries had started to blur.

Nationality was no longer a useful concept to determine who was on your side and who was not. In a situation of war, allies were won with the betrayal of old comrades. Friendship gained came at the cost of new animosity elsewhere. And as hostility spread around the globe, how far could friendship reach? How long could it be expected to last?

Nonetheless, despite the fighting, despite all the death and hardship, life went on. Time never stopped. As the tides, it kept going, endlessly. With a complete disregard for human indecision, it pulled everything along.

And so, as predictably as the water rising again, a new day had just begun – 17 December 1940 – only eight days until Christmas. Soon, another year would be over, another bad year – the worst so far, and nothing to look forward to in the next. With hatred and determination growing on both sides, it was clear that the war was going to get worse before it was over.

Even the thought of Elisabeth, waiting for him back home in Kiel – with Lena, their little daughter – had ceased to be comforting. Since the first English air raids in summer, the city with its major naval base was not a safe place anymore. And with German attacks on English cities getting ever more intense, the English were bound to retaliate in equal measures.

Then he thought he saw something. At first, it was only the slightest indication of a solid outline within the wavering opacity of the thick fog.

Was it an illusion? Or a dream? He could not be sure. Had he managed to fall asleep after all, still slumped against the rough wall of the cave, huddled together with the English soldiers? Had it not been for the damp cold biting through his thin uniform, he could well have believed that this was just a nightmare from which he could get himself to wake up, if he concentrated hard enough.

But a moment later, he was certain – it definitely was not a dream. The grey submarine that had slowly pushed itself out of the darkness was undoubtedly real. It was now getting to a halt at a safe distance from the rocky shore, faintly illuminated by the pale moonlight. The steady humming of the diesel engines carried across the waves. And on the side of the conning tower, their new emblem could be seen: the Pole Star shining down onto a lone island on the horizon. This really was their boat.

The others had managed to bring her back to life. They had not abandoned him. And, after two long days and two longer nights, emerging from the darkness and the grey fog, the *Atlantis* had finally arrived.



The night-sky was not dark anymore. Following hours of total blackout, the criss-crossing beams of bright searchlights were now wiping away the stars, occasionally catching a low cloud, or reflecting off the silver barrage balloons, which swayed ghostlike over the vague silhouette of the city.

Above the wailing of the air raid sirens, the unnerving steady drone could be heard of the first bombers, swarming like invisible birds of prey – more probably already crossing the Channel. Perhaps they would pass by high above, bringing terror, death, and destruction to cities farther north, and London would be spared. Or, perhaps, the bombing would return. Then, as on the terrible night of their arrival, the great city would bleed again, the orange and red blaze of burning homes gushing up into the sky.

Already, the devastation was horrific, with few buildings left undamaged and most roofs gone. Streams of greenish white dust, deposited by the explosives that had rained down onto them two nights ago were blowing along the streets like poisonous snow, swirling around street corners and through ruined walls.

Elisabeth knew it was risky staying up in the attic room again, directly underneath the rafters. But with so many buildings destroyed, living space had become limited in the East End, even with half the population either evacuated or dead. And so, the top floors in the remaining buildings, normally abandoned, provided the last places to stay for someone not only hiding from the Germans, but also from the English.

She looked over to the old bed where her daughter slept, still clasping her favourite doll – the one toy she had been able to take along on their desperate flight. What Lena needed now more than anything else was rest. During the afternoon, her cough from the previous nights had started again, and worse than ever before.

It had taken an hour until, out of sheer exhaustion from coughing and crying over the disappearance of her friend, the little girl had finally fallen asleep. Now, Elisabeth could not get herself to wake her up again – not until the first bombs fell within sight of this elevated vantage point. Then she would have no choice. They would have to go back to the nearest shelter – Bethnal Green. She remembered that name and, if necessary, she would find it again, even alone.

They would hurry along the deserted streets, forced to climb over piles of rubble from collapsed buildings in some places, carefully avoiding large craters in others. Where a bomb had opened up the pavement and broken through into the sewers, the stench steaming up into the crisp winter air would be sickening. They would make their way, as fast as they could, towards the beam of the searchlight near the entrance to the unfinished underground station; down the slippery steps of the staircase, dimly lit at the top by a single lightbulb; down the unmoving escalators, and eventually onto the overcrowded platform.

They would then have to find some space among the hundreds of people, sitting or lying on thin mattresses, blankets, or simply on coats; drinking tea from thermos flasks, or sharing a simple dinner of sandwiches and chocolate; chatting quietly, or playing a game of cards; then desperately trying to get some sleep, to recover the strength necessary to deal with the harsh reality above ground – all waiting for the relief of hearing the steady tone of the “all clear” signal at dawn.

But sunrise was still hours away. And she knew that the German bombers were not the sole danger for them in this big city. Far riskier perhaps was the exposure in these busy public shelters, where after months of persistent bombings, sharing not only the same confined space, but also the same plight and the same hatred towards a common enemy, a tightly knit watchful community had formed – a community in which, every evening, people queued for hours to get their usual spot on the platform. These new underground neighbours had come to know each other intimately, and the arrival of strangers would not go unnoticed for long – especially if they looked and sounded as German as she did.

During the many endless nights, with people closely assembled, information passed freely: news about fatalities among shared acquaintances, about homes that had recently been destroyed, about events in other parts of the country, or about the fortunes of war on the Continent. Enquiries were made about missing people. Rumours were circulated about secret ammunition factories and government offices, hidden away in the unused railway tunnels. In such an environment, how easily would news spread about the arrival of two German women with their young daughters? How long could they rely on people’s assumption that they had to be Jewish refugees?

And Lena ... the child worried her more than anything. In the already weakened state she was in, the danger of falling seriously ill in the poorly ventilated shelter was too great. There were too many sick people assembled in too little space, with too little clean air between them. What if Lena caught pneumonia or tuberculosis? What if she had already been infected? What options would they have then, in their present situation, to get proper medical treatment? On their first night in the shelter, Lena had already attracted far too much attention with her coughing, and not only compassion, but also indignation and angry remarks from people who were equally afraid of the spread of infectious diseases.

The coughing had begun in the rowing boat, during the final stage of crossing the Channel, just as they had been approaching the dark Essex coast, and complete silence was essential. Then already, Lena's distress had provoked nervous complaints from some of the other refugees. They had remonstrated with her, telling her to be quiet. And it was impossible for the poor girl to understand why everyone was always angry with her, when she felt so miserable.

Threatened from above as well as below, Elisabeth knew that, no matter what she did, hiding from one danger would unavoidably expose her to another. Their survival would therefore depend on balancing the two risks. And with Lena's health deteriorating rapidly, she was determined not to expose her daughter to the discomfort and resentment in the underground tunnels, until bombs started to fall close to their neighbourhood.

Ingrid had disagreed, the previous evening. She had insisted that the public shelter was still the safest place for them; that going there, once the bombing had begun, would be too late and far too dangerous in itself. But Ingrid did not have to worry about her daughter. Rosemarie was much stronger than Lena. They had argued vehemently about whether to go or not, until the sirens had started, and Ingrid had decided to leave, together with their English friends. The two girls had desperately clung to each other, as if they had feared they might never see each other again; until in the end, they had to be separated by force.

At that moment, Ingrid's had seemed to be the sensible decision. But then, the following morning, she and Rosemarie had not returned. In the large crowd down on the platform, they had become separated from the others, and no one had seen them since. No bombings had occurred over London that night, and there had been no reported fatalities. Then what had

happened? Had the two been arrested? Or had the suspicion among the underground crowd already turned to violence? In either case, Elisabeth had no way of finding out. Getting the police involved was only going to get her arrested and interned as well – or worse, deported back to Germany.

All day she had waited for Ingrid to return, increasingly desperate towards the evening. Finally, she could wait no longer. Their friends had left for Euston Station as planned, and Elisabeth had had no choice but to go with them. This was their chance to get out of London, possibly the only one they would get. It had been difficult enough for their supporters to obtain for them these precious tickets – for the night train to Manchester. And now their resources were almost exhausted.

With both their luggage, in the blacked-out and smoke-filled hall of the station, Elisabeth had waited in vain for her friend, still hoping against hope, that Ingrid would turn up at the last moment. The large clock had counted out the minutes at a faster and faster rate, as the time for their departure came closer. The ominous N°13 on the platform sign had been illuminated by dim blue light, while underneath, on the crowded platform, people moved about in near darkness.

More and more passengers had boarded the train in an orderly fashion and vanished behind the covered-up windows, visibly relieved to be able to get away from the war-torn capital. Among them, eventually, also her devoted friends, who had helped her so much. Reluctantly, they had agreed to depart without her, leaving her behind on her own, alone in the largest city in Europe, in a country, whose language she barely spoke.

For standing in the busy station, surrounded by uncertainties and risks, Elisabeth had come to a decision. Somewhere out there, among the millions of strangers, had to be two people she knew and loved. And she was not going to abandon them.

Shortly before midnight, the platform had emptied. The last goods and newspapers had been loaded, the doors had been closed, and the guard had given the signal for departure. Briefly, his green lantern had flashed in the dark, accompanied by a shrill whistle. Then, with only a few minutes delay, the long train had pulled out of the station, away from the vulnerable south coast and the crumbling metropolis.

Now, Elisabeth was back in their small attic room, and still Ingrid had not returned – another mysterious disappearance. She knew then that something had gone terribly wrong. Starting tomorrow, regardless of the dangers, she

would have to go looking for her friend – and she did not have a lot of time. The winter had just begun, and they were already low on heating material. When the last lump of coal and the last piece of wood had been used up, the cold and lack of proper food and medicine would make matters even worse for Lena. Her only option was to find Ingrid quickly, so that they could leave London together and re-join their friends in Prestwich.

Elisabeth glanced at her watch, one of her few remaining valuables, faithfully ticking away the seconds, those fleeting markers of a restless time. Nineteen minutes past two, on 22 December 1940 – only three days until Christmas. The second Christmas since the beginning of the war, and the fighting went on, relentlessly. Would she have the strength and skills necessary to survive in this world?

Looking out over the ruined buildings, she wondered what would be left of the world when the fighting ultimately ceased. If the devastation that could be seen from her window was not enough to defeat this people, they would never surrender. Surrounded by their dead, the spirit of the survivors appeared unbroken, and the traumatic events only increased their determination to carry on. How much more death and destruction would it take on both sides to bring this manmade catastrophe to an end?

And Lena – if they made it through – how old would she be when the war was finally over? How much of all this would she remember?

Fifty years from now – Elisabeth wondered – who will be left alive? Will life continue to be dominated by chaos and violence? What kind of place will this world be then? Just a barren wasteland, left behind by human strife? Or will a new generation emerge from the ashes, with more foresight and fewer prejudices?

Fifty years from now – if we make it through – Lena may have grown-up children of her own. What kind of problems will they be facing?

Fifty years from now ...

CHAPTER ONE

A PERFECTLY NORMAL ADVENTURE

All is white ... our planet hidden underneath a bright blanket of clouds, resting peaceful and quiet.

Diffuse light breaks through the intricate pattern of frost that has formed outside the window.

The aircraft still glides smoothly through the thin air, with a reassuring steady drone. Everything appears to be normal. It does not seem to have been anything in the real world that brought the desperately needed sleep to an abrupt end – a sudden noise or turbulence.

No concrete memory remains, only a lingering shadow of confusion and fear that reaches out from the other side of sleep, leaving the heart rate elevated and the breathing faster and more shallow than usual – a vague feeling of falling into empty space.

It must have been the same wretched dream again: being immersed in water – immersed, but not suspended; betrayed by the formerly familiar element; unsupported by seemingly natural circumstances. Unsettling, of course, but in the end just another nightmare, nothing to be bothered about in the real world.

Since our departure, the sun has circled around to the other side of the aircraft, now moving along its southern arc, heading towards evening and a night without sunset. But the endless daylight in the far South is only borrowed from the dark world left behind on the other side of the globe. Much too soon, we will have to give it back.

A few minutes to five ... after almost eight hours in the air, we should be at Aurora soon. Eight hours, and most of it spent asleep – uneasily perhaps, but at least uninterrupted for the first time in days, for the first time since the murder.

As if the year had not been exciting enough already, with several momentous occurrences – and positive for the most part. A year in which injustices were defeated and borders broken down. A year in which we began

talking to the Argentinians again; when apartheid was abolished, and Mandela released from prison, at last; when the Iron Curtain opened, with the mighty Soviet Union gradually falling apart, and Germany reunited – bloody Germany, booting us out of the semi-finals. Then, just as the Cold War comes to an end, the fighting starts again in the Middle East. And so, history continues to be written by the big events of global significance.

Despite that, it is the little things, which happen close to us, that affect us most of all; those very personal incidents that never make it into the news or into the history books – an unexpected phone call and a belated job offer. And before we know it, we find ourselves suspended in mid-air, moving inexorably towards a destination that only three months ago had seemed completely out of reach. And with the realisation of that certainty come the doubts. It was easy to apply for the position on Antarctica, when there appeared to be no chance of ever being accepted, when it was unnecessary to consider the consequences of being separated from ordinary life for such a lengthy period.

Separated from Alison – her letter still clutched in my hand, the envelope involuntarily crumpled during sleep. The card inside it ... crumpled too. Thin, irregular lines now run across the picture, across the two emperor penguins standing in an empty snowscape, touching flippers, and looking towards the sunset – a bit twee perhaps, but still very cute; together with the inscription: “Lots of love in a cold world.” There was nothing else she had to add, except her name. That lifelong, unwavering friendship she has given – all contained in her signature. Six handwritten characters conveying more than any number of platitudes and conventional greetings ever could.

But while friendship remains implicit within the empty spaces of the card, its spirit has changed during the short week since it was written. When, normally, it would have radiated cheerful optimism, it now projects apprehension and the fear of tragically losing another friend – not to human violence this time, but to the harsh forces of nature.

In return for this faithful dedication, right at the very moment when Alison needed me more than ever before, I abandoned her. I walked away from her, through the entrance gates of the RAF station, to board the plane for Antarctica; leaving her behind, standing alone by her car, lost amidst the aftermath of a ruthless crime. And neither her encouragement for me to go through with the journey as planned, nor her insistence on driving me the

hundred miles to Brize Norton herself, to make sure that I got off all right, does anything to alleviate the guilty conscience.

Gran, meanwhile ... although she is still doing well, a lot can happen even in a few months. So quickly ...

Paul's voice faintly penetrates the sound of the engines, but the words are unintelligible. He has half turned in his co-pilot seat, peering through the opening from the cockpit, flashing the fingers of his left hand – only five more minutes to Aurora.

Sure enough, we are already descending. The low clouds over the ocean are left behind, and directly underneath us, the sharp white line of the leading edge of the ice shelf can be seen, dropping off steeply into the blue-green water of the Weddell Sea. A few icebergs have broken off from the sheer cliff, drifting among the scattered floes of broken-up sea ice. And stretched out in front of us, the plateau of permanent snow extends all the way to the distant horizon in the east.

So, this is it then. As the long journey comes to an end, it is time to take a mental leap as well: to leave Britain behind, and to focus on what lies ahead; to move away from the dreary grey winter skies and the customary last-minute Christmas bustle of the civilised world; far away from Satanic rituals, abductions, and murders – into the cold sanity of Antarctica and a perfectly normal adventure.

Somewhere underneath us should now be the compound of the research base. The few structures above the snow should show up as a collection of dark dots. But from the air, they are all lost in a limitless sea of white.

Then the aircraft banks left, curving around towards the north, while continuing its steady descent. The irregular surface of the ice shelf becomes clearer. And there, up ahead, the landing site comes into view – the first token of any human presence on this frozen continent.

Circling ever lower over the ice shelf, the skiway is shown to be a patch of relatively smooth snow – marked by red flags straining in the wind, and surrounded by a rough pattern of pressure ridges and crevasses. A large sledge with several fuel drums is parked on one side, together with an old shipping container that has been converted into a basic shelter. Nearby, a lone figure, clad in one of the Institute's red and blue survival suits, is sitting sideways on a snowmobile, with a smaller, empty sledge in tow.

The twin engine plane is being buffeted about, as it turns into the wind again, rapidly descending towards the improvised airfield now.

Engines roaring at full throttle, the skis make their first contact with the snow, skidding over the remaining ripples on the groomed surface. As the marker flags rush past, the engine noise decreases. The seesaw over the soft ground gradually weakens and eventually runs out. The propellers judder to a stop. The snow that has been stirred up during our landing settles again into its natural swirling motion.

We are there – no, *here*. This is it. At the end of a long journey, the distant “there” is no more. We have arrived.

Paul extricates himself from his seat, stretches, and steps into the sparse cabin. ‘Everything all right back there?’

‘So far, so good.’

He nods, smiling. ‘I’ll open the cargo doors.’

Brandon follows from the cockpit, also a little drowsy from the long flight.

‘Thanks for the lift, Captain.’

‘Pleasure. And ... well, good luck out there.’ He glances through the frosted windows, looking concerned. ‘It’ll be fine. Now in summer, you’re only a few flying hours away from Halo. So, if there’s anything, any kind of trouble, we’ll get you out.’

But his words are more reassuring than his expression. We all know that the main base is a long way away, especially if the weather turns bad.

Paul swings the cargo doors open. A blast of ice crystals enters the cabin. ‘This is you, Siobhán – last stop. I could attach the stepladder, but it almost isn’t worth it. It’s not far down.’

‘That’s all right. I believe I can manage.’

‘Just take your rucksack for now. We’ll hand down your kit bag with the rest of the cargo.’

And there it is – Antarctica, empty and white. Even the atmosphere seems to consist of ice, pressing in on us hard and cold. A trace of exhaust fumes still hangs around the aircraft, but it dissipates quickly into the turbulent air. Beyond that is the pristine, dry smell of permanent snow, the frozen surface now only a few feet below.

So, here we go: just one small step for a woman – or jump, rather.

With a reassuring crunch, the boots leave a distinct mark in the dry snow, but only temporarily. Already, the footprints are being eroded away. Our human presence on this continent is still young and insecure. We are still

desperately trying to cling to its edges, while the ceaseless wind and the motion of the ice pushes us back out to sea, telling us in no uncertain terms that we are not meant to be here. And yet, against all odds, I am – I really am.

After dreaming without hope of ever being given a chance, after the seemingly pointless effort of applying for a position for which, by default, I had been disqualified even before I was born, after the inevitable initial rejection – this is it.

The man from the base comes walking towards us. He does not slow down as he approaches and, in passing, only places his hand on my shoulder. Together with a brief nod, this is his sole recognition of my presence. My own excitement notwithstanding, in the larger scheme of things, my arrival here is clearly not the main priority at the moment.

The man climbs up into the cabin. He greets Paul by name and enquires about the flight. Together they disappear into the cockpit, leaving me alone to take in the scenery – to the extent that it is visible.

A steady stream of snow emerges from the distant interior of the vast continent, having travelled perhaps for days through a world that is still largely unknown to us. Through this veil of suspended crystals, the low sunlight scatters as if emanating from it.

What a place. Who would have thought that a wind-blown desolation could be so beautiful – independent and pure, unpolluted by human civilisation and strife, without any historical or social baggage, without anything to keep us apart, to separate us into different camps. We are all newcomers here, all strangers.

And it is definitely going to be a white Christmas this year.

‘Siobhán!’

The man from the base has appeared again in the open cargo door and jumps down. He smiles as he approaches. *‘Is mise Iain. Ceud mìle fàilte.’*

‘Uhh ... *tapadh leat*. But beyond that, I’m sorry to say my Gaelic is rather limited.’

Iain laughs. ‘That’s all right. It’s just that with your first name, and since you live in Scotland, I thought I’d give it a go. But you’re very welcome anyway.’

He motions towards the aircraft. ‘Sorry about the wait, by the way. We had to clarify first whether they’d be able to fly back today. Brandon’s been

on the radio with the control tower at Halo, and they're saying that in a few hours the airport will be down. The weather at their end has already turned pretty nasty, and it's heading our way. I guess you saw the clouds from the air. So, they have no choice but to stay here for the night, and quite possibly longer. The good news is that there is no need for refuelling now, which is just as well. Avtur fumes have a nasty habit of getting into your gloves and sucking the last bit of heat out of your hands.'

Paul calls over from the cargo door, holding a stack of sealed plastic containers.

With a quick gesture of an excuse, Iain walks back to the aircraft, to receive them. He checks the labels and nods. 'Medical supplies ... I need to get them inside, before they freeze. They were the main reason for sending the plane over today – and the airmail, of course.'

He passes the containers on to me and takes hold of the large postbag that Paul lowers down from the cabin.

With obvious excitement, he carries it back towards his snowmobile. 'This is the most precious cargo we get down here, especially now after the long winter months, when we had nothing coming in from the outside world at all. And with the weather closing in once more, it looks like it got here just in time for the holidays.'

He begins securing the bag on the sledge. 'Brandon said he was going to contact Aurora. They'll probably send two of the lads to help secure the aircraft and then take the pilots back to the base. However, I would suggest you come with me now.'

'Sounds good. But, where is it?'

'Aurora?' Iain squints into the icy haze, glistening underneath the retreating sun. 'You can't see it from here today. The blowing snow is too intense. But it's only about two miles from here – down this way.' He points towards the south. 'The old skiway was a little closer to the base, until it was destroyed during the winter when a crevasse opened up right across it. These ice shelves are in constant motion, you know, not only pushing out to sea, but also heaving up and down with the tides. Cracks and pressure ridges appear and disappear all the time. So, we must constantly be on the lookout for a sufficiently smooth surface that is long enough for the *Twin Otter* to land on. At the moment, this here is the closest we can find.'

‘Anyhow ...’ He takes back the plastic containers, to fasten them next to the postbag. ‘I really need to get these drugs out of the cold. Just let me strap your rucksack here onto the sledge, and then we can get the rest of your stuff.’

By now, the kit bag has also been unloaded. Sitting there in the snow, underneath the aircraft, it looks rather more intimidating than it did back in Cambridge. Tired as I am, it feels to have got a lot heavier too. It will not be easy to get it off the ground and over to the snowmobile. But I cannot afford to show any weakness now, to arrive here as the girl who is unable to carry even her own luggage.

Iain’s crunching steps approach from behind. He stops discretely off to one side, hovering about uncertainly. But he cannot get himself to ignore my second failed attempt at shouldering the unwieldy bag. ‘Not meaning to be patronising or anything, but if you need help with that ...’

‘Actually, I do – cheers. It didn’t seem quite so heavy when I packed it. But I’m absolutely knackered from the trip.’

‘Sure, no worries. I know exactly what you mean.’ He picks up the bag with a polite exaggeration of the effort required. ‘Last year, I did not get much sleep either on the various flights here.’

‘It would have been nice to go on the supply ship, but it left Hull only the day after I got formally accepted for the wintering position.’

‘Yes, the *Steadfast* got here twelve days ago. It’s still moored down in Creek 9. That’s the big crack in the ice shelf edge, which allows us to get down to the ocean. You’ll see it, once you start your research – although, given the weather conditions, that may not be for a while. Anyway, at least you managed to get here now.’

‘As a last-minute replacement, judging by the way they rushed me through the basic training courses. It was quite a surprise when, one evening, I suddenly received a phone call from the Institute – especially after they’d completely ignored my application the first time around. They didn’t give me much in terms of an explanation either.’

Iain occupies himself with loading the kit bag onto the sledge, looking uncomfortable, and chooses not to respond.

‘So, my predecessor had to go back to England then?’

‘Kevin? Yes.’ Iain shoots a sideways glance. ‘But he’s better now, last time I heard.’

‘Better? Did he become sick? Or did something go wrong during diving?’

‘Oh, no, nothing of the sort.’ Iain looks even more uncomfortable. ‘No, diving went surprisingly well, considering it was the first year we had the marine science programme down here at Aurora.’

The same evasiveness on the subject of the previous biologist as at headquarters. There is definitely something dodgy about this, something to enquire about at a later point; but it will have to wait. With my bag secured, apparently, we are ready to leave.

Iain takes two pairs of goggles, which had been hanging from the handlebar of the snowmobile, and shakes off the accumulated snow. ‘I brought you one of these. You’ll need them, once we get going.’

He puts on his own goggles and mounts the snowmobile. ‘You should have enough space on the seat behind me. Just hold on to these grips in the back. The ride is going to be a bit bumpy, I’m afraid. With the wind we’ve had recently, the snow surface has become quite uneven. It’s hard to tell in the glare of the sunlight, but over there you can see some of the sastrugi: this regular pattern of waves, which look like they froze in the moment of breaking. We try to maintain a groomed track between the base and here, but it’s mostly a hopeless endeavour.’

Iain turns his attention towards the front. ‘Right, here we go then. Pad my shoulder, if you need to catch my attention. I won’t hear you against the head wind, and over the racket this thing is making.’

The instant he pulls the starter rope, the natural soundscape of the wind is pushed away by the engine noise. He gives a final wave to the two pilots, and we are off. The driving belt cuts into the slippery surface. The heavily laden sledge lurches into motion, swerving after us. Then, gradually, it straightens itself out, as the snowmobile gathers speed, its runners gliding more smoothly over the rippled snow, plunging us into the uncertainty that lies ahead.

The route to the base is only vaguely made visible by a pattern of tracks, which cannot survive for long on a surface that is in constant flux. Along the right side, the occasional red marker flag still stands, having survived the persistent onslaught of the harsh elements. But most of them seem to have vanished, either blown away or buried.

Without a warning, two snowmobiles burst out of the agitated whiteness in front of us, trailing eddies of snow, as they race past us towards the skiway. There is only a brief greeting from the drivers, both leaning low behind their

windcreens, straining to make out the waiting aircraft. Then, as quickly as they appeared, they are lost from sight again.

A localised yellow shine has developed directly ahead of us. It is strongest immediately above the surface, before it blends into the diffuse glow above the horizon.

Responding to my leaning over to one side, Iain half turns back with a confirming nod. ‘Aurora.’

Gradually, two indistinct structures solidify inside the haze – raised platforms, one with a simple container building at the top, the other with a giant satellite dish.

From closer up, some smaller objects come into view: what looks like a fuel tank, and there – the two red igloo-shaped plastic domes with the round windows, each sitting on its own sledge – these must be the mobile shelters for field operations.

Closer still, the first indications of the buildings buried beneath the snow become distinguishable, with various access towers, ventilation shafts, and antennas protruding from the surface. Above the main tower, a Union Jack rattles in the wind. A weathered sign, half buried in a snowbank, announces:

Aurora IV
British Institute for Polar Research
75°16’45”S, 24°56’39”W

The artificial light is now revealed to emanate from a ramp leading down into the main part of the base, with a London Underground sign next to the entrance. Dim light also emerges from the few windows of the raised container building. But without any visible human presence, and with the lifeless structures being swept over by a ghostly current of snow, the first impression of the compound is one of abandonment.

Iain slows down as we approach the opening of the ramp. Then he lets the snowmobile run down the steep slope, just fast enough to prevent the sledge from swinging around.

Down at the bottom, the tunnel widens into a long garage. The ground is hard-packed snow, but the walls and ceiling are formed by arches of corrugated steel, with rows of fluorescent lights installed along both sides.

Iain brings the snowmobile to a stop and turns off the engine. A welcome silence settles, as even the natural sounds are left behind at the surface above.

Iain waits for me to dismount, before getting off the snowmobile himself. He takes off his goggles with a sigh of relief. 'Home again.'

'Yes ... Sorry, just to make sure I got that right earlier on, with the wind and all: did you say your name was Iain?'

He smiles and takes off his gloves. 'That's me: Iain McDonnell, weatherman.'

'Siobhán Dannreuther, marine biologist.'

He nods and takes my outstretched hand. 'Welcome to Aurora, Siobhán. I guess they told you about this place, back home in Cambridge?'

'To some extent. At least they did mention that, on Antarctica, I'd be living underground.'

'Yes, that's right. We're now under almost forty feet of snow. Each year, about four feet accumulate at the top. Simultaneously, with the heat we're producing down here, the base melts itself down into the ice. So, there's a fair amount of pressure building up from above. In addition, there's the strain inside the ice shelf, as it flows out to sea. With all that, Aurora IV has pretty much reached the end of its lifecycle. Therefore, next summer, when the new team arrive, they'll begin with the construction of the fifth generation of the base. Otherwise ...' He gestures back up the ramp. 'You saw the Met Tower, which is where I spend my working hours – doing routine observations, launching the daily weather balloon, preparing forecasts, and such things. I hope you also admired our latest acquisition: the brand-new satellite antenna. It was installed last summer, and it worked all right throughout the winter – with regular de-icing, of course. It's available for personal communication in the evening, when the channel is linked to the public network. But it's extremely expensive, as you can imagine, and only suitable for very special occasions.'

He begins unloading the sledge. 'So, Aurora is definitely getting old. Still, I would say it is reasonably comfortable down here, considering where we are. I mean, you get used to it, after a while. At least it's warm, and you're out of the wind. Outside, on the other hand, it's a very different story. You'll see, there are hand-lines leading from here to each of the outlying parts of

the compound. When you're moving about out there, you should never stray away from these ropes. Even on an apparently calm day, the wind can pick up at any moment, when a wave of cold air comes sliding down from the elevated interior. And before you know it, you can find yourself in complete whiteout conditions for hours on end, or even days. When that happens, without any visual references, and with the snow spinning all around you, your orientation may be gone within seconds, and so are your footprints. Then, since you won't be able to retrace your steps, chances are that you walk off into the wrong direction. In this way, people have frozen to death within only a few yards of their base.'

Iain falls silent and dedicates himself, with loving attention, to wiping the snowmobile dry.

The garage houses an assortment of tracked vehicles, all obviously well-respected and kept meticulously clean. Additionally, two football goals and two sets of rugby posts occupy one corner in the back, together with an old dog sledge and several pairs of wooden skies. Rather more optimistically, there is also a large parasol for the beach and several deck chairs.

And somewhat hidden among all the other vehicles, propped up on its sledge – still waiting for the long winter break to come to an end – stands the dive boat, the real thing, only yards away.

The rubber tube now bears the Institute's logo, but the orange-and-grey colouring clearly betrays its venerable past as a lifeboat. Despite the dramatic action it must have seen before its retirement from the previous service, it looks well up to the new duty. The two powerful outboard engines are brand-new. And arching over them, the roll-bar glints even in the low artificial light, with the radio antennas mounted at the top. A windlass has been installed at the bow, to be able to lower the rack with the scientific instruments into the water.

Iain notices my excitement about the boat. 'Yes, that's the one. But as I mentioned earlier, I suspect you'll have to wait until after the holidays, when the weather has settled a bit, and summer has fully started.

'Now, if you could take your rucksack and those boxes with the medical supplies – cheers. I'll take your kit bag, and then I'll come back for the post later.'

He points towards one side of the garage, where a steel door and a large sliding gate seem to be leading to the main part of the base. 'Basically, Aurora consists of two parallel tunnels, connected on this side by the garage, and in

the middle by a crossway. In the North Tube, here on the right, are the workshops, the back-up power generator, the laundry, the main storage, the surgery, a little gym, and your biology lab at the very end. The lab is a bit rudimentary and probably not what you're used to at university back home. But you've got a decent microscope, as far as I can tell, a freezer, and what appears to be a refrigerated incubator – all emptied and cleaned. The previous results are stored in the computer, together with the copy of a draft report. Kevin didn't get around to finishing it.

'So, that's work over there. But most life underground takes place here in the South Tube.' Iain walks towards the door on the left and opens it. 'This is the so-called Boot Room. It has the lockers for outdoor clothing. Yours is this one here – cleaned out as well, I hope.'

He sinks onto a wooden bench along one side of the room and begins taking his boots off. 'Just put those boxes down somewhere. I'll take them over to the surgery, after I showed you to your room. And while your indoor shoes are still packed up – somewhere deep inside your bag, I imagine – you can leave your boots on for now.'

The state of the changing room stands in stark contrast to the meticulous order and cleanliness in the garage. In here, instead of the crisp outside air, the strong locker room smell is only partially obscured by the volatile scent of some kind of fuel.

'Diesel ... we use it in the power generators and for heating. Although the main storage is outside, the fumes are everywhere. But you'll get used to it.'

Iain must have seen my involuntary reaction to the dense atmosphere in the poorly ventilated room and misinterpreted it.

'My checklist says that I should report to the Base Commander upon arrival.'

'John, yes – John Rowlands. He's our BC and also the station doc. But he's away at the moment, with one half of the lads. They're down by the ship, getting the last load of cargo, and having their dental check-up on board. We're not equipped for that here. So, you can get yourself a good night's rest, and then I'll introduce you to the guv'nor tomorrow, when they've all come back; or when things have calmed down a bit, and everyone is on a regular schedule again. You know, the first relief after the winter is always a busy time, when we have to travel back and forth between the base and the ice shelf edge, unload the supplies for an entire year, and then somehow find the space in here to store it all away – ideally before Christmas.'

But we got lucky this year. The ice wasn't particularly thick, and so the *Steadfast* managed to get through to us about a week earlier than usual. Now we've got a full supply of new books, magazines, films, plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables – real crunchy lettuce. Not that you would appreciate that yet, but you will, soon enough.'

Iain has finished changing his shoes and gets up. 'In any case, now you're here, you can safely forget about your checklist. Cambridge HQ are a long way away.'

He opens the door leading out of the Boot Room and flips a heavy-duty light switch.

As a row of pale fluorescent lights flickers to life, another tunnel is gradually revealed, this one made of arched plywood panels. On the left, a row of prefab building units, two storeys tall, is joint together into one structure, about half the length of a football field. A corridor with a bare wooden floor runs alongside it. About halfway down, a dim column of evening sunlight descends from a shaft in the ceiling, adding a little warmth to the austere environment.

There is no sign of life anywhere, and the only noise to be heard is the steady chugging of a large engine inside the first of the building units.

'It's quiet in here.'

Iain nods. 'Those, who aren't down by the ship, are recovering from their last shift during the relief. So, they should still be sleeping – except, of course, the two we met on the way here – and Nigel, the other meteorologist. He's on duty right now.'

'Then I'm keeping you from your well-deserved rest?'

'Oh, no, not at all. All I had to do was to get up a little earlier for my night shift, which starts in about an hour. Nigel and I were exempt from unloading the ship. We're working twelve-hour shifts anyway throughout the year. Especially now in summer, with aircraft coming in again, we need to keep on top of the weather. Our skiway may not look like much, but it's quite important for refuelling and emergency landings. Normally, there isn't too much traffic from other bases, but you never know. About a week ago, the new German team passed through on their way to Helios. That's the nearest base from here, about five hundred miles to the northeast.'

Iain glances at his watch. 'Right, then, let me show you your new home for the next year or so. To begin with, as you can hear, this is the main generator room and the snow melt. All our water is produced here – that is,

as long as enough snow is being shovelled down the funnel from above, which is the main part of our daily duties, as you'll find out very soon. Needless to say, this is the heart of the whole operation. Without at least one of the generators running, the base is dead.'

At the next door, Iain contemplates for a moment whether to open it or not, but then decides against it. Instead, he vaguely gestures at it. 'This is our washroom and, you know, other facilities. It's unisex, I'm afraid. But if we work out a system ...'

'Iain, I was briefed about this, and I'm sure it'll be fine – don't worry. They already told me everything about water rationing and the half-a-minute showers. So, I'm confident I'll manage, just like the rest of you.'

He seems relieved. 'Good, I'm glad you've been forewarned. Then we can move on to more pleasant territory. Here, for example, we have the kitchen and pantry – very important, but pretty much out of bounds, except when you're on meal duty. And next to it ...' He opens the door and switches on the lights. '... is our dining room and lounge.'

The left half of the room is taken up by two tables. It is spotlessly clean, but furnished plainly – reminiscent of a ship's mess. An open side door leads directly into the dark kitchen. Neat rows of framed sepia or black-and-white photographs from the heroic era decorate the walls on both sides of the tables, all commemorating groups of men with haggard faces, mostly hidden behind bushy beards, and with a wild energy in their eyes, born of hardship and desperation.

The other half of the room is more disorganised and homely, with a worn-out but comfortable looking set of dark leather sofas and armchairs, facing a television set that, for a complete lack of reception, must be connected to a video recorder. A row of book shelves stands along one of the windowless walls, while a plastic Christmas tree, still unadorned, leans against another. In contrast with the dining room area, the lounge is decorated with a set of more recent photographs, showing a succession of wintering teams in increasingly less washed-out colours. The men here are generally younger than the early pioneers, and considerably better fed. The occasional beard or moustache is more a fashion statement of the past two decades, than an inevitability of life on the edge. In the far corner of the room, a winding metal staircase ascends to the upper floor, a shiny brass plate with a baroque inscription on one side:

'Le Cercle 75?'

‘That’s our club, as we like to call it. It’s not much, but it’s got a fairly decent bar – keeping in mind that alcohol is strictly rationed down here. Then there are darts, a pool table, things like that. The name, by the way, has to do with our position here on the ...’

‘75th Parallel – yes, very clever. Are women allowed in there at all?’

Iain smirks. ‘I think we may be able to make an exception for you.’

He leads the way back out into the corridor and switches off the lights. Closing the door, he nods down the remaining line of buildings. ‘Past the common rooms are the sleeping quarters. This is where the whole crew live, door to door. Now, with you, we’re going to be sixteen again – the full contingent. Here, the first one, that’s the unit I’m sharing with Nigel. But, as I said, he’s out at the moment.’

A few paces on, Iain stops at a solid door on the right side of the corridor. ‘Behind this is the crossway that leads over to the North Tube. In the middle of it is the main access tower, which takes you up to the surface. I can show you all that tomorrow.

‘Meanwhile, this is where Chris lives – Christopher Heywood. He’s the marine assistant and your diving partner. He’s down by the ship tonight. But you’ll meet him latest at the Christmas party. He’s sharing a room with Darren Walsh, our field assistant and boatman. He’s the one who’ll get you safely out to the diving site and back.

‘Then this here is John’s compartment. He’s got one floor to himself – the benefits of responsibility. The one above is used by occasional guests, such as the two pilots, who will arrive later. But mostly, he’s alone.’

Iain continues to the next door. ‘In here, we have the administration office on the ground floor, and the Comms Room above. That’s where you find the shortwave radio and the satellite phone. For about half the year – when it’s too cold and too dark for flying, and the sea ice gets too thick for the ship to break – this is our only connection to the rest of the world.’

He points to the very end of the tunnel. ‘There, through that steel door is the emergency exit tower – not that you’re likely to need it. Things must get pretty bad down here, before it’s safer to be outside.

‘And so, finally ...’ He opens the door to the last unit and switches on the lights. ‘... this is your home.’

The ground floor is filled almost entirely with boxes, stacked up to just below the ceiling.

Iain leads the way along a maze of narrow paths that winds between them. ‘All this stuff ... It’s a bit of a nuisance down here, to be honest. Originally, the storage room was meant to be at the top. But over the years, the base accumulated more and more material that no one really needed anymore, but no one was willing to throw out either – as in the attic of an ordinary family home, I suppose – until it got too heavy to be kept on the upper floor, and they had to bring it back down. Since then, people kept chucking things in here, without thinking about how to arrange them systematically. It only got worse when, a year ago, we had to empty out one of the storage rooms, over in the other tunnel, to make space for the biology lab. So, you just have to try not to get lost and ... here we are.’

We have arrived in the corner farthest from the door, where, as in the lounge, a winding staircase leads to the floor above.

Iain shoulders the kit bag and begins climbing. ‘You’ll be staying in what we used to call the Con Room – as in convalescence. It was reserved for crew members who are not injured or ill enough to be cared for in the hospital, but are still better off being away from the cramped lifestyle of the rest of the base for a little while. If it got very crowded during the summer months, it was also used by guests, but we’ll find enough space in the other quarters. So, it’s all yours now.’

The landing at the top of the staircase opens into a room that, despite the lack of windows, turns out to be far more comfortable than one might have expected. About twice as wide as it is deep, it was evidently intended to house two people, each half furnished with a single bed, a wardrobe, a desk, and a small bookshelf. A larger shelving unit that, judging by the indentations in the carpet, had been dividing the two halves of the room, is now pushed against the wall.

The bed on the right is covered by a coarse rug. On the other lies a fluffy duvet and pillow, together with a separate pile of folded covers, from which originates the inviting smell of freshly laundered linen. But the air inside the low room is over-heated and dry.

Iain indicates a grid in the ceiling. ‘Normally, the heating is done through the ventilation system. So, there is more or less the same temperature throughout the whole base, which is kept quite low to reduce the melting. Since I wasn’t sure how warm you wanted it, I set up this space heater here, to give you time to acclimatise. But I realise now that it’s a bit on the warm side. So, if you ...’

‘It’s perfect, Iain. Cheers.’

He nods and deposits the bag next to the wardrobe. ‘Right then, I’ll let you settle in. Have a good first night on Antarctica and ... well, I’ll see you again after my shift tomorrow morning.’

Iain’s footsteps recede on the floor below. As the door closes behind him – with the space heater turned off, and the chugging of the power generator lost at the other end of the tunnel – silence settles in.

But only for a moment. Then the breathy sound of the ventilation system becomes noticeable. And beyond it, faintly, the creaking of the outer cylindrical shell that protects the frail manmade structure against the restless motion of the massive ice shelf that surrounds it – the exiled part of an ancient ocean that, having been condemned to spend millennia on land, is now coming towards the end of its long journey back home, unaware of the insignificant foreign object that has embedded itself in its skin.

CHAPTER TWO

AURORA IV

‘I’m bored, Ally – bored out of my mind. I’ve been here for almost three weeks, and I still haven’t had the opportunity to get going with my research. Ever since I came, the weather has been absolutely awful. I’ve never experienced anything like it. The sky is completely clear, the sun is shining around the clock, and yet, there is this never ending strong wind, which picks up the dry snow from the surface and creates an impenetrable cloud over everything. When you’re inside that, you can’t see anything, you can’t breathe, you can’t walk, and the constant howling drives you utterly insane within minutes. Meanwhile, the sea ice is breaking up into smaller and smaller fragments that get thrown about by the waves – not a healthy environment to go diving in, or to drive a boat through, for that matter. So, I’ve been mostly cooped up inside. The first week was quite exciting, right through the holidays. There was always something new to discover, and generally lots to do: getting to know everyone, becoming familiar with the different parts of the base, the daily routine, but now ...’

‘Sorry to hear that, Shivy – to the extent that I *can* hear you. I’m afraid the connection is rather poor at this end. Then again, considering how far away you are ... You should be happy now. After all, that’s exactly what you always wanted, isn’t it: to travel to the end of the world, to live life at the extremes – *nil satis nisi optimum*. But don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for you. To be able to get away and leave everything behind for a while – I wish I could, with everything going on at the moment. And I do appreciate you responding to my telex. They told me how horrendously expensive this is, and I’ll pay you back. I just needed someone to talk to, and there isn’t anyone else who’s particularly close – except Gran, of course, but it’s different with her. She’s been very supportive, but I can’t continue to burden her with things like that. I know that, ultimately, I’ll have to find a way to cope with it myself. The problem is, I haven’t been myself since the murder. I’ve never fallen to pieces like that before. And to make matters worse, now with you down there in this dangerous place ...’

‘Ally, honestly, you don’t need to trouble yourself over me. What I said about the weather, it isn’t so bad, really, just a little annoying. If you follow some basic rules, Antarctica is perfectly safe these days. And without any violent crimes, life here may well be safer than in the UK these days.’

‘But you’ll be prepared, won’t you, when you finally get the chance to go diving, after all this sitting around and waiting. I mean, you know what you’re doing?’

‘Sure, Ally. No one here is willing to take any chances with unnecessary risks – which is exactly why we continue to be stuck inside. Admittedly, the environment around here is pretty intimidating. But now in summer, the air and water temperatures aren’t a lot colder than during the winter in northern Scotland, where I’ve been diving for years. And the work isn’t particularly difficult either – taking water and ice samples at different depths down to about a hundred feet. The main work happens afterwards, when I have to analyse all that stuff in the lab. The only thing that is likely to kill me then is boredom.’

‘And I guess there aren’t any dangerous animals down there – no sharks or anything?’

‘There are ... no, no sharks or polar bears. But, Ally, why are you so concerned about me all of a sudden? We’ve chatted about what I was going to do on Antarctica before.’

‘I know, and I’m not seriously worried. I’m probably just trying to distract myself from my own problems by worrying about you.’

‘So, Kathleen ...’

‘Yes, I can’t get over it. It’s been three weeks – as you said – and every time more details are being released by the police about the manner in which she was killed, it gets worse. And I can’t stop thinking how easily it could have been you coming home to her flat that evening. If Kathy had been away for only a few days longer, you would still have been living in her flat, and it *would* have been you, who got attacked and eventually murdered in that terrible fashion. It’s silly to pretend otherwise. Kathy wasn’t a specific target, that much is certain now. Nobody who knew her considers for one moment that she was involved with this Satanic cult, not even the police. But they couldn’t find any other motive either that would explain her murder, least of all under those extreme circumstances.’

‘Her work placement in the Cabinet Office – didn’t that turn up anything?’

‘There was nothing about that in the news, but I doubt it. She was there for less than two months. During that short period, she wouldn’t have got anywhere near any sensitive information. Even if she had wanted to, she wouldn’t have had the opportunity to get mixed up in some kind of important affair. And, as a general rule, if you want to extract information from someone working in the government or for the diplomatic service, there are any number of things you can do: you can break into their office, you can bug their phone, you can steal their briefcase, you can attempt to bribe them, you threaten their family – but you don’t stage a ritualistic killing, which is bound to attract everyone’s attention for weeks. So, I don’t think that Kathy’s brief affiliation with the Cabinet Office is relevant for anything that happened to her, and we probably have to accept that we’ll never find out exactly why she was abducted. Chances are, it genuinely was just bad luck – the wrong place, at the wrong time. I suspect the perpetrators were lurking about outside her apartment building one evening, when they saw her come home. They liked the look of her, but couldn’t assault her out in the open. So, they went in after her. That way, they found out which flat was hers. From the name plate, they would then have known that she was living there on her own. And the simple fact is that if you had still been staying there, instead with me, it would have been you they had seen coming home that evening.’

‘But judging by the photographs in Kathleen’s flat, I don’t look like her at all.’

‘You’re young and female, that’s all that matters to these bastards. Also, perhaps they didn’t see her at all and simply concluded from the name tag and the decorations in the windows that a young woman was living there alone. I don’t know. Maybe they saw her photograph in the department newsletter, when she graduated from King’s last June. From that, they would also have known her name. Then all they had to do was to get her address from the phonebook. And when they decided it was time ...’ Alison breaks off with a quivering sigh.

She is right, there is no point denying it: that was a narrow escape, no two ways about it; and that realisation affected her more than even myself.

Alison sighs again. ‘At least, the coroner released her body now, so that she could be buried. And you know, Shivy, I was driving back from Kathy’s funeral ... that was last Saturday, down in Bournemouth, where she grew up. The occasion was depressing enough – meeting her family and other

friends. But it was made worse by the fact that I appear to be the last person who saw Kathy before she was abducted. So, I had to tell everyone how happy she had been, and to reassure them that there was no chance whatsoever that she might have got involved with any kind of shady activity, such as strange rituals or illegal drugs. On top of that, throughout the whole weekend, there was another bad storm down by the coast, as if we hadn't had enough of them already this winter – no snow this time, but the wind was as bad as on the day we moved your stuff from Kathy's flat into mine, remember?

'So, anyway, I was driving back to Cambridge late that evening. The traffic was slow because of the storm, and I had far too much leisure to think, when suddenly it hit me: the reason why I'm so devastated about Kathy isn't the fact that we'd been particularly close friends at all. It's the fact that we *hadn't* been. The truth is, I didn't know her all that well. I'd only met her last summer during the weekly aerobics classes. We got on fine on a casual level, and we chatted occasionally over a cup of coffee somewhere, since she had just completed the same programme in International Relations as I had. So, she was interested in the internship at the embassy in Dublin that I had done after graduating. And when you were selected for the wintering position on Antarctica, I told her you'd be temporarily coming back to Cambridge for your training, and that you'd be bringing back all your stuff from Aberdeen, partly store it in my flat, and partly at your gran's. I mentioned how I was looking forward to having you back for a while, hoping my little flat wouldn't get too crowded with two people living in it and all the extra stuff, and ... I never told you this, but I was concerned that under those cramped conditions and without having the opportunity to spend quality time together – given my regular work hours and your busy training schedule – we would notice each other mainly by getting into each other's way. So, I was afraid that that might create tensions between us, shortly before you left for such a long period, during which we wouldn't see each other at all, and wouldn't get the chance to reconcile. It seems rather silly now, but at the time ... that was a few days before Kathy went to London. And right away, she offered to let you use her flat while she was away, without knowing you at all. She was a lovely girl, whom I should have known better, but I didn't. And now she's gone, and I can never talk to her again, to ask her about all those things I should have asked her about months ago: her family, her friends, her plans for the future ...

‘So, it’s a combination of things that is bothering me: the shock of realising how close to being killed you came; the relief that it wasn’t you on the one hand, and the bad conscience about Kathy on the other. I understand that, rationally, but that doesn’t make it any easier. And the problem is, there isn’t anything else going on at the moment that would distract me. I thought that, once the holidays were over, I might find it easier to focus on other things, my job for example, but ...’

‘Yes, how *was* Christmas? Did you go to see Gran?’

‘On the 24th, yes – straight after work, as usual. I stayed with her until Boxing Day. Apart from the murder case hanging over everything, it was lovely, really, just like always. We had tea together and listened to the *Christmas Oratory* on the old turntable. Only it wasn’t as always, because you weren’t there. But we chatted about you. She’s very proud of you.’

‘I feel as if I didn’t spend enough time with her, before I left. I mean, what if ...’

‘No, Shivy, don’t worry about her. She’s doing well. She asked me to put on the LP for her, but that was just ... well, you know how much she values her old records. She was afraid of scratching it, but I could see that her hands were quite steady. And she’s as bright and as alert as ever.

‘Given that, it didn’t take her long to work out that Kathy had lived in the same building in which you had stayed for what ... three weeks before going to Antarctica? We were watching the news together on the evening of Christmas Day. I had tried to distract her, but it was hopeless. She had heard of the murder, of course, like everyone else in the country, and she wanted to see if there were any new developments. And sure enough, as soon as we turned on the telly, they were talking about Kathy having been abducted from her home in Cambridge. That was new information at the time, which the police had just released. Until then, the reports had focussed exclusively on the uninhabited manor house in the Highlands, where her body had been found, and on the ritualistic nature of the murder. Now they were standing right outside the apartment block, explicitly mentioning the address. I could tell that Gran recognised the street name, and she tried to remember from where. Finally, she got up and went out into the corridor. I couldn’t see her, but it was easy enough to guess that she checked her address book by the phone. I know she’d written down your temporary address at Kathy’s. She didn’t say anything when she got back. We simply looked at one another,

and she knew that I knew that she knew ... So, I told her that it had not only been the same building, but in fact the same flat that you'd been staying in.'

Oh, dear ... 'And how did she take that?'

'As I said, she'd already been troubled by the case before then. And she was particularly sorry when she found out that the victim had been a friend of mine. But aside from that, regarding you staying in Kathy's flat up to a week before she was abducted – I was surprised, she took that rather lightly. Gran seems to have your ability to rationalise away these kinds of coincidences – or rather you inherited hers, I suppose. Also, she has this indestructible optimism and confidence in you. She is convinced that, whatever the situation or whatever the danger, you'll be able to cope with it. The embarrassing thing is that, right now, she's far more concerned about my mental state here in all the familiar surroundings than about your safety on Antarctica. And no matter how hard I try to downplay my depression and pretend that I got over everything, it's hopeless. She's known me for too long.

'She was so sweet, when I went to see her over the holidays – all excited and happy for you. Shivy, I love her so much, and I hope you appreciate what you have in her. Most of her life she's dedicated first to her daughter and then to you. She's gone through incredible hardships for many years. And now she sees you achieve your goals: first going to university and now to Antarctica, despite everyone saying that there was no point in applying, what with you being *a girl* and all.

'She had the old atlas open on the table, and she showed me where you'd marked the position of your base on the white, empty continent all the way at the bottom of the page. I could tell that she didn't have a clear understanding of how you could live down there – after all, she does know that there aren't any villages, with shops and such things. So, I explained it to her as best I could. But as far as she knows, you've pretty much walked off the charted territory on the map.'

'You're right. It all happened so quickly, and there was so much that needed to be done before leaving. Somehow, I never thought about how foreign all this must be for Gran. But she never asked me about any details, and I honestly had the impression she understood what I'd be doing.'

'Yes, Shivy, because she's content just to hear you talk about your work, starting with the excursions up in Scotland, your research with the dolphins, and then the preparations for Antarctica. Your happiness and enthusiasm is

what interests her most. And she doesn't want to spoil that for you by letting you know that, for the most part, she has but the vaguest notion of what exactly it is you're up to.'

'But then at least I could explain it to her properly.'

'I doubt it, Siobhán. The Old Lady is quite clever in her own ways, but she's really from a different world. When she was our age, her sole concern was to keep herself and her little daughter alive from one day to the next, under conditions that you and I couldn't even begin to imagine. After the War, she's known little apart from work, her colleagues at the hospital, the two of us ... Just think about the places she's seen in her life. All the locations we visited with her, you can count on the fingers of one hand: apart from Norwich and Cambridge, there were the occasional trips to the seaside at Yarmouth, either the Lake or Peak District for the summer hols, and combined with that, your mum's grave in Liverpool, while it still existed – that's all. Now she's old, and there is only so much you can explain to her. She knows that, and you'd notice it too, as soon as she began to ask any detailed questions.

'Then also, often you're so completely caught up in your own world – which, let's face it, is largely dominated by your science and by dreaming about some faraway places – that you don't see how incomprehensible most things you do are to the majority of people. At first, during our undergraduate years back here at King's, it was all right. Having worked as a nurse for decades, Gran does have a basic understanding of biology. But when you went off to St Andrews and started with your dissertation research, she simply couldn't keep up anymore. My own work, politics and journalism, those are concepts she can relate to. After all, they are part of ordinary life. But every time you'd been on the phone to her, when I went to see her afterwards, she had a whole list of questions – actual notes she had made during your conversation, Shivy, about some terms you had used – and asked me, if I could explain them to her in a manner she might be able to understand. She always made me promise not to tell you. But there you are, now you know.'

'Dear old Gran ... what was it she didn't understand?'

'I can't really remember. Often things that didn't mean a whole lot to me either, although I heard you talk about them endlessly for years – you know, "signal analysis," "bioacoustics," "spectrograms," things like that. To you, all of this may be blindingly obvious. But you must realise that for most

others, that's barely English. So, about your work in Scotland, I explained to her that you're studying the way dolphins communicate with each other; but that, instead of words, they're using different whistles and other sounds; that you record these sounds underwater and compile a sort of dictionary, to be able to see how they socialise and hunt and generally organise themselves.

'And with regards to what you're doing now on Antarctica, I told her you're studying different types of very small organisms, plants and animals, that live in the ocean and in the sea ice. I told her that you're trying to work out how they manage to survive at these very low temperatures, and how they may be the closest examples that we have here on Earth of life on other planets, like Mars, for example. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, it is. But Ally, after the holidays, I'd sent long letters for Gran and you to our main base down here, trying to explain a little bit about my work – together with the film rolls I'd completed during the first week. From there, they were supposed to go north on the first plane. Haven't they arrived yet?'

'Yes, they have – cheers, Shivy. Sorry, I forgot to mention that. There was so much else on my mind. But I picked them up yesterday at the Institute, when I sent you the telex. The films are currently being developed, and I'll collect them and take them to Gran tomorrow. I'm staying with her over the weekend.'

'Ally, that's brilliant – then give her my love. And once the research gets going, I'll send you a more detailed account of exactly what it is I'm doing down here, with photographs and all.'

'Sounds good. Then I'll be looking forward to that. Just promise to be careful.'

'I do. But otherwise, what's going on back home? Nothing positive to report?'

'I don't know. Do you get the Cup results down there?'

'Indeed we do, yes. That's an important part of our routine communication, and there are always up-to-date football fixtures and results on the notice board. So, I saw that Everton won.'

'Yes. Now they're through to Round Four. But look, Shivy, we've been chatting for far too long. It'll cost you a bloody fortune. Still, it was worth it. I feel a bit better now. Let's hope ...'

'No wait, before I forget, very briefly: yesterday, when I went to the Institute, one of the secretaries there mentioned that an editor of *Brigid* had

contacted them and asked about the rights to publish your “Antarctic Diary,” as she called it. I didn’t know you’re keeping a diary, Shivy.’

‘Neither did I – and I don’t, as a matter of fact. I suspect she believes I should. But at the moment, it’s deadly dull, as I said.’

‘Well, think about it. Something is bound to happen sometime. I know you never had much patience for this kind of magazine, but *Brigid* isn’t bad, considering the alternatives. Apparently, the editor read your interview with the *Alumni Magazine*. That’s come out now in the Lent edition, with a very nice write-up and some photographs. I’ll keep a copy for you. I didn’t appreciate that it was being read outside the university, or even outside the college. But I noticed that *Brigid* are currently publishing a series on new job opportunities for women. So, I suppose they have to keep informed about what comes out of our elite education system.’

‘Yes, probably ... All right, I’ll see what I can do. But first, I finally need to get the chance to prove to all these guys that I can do the job I was hired for – even if, momentarily, I seem to have misplaced my Y chromosome.’

* * *

Suspended in a frozen flow of time ... trapped in a random instant, a state of insignificance, more inactive even than the ice that surrounds us – that rigid body of water that holds us in its grip, crackling ceaselessly, taunting us ... the only thing still moving.

Except – there are footsteps outside in the corridor. They come to a halt ... followed by the sound of a door opening.

Someone enters, turning right into the lounge, approaching tentatively. Then he chuckles quietly. ‘All right, I get the point.’

‘What?’

Chris sinks into one of the armchairs, smirking. ‘Siobhán, if someone lies on a sofa, eyes closed, but moving their foot in rhythm to the music playing softly in the background, it usually means they’re conscious. And if then, upon hearing someone enter the room, they stop moving their foot, they probably want to pretend to be asleep, for the purpose of being left alone.’

‘Or, alternatively, upon hearing someone enter the room, they casually wonder to themselves who that might be. But they are far too lazy to open their eyes. And so, to conserve energy for this unexpected mental task – in an entirely unconscious manner – they stop moving their foot.’

Chris nods, still smirking. ‘Yes, all right, point taken.’

He falls silent and begins studying the intricate pattern of cracks in the old leather of the arm rest, becoming more serious. ‘You’re okay down here – with us, I mean?’

So, it is still “us” and “her,” then ... ‘Sure, yes. I’m simply bored, like everyone else. It’s obvious already that I didn’t bring nearly enough to read. Now, in my desperation, I began leafing through these magazines. I was just reading this insane story about some secret bases that the Nazis supposedly had underneath the ice – over in “Neuschwabenland,” or however they called Queen Maud Land. According to the article, they used them to hide some advanced alien spacecraft, which they had found during the War, after it had crash landed there – advanced, as it was. Imagine that: there may even now be a whole society of fascists and aliens living not far from here, planning to take over the world someday through the use of some kind of superior weapon that they developed from the alien technology. Isn’t that nice, Chris? A warm, uplifting thought on an otherwise dreary afternoon.’

‘Yes, I read that too. Unfortunately, we’re not being told how these vast structures could survive inside the ice for decades. That would have been interesting, considering that our own bases don’t last for much longer than ten years, before they’re being torn apart and crushed. Take Aurora, for example: it’s been occupied for only eight years, but none of the floors are level anymore, and in some parts of the outer shell, the first cracks already start to appear.’

‘Tah ... another comforting thought for the day. But I think I know where this belongs.’

‘No, don’t throw it out. What’s wrong with you?’ With a horrified expression, he jumps out of his seat, pulls the magazine out of the waste paper basket again, and straightens it out as reverently as if it were a precious old manuscript.

‘Come on, Chris, it’s only some random nonsense about alien UFOs, hidden on giant Nazi bases under the ice.’

‘Exactly. We’ll be needing this, before the next winter is over. We only just got it with the last relief, you know. Don’t be so bloody intellectual. There’s nothing like reading about the delusions of other people, to keep the madness out of your own head.’

He puts the magazine back on the table and, with an exhausted sigh, slumps into his armchair again. Mechanically, he attempts to brush his hair

back, only to remember that – just a few days ago – it was cropped rather generously by an obliging mate. He glances over. ‘Must have been a bit stressful to be called up at such short notice, when the rest of us had months to prepare for this.’

‘I’m fully qualified, Chris.’

‘Oh, no, that’s not what I meant. It’s just ...’

‘I assure you, I went through exactly the same training as you did, only more concentrated, over a shorter period of time. But I took the same first aid course, went through the same field training in Baslow, had the same boat handling instructions on Grafham Water, and the same sea survival training. I’m sure I don’t have your experience as a diver, but I’ve been diving routinely since ‘84, and clocked hundreds of hours underwater, mostly from the field station at Tarbat Rocks, out in Moray Firth – where, incidentally, the water is bloody freezing.’

‘Yes, I know. I experienced that in the past.’

‘You’ve been diving the Firth then? Because of the dolphins?’

He laughs. ‘I wish. No, that was for inspection and maintenance of the oil rigs there. Over the years, I’ve supported all sorts of diving operations around Britain – mostly at offshore platforms and occasionally for salvage, which is a bit more fun. But the work here has been the most enjoyable so far.’

He looks apologetic. ‘I didn’t mean to offend you, by the way. I only imagine that, if I had been in your situation, being asked to leave everything behind so suddenly and go to Antarctica ...’

‘I know, I overreacted, and I’m sorry. It’s just that all this sitting around and waiting is getting on my nerves. Almost half the summer is already over, and we haven’t even started with our research yet.’

‘I wouldn’t worry too much about that. It was the same last year – one spring gale after the other, well into January. Then, within a couple of days, the weather turned, and we had weeks of sunshine. There’ll be plenty of opportunities throughout the winter too. Actually, once the sea ice is back, we’ll be protected from the wind, at least while we’re in the water – no need to deal with the waves anymore. And with a little artificial light, the visibility is generally much better than in summer. So, I’m sure it’ll be all right.’

Yes ... if only there wasn’t this constant unease following me around, even into my dreams; those repeated nightmares, the sense of falling, falling in water as if it were thin air – thin air, but still suffocating; falling farther and farther away from the surface, without any chance of swimming back up.

That this should happen now, when I cannot, under any circumstances, allow myself to lose my nerves ... But there is only one cure: to finally get back into the water and start focussing on the research.

‘It’s John’s birthday next Thursday.’ Chris has been quietly following his own thoughts for a few moments, now looking slightly more animated. ‘There’s bound to be a big party, and we have to prepare some practical joke again, maybe in the administration this time. But we need to be clever about it. After last year, he’ll definitely be expecting something.’

‘And you want me to keep cave out in the corridor, while you rifle the headmaster’s office?’

‘I’m serious, Siobhán. We’ve got to come up with something. It’s a tradition with the BC’s birthday.’

‘I see ... But if John expects some kind of mischief, we could *not* do anything. And then the joke is he’s stressed out the whole day for nothing. You know, like in a horror film: the scary bit is never as nerve-racking as the anticipation of it.’

‘Hmm ... I don’t know.’ He falls silent again, now studying the orange and brown pattern of the worn-out carpet, casting about for another way into the conversation; perhaps trying to establish the close personal relationship he had with Kevin.

‘Chris, I think it’s only fair to tell you ... because after all, we’re meant to be dive buddies ...’

‘And I hope we will be very soon.’

‘Yes, me too. Because of that, we’re meant to look out for each other, aren’t we? We need to be able to rely on one another. So, if there’s any chance that my – or your – concentration or judgement on a dive might be affected, due to some other stuff going on, the other has got the right to know.’

Chris is listening now with considerable unease. ‘I guess so.’

‘Well, then I should probably tell you that, for the last few days, or several days in fact ... basically, I haven’t slept well, since I came here.’

‘You left unfinished business at home?’

‘I ... yes, I did.’

‘And the new surroundings – the constant sun outside and absolutely no sun in here, together with the strange daily routine – all that isn’t exactly helping either, is it.’

‘That took some getting used to. But now, life on base is fine. No, the real problem ... what happened was ... it began a few days before I left England. There was a lot going on at that time, in addition to preparing for Antarctica.’ – This is going to be complicated. – ‘I suppose you heard about Kathleen Reed, the girl who was abducted from Cambridge and found murdered in the Highlands, just before Christmas. I saw summaries of the first press releases among the old news bulletins by the teleprinter.’

‘You’re right, we did hear about the case. That was terrible.’

‘Yes, it was. But I suspect the Institute didn’t pass on to you that I was personally caught up in the affair – that, actually, I was being interviewed by the police the day before I was scheduled to leave, and that I might not be able to come as planned. The reason for that was that I had stayed in Kathleen’s flat during the three weeks of training, while she was away on some work placement in London. A friend of mine, Alison, had arranged that for me. Just before Kathleen got back, I moved in with Alison. But she invited Kathleen over to her flat the last Saturday before I left, so that I could meet her. When she didn’t show up, Alison tried to reach her by phone, unsuccessfully. So, she called all their mutual acquaintances, but no one knew where Kathleen was. When, the next morning, she still didn’t answer the phone, Alison and I went over to her flat together and rang the doorbell. But there was no response either. Then, Alison got really anxious, and eventually, in the afternoon, she went to the police to file a missing person report.

‘Promptly the next morning, Kathleen’s body was found in that old manor house, after the police had received an anonymous tip-off, most likely from one of the perpetrators. Thanks to Alison’s report, the body was identified immediately. The police then needed to talk to her, to find out about the victim, and why Kathleen may have been abducted and killed in that remote place.

‘By then, it was two days before I was supposed to leave, and Alison knew that. She also knew that, if I got dragged into the case, I would most likely miss the plane and might have to wait for several weeks, before getting another opportunity to fly south. On the other hand, any careful examination of Kathleen’s flat was bound to reveal that another woman had stayed there very recently. I had cleaned the flat before I moved out, but not exactly forensically. At least my fingerprints were all over the place, and possibly several of my hairs. If the police had somehow been able to link

them back to me, both Alison and I would have been in major trouble. So, during her interview, Alison mentioned my stay in Kathleen's flat, while she had been away. Then, of course, the police called me in for questioning as well, initially on that same afternoon, and then again the following day.

'The first interview wasn't a pleasant experience at all. For some time, I even thought they might arrest me and keep me there overnight. What got me into some difficulties was that Kathleen had been abducted from her flat. That was shown by the fact that the door chain had been cut, but the lock was undamaged. So, clearly, whoever it was, broke in at night, either had a key or picked the lock, but then realised that they had to cut the door chain. They were able to do this quietly enough not to wake Kathleen. At least she didn't get the chance to phone for help. They probably surprised her in bed, somehow sedated her, or threatened her to keep quiet. Then they managed to get her out of the apartment building unnoticed and drove up to Scotland. Not surprisingly, the initial suspicion landed squarely on me. I'd left Kathleen's spare key, that I had been using, inside the flat when I moved out. But I could easily have had a copy of it made. So, the police kept asking me these seemingly random, oblique questions, trying to establish what my relationship with Kathleen may have been, and whether I might be connected to this Satanic cult, which apparently is responsible for her murder. They kept on it for more than an hour, but there was nothing useful I could tell them. And so, in the end, they let me go. They still told me not to leave town and to come back the next day.

'The second interview was much more affable. By then, the police had done some background checks on me. They had obtained character references from the Institute and my university in Aberdeen. They also had received confirmation of the reason for why I had been staying in Kathleen's flat. But crucially, based on further anonymous information, they had been able to make the first arrests. They had apprehended at least some of the cult members, and since they couldn't establish any connection between them and me, they simply went over everything once more, I signed a written statement, they took finger prints and a hair sample – for elimination purposes – and then I was allowed to leave the country. After all, they know where to find me, and there's nowhere to run down here.'

Chris nods thoughtfully. 'Blimey ... To be honest, I did have the feeling that there was something bothering you, but I had no idea. Then let's hope the police find the rest of the gang soon.'

‘Yes, let’s. I just wish we could finally get on with our work. Then I could start thinking about something else. I mean, how long can these strong winds last? It’s been going on for weeks.’

‘In winter, this is what you get most of the time. Now, in summer, it should eventually stop. But if you want to know for sure, there’s one place to find out.’



The rope strains in the gale, forming a yellow arc that, despite its bright colour, disappears into the violent cloud of white only a few yards ahead. Piercing cold invades the lungs with each careful sip of air. Nature appears to be intent on wiping out and burying under a blanket of snow any sign of life in this hostile environment. The footprints of previous travellers have already disappeared. However, at a distance, the upper part of the Met Tower still emerges from the cloud, surrounded by a diffuse aura of evening sunlight.

The metal staircase vibrates precariously in the wind. At the top, the raised platform itself oscillates on its four legs, creating the illusion of being on a raft, stranded in an agitated sea, while snowdrifts spill over the sides, creeping along the walls of the paled orange container building.

Another staircase leads up to the observation platform on the roof, with a diverse array of instruments directed skywards.

An inscription above the door reads: *Sub specie aeternitatis*.

Inside the building, the shaking remains. But, thankfully, the unnerving howling of the wind is muffled, while breathing becomes normal again.

A narrow corridor leads away from the entrance, with a small snow-encrusted window at the other end, and a door on either side.

The one on the left is labelled Ozone Lab. The room behind it is unoccupied, with windows shuttered against the harsh elements, and illuminated only by a continuous succession of green numbers running up a computer screen.

Farther down the corridor, the door on the right is identified as leading to the Met Office, with a hand-written sign taped to it: “Knock, knock, knock on Heaven’s door. If no one answers, knock some more.”

There is music playing inside it – “I’m On My Way” – with Iain singing along.

He seems to have heard the second knocking. His singing stops, and the music is turned down a little.

‘Come in?’

‘Just me. I hope I’m not disturbing anything.’

Iain glances up from a map of the Southern Ocean, covered with a variety of hand-drawn symbols and coloured lines. ‘Well, bless me, if it isn’t Dr Dannreuther. I thought you’d never stop by for a visit.’

‘I know, I’m sorry. I wanted to come earlier, but somehow the thought of having to brave the Boot Room for any extended period of time, to go through the elaborate process of putting on all the different layers of outdoor clothing, not to mention having to brave the tempest outside ... I just always remembered that I had other pressing things to do.’

‘Such as lying on the sofa?’

‘Yes, something like that. But I regret that now, seeing how beautiful the view is from up here, looking down onto the drifting snow, rather than being trapped inside it. And you can actually see the sun from here, without immediately freezing to death.’

‘Out of these windows – yes. At least during the evening and night, when I’m on duty.’

‘And you’re feeling a little homesick?’

Iain follows my nod to the tape recorder. ‘Oh, I see ... No, today, it’s not too bad. I just like the tune.’

He puts down his pencil and leans back in his creaking chair. ‘How about you? How are you holding up?’

‘All right. But I thought there would be more to do earlier on during the season. I haven’t even been able to see the penguins yet. The chicks must be about half a year old now. I hoped I would be able to get down to the water and see them, before they lost all their grey baby feathers. Besides that, there isn’t much around here to cheer you up.’

‘Depends on your preferences, I suppose. Since cigarettes and booze don’t seem to appeal to you ... eating lots of chocolate is a popular alternative.’

‘Guess what ... and I’m sad to say it’s starting to show. So, it is high time to get some exercise again.’

‘In that case, I have good news for you.’ Iain points to a sequence of maps, lined up on a long pin board. ‘I’m very pleased to tell you that the weather will begin to turn tomorrow. So, it should be fine by early next week.’

‘Next week?’ – Well, that’s just typical. – ‘I didn’t expect it would change so quickly. You really believe it will be sufficiently calm then to go out to sea?’

‘Indeed I do. I was going to keep it for the weather briefing tomorrow morning, but I don’t mind telling you now. The wind we’re experiencing right now is associated with the last – for now – in a succession of cyclones passing north of us. They will continue retreating eastwards, and with a little luck, starting Monday, it should be quiet for some days.’ He smiles broadly. ‘So, it looks as if you’ll finally get to play outside. Aren’t you excited?’

‘Yes, sure ... And what’s the next window after that, you think?’

‘Why? Are you busy next week?’

‘No, I was just wondering ... trying to plan the research ahead, you know.’

‘Sorry, lass, can’t say reliably beyond five days, or so. But around here, you can’t be too choosy. You’ve got to take each opportunity nature offers you.’

Iain is clearly disappointed by my lack of enthusiasm. He turns the music off completely and scrutinises me. ‘You seem pensive, Siobhán Dannreuther. Everything all right?’

‘Fine.’

But he is still sceptical, waiting for an addendum.

It is time to change the subject. Sadly, the room, cluttered as it is, provides little inspiration for topics of conversation – except about the weather.

A poster-sized print of a photograph is taped to one wall, entitled “On Her Majesty’s Meteorological Service.” It shows the vague outline of one of Iain’s predecessors, tinkering with some scientific instruments in the middle of a blizzard.

On a filing cabinet, surrounded by piles of teleprinter messages with long lists of numbers, is the framed photograph of a young woman. She sits on an ancient stone wall at the top of a cliff – Tintagel Castle, apparently – beaming at the photographer, with the sea glinting behind her in the evening light.

‘Who’s she then? Is she *your* lass?’

Iain laughs. ‘Aye, she’s my lassie. Her name’s Talwyn.’

‘Nice. Are you ...’

‘Engaged, yes, just before I left the UK.’

‘That’s great, Iain – congratulations! Then we must hope that you make it through the second winter all right. At least there isn’t much in terms of temptation around here.’

‘No, not really – present company excluded, of course.’

‘Well, there have to be trials of some sort. But look, I better leave you to your work now.’

‘No worries. I’ve got all night to finish the forecasts.’ He picks up his cup. ‘Here, why don’t you transfer half of my tea into this good-as-clean cup over there by the computer, make yourself comfortable, and tell me a little about the ordinary world – all the wondrous things that happened during the past year.’

‘Sorry, Iain. I appreciate the offer, but I just remembered: I promised Chris I would help him this evening to repair some of our diving gear. There’s corrosion on some of the metal fittings, and some of the valves and seals aren’t as tight as perhaps they should be. We had to do it some time, especially now that we may be able to go out sooner than expected. So, I better start battling my way back to the base again.’

‘Admirable work ethics. Then I shall not detain you any longer. But if ever there is anything ...’

‘Cheers, Iain. I’ll keep that in mind.’



Scattered rays of sunlight dance underneath the rippled surface of the water. Dolphins glide effortlessly through the gentle waves, with synchronised graceful movements. They are basking in the afternoon sun, enjoying the fine day and chatting among each other, their whistles relaxed.

But the light gets gradually darker, the water murkier. The bright blue that once shone down from the clear sky slowly turns to green.

The water’s surface is already higher above and still moving farther away, as if the space between were slowly expanding.

The dolphin’s behaviour has changed too. They stopped moving about and have assembled in a tight circle, looking down. Their whistles are more urgent now and not directed at each other anymore. They are trying to communicate with me. Their message appears to be important. But they are slipping away, and with them the surface of the water, and the warmth, and the light, and the air.

Already, the dolphins are distant figures. And as their warning voices get weaker, other noises become more prominent. Nearby, there is the gurgling sound of water rushing upwards, while at a greater distance, there is an indistinct, muffled droning.

With every desperate swimming stroke upwards, the surface retreats faster. And as the sunlight fades away, a suffocating darkness and cold closes in from below. Vague shapes rise out of the depth, getting ever closer, but without becoming any clearer.

A void opens underneath, the entrance into an endless world of menace – and death.

The room lies in near darkness, with only a faint red glow emanating from the alarm clock – 02:35.

This is still Antarctica, and we are still stuck inside an ice shelf.

The base is completely quiet, except for the usual groaning of the protective shell around us, fighting its losing battle against the encroaching ice.

Awoken once more by the same old nightmare of falling down the rabbit hole, turning into another restless morning, as insomnia continues to feed on my health and on my nerves.

And it is no good saying that these are only dreams, when it is the corrosive effect of these dreams that may become a serious problem in the real world; when each nightmare is an additional drain on my energy; when my nervousness about going diving gradually increases, as my energy and fitness decline; when the increasing nervous tension leads to more nightmares and sleeplessness.

Something needs to happen soon to break this destructive cycle. Otherwise, I am going to lose my mind.

CHAPTER THREE

ORIGINS

Snow continues to swirl around the access tower, obscuring the view to the outlying structures – the dark circle of the satellite dish, and the angular shape of the Met Tower – while the main part of the base lies hidden underneath a flowing pattern of waves, sculpted from the natural irregularities of the ice shelf.

But the wind is not quite as violent as it was only yesterday evening. The flag at the top of the tower now streams in a more dignified manner in the crisp air. And the glow of the sun, directly above, is much less diffuse than during the past weeks. It looks as if there may actually be some calmer days ahead.

And so, as diving is about to become a reality, all it would take is one good night's sleep, to be able to shed the constant fatigue, and to ease the strained nerves. Instead, here I am, awake again for several hours too long, already weak, and still another sleepless night away from the physical and mental strains of the first dive tomorrow morning.

To make matters worse, half my mind is still stuck in the familiar places half a world away, with the people who matter most.

Gran ... At 2 o'clock her time, on a Sunday afternoon, she has already been to church and had her lunch. Right now, she may be making some coffee, standing in the little kitchen, looking out onto the familiar street – over to the red brick houses on the other side, greyed by the dull winter's light – until, in a moment, the water has percolated through the filter. She may then settle down with a book, or listen to music, or to a serial on the old wireless. Later, she may go to visit one of her former colleagues for tea, or perhaps receive a visitor herself.

And Alison ... Her daily routine is far less predictable, especially now, when she is going through a difficult patch. All these years we have known each other, she has always been calm and collected; always secure enough in her own life, to be willing and able to support those who found themselves in more difficult situations. Even now, affected by the murder, her nervousness and depression does not derive from concern for herself, but rather from the

comprehension of the potential danger that might have affected me – whereas I shrugged the incident off as a tragic coincidence and simply walked away from everything.

But it all happened so quickly during those last few weeks in England, too fast to register properly. A hectic time, which feels quite surreal now.

The heavy door of the access tower crunches open, pushing past the snowdrift that continuously accumulates in front of it.

Iain steps out onto the platform, a pack of cigarettes in his hand. ‘Siobhán ... Taking in the fresh air?’

‘While it lasts.’

‘Oh, come on. You can’t begrudge an old man his last smoke before a well-deserved rest from a long night’s work.’

Nonetheless, he manoeuvres himself into a downwind position and turns away, trying to shield the feeble flame of the lighter. ‘I saw on the rota that *your* first week of night duty begins tomorrow. Then we’ll be on a similar schedule, for a while.’

‘Yes, that should be fun.’

‘It’ll be all right. Just do your rounds regularly, make sure everything is as it should be – respond to incoming radio messages; but that happens rarely, and you can’t miss the warning lights go off throughout the base. The main thing is not to fall asleep. That would get you into serious trouble. Of course, it’s not exactly perfect timing, is it: having to stay up all night, when finally the weather will be as good for taking the boat out as it will ever be around here. I guess you’ll have to try and get some sleep in the afternoon and evening, between returning from diving and the start of your night watch. But maybe, if you asked John ...’

‘No, I don’t want any special treatment. Everyone else manages to accommodate night duty with their regular work, and so will I.’

‘Siobhán, you don’t have to prove anything to anyone.’

No, but you see, I do – I really do.

‘It’s perfectly normal to trade night watches under certain circumstances ... Crikey, this is hopeless.’ Iain gives up trying to light his cigarette and disappears behind the door again.

He soon re-emerges, noticeably more relaxed after his first draught, and leans back against the banister. ‘I was chatting with John just now and, apparently, there’s been some bad news from East Anglia.’

‘What? Have they been invaded by Mercia?’

‘Now that’s not fair, Siobhán. The Institute is not that archaic. And things *are* changing – I mean, look at you.’

‘Me? What about me?’

‘You’re here, are you not.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, there you are then.’ He watches a trail of smoke dissipate into the pristine air. ‘You have to give us a chance, you know.’

‘Us?’

‘Men.’

‘Aye, right ...’

Iain laughs. ‘Humans then.’

He takes another contemplative draught of his cigarette. ‘Look at it this way ... focus on the positive developments – and it’s not just in the Institute, is it? It’s happening everywhere. Now they’re going to send the first Briton into space – a woman no less – and with the Russians. These are exciting times, Siobhán – the dawn of a brave new world.’

‘Yes ... Utopia, coming soon to a planet near you. All we need to do now is to get rid of these bothersome Irish terrorists, and everything will be absolute tipping for the British Empire. We can all relax again, get back to our tea and tiffin, and jolly well get on with things, as we move ahead into the new Millennium.’

Iain scratches his head in mock confusion, but chooses not to respond.

‘So, what happened in East Anglia?’

‘Nothing official, mind, but the Institute is having some difficulties securing sufficient funding for building the new base next year. So, it’s likely that one more crew will have to manage with this old contraption, before a replacement can be built. Don’t get me wrong, Siobhán, Aurora IV has been a good home to us. But as I told you when you arrived, the base is definitely getting old now, and it’s beginning to show. If you get the chance – during your night duty, for example – go through the access panels behind the building units. You can see that the outer shell is already cracked in several places. And there’s humidity everywhere. After all, Aurora is basically drowning itself in melt water. To keep the heat in a little better, they used plywood for the protective shell, rather than steel as for the previous incarnation of the base, but it makes little difference. And the water creates no end of problems for the electronics. I heard that, recently, they had a short

circuit in the vehicle workshop. In that instance, all that happened was that a fuse burned out, and they had to better insulate some of the connectors. But with things like that, you never know. You can't compromise in such an environment. You do it properly, or you don't do it at all. At some point, it simply gets too dangerous. And if by then the new base is not ready, we may have to interrupt the whole programme here – after thirty-five years of continuous operation and data collection. Perhaps that's the downside of the changing politics at the moment. With international conflicts coming to an end, people may be seeing more pressing tasks closer to home and abandon exploration all together.'

He lets his thoughts trail away with another puff of smoke, then gives me an appraising look. 'You still seem somewhat muted, like yesterday.'

'Do I? I'm just a little tired. I didn't sleep much last night – practicing for night duty, you know.'

'I'm serious, Siobhán. If there's anything that's bothering you, you can talk to us – and you should. We're all in the same boat here. We've all got people back home – our suspended lives in the ordinary world, which keep calling us back. But while you're down here, you cannot allow yourself to follow these calls. When you're physically separated from the rest of the world – as we are here, even now in summer – it's best to let go mentally as well. Keep your mind where your body is. Focus on being here, as much as you can. Otherwise, it will eat you up inside.'

'The story of my life, Iain: letting go of people, moving on ...'

'I know it sounds harsh, but it's the only way. Too much thinking isn't healthy down here. If you retreat into your head, and your thoughts are far away, you disconnect, you lose yourself. And then all sorts of things can happen. I suspect that by now you've found out what happened to your predecessor – Kevin.'

'No, actually, I haven't. Everybody just keeps making these vague insinuations.'

'Then I might as well tell you. It began slowly. At first, he got on well with everyone, and the summer was no problem at all. But then, a few months on ... Nobody knows what caused it. We asked him repeatedly, but he did not want to talk about it. It could have been some trouble with his girlfriend. Maybe they had an argument and could not straighten it out over the long distance, with the limited ability to communicate. Either way, moving into winter, Kevin started to get more and more withdrawn and touchy. His mind

was always somewhere else – back in England, presumably. We tried to involve him in our social activities, but he became increasingly difficult to deal with. Whatever it was, playing cards or snooker or darts, he kept losing, simply because he didn't concentrate. So, he got more and more upset. Eventually, towards the end of winter, he completely cracked up, after he'd lost at cards the whole evening. There was no money involved, of course. We were only playing for points. But he still claimed we were all conspiring against him. To be fair, by then we were all a little shirty, some more than others, perhaps. But basically, we all found it increasingly difficult to deal with his aggressive behaviour. And so, push led to shove. John tried to intervene, and then it all escalated. Kevin attacked him and tried to stab him in the face with a dart. That must have been the first time something like that happened on any of the British bases.'

He looks indignant. 'It wasn't funny, Siobhán. You can never know where these things end. And whatever trivial issues there may occur in any conventional situation, they're amplified down here, with so little distractions and the limited ability to avoid each other.'

'Sorry. You're right, one shouldn't laugh about things like that. But anyway, what happened then?'

'Well, as John is acting magistrate down here, it was up to him to decide whether to pursue the case further. I doubt he ever considered taking legal actions, although it was clear that he had no other option but to send Kevin back to England at the earliest opportunity. By then, Kevin himself just wanted to go home, rather than having to suffer through another eighteen months or so, including also another long winter. Ironically, it was that incident that made him snap out of his destructive state of mind. But in different ways, he was in a pretty bad shape – even more depressed than before, and now he also felt embarrassed around us.

'Then, the only question was how to officially deal with the situation. Obviously, a nervous breakdown like that, resulting in a physical assault, is quite serious. Something like this comes out, and next thing you know, you've got the government meddling in the way things are run down here: tighter supervision from London, stricter safety regulations, introduction of regular psychological evaluations, and so on. We do not need this sort of bureaucracy down here. Antarctica is the last place on Earth where, effectively, you're outside of direct government control. You know how it is in Britain these days: someone is always spying on you and trying to control

your life. Also, for Kevin's sake, there was no need for anyone outside the Institute to know what had really happened. And so he went back under the pretext of some unspecified family matter.

'The Institute, of course, could not afford any more staff problems. But they did not want to give up the biology programme at Aurora either, after they had finally got it funded. So, they tried to get one of the veterans who had dived at Signy or Halo within the past years. But they had all moved on in the meantime – got themselves permanent jobs back home, wives, kids, mortgages, the lot. With all that, the Institute will not let you come back here, even if you wanted to. It would be too much of a liability for them. Since there wasn't enough time to advertise the job again, and to interview a whole bunch of people, they went back to the applications they had received for this tour, hoping that there might be one qualified person among them who could leave the UK at such a short notice, without requiring a lot of training. And then ... well, they contacted you.'

'I see. They wanted an experienced bloke – a genuine man of the world – and what they got in the end was a wee lassie from the sticks. That must have come as a bit of a shock to you down here. In fact, I can just about picture your reaction when you got the news: "Gorblimey, guv'nor, I think they're sending us a – you know – *a woman*".'

He suppresses a laugh. 'Come on, Siobhán, it's not that bad. And you have to understand ...'

'No, it is exactly that bad, because you never manage to treat me as either a man or a woman – and to be perfectly honest, at this point, I wouldn't mind either way. But to all of you I seem to be this strange, awkward, in-between creature who's apparently not male, but still mostly human, and so – by process of elimination – quite possibly female, and therefore someone whom – by some new regulation, I imagine – you're not allowed to treat as such in any way, and simply pretend that ... Oh, go ahead, laugh at me, you big lump.'

Iain attempts too late to avoid the line of snow coming at him from the top of the banister, hitting him squarely in the face. He sputters and suppresses the spontaneous reaction of throwing his soggy cigarette down the access tower. Instead, he puts the stub into his pocket. 'Gorblimey indeed, you really got me there, didn't you?'

He continues to grumble, as he does his best to remove the snow from the collar of his parka. 'I would like you to know, Siobhán, that strangely enough,

we're all very glad to have you here – most of the time. We're all agreed that, apart from the occasional tantrum, you're basically a good mate. But let's face it: you *are* different, and things *are* different, since you came – simple things, you know.'

He abandons cleaning his collar and tries to warm up his hands again. 'Look, we all have our girlfriends back home, and we miss them, naturally. They used to be very far away. But since you came ... it's almost as if you brought something of them with you. It's not just the obvious things – appearance and voice and all that. It's these little mannerisms that women have, you know: how you tuck your hair behind your ears; the whirly way you move your hands about when you gesture; or the way you sit on the sofa, with your legs pulled up – your whole body language. Please don't take this the wrong way ...'

'No, it's fine. I'm quite flattered, actually. I never had so much attention.'

'You're fit enough, Siobhán, you know that. But that's not the point. What I'm trying to say is ... about those old prejudices against having women on Antarctica – we all know they're rubbish. But the administration were still concerned about having you on base as the *only* woman, mostly for your own sake – you must believe that. Nobody doubts your scientific qualifications or your diving skills. And yes, you're happy with your situation here – being alone with the rest of us – but how could we have known that? I must admit, I was worried myself. Fifteen months can be a long period for anyone, and so ...'

He is unsure whether to continue. 'All right, it's probably best to lay it all on the table. It's like this: before you arrived, John asked me if I could look after you a bit – you know, be your main contact in case there are any problems. He must have thought it would be safe to ask the oldest and fattest guy in the team. He also knows I'm engaged to Talwyn. But basically ... try to see it this way: if everything continues to go well with you – as I'm sure it will – perhaps attitudes will change within the Institute.'

'Yes, perhaps ... And sorry about the snow, by the way. I guess if I was as stropky as this all the time, I couldn't really blame you for being a little cautious around me.'

'You're not. As I said, all of us down here on Aurora are behind you one hundred percent. And if there's anything we can do, any one of us ...'

'Cheers – *mate*.'

Iain grins and pulls the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, but then decides against having another smoke and puts it back again, glancing at his watch. He looks tired and worn-out – not only physically, but also jaded and dulled to the privilege of being in this special place.

‘So, you’re quite serious about Talwyn then? I mean, you definitely *are* going to marry her when you get back?’

‘Well, we still have a bit more than a year to get through, but yes, if we pass that test, I don’t see any reason why we should not get married.’

He rubs his cold hands and yawns. ‘Right, I’m off to kip. Good luck tomorrow for your first time descending into Weddell Sea. And afterwards, if you get bored during your night duty, come over to the Met Tower and tell me all about it.’

‘I’ll do that.’

He nods and walks towards the door.

‘Oh, and Iain?’

He stops and turns back, looking a little apprehensive.

‘Just for future reference – perhaps something for John to mention in his final report – but, you know, age, body mass, and prior engagements are generally overrated as deterrents of female affection.’

Iain smiles, visibly relieved. ‘Careful now, Dr Dannreuther.’

* * *

Chris suppresses a yawn, shivering in the chilly air of the Boot Room. He makes an awkward attempt at closing the zipper of his dry suit, running along the back of his shoulders ... snagging it on his fleece insulation layer ... but succeeding eventually – no need to interfere then.

For a few more precious seconds, there is the possibility to remain sitting on the bench and to let the feeling of dizziness subside a little.

A draft of fresh outside air enters underneath the door to the garage, moving some dodgy looking balls of fluff across the floor, along erratic trajectories of further acquisition and growth. But the soft breeze is barely perceptible and not nearly strong enough to be invigorating in the spent atmosphere.

This is way too early, even under ideal conditions – made only worse after yet another sleepless night. Already, there is the dull hint of a developing

headache. And if the circulation does not start up soon, this might get very awkward – and dangerous.

So, with all that, is avoiding the embarrassment of having to call off the dive really worth the risk?

Under normal circumstances, it should not be. But the truth is, this is not only about diving, nor is it only about me. This is equally about all the others who might follow. This is about me not squandering the rare opportunity I was given. This is about the responsibility of being the first – and the first domino in a row can never fall, for the others to have a chance to stand.

So, realistically, there is no alternative. The necessary decision is an obvious one. It would be inexcusable to wimp out now, after waiting around for weeks.

Chris is already anxious to leave, glancing over more and more frequently. In a moment, he will get suspicious. And when he realises that something is wrong, it will be his duty to call off the dive.

So, it is time to get back on the feet and to get suited up, to pull the outer neoprene shell fully up and over the head.

There is the well-known tugging on the hair, as the long neck seal slides over the face – an unexpected bout of claustrophobia during the brief period of interrupted breathing – the nerves evidently in tatters, but that cannot be helped now.

Darren appears in the door from the garage. ‘Morning all. This is the big day, then. A clear blue sky awaits you outside, and calm conditions, as promised by the weatherman.’

He rubs his hands in an unbearably cheerful mood. ‘Siobhán, your first time out – at last. Anything I can help you with.’

‘Don’t fuss, Darren.’

‘I don’t. I was just wondering if you needed anything.’

‘Trust me, I’ve got everything under control – even if I am the Plan-Z-Woman.’

He is taken aback and exchanges a brief look with Chris. ‘Right ... I’ll wait outside then by the snow tractor. The boat is already fuelled, hooked up, and ready to go. I also loaded the filled diving cylinders and the science stuff from the workshop. Unless there is anything else ...’

He returns to the garage, closing the door behind him.

Now Chris is getting edgy too, infected by my nervous tension. He turns away and begins putting on his stabiliser jacket.

But with the suit properly closed, I am almost ready to leave. Just one last check if all the necessary equipment is in place: the gloves and the hood, the mask, the snorkel, and the fins, sufficient weights for the target depth, the dive tables and depth gauge, the knife, the torch, the camera ... and the regulator, of course – all in order.

Chris unnecessarily fusses with the content of his own meticulously packed bag, noticeably irritated by my dawdling.

‘All right, Chris. I think that’s it.’

He manages a valiant smile. ‘So, we’re ready?’

‘Sure, let’s do it.’

‘It’ll be fine. There’s absolutely no stress today. For the first time, we simply ...’

‘Chris, I know the drill. Let’s just get out of here.’



The stretch of open water left in the wake of the *Steadfast* almost two weeks ago still persists, providing a safe fairway for the small boat through the narrow fracture in the ice shelf. Sky-blue cliffs tower on both sides, their tops more than a hundred feet above. Left behind at the head of the icy fjord, the lonely red spot of the snow tractor becomes ever smaller, until it is lost from sight behind a bend.

Gradually, the meandering crack widens. With every curve, the blue glow emanating from the glacial walls gets paler, as more sunlight manages to shine down from above.

Then, after a final bend, the gorge comes to a sudden end, the steep cliffs fall away on either side, and the limitless expanse of the Weddell Sea opens up in front of us, dotted with a few tall icebergs gracefully drifting away.

Following the succession of storms over the past weeks, the sea ice has almost completely vanished. Only a few floes are still scattered about.

With the sun now able to penetrate the water, the phytoplankton is in full bloom, turning the colour of the sea into a deep green, with a faint yellow tint added by bioluminescent krill, which got trapped within ocean gyres. Hordes of petrels and skuas circle above, making the best of this brief season of plenty.

Manoeuvring out of the cracked ice shelf, Darren carefully shirks some of the larger fragments of ice. Then, with the outboard engines at full power, he takes the boat out onto the open sea. The former lifeboat rears up as it gathers speed, barely skimming the calm surface of the water. With the sound of small pieces of ice scraping against the keel, it appears to be skating on a mirror. The cold head wind is refreshing, a welcome change after the stale air inside the base.

This should be enjoyable, but the recurring dreams of the past weeks are not easily pushed aside.

Still, this is not just another nightmare. This is real life. We are currently gliding on real water – water that obeys the ordinary laws of nature. And the one thing we can always rely on – possibly the only thing – is that there are no tears in the fabric of reality.

Darren points at a particularly large iceberg and begins rounding it in a wide arch.

Chris and he are evidently on the lookout for something, intently scanning the leading edge of the ice shelf.

Then Darren seems to have found what they were searching for. He turns the wheel slightly and shuts down the engines.

The noise echoes away along the wall of ice, towering above us once again.

The boat settles back into the calm water, as it runs out of speed, coming to a halt near a relatively smooth indentation in the otherwise craggy cliff, where the large iceberg must have broken off not more than a few days ago.

Darren turns around at the steering console. ‘Right, here we are. This looks stable enough for the moment. It’s also quite close to our favourite spot from last year – remember, Chris?’

‘Yes. And like last year, with all that stuff in the water, visibility is not going to be more than twenty feet, if that – even with the good light we have today.’

He shoulders his diving cylinder. ‘I don’t know if you’ve ever dived in soup like that before, Siobhán, but it’s very easy to lose sight of the boat from down there. And then there are the strong currents. I think we’ll definitely have to rope up.’

Darren nods. ‘Agreed. So, let’s go over the final checks – if you two are ready? Right then: inflate suit ...’

Chris winks cheerfully, while the dry suits expand, amused by our bloated appearance and obviously looking forward to getting into the water.

‘Deflate suit ...’ Darren’s flat tone of voice reinforces the fact that nothing but strict adherence to a precise, well-choreographed routine is acceptable out here – the well-calculated risk.

Yet, simultaneously, the dark water, gurgling maliciously against the thin hull, is a constant reminder that beneath us lurks a sea of unpredictability – with nothing on our side, nothing to keep us from falling all the way to the bottom of the ocean, but the laws of nature – such as we know them.

‘Inflate jacket ...’

It all feels terribly wrong out here – the imposing cliffs above, the murky sea below. Suddenly, the laws of nature seem rather frail compared to the immensity of nature itself.

‘Deflate jacket ...’

All these routines that get us through our daily lives, all these little rituals we engage in without noticing, mechanically, without really thinking about them. And we only wake up when things go wrong and ...

‘Siobhán!’ Darren sounds irritated.

‘What?’

‘Test your weight release.’

‘Right, yes, I’m sorry.’ With a simple pull of the quick-release handles, the weight harness comes loose.

‘Good.’ The boatman is satisfied.

But Chris remains suspicious. ‘You’re all right, Siobhán?’

‘Yes, sure. I just got distracted for a moment. I thought there was something in the water. Only a reflection on the surface, probably. I can’t see anything now.’

Darren glances down into the green depth. There is nothing moving in it but swarms of plankton. ‘Well, let’s get *you* in the water then, shall we?’ He hesitates briefly. ‘Chris, perhaps you go first.’

Chris splashes a handful of water into his face, pulls the mask over his eyes, and takes his first breath through the regulator mouthpiece. He balances himself on the tube of the boat and indicates “OK.”

Darren lays out the tether and checks the water again. He nods. ‘Clear.’

Chris lets himself slide backwards into the icy sea. After a short fall, he comes to a rest, balanced just below the surface, the red of his dry suit

providing a splash of warmth among the cold hues of the water's natural colour palette.

Darren smiles encouragingly. 'All right. Good luck, Siobhán. And don't worry about other large creatures down there. We never managed to see leopard seals or orcas around here on any of our previous dives. But I'll signal down to you, as soon as anything of concern is happening up here – four pulls, as you know.'

And there is the salty taste of sea water – comforting in its familiarity, indicating that it still *is* the same old element, only colder than usual – bloody freezing, in fact.

But cold we can deal with. Simply relax. Let the diving reflex set in and allow the heart rate to go down.

The strap of the mask is a little too tight, but there is no time to adjust it now, with Chris already waiting in the water.

A few deep breaths of compressed air – another familiar taste, but dry this time.

Darren lays out the second tether. 'Ready?'

Ready.

He looks out for Chris in the water behind me ... and nods. 'Clear.'

The contact with the water, dampened through the diving suit, followed by an uncomfortable feeling of disorientation – falling backwards – piercing cold impacting the exposed skin of the face – still falling ...

Then the world straightens itself out again, as the stabiliser jacket pulls the heavy diving cylinder the right way up. And cold turns to numbness.

Beneath, the dark abyss of many nightmares opens up. But just above, and well within reach, is the peacefully undulating surface of the ocean, with the indistinct glow of the blue sky shining through. So, the laws of nature are still in charge after all.

And there is Chris floating nearby, closer to the pale face of the icy cliff we are about the descent. He is watching me and signals "OK?"

Yes, Chris. This is very much "OK."

In fact, it is brilliant – floating freely hundreds of feet above the Earth's surface, weightlessly, effortlessly, on top of the last uncharted world on our planet. All the stress and aggravation of life above ground are left behind. Time moves at a more graceful pace down here.

Suddenly, though, there is a commotion above, the waves getting more agitated. Then the dark outline of the boat pitches forwards. A moment later, the lighted rack with our instruments and the sampling bottles breaks the surface. Out here, in the vast ocean, lowered slowly on its tether, it is a rather frail looking feeler, a modest token of our desire to penetrate these mysterious depths with scientific understanding, to uncover the secrets hidden in the eternal darkness. But it is a start.

And the descent into the oceans also takes us back in time, for here is where our story begins. This is where we all come from, misguided exiles that we are, descendants of the first pioneers – the bravest, the most inquisitive of our early ancestors – who ventured out onto the land, in wide-eyed and breathless bewilderment.

Eventually, they left the oceans behind. But now, at least temporarily, I'm back.



'Do I bore you, Shivy?' She has heard me yawn.

'No, of course not – sorry, Ally. It's just that I'm on night duty this week. After sitting around and waiting forever, it's all happening now: I go diving early in the morning, take care of the water and ice samples afterwards, and then try to get some sleep later in the afternoon. In the evening, I get up again, have some breakfast, and when everyone else has gone to bed, I begin sleepwalking through the quiet base, checking the water pumps, the generator rooms, the workshops ... until around midnight, when I have lunch in the kitchen – alone, unless the meteorologist on night shift drops by. And then comes the toughest period until the morning, when it's time to go to work again.'

'Exciting ... And how are things with the lads?'

'All right. Much better now that the weather is nice, and we can go outside more often – actually do the things we are here for. But I suspect I shall always be "the new girl" – or "the girl," at any rate. The other day, they had a game of ruggie outside in the snow. They asked politely if I wanted to join in, but seemed rather relieved nonetheless when I decided to opt out. I would consider football, playing in goal. But at the moment, with night duty, I'm mostly out of sync with the others anyway.'

'So, there isn't anything ...'

‘No, and I can’t think about that down here. It’s too complicated, and you promised not to ask.’

‘Yes, I know. I’m sorry.’ She sounds depressed and falls silent.

‘You went to see Gran over the weekend?’

‘I did, yes. She returns your love with the best wishes. I brought her your letter and the photographs. With all the snowflakes flying through the air, many of the pictures showed mostly blurry white dots. But some came out really well. That’s a bizarre landscape down there, all these natural snow sculptures on the ice – these waves, looking like a frozen ocean. We were both very impressed, Gran and I. Also, from outside, the base looks quite cool, with the towers and antennae, and the flag. About the interior ... well, I’m not so sure.

‘But I remember now what I wanted to say, before you fell asleep. When I left Gran on Sunday evening, before I took the bus back to the train station, I walked along our old way to school. I wanted ... I don’t know. Since you went away, I’ve been thinking a lot about our years in Norwich, about growing up together. It’s strange, but I’ve become a little nostalgic recently. I’m even re-reading some of our children’s classics – quite enjoying it, actually.

‘Anyhow, I wanted to see if Angel Road Comprehensive had changed in any way within the last ten years, or so – and, of course, it hadn’t. It’s still the same block of concrete, exactly as grey as it was right from the beginning. Only time has moved on, and so it feels different now, as if something got lost ... the simplicity of the school years, I suppose – even if, back then, they didn’t always seem quite that simple. But it was nice to see the old hockey ground again. The long afternoon and evening hours we spent there – do you remember? – instead of studying for the exams.’

‘Sure I remember. We were completely obsessed. We – that is to say you – had got it into our heads, that we had to win the East Round, no matter what. So, we only stopped practicing when we were completely famished. Speaking of which: is the old chippy still there?’

‘I’m afraid so, yes – and as smelly as ever, despite being closed at the time.’

‘Hey, I could murder for fresh fish ’n’ chips right now.’

‘How fresh do you think the fish was at the chippy?’

‘It wasn’t as bad as you claimed. And I never got sick from it.’

‘No, but I, watching you eat that stuff. And your gran always prepared such lovely food for you.’

‘She’d been working far too much anyway, throughout her life, without having to cook at odd hours.’

‘Yes, that was always your excuse – and I know you meant it.’ She sighs. ‘These were good times, weren’t they? I wonder whether the current U18 team are still competing nationally.’

‘Not unless they have a captain who is as fanatical as you were.’

‘Or inspirational?’

‘All right, I’ll settle for that. But, Ally, what’s up? You seem a little off colour.’

‘I know. It’s Kathy – still. Normally, I would simply try and get over it, but it’s completely impossible with the public attention the case is getting. And at work, I can’t ignore it either. After all, the original crime – the abduction – happened right here in Cambridge. In the current affairs edition, we usually don’t report on individual murders, unless there’s some larger societal implication. But this is clearly becoming a bigger issue, not only spreading across Britain, but also with thematic connections to earlier incidents of alleged ritual abuse. It’s just that, the more I find out about what happened to Kathy, and the more I think about it, the more sceptical I get.

‘Specifically regarding Satanism – within the last ten years or so, how many cases did we see, spawning a flood of overblown, sensationalised news stories? And in most of these, no evidence of any *ritual* abuse having taken place has ever been presented – Satanic or otherwise. In fact, many of these allegations – including some against close family members – have been proven to be completely unfounded. Only a few months ago, last autumn, that famous Canadian case, which started it all, was finally debunked. So, on the one hand, as a current affairs issue, we can’t ignore this any longer. On the other hand, I’m reluctant to casually run along with the idea that, when it comes to Kathy, we are dealing with a ritualistic killing, and to contribute to a programme in any way that feeds into the already existing hysteria. I’m now at a point where I am convinced that Satanism is only a smoke screen, a cover for something much darker. The problem is, I don’t know what that is, or even what it could be.’

‘Then the case hasn’t been solved yet?’

‘No, that’s just it. I get the impression that the police are nowhere near finding the real culprits. I didn’t want to say too much about that during our last conversation. The time on the satellite phone is far too precious –

literally. I rather wanted to chat about harmless stuff. But since I can't think of anything else ...

'Basically, what happened was, shortly after you left – you were still *en route* to Antarctica at the time – the police managed to arrest the remaining members of that Satanic cult. Turns out, they're all quite young, all in their twenties, from ordinary social backgrounds, without any previous convictions. Most of them are from England, and a few from Scotland. They admit to having met regularly in the abandoned manor house since last August, to perform "black masses," as they call it. But they categorically deny that Kathy had any connection to their group, and that they had ever seen her before. Moreover, they all swear that none of their rituals ever involved any form of blood sacrifice, including animals, and that they never killed anyone.'

'Then what is their version of events?'

'The truth, I think. For a while, there was nothing but wild speculations in the media, because their statements to the police and many details about the investigation couldn't be disclosed, of course. You experienced the early stages of that, before you left. But now, at last, the trials have started. So, a week ago, I went down to London for the initial hearing in the Magistrates' Court, to get more reliable information than what had been published previously.

'In the evidence the cult members gave to the court, they all stated consistently that on that fateful Friday, they travelled to the Highlands in separate cars, assembling at Loch Assynt over the course of the afternoon – by that old ruin of Ardvreck Castle. From there, they drove on to the manor house together, arriving late in the evening. By then, the surroundings were all in darkness. But there were no other cars parked outside; and as far as they could tell, there was no one else in the vicinity. At least from the front of the building, everything appeared to be normal – quiet and dark as always.

'They had forced a patio door open when they had begun to use the manor house, which had remained unnoticed during all that time, since no one really comes out there anymore. So, they walked around to the back of the building, as usual. But as soon as they entered through the open door and into the drawing room, they noticed that in the fireplace the ambers were glowing. At first, they were afraid that someone had returned to the building, and decided to leave. But there was no sound at all, and so they carefully went to check the other rooms. That's when they saw unsteady light

coming from the adjacent dining hall. In the centre of it was Kathy, lying in the pentagram they had drawn on the floor during their previous meetings, with her head, her hands, and her feet positioned in the five corners. The circle of black candles that they had set up around it was lit. Kathy was wearing a simple white dress and a silver necklace with a large pendant – one of these amulets with a goat’s head in an inverted pentangle.

‘The remarkable thing is that this by itself did not surprise them very much. They honestly believed that, through their rituals, the building had become a focal point for demonic powers, that Kathy had somehow been teleported into their pentagram through some form of magic.

‘Upon first sight, she seemed unharmed, without any obvious signs of injuries. She was just lying there, as if in a trance. But then they noticed that the pendant of Kathy’s necklace must have got extremely hot while she had been wearing it, because it had burnt through her dress and into her skin. That’s when it occurred to them that she was in fact dead. And that’s when they panicked and fled the scene. They thought that Satan himself had entered Kathy through the amulet, making it glow, and taking her soul to the afterlife.’

‘Insane ... But then, I suppose, one of them lost their nerves, contacted the police about where to find Kathleen, and denounced at least some of their mates.’

‘No, you see, that’s where it gets mysterious. During the hearing, it came out that in the anonymous phone call made to the police, the caller had not only indicated where to find Kathy, but also that vital evidence had been deposited in a pillar box near the police station. This turned out to be an envelope with several instant photographs, taken through the windows from outside the building, showing Kathy lying in the pentagram, surrounded by the cult members. And there were also photographs of the cars parked outside, with all the number plates.

‘So, evidently, someone else had been in this remote place – but why? What were they doing there? Were they really just witnesses of a Satanic ritual that killed Kathy? Or is what the cult members are saying true? Then it is highly likely that this other group of people is responsible for her murder.

‘Consider this: those who planned and executed Kathy’s abduction in such a precise manner could also be responsible for killing her. But they wouldn’t be the kind of people who then panic and run away, leaving a dead body behind. That is completely ridiculous. The police and defence counsels

must realise this, and I'm sure it will be used as an argument in court. It is much more plausible to assume that these "witnesses," who took the photographs, weren't only innocent bystanders, who just happened to be in that remote spot.'

'But even if those who were arrested aren't responsible for the murder, they're still pretty dodgy characters. I mean, they did break into a lonely old place, and they did perform Satanic rituals.'

'They did. The break-in was illegal, of course – and worse than that, fleeing the scene of a murder without informing the police. But as far as Satanism is concerned, the kind of activities that this might realistically include, tend to be massively exaggerated in the media, presented as being at least morally depraved and corrupt, if not illegal.

'Satanists themselves, meanwhile, have a very different view of their ideology. During the hearing, they described that they see Satan as a tragic hero, a fallen guardian angel for humanity, who was unjustly cast down from Heaven, because he challenged God's authority. Seeing how bad things were down here on Earth, he argued that God, with his omniscience and omnipotence, should act to prevent the suffering of the innocent and bring justice to the world. In the view of these cult members, Satan attempts to lead humans away from God by giving them the gift of reason, and to free them from religious dogma. True evil for Satanists is the rejection of knowledge about the world and acceptance of religious ideologies on blind faith. Christians then turn around and call them materialists, who reject spiritual salvation to give in to the "desires of the flesh," and so the debate goes on.

'But whatever your view is of Satanism, the rest of us I hope can agree that demonic powers have nothing whatsoever to do with the crime that has been committed. In fact, the post-mortem has shown that Kathy was killed by a drug overdose. So, whoever it was who abducted Kathy, knowing that the cult members were going to arrive that evening, killed her shortly before, placed her inside the pentagram, lit the candles, put the necklace into the fireplace for a while, and then ...' She breaks off with a sob. 'Who does such a thing? How ruthless do you have to be? And how sure of yourself? It makes me sick to know that these people are still out there. That's what is so troublesome about it. Whoever did this is far too clever to make any mistakes. They will never get caught, and they will do it again. If we really *were* dealing with Satanic rituals, I wouldn't worry too much – only this is different. How

do you go against such cold-blooded violence? What does it take to defeat this kind of evil?’

‘But, Ally, whoever these people are, in the end, they’re just human. They live among humans, and by humans shall they be defeated.’

‘Now *you* go biblical on me – you of all people, Siobhán Dannreuther. Still, I hope you’re right.’ She chuckles, despite herself. ‘In the meantime, there are far too many open questions – most importantly, what motivates them, these dark figures in the background? The members of this Satanic cult are completely harmless, I have no doubt about that. It is therefore inconceivable that someone would commit such an elaborate and horrendous crime, only to implicate them, no matter how strongly someone might disagree with their ideology. On the other hand, no one would go out to this remote place by accident. So, these other people must have been there with a very specific motive, which has nothing to do with Satanic rituals at all. Their interest, in some sense, must be in the old manor house. That building must somehow be at the centre of these events. And the main purpose of these people cannot simply be to scare others away, as they did with the cult members. If that were the case, the last thing they would want to do would be to make sure that, for weeks, the attention of the whole nation – including a full-scale police investigation – was focussed almost exclusively on that place.

‘And now you see the problem: it is silly to believe that the cult members are responsible for the abduction and murder. But if Kathy wasn’t a random victim of a gang of Satanists, we are right back where we started. And we need to ask ourselves: why her? Why Kathy? And why display the crime in such a public and dramatic fashion?’

‘You’re right, that doesn’t add up. And based on what you’re saying, if this *is* about the manor house, since it hasn’t been occupied for quite a while, the motivation for the murder may be linking way back in time.’

‘Exactly, Shivy. I am convinced that this isn’t about what is happening in that place right now. This is about something that happened there in the past. That is why they’re not afraid to draw attention to it. The murder was clearly set up to shock and to intimidate, almost as a warning. There’s a story here, written between the lines. And while most people following the news only hear about Satanic rituals, there must be a certain group of people out there who understand what is really going on, and for whom the manor

house itself, or what happened there years and possibly decades ago, has a certain significance.’

‘But what kind of a building is it? And whom does it belong to?’

‘Apparently, it’s in private ownership. At least, I couldn’t find it in any of the Royal Commission inventories. When the police conducted their investigation, they must have been in contact with the owners. But according to the official scenario involving Satanic rituals, they probably had no cause to suspect them of anything. That the house has been uninhabited for a while isn’t too surprising, given how remote it is. Without a full domestic staff, it would be nigh on impossible to maintain. The plumbing must be archaic. And it’s quite possible that it never had electricity laid out, up there in the mountains.

‘Regarding the building itself, there’s nothing unusual about it – fairly common Victorian architecture, as far as I can tell. But I can see how the “Gothic” style might appeal to some people who fancy themselves as Satanists. Especially with the building standing all by itself, next to a deep lake, and shielded from view by mountains – a bit like the setting in some old horror film.

‘Considering that, it’s not surprising that the manor house had ghost stories attached to it even before the murder. There are bizarre stories about phantoms and evil fogs that rise from the lake to either induce people to walk out into the water and drown themselves, or to murder others. Allegedly, the ghost of at least one of these earlier victims is already haunting the building. And according to the tabloids, these supernatural occurrences are the “real” reason for why no one has been living there during all this time, if you can believe that.

‘Ghosts, Shivy – phantoms and ghosts: that’s the kind of stuff we’ve had to put up with since you left. I’m telling you, you’re lucky to be far away from all this madness. And I am convinced that someone is taking advantage of these old stories and rumours, to obscure the actual motive behind a very serious crime, and to send a message about something quite different.’

‘Blimey, Ally, I had no idea how bad this got. So, when you put the documentary together, how are you going to sort through all this mess? Did you go and talk to the police again? That detective who interviewed us about Kathleen – he seemed quite reasonable.’

‘DCI Anderson, yes. He *was* rather dashing, wasn’t he?’ She falls into a contemplative silence. ‘But I didn’t go back, and I won’t. He couldn’t tell me

anything new anyway, nothing that wasn't already publicly known. We'll probably have to wait for the jury trial to get more reliable information. The cult members all pleaded not guilty at the initial hearing, but the evidence against them can't be ignored. Therefore, the case was committed to the Crown Court, with a trial date set for some time in summer. Now we've got months of uncertainty and futile speculations to look forward to.

'I know I should let it go. As I said the other day, I barely knew Kathy. But I can't stop thinking about it. To begin with, there's the nature of the crime. Moreover, the murder isn't the only injustice that has been committed. There is a good chance that the lives of a whole group of innocent people are going to be ruined as well. Everything we hear about the incident is obviously wrong. But none of the alternative theories I can think of are without flaws either. So, I keep turning the same thoughts over in my mind, without ever coming up with new and sensible ideas. Now it's got to the point where I can't sleep anymore. I simply cannot turn off my brain. So, I started drinking ...'

'Ally!'

'Not a lot, but regularly. It's useless for me to go to bed without having had at least a glass of wine, or two. I'm afraid, you know, of lying there – half awake, half asleep – trapped inside my own head, with all this crazy stuff going on. And then these silly things they keep talking about in the media – evil spirits and such. I know it's stupid. But somehow, I let this nonsense get to me.

'For days now I've had this vague feeling of being pursued by some malevolent power, like a shadow closing in. It began during the weekend. On Saturday, when I went out to Norwich, it wasn't so bad. But when I left the next day, walking out to Angel Road all by myself ... admittedly, it was in the evening, and it was getting dark, which can play funny tricks on your mind. But I really had this feeling that someone or *something* was behind me all the time. Of course, I never saw anything suspicious. It was only an apprehension I had, but I couldn't shake it off.

'Then, on Monday evening, when I returned from work ... as soon as I stepped into the flat, I had this horrible feeling again that someone had been here. Neither the door nor the lock had been forced – nothing had changed in any way. It was just ... like a strange smell hanging over everything. I thought the fears would subside after a few days, but they didn't. And today, it got so bad that I didn't know what to do anymore, and whom to talk to.

So, after work, I went to your institute to send you that telex. Cheers, by the way, for responding so quickly, seeing how expensive this is.'

'Ally, that's no problem at all. I've got no other opportunities to spend money down here. I don't have any rent to pay. I don't need to buy food. I can wear all the old clothes I wouldn't dare wearing back home. And besides, you're worth it, you know that.'

'You're sweet, Shivy. I wish I could manage somehow to be more cheerful; or at least talk to you in person. But once again, we've tied up your vital satellite link for far too long. I'm sure that's exactly the confirmation of the "girls on phone" cliché your colleagues need.'

'Never mind that. Now that I had the chance to go out and do my job a few times, I feel much more confident among the lads. I know that I can do what is required of me, and I simply have to keep doing it. So, let's not worry about the others. In fact, why not make a tradition of it. Unless something comes up, I'll phone you every Sunday evening – say ten o'clock your time – at least for the next few weeks.'

'Don't you want to talk to your gran occasionally?'

'Ally, she would be absolutely horrified if I called her up from Antarctica. You know how she is about long-distance phone calls. I can barely keep her on the phone from Scotland for more than a few minutes. Then it's always: "Just write me a nice letter, dear." Apart from the costs, I think she prefers that because she can keep the letters and reread them – or, it seems, ask you for explanations about them, clandestinely.'

'You're right. I didn't dare tell her about our last phone conversation. I only mentioned sending you a telex. I imagine she assumed that you had responded in the same manner.'

'I hope so. But look, why don't I phone you again this Sunday evening? If only for a few minutes.'

'All right, sounds good. I'll try not to let these phantoms get to me until then.'

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GATEWAY

The night-time sun hovers low above the southern horizon, serenely gliding back towards the east and the beginning of yet another calm and uneventful summer day on Antarctica.

In the dense orange light, the boundless expanse of eternal snow attains a warm glow, and even the acute lines of the Met Tower appear to be softened.

Complete silence hangs all around ... but for the crunching of the boots in the dry snow.

Iain watches me scramble up onto the platform and surreptitiously puts out his cigarette. ‘Siobhán, what a pleasant surprise. What brings you out tonight?’

‘I was checking the external fuel depots when I saw you standing up here, all by yourself. So, I thought I could afford to take a little time off and exchange a few words with the only other waking soul for hundreds of miles.’

‘Awake *and* sober. I wouldn’t be surprised if John’s party is still going on over there.’

‘No, it’s all quiet now. But there’s going to be some cleaning up to do tomorrow.’

‘No worries. In the end, it’s never as bad as it looks.’

‘Nonetheless, I might find that, by the time the others manage to get up, I’m suddenly quite tired and much better off comfortably tucked up in bed. Chris suggested that we might take a day off from diving tomorrow, and I didn’t argue with him.’

‘Is night duty getting to you?’

‘No, not particularly. If anything, I sleep better now in the afternoon, than during the first few weeks at night, when I had nothing to do. Concepts like “day” or “night” don’t make a lot of sense down here. Inside the base, the sun never shines at all, and out here, it never sets. Life on Antarctica seems somehow disconnected from time. I mean, I can see how the hour hand continues turning inside my watch – two rounds for each circle the sun

completes in the sky. But besides that regular motion, nothing really happens. It's just the same cycle over and over again.'

Iain looks a little sceptical and stifles a yawn.

'You've been on night shift ever since I came.'

'Indeed, and I shall be for the rest of the summer. But I like it, and Nigel didn't fight me over it. So, we simply keep our schedules. That way we don't have to adjust to a different rhythm all the time. And I get to meet the other guys when I wake up in the afternoon – and you, of course.'

'Us" and "her" ... 'You're still bewildered by my presence here, aren't you?'

Iain reacts surprised.

'No, don't get defensive. I'm just curious. I know you're not bothered by me.'

'You're right, I'm not, not at all. But since you bring it up, I *was* wondering ...'

'... how a nice girl – such as myself – could end up with a bunch of blokes – such as yourself – in a place like this?'

He laughs. 'Yes, something like that. It's not one of the most obvious places to visit, for most women *or* men. So, there had to be a moment in your life, when you thought it might be a good idea to forego everything and everyone else – for more than two years when you applied initially – to leave everything behind, and come here.'

'But the thing is, I *didn't* think about it in that way. I just thought about the adventure, rather than the social implications – you know, focus on the benefits, and ignore the downsides. Even growing up, I was always more interested in realistic adventure stories, rather than fantasy tales – the old accounts about Amundsen and Scott, for example. Naturally, I thought it would be grand to be able to go and see these faraway places myself. But I never had the opportunity to travel abroad, even within Europe. It was simply too expensive. In fact, this is the first time I'm outside of mainland Britain. I could never work out how to combine these dreams of exploration with real life, and throughout most of secondary school, I was undecided about what I wanted to do afterwards. Then, entering Fifth Form, the one thing that might have compelled me to stay on for A-levels was to go into nursing, as both my gran and my mum had done. But aside from upholding a family tradition, that really didn't appeal to me. I understood even then that I didn't have the necessary social skills or patience – as you can probably

attest to. Meanwhile, across the country, there was the “Winter of Discontent” going on, with everyone going on strike – those who still had jobs, including the nurses. And what little money was earned became less valuable every day. So, I mentally prepared myself to leave school to try and get whatever job there was available. But then I got lucky, I guess.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, you may remember that, adding to the general chaos, it was a particularly cold and snowy winter, with blizzards and all – the sort of weather you love to take as an excuse for staying at home and being lazy. So, on one such evening, coming back from school, I settled down in the living room with a nice cup of tea, flipped on the telly, expecting to be comfortably bored, and there it was: travel, exploration, adventure – all wrapped in one. It was an episode of *Life on Earth*, when it was first shown on the Beeb. And so, after years of sleeping through lessons in school, I had this sudden epiphany that biology was about life – imagine that, Iain – not just about silly schematics in old-fashioned textbooks, or mutilated frogs on the dissecting table. Moreover, I learned to appreciate that, as humans, we are part of an intricate network of life, spanning the entire globe and going way back in time – our planet’s history written in living cells, not stone. From then on, I had to be at home at least a few minutes before the start of each episode, to have enough time to warm up the old television set, fiddle with the antenna to stabilise the picture, and then ...’

Sitting on the old over-hoovered carpet, leaning back against the equally worn-out sofa – Alison lying behind me, leafing through some magazine; present not so much out of interest in the programme, as for company; occasionally stealing a glance and making a comment if something particularly cute or ugly appears on the screen – like that mudskipper emerging from its mangrove swamp, the bulbous eyes at the top of its head casting about for something to eat, or for any sign of danger.

‘Ugh, what’s that?’

‘Hey, Ally, look at him. He’s only trying to live, you know. And he’s making a pretty good job of it, considering.’

Alison laughs and ruffles my hair. ‘So, you are a romantic after all.’

Iain has noticed the brief absentmindedness. ‘You’re a strange person, Siobhán Dannreuther. You think too much. That’s not healthy down here.’

‘Well, if I am, it’s all your fault. That’s what you get from stirring up old memories – and some are a little distracting. Anyhow, I knew then what I wanted to do. I stayed in school, got three adequate A levels, managed to get accepted for an undergraduate course in natural sciences at King’s College, left Norwich, where I’d grown up, and moved to Cambridge. That was a bit of a change from life at a humble comprehensive. But at the residence, I was staying next door to an old friend from Norwich, and she always encouraged me to carry on when I was ready to give everything up. With that support, I managed to hang on during the first term, and then I got used to the new pressure.

‘I became interested in marine zoology, which unfortunately wasn’t offered at Cambridge at the time. So, years before getting the opportunity to come here, I already had to make a tough choice: stay at Cambridge and take up one of the subjects on offer there, or pursue the topic I really wanted to do, which meant moving away from friends and family. In the end, it was clear what I had to do. I got my B.A., went to St Andrews for the postgraduate programme in marine mammal science, and eventually got a Ph.D. in dolphin echolocation and communication.

‘Initially, there was hardly any data to work with, which required us to get into the water ourselves, to be able to study these animals. I therefore joined the university sub-aqua club and learned scuba diving. At that time, I also began to collaborate with scientists at the University of Aberdeen. I went on field trips with them in Moray Firth, where we made audio and video recordings, and then tried to distinguish between navigation and communication signals, or to associate certain sound signals with certain types of behaviour. Just then, Aberdeen were in the process of establishing a field station by the lighthouse on Tarbat Ness – that narrow spit of land sticking out into the Firth, along the north coast. Fortunately, they needed people. And so, after my dissertation, I transferred to Aberdeen on a postdoctoral research fellowship. I divided my time between fieldwork in the North, and then analysing the data back at university, and things were going well.

‘But then, less than a year later, before I had the chance to settle in too much, I saw the announcement for the job here pinned to the department notice board. At first, I got excited about it; only it didn’t take me long to find out that, by default, women aren’t allowed at all as members of British Antarctic wintering teams. I knew that it was pointless to apply, but I did it

anyway, in an act of defiance, I guess, simply to annoy the establishment. Obviously, I never heard back from them, and I quickly forgot about it myself.

‘So, it came as a bit of a shock when, more than a year later, I got a call from Cambridge, asking me if I might be able to leave for Antarctica in three months’ time, assuming I passed all the required tests and medical exams. At first, I probably didn’t come across as being particularly coherent. But after a while, I managed to say “yes,” and here I am – and so far, I must say, no regrets.’

‘But you’re going back to Aberdeen, when this is over?’

‘Definitely, yes. I love it up there. I’m temporarily on leave right now, but I’ve still got my contract with the University.’

‘Good man.’

‘I only wish the Dons didn’t play in red. I mean, I’m happy to support them, and I wish them well, but it’s hard to get over that particular aspect of Aberdeen culture.’

‘Agreed, entirely – red has no place on a football shirt. When it comes to that, green must surely be the colour.’

‘Or blue.’

‘All right, I suppose, especially on an international level – anything but red, really.’

‘Your family is from ...’

‘East Coast too – a small place, just north of the capital.’ He suddenly looks up. ‘There, did you see that? I think it was an aurora, very briefly ... yes, there it is again.’

A faint green shimmer flits across the dark blue sky directly above.

‘You see, Siobhán, our two colours joined in harmony.’

‘Yes ... Beautiful, isn’t it? That’s the first one I’ve seen.’

‘Now in summer, they must be fairly intense to show up against the sun, even at night. But this is a prime location for auroras. In winter, you can see them quite regularly. In fact, geospace research was one of the reasons the original base was built here, back in the ’50s.’

‘Thus, the name.’

‘Indeed.’

‘They look like curtains blowing in the wind, don’t they – or a luminescent veil suspended from the sky. How high do you think are they?’

‘They?’

‘The lights, whatever they are.’

‘*They* are trillions upon trillions of excited little molecules falling back into their ground state and becoming thoroughly depressed in the process.’

‘So, how high are they?’

‘Upper mesosphere, lower thermosphere.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning way up – hundred kilometres and more.’

‘I see. But why did all these little molecules get excited in the first place?’

‘You’d get excited too, if you were hit straight-on by high-energy particles from the sun. And the cool thing is, they come in different colours. The green light here, for example, is from atomic oxygen.’

‘You weather people really *are* dull.’

‘Siobhán, that’s got nothing whatsoever to do with the weather. These emissions are much higher.’

‘You’re still dull. The Inuit have a much better explanation.’

‘The Inuit?’

‘Yes, the northern circumpolar peoples, you know.’

‘I do. But what are they saying?’

‘They’re saying that auroras are gateways to the afterlife – at least that version of the afterlife that is reserved for good people, and particularly those, who suffered unnatural and violent deaths. So, whenever an aurora is seen in the sky, it’s a sign that the barrier between the two worlds, ours and theirs, is very thin – a warning that something bad is about to happen, some catastrophe or accident, or even a murder.’

‘Planet Earth According to Siobhán – from the popular series: An Outsider’s View of Our Galaxy.’

‘Don’t be so dismissive. I’m not sure, who told me – wait, now I remember: it was a former flatmate of mine, back in St Andrews.’

Claire ... funny, that I should be reminded of her now.

‘Anyhow, if this barrier is weak, it becomes easier to establish a connection between this and the other world, to communicate with your ancestors and other helpful spirits, to get advice from them and encouragement in hard times; to tell them that you’re still thinking of them, that you miss them, and that you are hoping to see them again.’

Iain looks slightly concerned. ‘Siobhán, you’ve been here for less than a month, and you’re already getting sentimental. How can you possibly make it through the long winter at this rate?’

‘But death *is* a sentimental issue. Think about it: if you could establish a connection to the afterlife ... if your ancestors could communicate with you ... if the spirits on the other side could light torches – as the Inuit belief – to show their loved ones, whose time has come, the right way, so that they don’t get lost and end up in a bad place of the afterlife ...’

He seems seriously worried now.

‘Come on, Iain, say it.’

‘Say what?’

‘That I’m crazy.’

‘You *are* crazy, Siobhán. You think too much. I told you that a moment ago. And you know what your problem is, don’t you? You don’t drink enough. So, start working on your contingency, before someone else does. You’ll sleep much better that way.’

‘Och aye, here we go: spoken like a true Scotsman – not a problem in the world that couldn’t be alleviated with some healthy bevvy, eh.’

He chuckles. ‘All I’m saying is you have to be pragmatic down here, otherwise you can get into all sorts of trouble. You know what happened to Kevin – and unlike you, he was completely normal, when he arrived here.’

‘In other words, I should be a good girl, concentrate on getting my work done, and otherwise keep my head down.’

‘We simply have to make sure we make it through this second year and especially the second winter. Then we can all go home.’

‘Iain, this may surprise you, but I haven’t come all this way just to go home.’

‘No, you’re right. Of course, it’s different for you. You only got here. But why would you care about your ancestors anyway?’

‘Because some are worth it. And family is important.’

‘I don’t know. In my opinion, the usefulness of parents beyond the age of twelve is highly overrated.’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘Well, that’s my experience at any rate.’ He pushes himself away from the bannister and walks towards the door. ‘And speaking of death: I think it’s time for me to get back inside. Too much fresh air kills.’

‘That’s easy for you to say, living up here. But I’ll take a few more deep breaths, before returning to the pong of the underworld over there.’

Iain nods with a smile and closes the door behind him.

The cool green light still wavers across the sky, blending smoothly into the orange glow above the snowy horizon in the south. Some things *are* beautiful enough to justify a little sentimentality – even if, technically, the truth is less romantic.

And so, as the summer sunlight continues to fade – little by little, every day – giving way to the ethereal lights of the auroras, there is at least one good thing to look forward to during the long dark months of winter.

* * *

Chris reclines on the sofa in the otherwise empty lounge. He warms his hands around a steaming cup of tea, attempting to replace the heat lost in the icy waters of Weddell Sea. He gazes vaguely at the television screen, where a beige pick-up truck speeds through the searing heat of the Australian Outback.

A second cup sits on the table.

‘For me? Cheers, mate – exactly what I need right now.’

‘I drowned yours in milk, as I’ve seen you do it.’

‘Perfect. But Chris, before you get too comfortable: there should still be some hot water left in the shower, if you want to take the opportunity while it lasts – you know, before the others come back inside from their rugby match.’

‘In a moment.’ He is evidently too lazy to get up and turns his attention back to the music video.

‘They had a new album out last year.’

‘Did they? Is it good?’ He seems genuinely interested.

‘It’s all right – more aggressive than *Diesel and Dust*. They’re clearly serious about what they’re singing.’

‘Yes, clearly.’ He becomes pensive. ‘You know, we’ll have a lot to catch up with, once we get home after more than two years. All that life that’s been going on while we were away.’

He takes a sip of his tea. ‘It’s funny, isn’t it – home. Watching this makes you realise how far away that really is. I mean, right now, this parched desert is closer to us, here on this frozen continent, than our own rainy little island.’

‘The wonders of geography, Chris.’

‘Yes, never been my strength – science.’ He slumps deeper into the sofa. ‘But I’m going to mend your regulator tonight.’

‘What’s wrong with it.’

‘Nothing major. It’s just that when we ascended today, I saw a few small bubbles come out of one of your first stage connectors.’

‘I can take care of that.’

‘No, it’s all right. You’ve got the samples to deal with, do all the analyses, and I’m no good at that. Kev occasionally tried to explain some of the biology stuff to me, but I never got the hang of it.’

‘I’m not surprised. I don’t know what to make of it myself. The kind of biology we’ve pulled out of the sea and the ice so far is totally baffling. Strictly speaking, these simple organisms shouldn’t be able to live at these low temperatures. And yet, they’re absolutely thriving down there. So, I was thinking the other day, when I looked at them under the microscope: their morphology is really ...’

The old ship’s clock on the wall in the dining room area chimes.

‘Wait, what time is it – seven o’clock? I almost forgot: I’ve got a phone call to make.’

Chris fails miserably to suppress a smirk, glad to escape the biology lecture. Saved by the bell ...



‘Shivy, what’s going on? This is getting seriously creepy! I’m scared! I can’t be imagining these things, can I? Because if I am, I’m going insane, aren’t I. And if I’m not, it’s even worse.’

‘But why would anyone pursue you all of a sudden?’

‘Why would anyone abduct and kill Kathleen? Ask yourself that, Shivy. Why? I’m telling you, there are evil powers about, some kind of darkness that we can’t see. But I can feel it, and it’s coming closer all the time. I’m trying to keep it at bay, by shedding light on it – by attempting to find out what is happening behind the scenes, who really is behind the murder. I’ve been going over every aspect of this case, every little detail I could dig up, again and again, now focussing primarily on the manor house, as I said. I’m still convinced that it’s the building or the surrounding area that is at the centre of the crime, rather than these Satanic rituals. So, in my own time, I’ve spent several evenings trawling through all the news archives, trying to dig up any notable event related to that place. But I couldn’t find anything, nothing at all. With all these old myths about phantoms and ghosts, there doesn’t

appear to be a single recorded tragedy – a murder or an accident – that might have given rise to these stories. Based on what is publicly known, the building is completely unremarkable. And I went right back to the Mid-Nineteenth Century, when it would have been built – approximately, judging by the style. To check the exact date and the ownership, I would have to look up the title to the land in the Scottish Record Office. For that, I would either have to get someone to do that for me, or go up to Edinburgh myself – both being impossible. This is, after all, a personal obsession. It would be rather embarrassing if, for example, the people I work with found out that I’m wasting my time investigating the history of an old building, rather than following the most obvious lines of enquiry that everyone else is pursuing.’

‘Ally, you shouldn’t be too harsh on yourself for being affected by the sensational news reporting about the murder. A collection of papers got here with the post on Friday. So, I’ve seen some of these articles now that you were talking about. They’re completely out of order, especially the tabloids. There were also some photographs of the manor house and the lake – including one of the dining hall, with the pentagram and the candles on the floor. It’s definitely a creepy place. And to think how it must have been for Kathleen to end up there ...’

‘Exactly, that is what I can’t get out of my head. As I said, I’ve tried to make sense of it, but whatever resides in that place I don’t believe can be rationalised. There was no particular reason for why it hit Kathy, and there will be no particular reason for the next attack – because I am certain it will strike again. Moreover, I am convinced that this ... *thing* has been here before. There is something coming back to us from the past – something evil. It has lain dormant for decades, and now something has happened. Something has woken it up – and it wasn’t these Satanic rituals, I’m sure of that. This is much worse.’

‘I don’t know what to say, Ally. I mean, you know what I have to say, and I know what you don’t want me to say.’

‘No, you’re right. I’m being silly. I realise that, as soon as I manage to calm down for just a moment – only, most of the time, I can’t. But I understand that this is an awkward situation for you, and there is nothing that you can do, being so far away.’

‘Haven’t you talked to anyone else about it, in person? Not about the murder, but these ... these fears.’

‘What’s the point, Shivy. I mentioned that I’d told Gran about having known Kathy, and she knows I was rather troubled by the whole affair. Back then, that was understandable, but I won’t bother her with my paranoia now. And if I go to a psychologist, what are they going to tell me that I don’t already know? That I’m having a nervous breakdown, or panic attacks? That I’m being “overwrought” and should take some time off? Fantastic, I can tell myself that. In fact, that’s exactly what I’m planning to do. But until then, I’m stuck here, in the wake of a terrible crime, incapable of making sense of what is going on, and all the while watching myself slowly going mad.’

‘Don’t you go out with your friends sometimes?’

‘I don’t want to impose myself. I’m really no good company at the moment.’

‘I’m sure they would understand. And if it helps you ...’

‘Well, that’s the problem, you see. I’m not sure, it would. I find socialising too exhausting right now, in addition to everything else. Therefore, on balance, I feel better on my own – even if, occasionally, I get caught up in some unpleasant thoughts. I just have to push through, but I’ll be all right.’

‘And work isn’t helping either, I imagine, with the constant reminders of what happened.’

‘No, exactly. It’s obvious that I can’t deal with this on a detached, professional level. I’m too personally involved. I decided therefore that I would not contribute to our planned documentary on the “Satanic Culture of Britain.” Also, it is quite clear that I need to get away from here. So, shortly before our last conversation, I’d requested a sabbatical, and I got the confirmation now – three-months beginning on the 28th, that’s Monday week. Normally, you couldn’t make such a short-term request; but I suspect everyone at work recognises that I’m a little out of it at the moment. They were all very nice about Kathy, trying to be supportive. But as I said, this is different now. This is either me being paranoid, or there genuinely is something going on, of which Kathy’s murder was only a small part.

‘At any rate, whatever the truth is, I have to get out of Cambridge for a while, to get at least some physical distance from everything. I’m not sure yet what I want to do. My first thought was to do some voluntary work abroad for the UN. But it turns out they expect you to sign up for at least one year, and I can’t afford to be away from my job for that long. I do want to come back here, eventually. I really like Cambridge. I like the town. I like the old

colleges. I like being surrounded by university culture, even if I'm not studying anymore. And Gran lives nearby, of course.

'Alternatively, I thought I'd like to go to Dublin again, freshen up my Irish, use the National Library to do some research, learn more about the history of the island – Acts of Union and onwards, about the historical background of the Troubles, basically. And then, when I get back, perhaps I can try and get a programme commissioned about that, instead of Satanism, which clearly isn't healthy for me. I don't know. But I definitely want to do something worthwhile, get fresh ideas into my head, and purge the old ones. The good thing is, three months are plenty of time, and there is no need to stress myself out. So, I was thinking: rather than flying, I might take the *Sealink* from Holyhead. I've never done that before. It's much more relaxing, and I'll finally get to see Wales as well.'

'Ally, that sounds absolutely brilliant. You should definitely do that. And in the meantime, don't let these silly news reports get to you.'

'Silly? That's easy for you to say. You don't know how it is back here. Satanism and these ghost stories may only be diversions, created specifically for the media. But there *is* something very nasty behind these events.' She pauses, trying to get her voice under control. 'Shivy, you're not here. I can only tell you how it feels to me. There are shadows all around me, and they're closing in. In the past, I never used the chain at the door, you know that. Now I put it up as soon as I come home – for all the good it did for Kathleen. Still, I'm thinking that maybe it will buy me a few seconds, just long enough to call the police – because I fear it will happen, Shivy. I really fear it will happen. I keep telling you, I have this feeling of being followed, for more than a week now, as soon as I step out of the door. Even in here ... I can't see it, but it's there – creeping out of every dark corner. I keep far too many lights on, all the time. And even so, I don't feel safe anymore in my dear little flat. I can't sleep, and if I do, I have the most horrible nightmares. Then I wake up, but the nightmares are still there, as if the boundary between dreams and reality wasn't solid anymore. And no matter how ... What was that?'

'What do you mean?'

'I heard something, outside the door. Shivy, someone's outside the door.'

There is the noise of a table skidding on the floor. A glass shatters. Then the only sound left is the static crackle in the satellite phone line.

'Ally? ... Ally!'

‘Yes, I’m still here. It’s only the neighbours. I heard their child’s voice.’ She sighs. ‘It’s all right, I’m sorry. As I said, I’m in a bad shape right now. Just let me ... Look, let’s talk again the same time next weekend, as we agreed. By then, I should have made a decision and found something exciting to do during the sabbatical, and then we can chat about that. Right now, I’m feeling awful about a couple of things, but there’s nothing you can do. I’m just being silly, and I’m wasting your money and time. So, I’ll let you get on with your life. But I’ll be thinking of you – love forever, remember?’

‘Ally, wait.’

‘*Go dté tú slán, Shivy.*’

‘Ally, please wait ... Ally?’

She hung up.



Once again, the evening sun floats along the horizon, suspended in a golden haze. In about three weeks, it will be setting again. The short summer is almost over. And so, time does move on around here, even if at a glacial speed. The calm days will come to an end, replaced once again by the endless howling of the wind and the continuous flow of snow from the elusive world of the interior of this vast continent. And then, as winter approaches, darkness will settle ...

‘Siobhán, old girl.’

‘Iain ... Did you come out here for a smoke?’

‘Good point.’ He leans back against the bannister and begins rummaging in the pockets of his parka. ‘I was going over to the Met Tower to start my shift, but I still have a few minutes.’ He finally finds a crumpled pack and pulls out a cigarette. ‘Missing anyone in particular?’

‘A friend of mine – a very good friend.’

He nods slowly. ‘I know the feeling.’

‘She’s like a sister to me.’

He glances over. ‘I see ... family again?’

‘Yes, family. Contrary to what you believe, some of them are worth the heartache – and the tears. But I’ll be all right now.’

‘Anything major going on?’

‘I ... we just spoke on the phone. We didn’t have an argument exactly, but she basically hung up on me. I don’t blame her for that at all, and that’s not why I’m upset. But what hurts me is knowing how depressed she is, and that there is nothing I can do to help.’

‘Why? What’s bothering her?’

‘Alison? Well, it started with the murder of Kathleen Reed, shortly before the holidays. Didn’t Chris tell you about that?’

‘Chris? No. But we did hear about the case through the news bulletins that come in by telex. Then, yesterday, I read about it again in the latest stack of newspapers.’

‘I was just wondering. About a week ago, I told Chris that I had stayed in Kathleen’s flat until a few days before she was abducted.’

‘Blimey.’

‘Yes ... I never actually met her, but she was a friend of Alison’s. So, you can imagine that, when Kathleen’s body was found, she was completely distraught. And it only got worse when more and more of the circumstances of the murder came out. I mean, you saw the papers now. You saw what they’ve been publishing for the last few weeks – all this stuff about Satanic rituals. It makes absolutely no sense, and I agree with Alison – up to a point – that there must be something else behind it. But in her distressed state, she fears that there are some “evil powers” at work, which picked Kathleen at random and will randomly strike again. I don’t know to what extent she thinks of these evil powers as being supernatural. But regardless of that, to me, it seems unlikely that Kathleen would have been a random victim. A more probably scenario is that, while she was in London, she met a new group of people. Through these people, she got herself entangled in some kind of shady activity, most likely without noticing anything at all. It could have been as simple as a single casual conversation in a café or a pub, which she had completely forgotten about by the following day. But during that conversation, she could have mentioned that she was from Cambridge, and that she was going to return there soon. From what she said, it could also have been implied that she was single and living alone. Sometime later, when she does return home, someone follows her, uses the opportunity to abduct her from her flat, and all suspicions are directed towards Satanic rituals, with geographical connections to Cambridge and the Highlands, when really the origin of the crime lies in London.’

Iain nods gravely. ‘Dodgy place – I always said it.’

‘Big place, with some dodgy people living in it. And may I remind you, Iain McDonnell, that it is you these days who lives in the outskirts of this great English city, whereas I ...’

‘Yes, all right, Siobhán, no need to rub it in. And I have you know that I was only following the job – grudgingly.’

‘Fine, just ... Anyway, understandably, all of this had a strong effect on Alison, because it was she who knew Kathleen, and it was she who had to stay behind in this mess, whereas I could simply leave everything behind and come here.’

‘I see ... But you said she is *like* a sister to you. I take it then that you’re not actually related?’

‘No. We met when we were both very young, about two years old, in Norwich. Only a few months earlier, Alison had been in a car accident, which she had survived on the back seat, while her parents hadn’t been so lucky. She was then taken in by an aunt, who was working full-time, and couldn’t mind her during the day. I was in a similar situation, also without parents, being looked after by my nan. So, when we began to attend the same day nursery, being the youngest in the group, orphans in a way, and without any siblings, we naturally gravitated towards each other. But Alison never got on with her aunt. She probably sensed that she wasn’t welcome, that she was seen as a bit of a nuisance at home. Because of that, as she got older, she spent more and more time with Gran and me – whole weekends, usually. And once we were in primary school, she even went on holidays with us. So, just like a sibling, she’s always been there, for as long as I can remember.’

‘Then, I suppose, she was the friend from Norwich who pulled you through the first term at Cambridge.’

‘Yes, she was. Alison is only about half a year older than I am, but there is something about her character that naturally makes her the big sister, in the best possible way. She is not only cleverer than I am, but also more determined and charismatic – better with people, you know, more popular. She’s always been the driving force in our relationship. For example, when we started to attend comprehensive school, Alison got herself onto the field hockey team and wanted me to join as well. But I was a slow runner and felt more comfortable in the water. Because of that, I joined the swimming team instead. Then, in Fifth Form, Alison became captain of the U16 girls and somehow managed to convince the school that they should try and qualify for the National Championship within the next two years. Only they needed

a goalkeeper. So, she kept asking me to give it a go and, eventually, I agreed. I tried out and was accepted, for lack of alternatives, mostly. We managed to get through the East Round by sheer determination, inspired by Alison's enthusiasm. But in the finals, the competition got a little too strong for us. Even so, it was fun. I'd been a bit of a loner until then, and it was good to be part of a group.'

'And she's still staying in Cambridge?'

'She's back there now. Initially, after she got her Master in International Relations, she managed to get herself an internship placement with the British embassy in Dublin. At that point, I and everyone else were sure that she was going to have a successful career in the diplomatic service or in politics, and that we wouldn't be seeing much of her anymore. Therefore, we were all very surprised when, only a year later, she quit the internship, moved back to Norwich, and began working as a reporter for a regional news programme. It turned out that she had got homesick. She clearly felt more strongly rooted in the region where we had grown up, than I ever did. She never said anything, because she didn't want me to feel guilty, but I know that part of her reason for returning had also been to be closer to Gran, who was in her seventies by then and living on her own.

'After a couple of years, the news programme Alison was working for launched a current affairs edition. It is written and presented by a group from Cambridge, with close ties to the University, and is therefore broadcast from a local studio. Alison got offered the position of deputy editor and took it. She moved back to Cambridge and, until recently, she seemed completely happy. But that murder really unsettled her. That is what makes this whole situation even more disturbing – to see her fall apart like this. In the past, she was always the stronger character of the two of us. She was always the one who helped me get through difficult times. Now it would be my turn to be there for her. But I can't, being stuck here – and *here* is where I wanted to be for so many years.'

'That's tough, Siobhán. I had no idea. Otherwise, I hadn't been so callous about distancing yourself from life back home while you're on Antarctica – you know, what I said a week ago.'

'That's all right. I should have talked to you sooner, even if you can do even less about this, than I. I simply have to keep in touch with Alison as best I can, give her the opportunity to talk about those issues she doesn't want to discuss with other people, and hope that, eventually, she gets over her

depression. Which, incidentally, is why I have been using the sat phone more frequently probably than the rest of you together, just in case you were wondering ...

‘But listen, I mustn’t detain you from your duties any longer. I’m sure Nigel is already looking forward to his relief and to some lunch and company over here.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WRONG DIMENSION

The entrance hall of the grand manor is filled with pale moonlight, falling through the tall windows on either side of the porch, the slanting paths of the rays traced in a thin mist of dust. The air is completely still, unperturbed by draught or sound.

Straight ahead, and flanked by two elaborately ornamented columns, a wide staircase leads to the upper part of the building ... but the landing above lies in forbidding shadows.

Down on the ground floor, a door stands half open. The room behind it is empty. The walls are bare – except for a solid frame, off to the right, which appears to be filled with a perfect darkness. Is it window, or a mirror? A darkness looking ahead, or looking back? Or neither ... a painting, perhaps, covered in black to conceal the information it contains, to hide its secrets.

Standing in the doorway, it is impossible to tell. The nature of this darkness will only reveal itself upon closer inspection.

Instantly, however, under the first step already, the floor gives way, like the surface of a thick, viscous fluid – refusing any solid foundation, any support for further investigation.

Waves spread away from the initial disturbance, creeping up the walls and distorting the space around.

This room is out of bounds.

Here, another frame – definitely a large painting this time, hanging in a long corridor: the portrait of a young woman, elegantly clad in a Victorian evening gown with a richly embroidered bodice; her long, dark hair gathered up in an elaborate design of braids and curls. But despite the festive appearance, her eyes are sad, her gaze unfocussed and aimed into emptiness.

At the end of the corridor, a door again stands half open. Faint, unsteady light shines through from the room on the other side.

The dining hall, with a pentagram drawn on the floor, surrounded by a circle of burning black candles. A figure lies motionless inside it, wearing a simple white dress – it is Kathleen.

The candlelight flits across her face, creating the illusion of movement. Yet her features are rigid, her eyes closed. She appears to be unconscious – but still alive. Her chest expands with irregular, shallow breathing.

‘Kathleen! Kathleen, wake up!’

She does not move.

‘Come on, girl, wake up!’

Finally, her eyes open – if only they had not. If only they could have stayed closed in an eternal state of oblivion. Her eyes – glassy and lifeless from the horrors they have witnessed.

She begins to speak, attempting to communicate – with some urgency in her expression – but her voice is as empty as her eyes.

We must get out of here – and we will get out of here, away from this place. Even if demonic powers are against us, trying to hold us back – we will get out.

Only one door leads out of the dining hall – one door. It opens into a smaller room – apparently unoccupied. But there is light emanating from a fireplace.

I just need to support Kathleen long enough to find the way back to the main entrance. But she is weak, very weak, her whole body limp.

With her arm around my shoulder, she manages to take a few faltering steps towards the door – much too slowly. We do not have the time. Any moment now, the phantoms will realise that we are trying to escape. They will rise up from the deep lake outside. They will come gliding in through the windows – the shadows of the past reaching out to us.

Already, there is something moving out of the darkness in the adjacent room, the slender figure of a woman – the ghost. She walks up to the door, where she remains standing quietly, beyond the range of the flickering light from the candles, illuminated only by the red glow of the dying ambers in the fireplace behind her.

It is the woman in the Victorian dress – Alison! It is Alison. Everything will be all right now.

‘Ally!’

But she does not respond.

‘Ally, please, help us!’

She turns around slowly.

‘Ally, it’s Kathleen. We’ve got to get her out.’

She takes a silent step away, back into the dark room.

‘Ally, wait! Don’t go!’

But she continues to recede.

‘Ally, don’t leave me! I need you! Don’t go!’

* * *

How do you do it? How can you live in this cold world? How do you manage to survive, when all the odds are stacked against you? Tell me, because I would really like to know.

And why do you do it? Why do you put up with these conditions? Why do you choose to live at the extremes?

All this drive towards life – in the end, for what? Life for life's sake? At any cost? No matter the hardships?

What is the meaning of this kind of existence?

The door standing ajar is pushed open a little further.

‘Dr Dannreuther, working hard?’

Iain ... The peace and quiet could not last forever.

He enters tentatively. ‘What kind of secrets have you brought to light from the mystical ocean depths?’

‘Just critters, but lots of them.’

‘Critters? Is that a technical term?’

‘Critters don’t deserve technical terms – even if, technically, they’re algae.’

‘And they’re so small you need a microscope to see them?’

‘Individually, yes.’

Iain sidles over. ‘Can I take a look?’

‘Be my guest. I have to give my eyes a rest – and I need a good stretch. I’ve been hunched up and staring into that thing for too long today.’

He squints into the ocular with a reaction of surprise. ‘Blimey, I didn’t expect that. There’s a whole zoo down there.’

A zoo of autotrophs ... ‘Exactly, and that’s the problem: *why* are they there? In these numbers, and with that diversity? Conventional wisdom says that, at these low temperatures, single-cell life should be impossible, especially without any sunlight during a large part of the year. Incidentally, how’s the ozone hole doing these days?’

Iain glances up. ‘Just fine, thank you.’

‘Splendid, exactly what these little guys need, one more thing to worry about – increased UV-B.’

Iain is immersed again in the microbial world of diatoms. ‘I don’t know, Siobhán, I think they’re brilliant – completely bizarre shapes down there, no two exactly the same, at least among this lot. Perhaps you’re being a bit harsh on them.’

‘Yes, you’re right. They are quite fascinating, if truth be told. It’s just that I miss my warm-blooded friends.’

‘Them being?’

‘They being chirpy and clicky and whistly and squeaky and squawky – and so unbelievably cute.’

He leans away from the microscope with an alarmed expression. ‘At this rate, the next winter is going to be a pretty rough patch for you.’

‘I know. And I’m beginning to appreciate what a commitment it was to come here for this amount of time. But what really troubles me right now is Alison. I mentioned her about a week ago – remember? She was then quite depressed over the murder of one of her friends. But now, I don’t know what happened to her. We had arranged for me to phone her yesterday evening, and I tried to reach her several times, but she never answered. And then this evening again, as soon as the satellite channel got switched over to the public network, I repeatedly tried her home number, without any success. Sure, she could be at my gran’s in Norwich, but why? She knew I was going to phone her.’

‘Have you not checked?’

‘No. But if I still can’t reach Alison at her place tomorrow evening, I think I shall. And in Cambridge ... the thing is, I haven’t lived there for some years now, and I don’t know any of her friends or colleagues. Otherwise ... I just hope she hasn’t gone away already. This was her first day of a three-month sabbatical – she told me about that, last time we spoke. Back then, she wasn’t sure yet what she wanted to do. She only mentioned she thought about going to Dublin. But if she went there already, why didn’t she tell me?’

‘Maybe she left spontaneously at the weekend, when the Institute was closed, and she couldn’t leave a message for you.’

‘I don’t know, Iain. I guess it would be possible. It just isn’t like Alison to make rash decisions like that. She always plans things out meticulously. No ... I have this foreboding that something isn’t right – and I’m scared, genuinely scared, you know. Last night, I even ... well, I had a bit of a funny dream about Alison. The kind of bizarre dreams you sometimes get about people, when you can see them, and you want to talk to them, but they’re not actually there, or at least they’re not responding – you know that kind of a dream?’

He nods slowly in an attempt to seem understanding.

‘Anyway, with all these things going on, I can’t follow your otherwise good advice of letting go of the ordinary world and focus on being here. I feel disconnected from everything, neither properly here, nor there, you see – as if I were stuck in-between two separate spaces.’

‘Yes, I *can* see that. But if that is how you feel, you should not withdraw into the remotest and loneliest corner of the base. We’re very happy to include you in all our activities – or in-activities, as the case may be.’

‘I know. But when I’m ... like this, basically ... I don’t want to give anyone an excuse to say: see, that’s what you get from allowing a soppy, hysterical woman to work on Antarctica.’

‘Nobody thinks like that anymore, Siobhán. And I can’t see you beating your predecessor in terms of hysteria.’

‘No. I suppose, that would be difficult.’

Iain suppresses a laugh. Then he looks more serious. ‘Can I ask you about your family? It’s just that you mentioned growing up with your nan, and without any parents.’

‘There isn’t much to tell, really. Mum died of pneumonia, when I was very young, only a few days old. So, obviously, I can’t remember her at all.’

‘But what about your dad?’

‘I never had one. It was ... well, one night, coming back late from work, Mum was assaulted by three men. Gran doesn’t like to talk about it, even now that I’m grown up. And quite frankly, I don’t need to know any more than that. I prefer the happy image of my mother, that I can compile from photographs. She was quite pretty, and as I got older, I hoped to become more and more like her. But now that I’m basically the same age as she was when she died, there isn’t much to suggest that we’re related at all. There are no pictures from when Gran was young, but I suspect that Mum took mostly after her dad. Her hair, at least, was much darker than that of her mother. So, I like to think that I’m taking after Gran, recessively.’

‘Rather than ...’

‘Yes – and don’t *you* lecture me on genetics. You better stick to auroras and things like that.’

‘I don’t know. It seems, you have more exiting theories about them as well. But in that context, I have been wondering about what you meant about ancestors, those who are worthy of remembrance.’

‘I was thinking about my mum.’

‘Yes, I realise that now. And I’m sorry about what I said about family not being important and all that. We evidently come from very different backgrounds. But on your mother’s side, have you no relatives other than your nan?’

‘No, that’s another broken line. Gran is from Germany, originally. She came over to England during the Blitz, without her husband. It was only she and her daughter – Mum was only five at the time.’

‘Siobhán, why ... you should have told us you’re Jewish. I’m sure they could have arranged to have the appropriate food for you.’

‘But I’m not, and neither is Gran. That wasn’t the reason for her leaving Germany. It’s ... complicated, and no one really knows what happened. From what she told me, her husband was in the navy, a commander on a submarine. When the War started, he was gone for months at a time. And then, one day, they disappeared – the submarine and the whole crew. The first thought was that they had been sunk. But somehow, rumours sprung up immediately that that wasn’t the case; that instead, they had deserted and gone over to our side. Whether or not that was true, the Germans certainly took it very seriously, and they were going to arrest Gran – for interrogation, to prevent her from escaping as well, or simply as a hostage. Fortunately, she was warned just in time and managed to escape, together with a group of Jewish refugees. In retrospect, she never believed that her husband would have betrayed her and their little daughter in that way. But at that moment ... she didn’t have any other options, did she, especially with my mother. I mean, we know what the Nazis did with people they didn’t like, or whom they didn’t trust. There is no evidence to suggest that Gran’s husband ever arrived in Britain. Nor, as far as we know, was he ever seen again anywhere else. In the end, the most likely scenario is that the sub really *was* sunk, and that all those rumours were completely unfounded. But the damage was done. And so, when the War was over, Gran decided not to return to Germany. She had received some fairly nasty letters from her own and her husband’s family, accusing her of being a traitor who had gone over to the very enemy that had killed her husband. So, you see, my roots in England don’t go very deep. At the same time, I have no desire to find out more about the German part of the family either.’

‘No ... But you know, wars are strange – very confusing. Looking back at them from peacetime might not necessarily give you the right perspective to understand the actions of those people who actually lived through them.’

While you're involved in a war, you only ever get to see one side of the story. And your actions are going to be influenced by the views of that side, and not the other. But then again, what do I know. My own personal experiences are minor by comparison with what our parents and grandparents had to go through.'

'You were in the armed forces?'

'Yes, Siobhán, me – a trained killer, if you can imagine that.'

'I'll try not to.'

'Hmm ... but it's true. I was with the Paras – stationed in Northern Ireland, originally. Then, back in '82, when the task force was assembled ... We were on leave at the time, but our unit was recalled to barracks. And before we knew it, we were on an improvised troop transport heading south.'

'You were on the Falklands? How was it?'

'We won.'

'Yes, but I mean – the fighting?'

'It didn't feel very heroic at the time, I can tell you that. My unit was one of the last to be deployed, and it took us more than three weeks just to get there. It was well into autumn and already bloody freezing by the time we made the landing – sneaking in through the backdoor, as if *we* were the invaders. For a whole week, we were dug in and waiting. Our boots had got wet while wading ashore, and now they froze around our feet. That's most of what I remember from those first days – being cold and miserable. Then one night, we finally got the order to launch our attack. So, we marched off in single file, in the dark, over unfamiliar terrain, not knowing the strength and location of our enemy. We simply stumbled along over snow-covered tussocks and peat bogs – the Falklands, that was the real Bogside. I must have sprained my ankle at some point; but luckily, with the cold, I had lost all sensation in my feet by then and didn't even notice it until much later. Shortly after dawn, we got caught in enemy fire, exposed on open ground, and outnumbered by more than two-to-one. The supporting frigate had her gun jammed, and the Harriers and helicopters were grounded due to fog. Then it happened: our platoon commander got killed. They had lured him into an ambush by displaying white flags. That's when it turned genuinely nasty. We ... well, we did it, in the end. We pushed through. But we were badly prepared for the circumstances on the islands – the harsh environment, without any natural cover. Before, we'd been used to controlling urban conflicts, being caught up in street fights with armed civilians. Still, there was

one familiar element: the Argentinians were also Catholics. In their trenches, among the scattered body parts, we found their rifles with pictures of the Virgin Mary taped to the butts.

‘It was a bloody mess. And where was the morality in that? These guys we killed, they were all conscripts. They hadn’t signed up for being in the armed forces, as we had. They were completely under the control of a ruthless military dictatorship. And even with something as morally clear-cut as the Second World War, fighting is never as straightforward as you might want it to be. Ask yourself this: who or what exactly is the enemy you’re supposed to fight? Who or what are, let’s say, “the Nazis”? Sure, they’re a particular group of people, but that’s not what makes them dangerous. That’s just what makes them human. What makes people like that truly dangerous are their opinions about certain things, their attitudes and prejudices, whatever they may be – fascism, racism, antisemitism. And so, what you’re up against are ideas. But the problem is, you can’t shoot at an idea. You can only shoot at people who may or may not, at that particular moment, hold that idea inside their heads. But how many people must you shoot to kill an idea? In the end, you can’t escape ideas or ideologies. You’re always going to be part of one group or another: you’re a Fascist or a Socialist, you’re a Christian or a Jew, you’re a Catholic or a Protestant. And how many opportunities do you get to choose which group you want to belong to?’

He looks down at his hands, twisting his engagement ring. ‘It really was a bloody mess, the Falklands. Stuff like that, once you experienced it yourself, never leaves you alone. Even when we got back to Britain ... On the one hand, I was scared to be deployed again, but I didn’t feel at home anymore on civvy street either. I honestly believe that if I’d been seriously injured myself, perhaps it had made things easier. It has happened at last, your worst fears have become reality, and despite that, you’re still there. Maybe it had reduced the guilt a bit too, I don’t know. Instead, it was Warrenpoint all over again. While my mates died all around me, I walked away largely unscathed. There was no reason for why it should have been them and not me – and why I wasn’t going to be next. I realised then that it was time to get out, and so I left the Regiment.’

‘You know, I remember it, of course, watching it on the telly – the departure and then the return of the task force. But somehow it seemed like a long way away. I never fully understood what we were doing down there

in the first place. And now we're getting involved in the Middle-East again. Wars are strange, aren't they. If you don't pay attention to the media, you could easily sleep through them.'

'Unless they come knocking on your own door. Then it's a very different story. But there was one positive outcome from all this. The Falklands had put the Southern Hemisphere on the map for me, and Antarctica in particular. If you want to get away from armed conflicts, there's really no better place than here – the only continent on the planet where all military activity is strictly prohibited. But of course, at the time, it seemed just as impossible for me to ever get the chance to come here, as it must have for you, when you first applied. Leaving the army, at almost thirty years old, I couldn't afford to indulge in dreams anymore. I had to be realistic. Based on my experiences as a paratrooper, meteorologist was one of the civilian professions that occurred to me instantly. And unlike working as a paramedic, it provided a relatively small chance of ever being confronted with severed limbs again. I was lucky enough to be accepted for forecaster training at the Met Office and moved to Bracknell, as you know. That's where I met Talwyn. I got caught up in our relationship and somehow forgot about Antarctica. But after a while, it kept resurfacing. And when we began to talk about marriage, she insisted that first I should at least try and get onto the wintering team, to get it out of my system. And here I am.'

He attempts to look exited and checks his watch. 'Blimey, is that the time? Just gone past half eleven.'

'What? That late already? How is that possible?'

'Well, I did the 0 UTC observations and balloon release – so that was 2100 hours our time. Then I updated the weather maps, went over to the South Tube for a while ...'

'Yes, all right, I believe you. But doesn't time fly, when you're having fun. The others are probably making assumptions already.'

Iain gets up and stretches himself. 'Let them. But I have to get back to work now.'

'And I better try and get some sleep, just in case the weather tomorrow is still good enough for diving after all – the dire predictions on the notice board notwithstanding.'

'I like your optimism, Siobhán; but you should put more faith in "weather people," as you like to call us. There's a gale moving up from across the sea. It's already started to whistle outside, and by tomorrow morning, it'll be

howling. So, I'm afraid you'll have to take a break for the next few days, and use the opportunity to study these critters here that you already have.'

'Are you sure?'

'Definitely.'

'Right ... Then I think I'll take some sleeping pills and knock myself out. I haven't managed to sleep very well during the last couple of nights. I'll ask John whether he can give me something – if he's still up.'

The South Tube corridor lies deserted. But the unsteady light of the television set emerges from the open door of the lounge, together with the soft music of the final scene of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

'Incidentally, Iain: why did you come to see me in the first place? Did you want something from me?'

'As I said, I had some time to kill between routine observations, and I ... well, I thought I could use the gym. So, I came over here and saw the light in your laboratory.'

'Iain ...'

'Fine, I was in the lounge with the others, watching an old video and having a beer – better? And when I didn't see you anywhere in the common rooms, I thought I might go looking for you. I just wanted to make sure you're all right.'

'You know, I think I am ... or at least, I shall be. And I do appreciate you stopping by for a chat.'

He nods. 'Good night, Siobhán – and sweet dreams.'

I wish.

* * *

Dim light of a grey sky breaks through the sluggish waves. Above the surface, a dark silhouette can be seen, a line of jagged mountains – the mountains around the Highlands loch by the old manor. But an even greater darkness lurks in the water below, wavering shades of green – the world of the phantoms.

Suddenly, the deadly silence is disturbed by a wailing sound, the sound of an air raid siren. We are at war. We are under attack. The enemy is coming. There is a battle raging above. And here I am, caught between the fighting above ground and the shadows of the deep.

There are loud voices, people shouting – they are suffering, calling for help. I cannot stay down here. I must get up, back into the air. But the water’s surface is high above, always above, too high to reach.

Then the siren stops. The shouting subsides. The fighting is over. The war is lost. The din of battle is replaced by a rushing noise, undulating gusts of wind, blowing over the devastation left in the wake of the hostilities.

A distant rumbling penetrates the waves, as that of thunder. There is a storm raging above the surface, but I cannot stay down here. It is time to get back up, to get out of the water.

Total darkness fills the space around. No doubt, however, this is me, having returned to the familiar room in Aurora, at the end of just another wretched nightmare.

But the noise of the wind is still there, still howling at a distance ... howling – that cannot possibly be a storm above the ice. That would not be audible down here.

Also, there is something wrong with the air. It is thicker than usual, and it carries with it an unusual smell – the smell of smoke.

Smoke and the noise – that is not the wind – that is the sound of flames.

The base is on fire.

CHAPTER SIX

FALLEN BEHIND

This darkness in the room ... why darkness? What is wrong with the alarm clock? Should the numbers not be lit?

Unseen, here is still the lamp above the bed ... but the light switch flips with a dead click only. The power is already down then; and with it, the heating and ventilation. This leaves us with one choice: we have got to get out of here – even if there really is a blizzard raging above ground. And we will have to do this blind, until a torch can be found somewhere.

Some basic orientation first: the wall on the right, the bedside cabinet on the left. On it, the chain with the two identity discs – possibly about to become useful much sooner than one might have hoped.

Next to it, the watch – its steel casing cool and reassuringly heavy. The dial has lost its glow; but according to the internal clock, it must be in the middle of the night.

A brief contact with a glass, now on the floor ... a glass of water – the pills, those blasted sleeping pills. They must be responsible for the fog inside my brain.

This is serious. I need to wake up now – properly. I need to be alert. I need to get out of bed – now – and find out what is happening.

This way lies the black space of the room. And somewhere inside it, in that general direction, the stairs lead down to the ground floor.

A cold touch of water against the feet – just the puddle from the dropped glass – no reason to panic. This is not one of the nightmares becoming reality. The floor is as solid as ever.

So, here we go, step by step – some clothes first of all. On the chair ... this feels like the dressing gown – no use now; underneath it, the tracksuit – that will have to do for the moment, hoping that the outdoor gear has not been destroyed yet.

One sock also ... one, only one ... the other probably on the floor.

The rough texture of the old carpet ... a book, a thick hardcover near one leg of the chair, and another ... copies of journal articles ... a few paperbacks ... the slippers ... the cassette player ... several tapes ... the

weights and the rolled-up exercise mat ... how could this kind of chaos be allowed to develop?

Luckily, here is one of the trainers ... the left most likely ... and here the other. We are making progress – while still the clock is ticking.

Both legs are numb and feel strangely bloated. My circulation is clearly down. Still, I need to get moving – across the room, to the staircase.

With muscles sluggish to respond, this is like battling through black syrup.

Yet here is a wall ... and here are the stairs. A quick stumble down ... spiralling around ... with a less than elegant landing at the bottom.

Now it is a matter of finding the right line through the maze inside this chaotically crammed storage room. How many times have I come this way – without paying much attention, of course, and never in the dark.

There is not a glimpse of light anywhere – only the noise from the fire vaguely ahead and to the right. That is where the corridor is, and that is where the door is. However, in-between lies a confusing network of narrow paths, meandering between tall stacks of boxes.

Under these circumstances, muscle memory might normally be the best guide. If one simply stopped thinking, silenced the worrying brain, and began walking ... only with legs fast asleep, this is not an option now.

Still, to begin with, it is definitely down this row until ... approximately around here – yes, a narrow space of air opens up towards the right. This feels familiar.

A few paces on, some empty space again, this time on the left – the proper direction for the next turn, but this seems too soon. Just a little farther then, past the next pile ... this might be it, worth a try ...

But almost instantly, there is an obstacle in the way – a solid stack of heavy boxes. This should not be here, if the last turn was correct. Something has gone awry, and any further wrong turns will only lead deeper into an unexplored network of dead ends, lost among the discarded relics of the past.

There is no time now to double back and try again. I shall just have to risk it. Groping sideways into darkness ... an impediment on the left ... but no immediate opposition towards the right.

Then something on the floor – a single box apparently, enough to trip up an unsteady pair of legs. A helpless lunge forwards into a wonky pile of cardboard boxes – the pile toppling over, taking down another – objects crashing down in the darkness, including some wooden crates, by the sound of it.

Now it is total confusion.

With all dignity abandoned, the best approach at this point is to crawl out of the jumbled mess, blindly towards the noise of the fire, even if that means pushing through more barriers. Given the prospect of burning to death, being struck by falling objects somehow does not seem that bad.

But the next obstacle is an immovable wall of heavy crates. Which way now? To the right ... without any further detritus on the floor, this could be it. Follow that path along the barrier ... around the end and, for a short distance, back to the left. Then, with a little luck ... yes, just ahead, down at floor level, is a thin horizontal line of dim light – the door.

Outside, the corridor is filled with dark smoke. Through it, the fire can be seen raging at the far end, most fiercely at the power generator, but spreading along the tunnel. The wooden structure that once housed the kitchen has already broken down. The fire inside it has almost burned itself out, while a fresh line of flames now advances through the dining room and the lounge, the front panel of their prefab construction collapsing into the corridor.

Any moment now, the blaze will break through the common rooms and start attacking the sleeping quarters. There is not a second to lose.

Despite that, no one else seems to be moving about. Why do the others not notice anything? How can anyone sleep through this racket of bursting timber?

Moving along the row of living rooms, the heat gradually increases, as the crackling and whistling of the flames gets more intimidating. And still no one responds to the banging on the doors.

Closer to the origin of the fire, the smoke gets thicker, making it more and more difficult to see and to breathe. And the heat – that is going to be a problem.

But the lack of fresh air we can deal with. After all, we trained for this. This is just like an emergency ascent: do not let the panic get to you, fight back the first breathing reflex – and the second. It is just the carbon dioxide in the blood. There is still plenty of oxygen circulating through the system.

And here it is, the first of the sleeping quarters. Beyond it, the jagged fragments of the common area loom inside the billowing cloud of smoke.

The heat is truly intense now.

With a woeful groaning, the outer cylindrical shell over the kitchen caves in, finally yielding to the pressure from above. A moment later, another

segment of the shell collapses into the ruined space that used to be our lounge.

Now, the full weight of the ice bears down onto the top floor of the first bedroom unit. Although the flames have not reached it yet, it is not going to withstand the strain for long. Already the first cracks begin to form in the upper part of the front wall, as it bulges outwards ... until it crumbles and crashes down into the corridor, piling up right outside the bedroom door. A shower of sparks and glowing splinters of wood comes raining down.

Why does no one notice anything?

Some of the beams and panels are too heavy to shift. But it is still possible to climb over the jumble of broken building material – right up to the door.

Only the door does not budge. It should open inwards, and yet it does not move at all. It cannot be locked. The doors in here are never locked. Then what is the problem? Is the frame already too deformed?

The outer shell continues to groan, sagging lower and lower. Soon it will be resting on the ceiling of the ground floor unit.

The door has to open – it must. What is needed is something like a crowbar, something like ... this broken piece of metal there, lying buried underneath the debris. If I can reach it, perhaps it can be used as a lever.

At a stretch ... there it is – and it is hot, too hot to hold tightly in bare hands. Still, through the sleeves, it is just about bearable.

Now, this must work. Otherwise, we are out of options, and out of time.

The sharp edge at one end of the bar fits inside the narrow crack between the frame and the door.

But the metal is softened by the heat. It bends slowly under my weight ... and then it gives way.

‘Siobhán!’

Two figures wearing silver firefighting suits have appeared in the door from the crossway.

‘Siobhán, what are you doing there? The emergency exit is at your end of the tunnel.’

The outlines are vague in the thick smoke, but Iain’s voice is unmistakable.

After a brief exchange, one of the figures leaves again. But Iain approaches, a breathing apparatus on his back, the mask pushed up onto his forehead.

‘Iain, I was trying to get to you. The fire, you know ... I woke up, and I didn’t see anyone, and I thought you were all asleep. Then, suddenly, the upper floor came down, right here. There were flames everywhere, and your room was going to be next, and I didn’t know what to do, because I thought you were still in there, so I ...’

He lays his hand on my shoulder. ‘Siobhán, I was on night shift over in the Met Tower when the fire broke out – remember? – as every night.’

‘I forgot.’ I must be giving an impression of pure misery and foolishness, choking and coughing.

With an exasperated look, Iain takes the broken shelving part out of my hand. ‘What on Earth were you planning to do with this?’

‘I wanted to use it to force the door open, but it bent.’

‘I can see that – and burned your hands too, right through the sleeves.’ He drops the bar unceremoniously. ‘Come on, we need to get out of here.’

‘But the others?’

‘They’re all over in the North Tube already. Now come on, the smoke is going to kill us, if the flames don’t.’

Iain pushes the solid steel door shut against the heat and the aggressive noise of the raging fire. He is anxious to get farther away, down the crossway and back to the others, but ...

‘Iain, wait a second.’

‘What is it?’

‘I feel a bit dizzy. I need to catch my breath. Just let me sit down for a moment.’

‘Here, use this.’ He takes off the mask of his breathing apparatus.

‘No, it isn’t the smoke. It’s the effect of the sleeping pills.’

He suppresses a curse. ‘Siobhán, I’m so sorry. I should have remembered. I can’t believe we let you sleep in there. We only realised you were missing once we were assembled over in the gym and did the roll call. But with the fire and everyone running around blindly, trying to get Andy and Nige to safety ...’

‘What happened to them? Are they all right?’

‘Alive, for now, but in a bad shape, especially Andy. He was on night duty, as you know, sitting alone in the kitchen, when the alarm went off outside the generator room. He was hit by the blast of the explosion, when he went to investigate. He was being treated in the surgery when Chris and

I got ready to look for you, but there's only so much we can do for him here. We must get him to Stanley as soon as possible.

'And Nige – he was classic. He had fallen asleep in the lounge while they were watching a film – not exactly sober, as you can imagine. The others had left him there when they went to bed. He didn't wake up until the fire broke through from the kitchen. He was completely disoriented, didn't know where to go. But we got him out, just in time. His burns are not so bad, but he inhaled a lot of smoke.' Iain coughs contemplatively. 'You know, I think I'm going to give it up after this, if we make it out alive.'

'What, smoking? I think you should.'

'Oh, look at you, Siobhán. You're in absolutely no position to hand out health advice to anyone. I mean, were you honestly going to try and rescue all of us dressed like this? Or is it considered fashionable these days to only wear one sock when fighting fires?'

'I didn't plan this through in great detail, did I. I woke up with smoke coming into my room and the power down. I knew I didn't have much time, and this was the only clothing I could find in the dark. Then, when I'd finally found my way out into the corridor and couldn't see anyone, thinking you were still asleep, I simply started with the room nearest to the flames – which happened to be yours, by the way.'

Iain swallows hard and nods. Then he studies something on my forehead. 'That bump and the scratch ...'

'I think that may have happened when I got attacked by some boxes earlier on.'

'All in a day's work for Dr Dannreuther ... but it doesn't look serious.' He links his arm with mine. 'Come on, we should get going. The survival suits and everything else in the Boot Room was destroyed. But we've still got the backup suits in the main storage. You can put yours on over that.'

'Actually, I had a big laundry day recently, and virtually all my clothes are hanging in the drying room right now, together with the diving suit – so no problem there. I can wear several layers of socks, if that comforts you.'

He grins. 'All right. Let's go then.'

'But Iain, wait. We can't just let it burn – this is our home.'

'We have to, Siobhán. We've got no chance fighting fires down here, even dressed in these special suits. It's too dangerous underground, and with no water ... You know the rules: rescue only, and then evac.'

'Evacuation? All of us? You mean we're going back to England?'

‘Yes, Siobhán, we’re going back. Before we retreated into the North Tube, we managed to send out a distress call, using the emergency battery power. After a while, Halo responded. They’ll try and get an aircraft through to us, before the weather gets really bad. So, yes, with a little luck, we’re going home.’



‘Siobhán, if you just give me a few seconds to collect my stuff, you can have the privacy of the storage room all to yourself.’

‘Don’t be silly, Iain. This is not the time to fuss over something like that. I can barely see myself in the fading light of this torch – why is it that batteries always run out, as soon as you need them? And anyway, I’m sure you’ve seen these things before, and more.’

‘Not for some time though.’ He grumbles and turns away.

‘Well, there you are then. Enjoy it while it lasts. In a moment, it will all be hidden again underneath this incredibly stylish sports bra ... there, safe to look now.’

He glances over, busy peeling himself out of the firefighting suit. ‘You’re all right? You can manage with your burnt hands?’

‘Sure. It’s not too bad. I don’t think the skin will blister. And in the grand scheme of things ... What I don’t understand is why we can’t stay here, those of us who aren’t seriously injured. We’ve got everything we need right here in the North Tube. Isn’t that the idea behind having the two tunnels: redundancy for emergencies? We’ve got the backup power generator, and with that, heating and ventilation. There’s plenty to eat in the dry food and freezer store. Water we can get from the snow melt for the laundry. And we’ve even got the little washroom and the toilet in the hospital. Then why do we have to evacuate immediately? Can’t we wait for, I don’t know ... the *Steadfast*, that’s it. They’ll be here in three weeks’ time, and perhaps sooner, when they find out what happened. Why don’t we wait until then? And when the others arrive, maybe we can mend it, the base.’

‘Mend it? Siobhán, you saw what is going on over there. The main generator room has exploded. By now, all our sleeping quarters and the Comms Room are probably destroyed as well. And by the time the fire has burnt itself out, there will be nothing left to mend. Even if the flames don’t spread into this tunnel, we would only stay in an absolute emergency; only if

the fire happened in winter, basically, and there was no way out. Since now we may at least have a chance to leave, it would be foolish not to. From now on, flying conditions will only get worse. And just imagine all of us staying in this one tunnel for an entire winter, or even the few weeks until the ship gets here, without the kitchen and a proper bathroom, without the lounge and the bar. We would all be mad within a few days.’ He stuffs the scant remains of his personal belongings that he kept in the Met Tower into an old duffle bag. ‘No, Siobhán, let’s face it – Aurora IV is dead. The base was old when we got here, and now it’s dead.’

‘And Halo?’

‘That’s where we’re going first. But they don’t have enough space and resources to accommodate us for an entire year. And what would be the point of staying there anyway? What would we be doing? – Nothing. And the Government is not going to pay for us to have a year-long holiday on Antarctica. Therefore, we’re going to be moved on to Stanley as soon as possible. From there, we’ll be on the first *TriStar* back to Brize Norton.’

So, this is it – the sad end of a dream. Somehow, the whole situation always was surreal, right from the very beginning, starting with that surprise phone call. Even then, it seemed too good to be true.

And so, here we are, putting on our survival suits, one last time. Not to explore this enigmatic continent – no, to escape it, to run away in disgrace, defeated ...

‘There’s nothing valuable left in your room, is there?’ Iain sounds more compassionate now, having perhaps seen me wipe my eyes.

‘I took my watch, which is the most precious possession I have down here. The rest is minor. But wait – the letters I got from Gran and Alison!’

‘You’ll see them soon enough in person, much sooner than expected.’

Of course, why didn’t I think of that? Now I may even get the opportunity to meet Alison before she leaves for Dublin. And if she has left already, I can visit her there. We will straighten everything out. Everything will be back to normal, the way it always was. So, something good is going to come out of this after all.

‘You know, you’re right. This is definitely not safe down here. We should get going.’

Iain continues standing there in the semi-darkness, watching me shoulder my bag and walk towards the door.

‘Come on then. By now, we’re probably the last ones left down here.’

He finally picks up his bag too, shaking his head. ‘Sometimes, I do wonder about you, Siobhán.’



Leaning against the emergency exit door, Iain uses his weight to push away the snow that has accumulated outside it, within the few minutes since the others left. An ice-laden blast enters the narrow tower.

Iain nods towards the opening. ‘For England, Siobhán.’

‘After you, Scottie.’

He smiles and steps out into the storm. The wind really is howling now, white vortices trailing off in the wake of any manmade structure – reminiscent of the conditions during my arrival here just over a month ago. But now, a true air of desolation hangs over the whole compound.

Clearly visible by the sagging surface of the ice shelf, the South Tube hull has continued to collapse, with smoke and steam rising up the ramp from the garage at one end. The lights in the Met Tower are out now, the raised platform reduced to a diffuse silhouette, as dark as that of the satellite antenna.

The early morning sun is still low in the southeast, its rays struggling to break through the dense stream of snow near the ground. But there is the unsteady glow of torches from a small group of people, huddled together between the red shapes of the two synthetic igloos. Human life still clings to this hostile environment – the Thirteenth Aurora Wintering Team, to whom I almost belonged myself ... almost. The last to arrive, the last to leave. And now, all that remains to be done is to close the door.

Good-bye, Aurora, and thank you. It was a privilege staying with you, if only for a little while.



Suspended ice crystals circle above in a hypnotic fashion. But the wind, and with it the realism of the situation, is pushed away, muffled by the balaclava, the woollen hat, and the hood of the thick survival suit. It sounds distant and soothing, like the rushing of waves on a beach.

And immersed in the wind are the quiet voices of the others, only a few paces away. They are still waiting, although the sun is now high in the sky ... a few minutes before eleven.

I slept for six hours straight, dreamlessly, better perhaps than ever before on Antarctica. Who would have thought that this was the way to do it: lying on the seat of a snowmobile, looking up into the turbulent sky, rocked gently by the wind in the outskirts of a blizzard, and bundled up comfortably, with feet nice and warm inside a pair of mountaineering boots and a double layer of matching socks.

Chris' grinning face comes into view. 'Hello, mate. Glad to see you could join us again on this memorable day.'

'Did I miss anything?'

He chuckles. 'No, not at all. We're only having a picnic out here, enjoying the scenery.'

'Right, that's lovely ... Just give us a hand, mate. I want to get up – cheers. I realise now that the sleeping position wasn't quite as comfortable as I thought it had been immediately after waking up.'

'Yes, I was wondering about that. But after establishing occasionally that you were still breathing, I decided that you probably knew what you were doing.'

He fills two polystyrene cups of coffee from a large thermos flask. 'We managed to get the stoves going – eventually. But we forgot to take any milk powder out of the storage when we left the base. So, I'm afraid you'll have to make do without.'

He looks tired but defiant, perhaps even a little confident. Generally, with the increased daylight, the atmosphere is more optimistic than it had been during the early morning hours. The initial shock has subsided. The others are sitting together in small groups, loosely gathered around two simmering camping stoves, set up between the two igloos. The other snowmobiles are lined up as barriers against the wind and the encroaching snow.

'How are Nigel and Andrew?'

'Nigel will be fine. He's in here, still on oxygen, but breathing more normally now. And Andy ... he's over there in the other shelter. For him, the main thing is a severe head injury, then the burns and several fractures. John patched him up as well as is possible out here, but there's nothing more that can be done at this point. He'll need some fairly advanced surgery in a

proper hospital, and quickly. They're keeping him sedated now to reduce the pain. But basically, we're all just standing by for the arrival of the aircraft. One of the *Twin Otters* left Halo around three o'clock this morning, as you probably heard before you checked out. So, if everything goes well, they should be here any moment. Then it all depends on the wind, whether they'll be able to land.'

'If they managed to take off at Halo about eight hours ago, the main storm must have passed there already. Then it's currently over the sea and is going to hit us soon.'

'Yes, that seems to be the current situation. They were going to try and outfly it, skirt the northern edge of the system and use the storm's circulation to their advantage, but it will be tight. The way it looks, we'll barely have enough time for refuelling. John has the mobile radio set with him in the shelter. He is in contact with the pilots and was mildly optimistic about an hour ago. Still, we're not going to leave the base until we get the confirmation that the aircraft is approaching. We can't go back and forth, especially with Andy.'

'Darren and Iain went off in the snow tractors to bring fuel drums to the landing site. On the way, they're grooming the track, to make sure we don't get stuck at the last moment. They'll also mark the skiway with flares. But we won't light those until the aircraft is actually coming in. Until then, all we can do is wait.'

In that case ... 'I just remembered all the stuff in the lab. While we're standing around here, doing nothing, I should get that out. Otherwise, all our work, all the sample collection in the freezing water was for nothing.'

'Don't be stupid, Siobhán. You can't go back inside. The fire may still be going down there. Who knows, it may already have spread into the North Tube. You can't rely on the crossway to hold back the flames forever. With a constant supply of air through the ventilation shafts, the fire won't stop until all combustible material is used up: the wooden building units, drenched in diesel fumes, the furniture, the carpets, mattresses, books – everything.'

'Exactly, all my notes, the rolls of photographs – Chris, that expensive underwater camera I brought with me! The Institute are going to kill me, if I leave that behind.'

'They're definitely going to kill you if you die down there. You open that door to the emergency exit tower again, and if the fire has spread into the

North Tube, the draft could create an explosion that blows you sky high. Of course, if the aircraft can't pick us up today, we'll have no other choice. Then we'll have to see if we can get down there again. But I'm not looking forward to that.'

'They're still going to kill me, you know. I should have thought of that' ... instead of my clothes from the drying room – my clothes of all things, exactly what they would expect from a woman.

But Chris is unconcerned. 'Compared with the loss of the base, none of this really matters, as long as no one dies. That's the main thing right now. Although ... I saw our boat when we rescued the snowmobiles out of the garage. It was parked a little farther back, closer to the South Tube entrance. When the main generator room exploded, the fire must have caught on to the fuel left in the outboard engines. If I hadn't known that we'd left it there ... it was all ... I barely recognised it. There were the remains of the sledge, but the rest was nothing but charred bits of rubber and lumps of molten plastic.'

'I'm glad I didn't have to see that. It's strange, isn't it. What is it with vessels, that you get so attached to them? They should simply be utility vehicles, shouldn't they?'

'Only they're not.'

'No, they're definitely not. And it was *our* boat.'

Chris nods. 'Our boat ...'

He shuffles his feet, drawing a random zigzag line in the surface of the trodden down snow.

Suddenly, the hatch of one of the igloos opens. John emerges and straightens up gingerly after hours of crouching inside the low shelter. His expression is optimistic. 'All right, listen up everyone, we just got the confirmation: the *VP-FDC* is approaching, and there's still a good chance they'll be able to land. So, this is it – we're moving out. You all know what to do.'

He exchanges a few encouraging words with the lads, as everyone prepares for departure. Then he notices me standing by the snowmobile, some distance away from the others. 'Siobhán, are you ready to leave?'

'Yes, but I was thinking ...'

'Good. Then you can lower our flag – if you find that the main access tower is still safe to climb.'

The flag? Why on Earth? With all the things I should get out of the lab ...

John gets impatient. ‘The flag, Siobhán – please.’
He turns away, without accepting any response.



The iron rungs of the ladder leading up to the roof are overgrown with weeks’ worth of windblown snow. They are slippery and difficult to climb with the bulky boots.

At the top, it is impossible to stand upright in the strengthening wind, without hanging on to the flag pole, itself shaking violently.

The rope to which the flag is attached is encrusted with ice, as everything else on the elevated structure.

After some fiddling, the simple knot opens. But the rope refuses to run through the narrow wheel at the top of the pole, stiff as it is.

The flag is stuck – the bloody stupid pointless thing.

At last, under the pull of my full weight, it allows itself to be lowered, rattling indignantly all the way down, reluctant to admit defeat. It has only been flying above the base since the return of the sun at the end of last winter, a little less than half a year ago. Even so, from up close, it already looks weathered. The colour has faded somewhat, and the edges have started to fray.

It was intended to stay up until the last sunset before the winter. But by then, the ice shelf will be a frozen wasteland, abandoned by human life. And the remnants of our modest dwelling will be buried in eternal snow.



Some clothes, a diving suit, and a tattered old flag – that is all I shall be bringing back from my Great Antarctic Adventure.

John comes over again, evidently taking exception to my unceremoniously stuffing his precious Union Jack into the bag. ‘I’ll take that – thank you.’

He straightens out the crumpled fabric and folds it carefully. ‘These things are important, Siobhán, even if they seem to have no practical value.’

Well, if that’s true, then things with a practical value should be even more important.

But this is clearly not a topic for debate. John dedicates himself again to more pressing tasks. Whereas for me, if getting the flag really was the best thing I could do, I'm obviously not much use for anything.

Meanwhile, there is one important thing that I should be doing; and it would turn everything around – failure into at least partial success. Instead of returning empty-handed, I would have accomplished everything that could be expected under the given circumstances. It would only take a few minutes, and all the other dominos did not have to fall. On the other hand, if I do not go back inside, the biological research at Aurora will have been a total failure for a second time. The programme will undoubtedly be terminated, especially with the additional costs of rebuilding the base. And if that happens, who knows when it will be reactivated, if ever. After all, how dangerous can it be? There was no indication that the access tower in the middle of the crossway was destabilised just a moment ago. Even now, the fire cannot possibly have spread over into the North Tube.

Faint lights inside the heavy snow, approaching from the direction of the landing site, indicate that Iain and Darren are only now returning. Since everyone else is busy too, breaking up the temporary campsite, digging out the snowmobiles, attaching sledges to some of them, this is still going to take some time out here. No one pays any attention to me. I shall be back before the others are ready to leave, and no one will ever know.



Fresh snow has piled up again outside the emergency exit. The solid steel door is freezing cold. And in the snow all around the frame, there is no sign of any previous melting due to intense heat from inside.

Blocked as the entrance is, this will have to be done by force. One hard pull – the door swings open ... and nothing happens. Inside the dark tower is complete silence. No smell of smoke, no explosion, no drama, no sweat. But quickly now.

At the bottom, the door to the North Tube is cold too, with no sound coming from the other side.

It opens smoothly, without any indication of deformation by either heat or increased pressure from above. The whole structure still appears to be intact.

There is a dim shine in the middle of the tunnel, but not from flames. It is pale sunlight, coming down the ventilation shaft.

Everything seems normal, the biology lab exactly as Iain and I left it last night.

So, what do we need?

The camera, first of all, sitting conveniently on the table – out of its bag for drying, but easily packed up again ... together with all the undeveloped film rolls.

Then there are the notes and sketches on the desk – many only doodles, which probably deserve to go up in flames; but there is no time to sort through them now. The whole stack will have to come along – even if it does add up, all this loose paper.

Kevin's old folders, meticulously labelled and arranged on the shelf ... He was evidently better organised than I am, up to a point. At least the last one here should be preserved, with his latest results. And it has enough space left to stuff my notes in as well.

Now, what else?

The diskettes – all in one box; but without another bag available, they will have to go down the front of the suit, together with the folder.

And one last thing: the most recently used diskette, still in the drive. That can go into the side pocket of the suit.

The rest must stay, all the precious samples in the freezer and the incubator.

Right, this is it – no more time to lose.



The others have finished packing up, but are only now beginning to leave. The first two snowmobiles towing the sledges with Andrew and Nigel, bundled up in sleeping bags, slowly and carefully depart into the thickening cloud of swirling snow.

Iain is waiting at the end of the line, a sledge hooked up to his snowmobile, laden with some bulky objects under a canvas cover.

He looks around nervously, when he sees me emerge from the direction of the base. 'Siobhán, where were you?'

Best if you don't know, mate.

He has pulled my snowmobile behind his own. The engine is running now – warmed up and idling steadily.

And above the dense current of snow, the sun still shines directly above our heads.

It will be all right.

Iain observes me closely and recognises the camera bag. His eyes are hidden behind goggles, but his gesture of exasperation is telling enough. ‘You’re unbelievable, Siobhán. You really are bloody unbelievable.’

‘Don’t panic, Iain. I got the stuff out, and now I’m here – no problem. Anyway, what’s all this lot on your sledge?’

‘Some of the sensors and other equipment from the Met Tower. But ...’ He pre-empts my response. ‘... these things genuinely *are* expensive, and I didn’t have to go down again into a burning base to get them, just when we’re preparing to leave – honestly, Siobhán.’

‘It was perfectly safe. Don’t worry about me all the time.’

Still, as more and more objects emerge from my suit, Iain continues to mutter to himself – ‘unbelievable, un-bloody-believable.’

But it all fits into the bag, nicely cushioned by all the clothes.

Witnessing the good progress, Iain gets a little more relaxed. ‘Darren and I marked the track with a fresh row of flags on the left side, moving out, at intervals of about 200 feet. But with the low visibility at the moment, you may not necessarily be able to see the next one. So, we have to make sure we keep the taillights in front of us in sight. And be careful not to get off the groomed track. With all this drifting snow since last night, there are some majestic sastrugi on both sides.’

‘I’ll watch out for them. But what happens to the snowmobiles?’

‘We’ll leave them at the skiway and secure them under tarps. When the *Steadfast* gets here next month, they’ll take care of them.’

‘Then the ship is still coming?’

‘Yes, Siobhán. But we’re definitely not staying here.’

‘No, I understand. I was just wondering ... And I’m ready now.’

Iain nods and lets his snowmobile slide forwards a few feet, at the same time as the figure ahead of him drives off. But then he stops, turning back and indicating “lower your goggles.”

Cheers, mate!

Seen through the coloured lenses, the scene suddenly looks surreal. Everything is tainted yellow, and the weak contrasts in the diffuse light are unnaturally enhanced, lending a sense of comforting detachment.

The gauges on the dashboard show no sign of any trouble. The tank is almost full.

It will be all right.

I have done this before. Slowly release the clutch – very carefully. Do not stall the machine now.

And with only a small change in the engine noise, the snowmobile slides into motion.

There we are – this is no more difficult than riding a scooter. It may even turn out to be fun.

The others are already on their way, the taillights near the front of the line becoming fainter in the white haze.

Iain smoothly accelerates away, the sledge swivelling behind him.

Then, turning around again, he raises his hand in a questioning gesture. He understands my wave and speeds up a little.

But he continues to look back, to see if I am keeping up, while those in front are gaining on us.

Stop worrying about me, Iain! Go ahead!

Finally, he accelerates properly, trying to keep the lights ahead of him in sight.

At a greater pace, this is quite a different story. It takes nerves, developed through practice, to drive in conditions like these. The effect of every irregularity in the snow surface is amplified with increased speed. And if the snowmobile toppled over, I could never make up for the time lost.

Meanwhile, the storm continues to intensify. Already, the sun is nothing but an indistinct glow in the white cloud surrounding us, whereas the outlines of the Met Tower and the satellite antenna behind us have long vanished.

These goggles are not helping either, accumulating snowflakes faster than can be wiped off. And every time one hand is taken off the shaking handle bar, the snowmobile threatens to careen off the track. This is useless. I might just as well take them off ... there, that is better.

But in the few seconds of being distracted with the glasses, Iain's taillights have vanished – briefly. Then a pair of dim red lights becomes visible again, slightly off to the right, and moving fast. I need to speed things up a little bit.

Instantly, the ground gets choppier, as the texture of the snow surface becomes rougher. Somewhere up ahead, the groomed track must have made a turn to the right, and this is now an unintentional shortcut.

To get back onto the track, I would have to veer away from the occasional flicker of lights ahead. But while it is impossible to see the way markers, the worst that could happen now would be to lose sight of the others. And so, the only chance is to continue straight ahead, and attempt to catch up again. While the runners of the snowmobile manage to skip over the irregularities, there is nothing to worry about.

It will be all right.

Then perhaps a little faster still, while the going is good.

And there is the wave. Without a warning it appeared out of the whiteness of the streaming snow. Caught in the beam of the headlight, it gracefully rises up in the wake of a pressure ridge. An isolated sculpture, frozen in a permanent process of breaking. With it, time comes to a halt, paralysed in the moment.

Its regular shape has a simple beauty, despite being created by nothing but random collisions of individual ice crystals, driven by the ceaseless action of the turbulent wind – an image for the shaping of a meaningful existence out of the chaos of everyday life.

The inevitable impact is nothing but a sudden tug in the stomach. With a roar of the engine, the snowmobile's track loses contact with the ground.

A quick ascent ... and a fall into weightlessness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A MURMUR OF A PRAYER

Continuous low humming, quiet but purposeful. And moving about it, a fluctuating buzzing at a higher pitch, like a beehive ... like the buzzing of busy bees.

It is all right. It is only the sound of a beehive on a fine summer's day.

And there are voices too ... distant voices ... people in a park ...

Waterloo Park, on a sunny afternoon. Gran sits on a bench, reading, allowing me to wander off a little, to look at a flower bed.

There is a bee climbing in and out of the petals. It is working very hard, moving farther and farther into the midst of the many colourful plants. But I can follow it, carefully crawling among the stems, without frightening it away.

Gran comes up behind me. 'What have you found there, darling?'

'Look, Omi, it is climbing into the flowers.'

'Yes, but be careful, darling. Don't get so close. It might sting you.'

'No, Omi, look: it's a bummel bee. They're very friendly.'

But Gran is worried. She does not believe that a nice bee like that does not sting.

Suddenly, it flies off, struggling at first to get airborne, heavily laden as it is.

Then, finally, it ascends into the clear blue sky, sailing higher and higher ...

... its humming becoming more and more distant, until it is gone.



There is snow piled up all around ... soft snow ... and the dry whistling of the wind, still depositing more snow in the wake of the icy ridge nearby.

Some larger, broken pieces of compacted snow are scattered about.

It is cold ... desperately cold.

I should get up. But the legs are numb and heavy. They refuse to move.

Lying across them is an irregularly shaped object, covered in snow, with only a handlebar sticking out ... a bicycle ... I fell off my bicycle.

There it is, on the pavement. The beautiful new bicycle Gran had to save up for, working so hard, for such a long time. And now I scratched it.

'Come, darling, get up.' Gran is neither sad nor angry. 'Get up again and we'll dry your tears. It's not so bad. See, your bicycle is lying right here. We pick it up, and then you can try again.'

But then I fall off again, until everything is broken, the bicycle and I.

And there is Alison, still sailing along down the pavement, unaware of what happened. She does not fall. She never falls. She continues chattering away about all the faraway places we are now going to visit.

Finally, she notices that I am not keeping up anymore. She comes to a wobbling halt and turns around, shocked to see me lying on the ground. 'Shivvy!'

She puts down her bicycle and begins running towards us. 'Shivvy, I'm coming ...'

Alison! I have got to go back. I have got to meet her. I have got to talk to her, support her. Otherwise, these shadows, these phantoms that she spoke of – they are going to get her. And then she will be taken away, just like ...

No, that cannot happen. That must never happen. I shall be there for her. I shall protect her. Unless ... it is already too late. Because, where was she when I tried to phone her? Why did she not answer? If she had been at home, she had never ignored the persistent ringing, especially since she knew I was going to call.

So, where was she, and why did she leave – so soon, without saying anything, without sending a single message?

No, this is not right. And she did not talk to anyone else about it, about how the shadows were closing in on her. I am the only person who knows about the danger she is in.

This is serious. I must get back to England. I must warn the police.

And what am I doing here, lying face-down and buried in snow! That is ridiculous! Why would I do that?

There is something dark in the snow, down in the depression where my head rested, some frozen liquid. It looks like blood – it must *be* blood.

Right, that is it, enough of this. I have got to get up.

But there is something wrong with my legs. Something is weighing down on them, something bulky, hidden underneath the snow. It seems to be a snowmobile – turned over onto its side.

Clearly, something bad happened here, some kind of an accident.

The seat of the snowmobile is resting on my hips. The metal edge of the running-board must have fallen straight down onto my thighs.

The right leg is completely stuck, without any feeling or strength in it at all.

The left moves a little. If I can wriggle that out, maybe I can push the snowmobile away.

Of course, if only one leg is broken ... if the bone fragments are being displaced ... if they cut through the femoral artery ...

Then again, if I do not risk that, I shall freeze to death out here for sure. So, it is a simple choice, really. I might as well try.

After some effort, the left leg slides out sideways – not broken, then. But a dull pain develops in the right thigh, as it is forced to take the full weight of the snowmobile.

A desperate push – and the heavy machine slides off. I am free again, free to turn around ... carefully.

Also the right leg seems to hold together, but completely numbed from having its circulation cut off in the cold. It will take some time to let strength flow back into it, enough strength to get me on my feet again.

What a place ... Only diffuse sunlight breaks through the dense current of snow racing across the ice shelf, making it impossible to see for more than a few yards in either direction.

Beyond the constant howling of the wind, there is a deadly silence and endless emptiness.

I am alone – alone on Antarctica.

But the base cannot be too far away ... Aurora. I would not have gone far from it, not on my own.

Then where is it?

And how did I get here?

There were the others – not too long ago, it seems. We were leaving the base. We were trying to get to the aircraft. We had to leave, because of the fire. We were driving through the snow, and then ... then it must have happened. I had an accident, somehow, and the others left – they left without me.

The strong wind has long obliterated any tracks in the snow. Still, this cannot be too complicated. Surely we can work this out.

We were driving to the skiway. Therefore, the base must be south of here.

It is a little after one o'clock. So, if we add one hour for solar time, with the number twelve on the dial of the watch aimed at the sun, the base should in the seven o'clock direction, less than two miles away.

But without any visual reference, it is easy to get confused. What happens if the sun gets completely hidden above the billowing snow? The only real hope then is to catch brief glimpses of the dark shapes of the Met Tower and the satellite antenna, closer to the base.

And as the legs get warmer, the circulation starting up again, the previously dull pain is getting more acute. What if it becomes overpowering before I am able to trudge all the way back through the deep snow? How can I be sure that I shall continue walking? What guarantee is there that I shall not collapse again? It is easy to doubt your own weakness before the pain begins.

The snowmobile, carelessly pushed away, is still lying on its side, and almost covered in snow again. Nonetheless, it provides the best chance now of getting out of the cold.

The windscreen is broken, but there are no traces of motor oil or petrol in the snow. The engine and tank appear to be all right. With a little persistence, it should start up again – it must.

First, it needs to be turned back onto its running belt.

A firm push with one shoulder, weak legs dug into the loose snow ... The seat lifts off the ground, tilting grudgingly – until the machine tips over and comes to rest again the right way up, with the bag still safely secured on the luggage rack.

Now then, at least for the next half hour or so, it is a simple enough rule: drive away from the sun and veer slightly towards the right, checking occasionally with the watch – if the engine starts.

So, this is the moment of truth. Pull the starter rope in one determined but smooth stroke ...

Instantly, a stinging pain breaks through the numbness of the right wrist. But for all that, there is only the empty spluttering of a lifeless engine.

No, please, don't do this to me. You cannot do this to me – not now.

A second attempt, using the other hand – awkward with the weaker arm ... and the same result.

Look, I'm sorry I kicked you earlier on, and I probably yelled at you too. I can't remember, but I'm sure it wasn't nice – and I apologise, sincerely.

Another fruitless pull.

Please don't be mad at me. I know it's all my fault. But it's just the two of us now. And we must stick together, you and I. Otherwise, we are both not going anywhere.

A few red drops fall onto the seat ... as again the engine remains silent.

No, don't make this difficult for me. Surely you don't want to stay out here forever. I can get us back to Aurora, but I need your help.

Silence ... but for the triumphant howling of the wind.

Come on, one last journey is all I ask for, to get us out of this. Then you and I can rest, I promise.

Once more the engine stutters, but slightly less reluctantly than before. A little bit of throttle – and it starts up!

Revvng the engine sounds perhaps a little harsher than it should, cold as it is, but it is definitely running now. The man-made noise pushes against the wind, fighting back with a determined roar. The lights come on. The vibrations of the mechanical pulse register even in the numb legs. Warmth slowly spreads throughout the ice-encrusted metal.

Life has returned to the wasteland.



Clean white steam emerges from the ramp down into the garage – but no smoke. The fire did drown itself in the end. And the acrid smell that hung over the compound has been carried away by the wind.

The wooden shell of the South Tube has almost completely fallen in at this point. But the access tower in the middle of the crossway still stands.

Yet even from the distance, it is apparent that the main entrance is completely iced-up and blocked by a snowbank. And at the door to the emergency exit tower, the situation is bound to be the same.

With the pain shooting up from both legs getting more and more persistent, I shall not have the energy to battle my way through that – which only leaves the garage entrance to get back into the base. Judging by the even snow surface, the steel hull there appears to have withstood the fire.

The surface of the ramp leading down to it is almost sheer ice, but the snowmobile slides down eagerly, sensing the end of our journey, then running down its momentum in a dense layer of slush at the bottom.

We made it.

As soon as the engine is turned off, complete silence settles – except for the occasional dripping from the ceiling.

With all other vehicles gone, the first half of the garage is empty. Farther back, the sad remains of the dive boat float in a shallow pool of melt water, swathed in a veil of fog that rises into the cold air.

Time to get away from this depressing sight. But the bag will have to stay out here on the snowmobile. It is too heavy to carry at the moment.

The rolling gate to the vehicle workshop requires the usual determined push to open, sending fresh waves of pain up the legs. But at least there is no indication of immediate danger inside the large room. No signs of damage can be seen in the dim light from the garage.

The power is down, as expected, but a solid-looking torch lies on one of the shelves ... seemingly with fresh batteries this time.

Silent shapes of abandoned machinery appear in the narrow beam of light, resting lifeless in the pattern of moving shadows. Among them, the air compressor and our diving cylinders. And there, on the table, the science rack – all useless now, remnants of a lost opportunity.

A ghostly atmosphere hangs over the North Tube corridor, without any sound or movement. Beyond the range of the torch, the hint of a pale glimmer descends from the skylight. Even the early afternoon sun is incapable of struggling through the suffocating stream of snow, relentlessly burying the base.

Despite that, the tunnel looks exactly as it always did, only darker. There is no need to lose the nerves like this, simply because of a small change in illumination.

All the vital equipment and supplies are still here. There must also be some liquid water in the snow melt, left over from yesterday. The main store is crammed with food – most of it dry, of course, or deep frozen. Chocolate bars, cookies, and cakes will have to do then for the next few days – but who ever complained about that? So, really, this could be a lot worse.

And it is going to be soon. Judging by the thin layer of condensation on the metal door handles, while the temperature still appears to be above freezing, it has obviously dropped already by a few degrees. And with the power down, the remaining heat is going to dissipate soon.

Something will have to be done about that.

The inside of the back-up generator room is an intimidating network of pipes and tubes and cables, connecting the engine, the fuel tank, the air intake and ventilation shaft, the heat exchanger, and the snow melt.

For more than a month living in the base, I could never be bothered to find out how these things actually work. I simply took it for granted that there was always light and warmth at our disposal, even while we were surrounded by permanent ice. The regular chugging of the engine was a well-known component of the background noise, together with the pervasive diesel fumes – it was there, but mostly unnoticed. Even during the week of night duty, if the beast sounded and smelled normally, it appeared to be healthy, and that was good enough.

Now, the circumstances are different. The sleeping beast cannot be ignored anymore. There must be an operation manual somewhere. It must describe how to turn the power generator back on. And if someone else can write about it, I can learn it. It will give me something to occupy myself with, to pin my hopes on, and to keep my sanity.

But it will have to wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow, I shall work it all out. Now, I am too exhausted. The throbbing in both legs has become seriously distracting. Additionally, a discomfort in the chest is getting more noticeable with every breath.

So, while I can still think straight, taking care of the pain must be the highest priority at the moment.

The surgery is in total disorder – a gruesome reminder of the events that led to the evacuation.

The head end of the operating table is covered in coagulated blood. More blood has run down the legs and collected on the floor.

A pattern of dark footprints leads back and forth between the table and the supplies cabinet.

The rubbish bin overflows with bloody swabs and cut-up clothing. A discarded medical needle with a piece of thread lies next to it.

And, alarmingly, all the bottles of Entonox, which usually stood in that corner, are gone. But there should be some painkillers left, something more potent than aspirin.

The supplies cabinet – fortunately not locked again in the haste of evacuating. In it, stacks of syringes of different sizes, bandages, a variety of drugs ... and on the bottom shelf, a cardboard box labelled *morphine sulphate*,

containing several glass vials, together with a lengthy list of instructions and dire warnings.

It is hard to keep the small print in focus, while straining eyes only aggravate the pounding headache. I cannot deal with this right now. This is not the time for reading. This is a time when common sense must rule – with a little bit of luck.

Another wave of pain races across the chest, as the left arm is pulled out of the thick sleeve of the survival suit. The situation is clearly getting more serious with every passing minute. This has to succeed, and fast.

Still, it is probably best to start conservatively, with the smallest syringe available – one of these slim ones. If the morphine is being provided in any sensible concentration, that cannot be too much, surely.

Drawing the clear solution from the vial and getting rid of the air bubbles – that was the easy part. Now comes the real fun. And it will have to be done single-handedly.

The lifelong fear of needles and injections – that has to be put aside now. This time, it will not be possible to look away. This time, it will be necessary to watch the needle pierce the skin, push into the bloodstream, and then ... steady ...

But the shaking tip rips through the vein, followed by a trickle of dark blood that seeps out from its mutilated vessel. The flash of pain erupting from it is only fleetingly distracting. Then it simply adds to the overall agony.

Let's face it: this is hopeless. I cannot do it.

I would have to steady one hand long enough to be able to push the plunger down smoothly, without completely shredding the vein or giving myself an embolism. Following the disastrous first attempt, both hands shaking wildly now in nervous agitation and pain, there is little chance of that. And how many times would I have to repeat that procedure before receiving proper medical treatment?

Enough ... no more. I have come a long way from lying face-down in the snow. And if this is an exercise in dying-in-style, then fading away in here, as the base grows cold around me, is probably as good as it gets under the circumstances.

Admittedly, the hospital bed is not the most glamorous of final resting places. It has been used recently, and the linen is crumpled. But it is clean, without any sign of blood. The mattress is comfortable, and the soft weight of the blanket consoling.

Light out then. There is nothing more to see, nothing more to do, but rest.



A void of blackness all around ... and the constant crackling of the ice shelf ... while consciousness remains locked inside the aching body, without any hope of escaping into sleep – although it must be in the middle of the night by now. Impossible to tell down here, as once again, the dial of the watch has faded away.

But I can still hear you ticking in the dark. You're still alive too, aren't you? Still hanging on. Still with me, metering out my time, down to the last second.

Do you remember how we met, all these years ago, when life was simple – at the beginning of things, rather than the end; when I began diving, still full of plans and enthusiasm; when we went to see the dolphins for the first time – do you remember? You weren't cheap exactly, but you've been worth every penny. You never let me down; and we did have some exciting adventures together, didn't we? Some close calls, admittedly, but we always managed to get through, you and I.

And all the many exams we sat together ... you always kept ticking at a steady pace. Even when time ran out, you always kept ticking.

So, you just keep ticking now, when time may be running out for me once and for all.

You carry on. You carry on ticking, even if my heart cannot keep up anymore.



A pale shine has developed in the corridor outside the open door. The sun is high up in the sky again. A new day has arrived after all, a brief extension on life ... but also bringing with it an extension on uncertainty, on fear, on growing desperation – and all this, to what end, if there is no escape from this situation?

No. Eventually, they must come back for me – they are bound to. If they could not find me out there in a blizzard, if they could not wait any longer to fly out with the injured – that is understandable. But surely, they must come back as soon as the storm subsides.

Only how long can that take? A few days, or even weeks? Either way, one thing is certain: I shall have to stay submerged in this frozen ocean, let the storm rage above, and hang on for as long as I can.

Meanwhile, there is no point in lying in the hospital room all day. I have got to move about, at least occasionally, to try and keep the circulation up, if not the spirit – and I need to drink.

Even at rest, pain is now pulsating freely across the chest and through both legs. The right one buckles under my weight at the first attempt to get out of bed. But the thirst is serious, and it is not too far to the washbasin – just a few steps – one after the other.

Upon opening the tap, there is an ominous groaning from the direction of the snowmelt some distance down the corridor ... a hissing, getting closer ... then a fountain of crystal clear water comes gushing out of the pipe, still tasting perfectly fresh – only cold, already very cold. But with the drain plugged, the basin fills quickly – a reservoir sufficient for at least two days ... unless it freezes, of course, and that will be the end of it all.

Until then, there remains hope. And as long as there is hope, there are things that need to be done, and battles to be fought.



A drizzle of afternoon sunlight falls through the dusty, stagnant air underneath the skylight at the top of the silent ventilation shaft. Somewhere up there the sun still shines – that one thing is certain: the sun still shines. And when it breaks through the turbulent cloud of snow again, the others will return. Sooner or later, they will return.

When that happens, I shall be ready. I shall be sitting here in the bright column of light, shining down on me from a clear blue sky above. It will be far more dignified than lying in bed – weak and helpless, and in the dark.

And when they find me here, and I cannot talk to them any more ... when I cannot explain to them what happened and how I ended up here, maybe they will say: ‘Look, there’s that girl – Siobhán, remember her? Perhaps she wasn’t quite as silly as we always thought. Perhaps she could have been one of us – if she hadn’t died.’

But maybe I am seeing this the wrong way around. Maybe it is not the snow drifting over the stationary base at all. Maybe it is the snow and the cold that are at rest, staying behind on Antarctica, while the base is speeding along, taking me back home again, back to life.

Even so, the pain still stays with me. And as things stand at the moment, everything else having failed, the cold is the only thing left that can take the

pain away – and it will, eventually. Until then, pain and consciousness continue to be inseparably entwined, trapped inside the same broken body.



The snow still flies across the skylight, in the faint glow of the evening sun. Another day fades away; another night approaches. The shadows are back again, creeping up to me from either end of the tunnel – the phantoms of the night closing in once more.

My shallow breath begins to condense in the calm air. The last amount of heat is gone. The base is dead.

So, this is it then. This is really it. It is finally time to leave.

But it cannot be. This is too soon. I am not ready yet. I cannot allow myself to be ready, to abandon the responsibility that birth has presented me with. Or is that responsibility no longer my own? Is it already in the hands of another, someone who is wiser and more powerful? And if that is so, is that someone aware of their responsibility – aware of me? Or are they distracted by more important things, by all the other people who, at this very moment, are also about to depart this life.

If you are out there, and if you really care ... you cannot simply ask me to give up, when until now, I managed to accomplish so little with my life, when I know that there would be so much more that I could do. If only I could get a second chance. If only you could have a little faith in me. Let me have a new beginning, and I shall try, I shall do my best, do everything I can, not to disappoint you.

Because my heart, my brain, it's all good – just cold, just tired – but it could still work so well. All I need is a little bit of warmth, a few hours of sleep – away from the pain – and you will see, I'll be right as rain again. Surely, that isn't asking too much?

I cannot simply let go. I did everything I could to get back in here, back into the base, to keep myself alive. I tried to keep my mind together, despite the pain. It was just that, with the morphine injection ... well, when that failed, I tried to turn the power generator back on, but all I ever got were warning lights and alarms, until the battery was drained. It was hopeless without the instructions. They must have been kept in the administration office, over in the other tunnel, you see. I tried to get back in there, but it's all burned down – it's all lost. Yes, it is all over now.

Already, I can feel myself slipping away, falling asleep. And this time, it will be final. I can see that now. But if you could just ... the pain, you know ... it makes it hard to concentrate. And there are a few things I would like to say, while I am still able to. Perhaps

somehow you can find a way. Perhaps, from the perspective of eternity, things do look different than they appear to us. As for me, I have come to the end of the road. I have run out of ideas and strength. So, let me try and say this:

‘Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Forgive us our trespasses ...
Give us our daily bread ...’

No, this is not how it goes – forgive me. I shall try again. It’s just ... it has been a while, you know. So, please be patient.

‘Our Father, who art in Heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy will be done on Earth ...’

No, I cannot do it. I cannot remember the words. It all fades away with the last daylight – all the words, all the thoughts, all the memories – the flow of consciousness dissipating, and never forming again. But the words are not mine anyway. That is not what I want to say at all.

You see, what I really want to say is much simpler. I know I haven’t spoken to you in a long time. I am tired now, and I cannot think clearly anymore. But if it is in your power, please, listen to me. Try to understand.

‘Our Father, give me certainty.
End this darkness and let me step into the light.
If I am to live, take away my pain.
Give me the strength to follow the path appointed to me,
so that, when the end does come, I shall not have lived in vain.
But if I am to die, take away my fear.
Let me fall asleep and, in the final moment, stand by me.
Let me rest, knowing that I did all I was meant to do down here.’

CHAPTER EIGHT

INVASION

Voices, echoing above ... remote and vague, as if sounding from a great height, reaching down into the valley.

Soft white light up ahead in the distance, steady and welcoming ... with a darkness leading up to it, like the path through a tunnel.

The voices become clearer, descending onto me, calling my name – calling out to me, for me to join them. But everything is so heavy down here, making it so hard to move.

A tall figure appears in the light, itself even more radiant, with a blinding halo around its head. It raises a hand, as in a greeting ... and the halo vanishes.

A masked face emerges from the glare, with the eyes of an ordinary man – a man wearing a red survival suit.

Standing inside the column of light underneath the ventilation shaft, he turns back towards the crossway. *‘Torsten, Frank! Sie ist hier!’*

A short answer is shouted back from the direction of the South Tube.

They are Germans – the Germans are coming – the Nazis, from their secret base under the ice. But what do they want? Protecting their secrets? Or are they looking for something?

Whatever the reason, they have broken into the base, and now I am too weak to defend myself. Sitting in the middle of the corridor, there are exits on either side, but too far to reach in my current state. The only other way out leads through the main access tunnel, which is blocked by the men.

A crippling pain rages in both legs, making it impossible to get up. The chest hurts with every breath. The mouth is parched, the throat tight, the voice gone completely. And it would be futile to call for help anyway.

The man comes a step closer and takes off his headlamp and balaclava.

He is young, and he smiles as he kneels down next to me. ‘Hello, Yvonne. I am Stefan. I have come to get you out of here.’

He takes off one of his gloves and holds out his hand. My hand grasps his, automatically. He does not try to pull me up. He simply wants to say hello – very formally – but his hand is warm.

The logo on the chest of his survival suit indicates that he is from the *Deutsches Institut für Polarforschung*.

His smile widens. ‘I am glad I found you. But better if you stay sitting here, only a little longer, to see how you are doing. Then we can leave.’

He motions towards his two companions, who have now entered the corridor. ‘These are Torsten and Frank, by the way.’

They all try to appear optimistic, but they are clearly uneasy about the situation.

Torsten approaches tentatively. ‘*Stefan, das sieht ziemlich schlimm aus da drüben – alles ausgebrannt und vereist. Die äussere Röhre ist fast komplett eingestürzt.*’

Frank looks up and down the corridor. ‘*Was glaubt ihr wie gefährlich das hier ist?*’

Stefan shakes his head. ‘*Keine Ahnung.*’

He turns back to me. ‘Yvonne, do you know how dangerous it is in here? Has this tunnel been damaged by the fire as well?’

No.

He seems relieved. ‘Okay. But the air is pretty bad. I imagine there was no ventilation since the fire, so no fresh air for two days.’

Torsten is still nervous. ‘*Wir sollten uns hier nur so lang wie absolut notwendig aufhalten.*’

But Stefan is confident. ‘*Wir fangen gleich an. Dazu müssen wir sie aber bewegen. Und wir brauchen die Ausrüstung.*’

Frank nods and disappears into the crossway again.

Stefan smiles, seeing my utter confusion. ‘Yvonne, just in case you are wondering: we are from the Helios station. I don’t know if your colleagues managed to tell you that we were coming ...’

No!

‘Apparently, the power is out in the whole station, so maybe not? Well, what happened was, we received your emergency call on the radio, first about the fire, and then later when you got lost. But the weather was terrible, of course, too bad for flying. So, we came over the ice.’

He pulls a thermos flask out of his rucksack, having noticed my difficulties with speaking. ‘Here, you must be thirsty. It is fresh water. We melted it this morning.’

Too tired ... And I don't feel so good right now.

‘Okay, maybe later. But we were told that maybe you had an accident? Are you hurt? Can you tell me what happened?’

Your guess is as good as mine.

‘All this blood is from your nose, yes? And it has stopped bleeding now, so no problem. We will get you out of here as soon as possible. But before we can move you, I have to make sure that you do not have any bad injuries.’

‘Femur – right.’

After a moment of shock, Stefan manages a reassuring smile and nods. ‘Okay, I understand. I don't believe it is broken, if you were able to get back here – bruised maybe. But we will be very careful. And I can give you something against the pain.’

He picks up two gloves lying next to me. ‘You probably need them. Your hands are very cold. And you burned them a little in the fire. Is that why you took the gloves off, because they hurt on the skin?’

Can't remember.

Stefan is unconcerned, as he puts the gloves back on. ‘I think it is okay now. There are a few blisters, but they are all closed.’

Frank returns with a large bag and a folding stretcher. Stefan excuses himself and turns away to converse quietly in rapid German with the other two, as they assemble the stretcher and unpack a comfortable looking, thick down sleeping bag.

Despite all their pretend optimism, they are well aware of the difficult situation in which they find themselves. Having driven over the stormy ice shelf for two days, all the way from Helios, a long journey home still lies ahead, over treacherous ground and with low visibility. They could not have had much sleep since they left, if any, and must be getting weak themselves. This adventure is far from over, and they know it.

Stefan turns around again, holding a large pair of scissors. ‘Yvonne, I will have to cut open the sleeves of your survival suit.’

You what?

‘Until we know exactly which injuries you have, I do not want to move your arms around. But we have this sleeping bag for you. And in the snowcat it will be very warm.’

As he begins to cut along the sleeves of the survival suit and the fleece jumper underneath, the others prepare a syringe for a morphine injection. Relief is finally nigh. Whatever may happen on the journey out of here, at least it will not hurt too much.

As Stefan peels away the cut sleeves, he notices the traces of my own botched attempt. He hesitates. ‘Did you have an injection already?’

‘Tried ... I couldn’t.’

He looks uncertain, afraid of administering an overdose.

Stefan, please, I really need this.

Apparently, he can see the pain and fear in my eyes and nods. ‘Okay.’

Torsten hands him the syringe. Stefan is still a little nervous, but his hands are steady. He takes my upper arm in a firm grip, but the cold blood vessels are all hidden beneath the skin. Only slowly, under the pressure of his fingers, the cephalic gradually emerges.

For an instant, the tip of the needle is poised over the swollen vein. Then, against the smallest resistance, it pierces the thin layers of tissue. And with a steady push from the plunger, the drug enters the bloodstream.

Stefan smoothly withdraws the empty syringe and covers the tiny puncture with a plaster.

It is going to be all right now. With every heartbeat, the opioid is circulated more widely through the body. Soon, the first molecules will make it into the brain. They will bind to endorphin receptors and cut off the neural pathways from the damaged tissue. That is all there is to it. Pain is only a repetitive signal, a redundant flow of information, which can be turned off without any harm. It is not real. It is just a bad memory, still slightly annoying, but fading ... fading ... fading away.

And with the pain retreat the stress and the aggravation. The busy movements of the others dissolve behind a hazy curtain. The noises echoing along the tunnel become distant.

I am floating away into a wonderful state of lightness, as the cold, wooden floor softens.

‘Yvonne, don’t fall asleep now, please. You need to keep breathing.’ Stefan’s agitated voice sounds remote, as if emerging from a different room. But his warm hand is on my cheek ... now gently brushing the hair out of my eyes.

How long has it been, with everything else going on ... moving from one place to the other ... the field work up north ... then coming here ...

‘Yvonne, you need to breathe. We do not have oxygen for you. So, you need to concentrate on breathing.’

His face is very close – much closer than his voice. But it is hard to get into focus ... there it is again. He is not bad looking, really – perhaps a bit young.

‘That’s right, Yvonne, stay with me. I need to know more about what happened to you. You do not have to speak, if it hurts, or if it exhausts you. Simply nod or shake your head, okay? First, can you tell me if you have any other injuries?’

Oh, no. I’m fine now, thanks. I am really very fine.

‘Yvonne, you were out with the others, on the snowmobile. You were going to the landing site. But you got separated and had an accident, yes?’

But that was so long ago. Why are you still concerned about that?

‘Yvonne, please, stay with me. I will let you sleep in a moment. But first, I need to know: when you fell off the snowmobile ...’

Why do you insist on talking about that silly accident? It was embarrassing, all right. I messed up. But I’m not always like that. I can be quite sensible. I can even make myself look representable, if I take the time.

Look, Stefan, why don’t we have a normal conversation. You could ask me, for example, what kind of music I like. Or perhaps you could ask what I did before I came here. Go on, you’d be surprised. Because, you see, when I left school, I went up to Cambridge, don’t you know – not bad for a working-class girl, eh? King’s College ... yes, I liked it there. All the old buildings ... Gran used to visit us occasionally, to go to the concerts in the old Chapel – Mozart, for example. You know, I was thinking about the Requiem earlier on, before you came – so beautiful, isn’t it? And the lyrics: lux perpetua, just like here in summer, isn’t it? Perpetual light and eternal rest – requiem æternam ...



Falling ... tumbling headfirst down a deep shaft or a well, while diffuse light dances on its surface. Down, down, down it goes, falling deeper and deeper ...

The young German hurries next to me, clearly worried about something. The mood is tense. We are trying to escape from something. But where are we going?

Aurora – the North Tube – and we are heading towards the garage exit.

‘No! No, no, no! You can’t take me away from here. I cannot leave right now. I have to talk to Alison.’

‘Yvonne, there is no one else left in here. All your colleagues are already at the Halo station.’

‘No, you don’t understand. Alison is not here. She is in Cambridge, but she’s not there anymore. They took her, you understand? She was abducted. She knew something. She didn’t know what it was, but it was something everyone else overlooked, because they all thought it was about Satanism, and it wasn’t – of course it wasn’t, what an idea ...’

‘Yvonne, please. You have to remain calm. I promise you that all your friends are safe.’

‘How can you say that. You have no idea about what is going on. I am telling you, that was before the accident. When they followed her, when they entered her flat, while she was out. Why didn’t I take her seriously? I should have believed her, right away. To think that she would become paranoid – even after that horrible murder – that’s completely ridiculous. I know Alison too well. She isn’t like that. She’s never been like that, all these years we’ve been together. And then, suddenly, she’s gone. She’s gone, and all that’s left is silence. So many times I tried to phone her, and never got an answer. But I know what I have to do now. I just remembered something.’

‘Yvonne, you cannot get up right now. Your legs are very badly injured. If you try to walk, you will only hurt yourself more. No, please, stay on the stretcher and we will get you to your friends as soon as possible.’

‘There’s no time. Don’t you understand? You have to put me down. I have to go to the Comms Room – now, immediately! I have to phone Gran. I am such an idiot. Why didn’t I think of that before?’

‘Yvonne, you can send messages from our station. And you can phone anyone you like – no problem. But you really cannot get up right now.’

‘No, please, lie back down again and let us carry you out to the snowcat. It will be very comfortable in there and you can ...’

‘Yvonne, no!’



There is warmth and softness. And there is motion too – a soothing rocking motion, as if lying in a boat, floating on a calm lake.

This is only an illusion, of course. If I opened my eyes, I would find myself still hunched up and miserable, sitting underneath the ventilation shaft, on the hard floor of the North Tube corridor. I am simply falling asleep ... falling asleep at last, drifting away from all the pain and fears.

But I must not. That is how you freeze to death. You forget you are cold. You fall asleep, and you never wake up again.

So, open your eyes and realise that ...

This is not the North Tube after all. Nor is it anywhere else in Aurora. It is a strange room – small, with a low ceiling.

And the motion is real. It is accompanied by the monotonous droning of a powerful engine.

The lights built into the roof of the vehicle are turned off. Instead, pale daylight enters through a frosted window in the side wall. It is cold outside, but a warm flow of dry air enters through a vent directly above.

The softness is provided by a thick sleeping bag, unzipped halfway down, and secured to a narrow bench by a compression strap wrapped around it in the middle.

Then the jumper I am wearing – light blue, made of a soft fabric, with a German logo on the chest and a polo neck. It is none of mine. But it is cut for a woman – quite stylish and obviously expensive, well above my pay grade. And it has a wonderfully fresh smell about it – a little foreign, in a nice sort of way.

The young German sits on a bench along the opposite side. His eyes are closed, and his head nods with the movement of the vehicle – sleeping, apparently.

Stefan was his name. And it was he who got me out of Aurora, he and the other two. And now, we are on the way to their base.

But they do not understand what is really going on. They do not know what happened previously. They do not know about the shadows. They do not know how the shadows gathered around Alison, before she disappeared;

how close the shadows got to me before leaving England; how close they got again, here on Antarctica. The Germans do not realise that, perhaps at this very moment, the shadows are closing in on us once more, having followed us out of the lifeless base to make another attempt.

I cannot stay here. I have got to get back to England as soon as possible. I have got to find Alison, meet up with her. Together we are strong. Together we can defeat any danger.

But getting up turns out to be difficult. There is a heavy numbness weighing down onto the whole body, leaving no strength in both legs at all and barely any feeling.

I am obviously not in a great shape right now, but there is nothing for it. I definitely cannot stay here with the Germans.

Somehow I need to get out of this sleeping bag ...

Stefan opens his eyes as soon as the buckle of the compression strap clanks down onto the floor. He must have been dozing only.

‘Listen, Stefan, I’m sorry I woke you up. But you can go back to sleep. I’ll just ... I’ll be on my way.’

He seems confused and blinks several times, evidently still not fully conscious. Then he gets up and crouches down next to me, to fasten the strap again.

‘No, Stefan, don’t do that. You’ve got to let me go. I can’t explain the situation right now. It’s a bit complicated, because ... The thing is ... I don’t know when, but they’ll come after me again, sooner or later. And when that happens, you will be in danger too. As long as you’re with me, you’ll be in danger. It’s the shadows, you see. They’ve already killed once, and they will stop at nothing. So, just ... just abandon me here and return to your base. You will be safe there – yes, you will be safe.’

He smiles faintly and puts his hand on my forehead. ‘We will not abandon you, Yvonne, and we will definitely not allow anyone to kill you, I promise. Try to sleep and, tomorrow, we will be at Helios.’

Gran used to stroke my hair like that, many years ago, when I woke up from a nightmare. Perhaps this will turn out to be just another nightmare after all – a nightmare I can only escape by falling asleep.

* * *

The sudden impact of a wave of piercing cold ... but we are still indoors. There are bright floodlights underneath a curved ceiling made of glinting steel.

Indistinct noises echo within this dome. Obscure shapes move about erratically. An oppressive atmosphere of restlessness and agitation hangs over everything.

And away at a distance, people are talking in a great confusion of voices.

Then a single voice, closer by ... The vague outline of a woman, her face hidden in the glare above. But she has shoulder-length dark hair – it is Alison.

She reaches down to me, speaking my name.

But I am caught in a swift backwards motion, carried away in a current of distorted sounds and blurred images.

Ally, I'm sorry I left you. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you, when you needed me. I know I should have been, like you always were for me. I should never have left you. I meant to come back sooner, then something came up. I got delayed, but I'm here now, as promised. Remember, I said I would return from Antarctica, and here I am.

Alison is speaking faster now. The words are unclear, but there is a sense of urgency in the tone of her voice, and of concern – concern for me. She is worried about me. She is trying to warn me of something, some kind of danger.

The space between us is distorted, as if seeing her through a layer of water, looking up to her from underneath the waves. And it is getting harder to breathe.

I need air. I need to talk to Alison. But the water is too deep and too heavy.

The phantoms have finally caught up with me. They have lured me into their cold, dark lake. And now they are pulling me farther and farther down, until I sink all the way to the bottom and never rise up again.

An object is placed over my nose and mouth. It is going to suffocate me. But with a panicked gasp, fresh air rushes into the lungs.

Alison fades away.

CHAPTER NINE

BORROWED TIME

A line of palm trees on a white sandy beach sways in a gentle breeze. Behind them, the blue-green sea stretches to the horizon, under a clear, sunny sky.

Beside the poster, the rest of the wall facing the bed is taken up by a cupboard with a glass front and a shelving unit, both containing medical supplies.

One corner, near the door, is separated from the rest of the room by a white curtain, with a washbasin and a mirror next to it.

The bed itself has a simple white frame, while the mattress and duvet are dressed in green linen. An empty pole for intravenous drips stands nearby.

On the bedside cabinet is a box with tissues, a water bottle, a glass – and behind it, my watch.

Twenty minutes past one – in the morning or afternoon? Impossible to tell in a room without windows. The self-winding mechanism is still going. It cannot have been lying there at rest for much more than a day.

And something else glints behind the glass – two identity discs on a chain:

O POS
AXIII-630517-0
DANNREUTHER S
GB CofE

So, I guess that must be me, then. And that is something for certain at least.

On the floor by the bedside cabinet sits a large bag that also looks familiar – the kit bag for Antarctica.

Antarctica, yes ... the surprise of being selected for the team ... the frantic training period in England ... finally the day of departure ... walking into the RAF station, alone and completely out of place ... the long and exhausting journey south in the transport plane, surrounded by all the military guys ... the stopover on Ascension Island ... switching aircraft on the Falklands ... the restless night at Halo ... the flight across the Weddell Sea, and finally arrival at Aurora ... the Christmas and New Year's

celebrations ... being the newcomer, the outsider ... with terrible weather all the time.

But this is not Aurora. This must be another base, judging by the sparse nature of the room – a hospital room, obviously. Something went wrong then.

The right wrist is bandaged. The palms of both hands are a little sore, as if they had been burnt recently. In fact, they probably have. More worryingly, a blanket of pain lies over the whole body: dull throughout the legs, more acute and piercing in the chest, and throbbing with every pulse in the head.

But the sterile interior of the room contains no clues about what happened, or anything that would reveal its location.

The only additional information carried inside is an indistinct mixture of distant sounds – intermittent human voices over a constant background of mechanical noise.

Then closer by, the swift steps of a single person, slowing down and stopping outside the door.

The handle slowly moves downwards ... until the door is pushed open, very carefully ...

She is good-looking, in a rugged sort of way. The cold and dry Antarctic wind has obviously got to her. Her dark brown hair falls in wavy strands that, under normal circumstances, would probably be shiny and soft. But the more robust style suits her, whereas my own hair must be a lank mess.

‘Hello, Siobhán. I am glad you are awake. I did not want to disturb you. But I hoped I could talk to you, before we leave.’ She has a distinct German accent ... a bit like Gran.

As she approaches, she picks up a stethoscope from the shelf. ‘How are you now?’

Apparently, she expects me to recognise her, and perhaps I should. Clearly something significant happened, something I need to remember now.

‘Can I sit here, while I check your pulse and breathing?’ In an unconscious movement, she tucks her hair behind her ear, as she settles onto the side of the bed. ‘No, you don’t have to move. I have enough space. And raising your upper body hurt, didn’t it? I suspected already that you have some fractured ribs. At least your chest is badly bruised. So far, there are no

signs of any complications, but we will have to be careful.’ She inserts the earpieces of her stethoscope. ‘Just let me slide this underneath your shirt. It will be a bit cold, but only for a few seconds.’

As the diaphragm moves over the chest, the pain over some ribs becomes more intense – definitely broken, then. And that means no diving for at least a month, possibly even longer.

There are many questions to be asked about what happened. But she probably would not want me to speak right now.

She appears to be in her late thirties, at the peak of life, when persisting health and fitness are matched by professional skills and life experience. She has a plain wedding ring; but although her ear is pierced, she does not wear an earring at the moment.

She glances up from her watch and smiles, as she notices my scrutinising her.

With an encouraging wink, she removes the stethoscope and straightens out my shirt. ‘Still nothing to worry about. Your heart and lungs sound exactly as they should. There is no sign of damage from either smoke inhalation or your broken ribs. Just try to breathe normally and deeply. And if you need to cough, it is important that you do, even if it is painful. If it hurts too much, I can give you more pain medication, rather than having the risk of you getting a pneumonia.’

‘But perhaps I should introduce myself again. You don’t seem to remember our earlier meetings. My name is Monika – Monika Wendt. I am a medical doctor and also the outgoing manager of the German Helios station. That is where you are now. We used to have daily radio contact with Aurora, to see if everything is all right. But unfortunately, we can only meet very seldom – so maybe you have not heard about us?’

‘In any case, Helios is on the Ekström Ice Shelf, about nine hundred kilometres northeast of Aurora. The scenery here is very similar to what you know from your station. And you are not our only visitor right now. A few days ago, a group of emperor penguins from the nearby colony came by to say hello. Do you like animals, Siobhán?’

‘Yes. I’m a biologist – a marine zoologist.’

‘That is very interesting. There are no biologists working here. So, what kind of research have you been doing here on Antarctica?’

‘I ...’ Good question.

‘Have you been studying the animals at the Aurora station?’

‘Yes, the dolphins ...’

‘The dolphins?’

Dolphins ... *Tursiops truncatus*, common bottlenose ... ‘No, I’m sorry. That was before. At Aurora, I was ... Well, there were the penguins, I suppose, just like here ... although, I can’t really remember seeing them.

‘Oh, and we were diving, of course. That was the main thing – cryobiology, that’s what I have been doing: collecting water and ice samples, and then analysing their physical properties and biological content – mostly algal cells and protozoans, trying to work out how they manage to live under those cold conditions, with near darkness for months on end. It was intended to be the start of a long-term monitoring project, but I fear that’s come to a permanent end now.’

‘So, you remember what happened?’

‘Yes, I remember it now – the fire and the evacuation ... The others, did they make it?’

‘Yes, all your colleagues managed to get to the Halo station. The two who were severely injured were immediately brought to the Memorial Hospital in Stanley. I heard they will both make a full recovery. The rest of the team waited at Halo until it was clear that you were safe. They are now on their way back to England.’

The tone of her voice has dropped in pitch. Her expression is more serious. The casual chat is over. It is time to face the facts, to find out why I am here, in the hospital room of a German Antarctic research base.

‘Somehow I got separated from the others, didn’t I? I remember being out there with them in the storm. We were leaving the base on the snowmobiles. I remember the red taillights in front of me disappearing into the swirling snow. Then I got off the groomed track and ... I don’t know.’

‘Well, you definitely had an accident, that much is obvious. You probably hit something with your snowmobile, at high speed – a pressure ridge, for example, or a sastruga – and you were thrown over the handlebar. This would explain the fractured ribs. I also think that the snowmobile must have landed on top of you, because your thighs are badly bruised, front and back, as if they had been squashed – not only hit on one side, as from a fall. It is possible that the internal bleeding extends all the way down to the bones, especially on the right leg. The bones themselves are intact. But with contusions like that, I am sure it will be painful to walk for several weeks.’

‘My wrist?’

‘Sprained, I believe, not severely – definitely not broken. But it is a little swollen. You can take the bandage off, as long as moving your hand does not hurt. My main concern right now is to get you hydrated again. Drink as much as you can. Try to get yourself to use that at least once this evening.’ She nods towards the curtained-off corner.

‘And when you see yourself in the mirror, don’t be alarmed. You have some frostbite on your cheeks and nose, but nothing major. It will be gone in a few days, long before you are back home. So, I think that overall this adventure could have gone much worse for you.’

‘Still, I did mess up in the end, didn’t I – as they always knew I would, sooner or later.’

Monika looks confused for a moment, then she smiles. ‘You know, Siobhán, this is Antarctica. Men have died down here long before you and I arrived. No one is going to blame you for what happened.’

She shifts a little to get up, but then settles down again. ‘And if you feel any resentment towards your colleagues for having left you behind ...’

‘No, I don’t, not at all.’

‘Okay, good. Because, you know, they did try to find you before they left. But you remember how difficult it was to see anything. And as soon as you were lying on the ground, you were probably covered by drifting snow within a few seconds. Eventually, they had to break off the search, when someone else almost got lost as well. The wind only kept getting stronger, and the aeroplane could not wait anymore. They had to get out. You know how badly injured at least one of your colleagues was at the time. To leave some people behind in the station, when they did not know how far the fire would spread, and how long they would have to stay there, would have been very dangerous. And there would have been nothing for these people to do until the weather got better, at which point someone could have flown in from Halo.

‘Meanwhile, we had already started to prepare for a land rescue when we received the first distress call about the fire, just as backup, if your aeroplane was unable to land. So, we had equipped the snowcat for a long journey over the ice, with a sledge for the fuel barrels. And we had worked out the best route, because we had never done this before. When we heard that the aeroplane had landed, and the weather was still good enough to get out, it was a big relief for us, as you can imagine. But then, shortly afterwards, the message came in that you had got lost during the evacuation, and that they

would have to leave without you. Of course, we knew that we would not have any better chances of finding you outside than your colleagues had. But we thought that there was a small possibility that somehow you would manage to get back to Aurora on your own. Then, maybe we could pick you up and get you out sooner than your colleagues, who would have to wait for the weather to improve before they could do an airlift again. And so, when we heard about you, the boys left immediately. Do you remember the three?’

‘Vaguely ... yes, I do now.’

Monika nods. ‘One of them, Stefan, is a geophysicist, but he worked as paramedic during his ... well, instead of going to the military. And when we got the wintering team together, he was trained as my medical assistant. As the distress call came in, I was in the process of organising the handover of the station to the new manager, and to prepare for our departure. Out there, without proper medical equipment, there was nothing I could have done for you anyway that Stefan could not do as well. So, I sent him out, together with two experienced drivers for the snowcat. But, to be honest, when I watched the boys drive away from here and into the blizzard, I did not expect this to be a rescue mission at all. We knew that, even if things went well, it was still going to take about two days to get through to Aurora. And after that time, if you had still been outside in the cold, or even in a powerless station ... But you can be certain that, if we had not found you, your own people would have come back, as soon as it was possible to fly, and as soon as it had made any sense to begin the search again.’

‘I don’t doubt that at all. In fact, I’m glad they left when they did. It’s bad enough that I made a fool of myself, without putting everyone else at risk. I only regret that I forced them to make that difficult decision. A really bad case of *cherchez la femme*, I guess.’

‘I am sure your colleagues do not see it like that. I spoke with John on the radio, while you were on the way here. The connection to Halo was not great to begin with, but when I told him that the boys had found you alive, and that you were not in a critical condition, there was this strange noise in the background. It sounded a little bit like interference with a broadcast from a football stadium – after a goal, you know. From then on, it was hard to understand what John was saying; but I got the impression that they will give you a very nice welcome, once you are back in Cambridge.’

She notices my tears and hands me a tissue. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself. In the end, you came closer to death than anyone else on your team, and

your colleagues know this. You had bad luck in a dangerous situation. You got into trouble, and then you got yourself out again. The main reason why you are here today is that you *did* manage to get back to the station and survive there for two days all on your own. So, stop blaming yourself and take your time to recover. Yesterday afternoon, when you arrived here, although you did not speak, I could tell that you were in a lot of pain. I had to give you an analgesic, so that you could sleep. I hope, you are feeling better now.'

'I'm all right. Only ... I have this headache, and I'm still a little confused. I can't properly remember anything that happened after the accident. I've got some vague memories, just blurry images that are now coming back. But I can't be sure if they really are memories or simply hallucinations.'

'I am not surprised. You received fairly strong painkillers during the last three days. And you are probably concussed as well. Normally, with injuries like that, you should stay in bed for at least a week. But the problem is, my team is leaving tomorrow on the ice-breaker. We are going home, and I think you should come with us. Otherwise, you would have to wait until an aeroplane manages to get through again, and that could take several days. As you will see, the weather is still quite bad. Who knows to which station they would bring you first, and how many stops you would have to make before you are back in England. This could be very exhausting. On the ship, the whole trip to Germany will take about five to six weeks, and it is quite comfortable, with good food and plenty of fresh air on deck. There is also a sauna and a swimming pool. You can start your reha on board, and by the time we arrive in Bremerhaven, you will have completely recovered. Then you can fly home from there.'

She puts her hand on my arm. 'You will enjoy the crossing. There will be other biologists you can talk to and find out what they are working on. We will see a lot of animals – especially whales, they are my favourites. But I am sure we will also see some dolphins, when the ocean gets a little warmer.' She winks cheerfully.

'Sounds brilliant. Ordinarily, I'd give everything for a cruise like that.'

'That will not be necessary. I already got confirmation from the ship that they would have a berth for you on C-Deck, where most of the scientists are. And about your friends and family at home: John told me that the Institute contacted your relative and told her about what happened, that you are safe, and that you are coming back a year earlier.'

‘My relative? I suspect they must have talked to a friend of mine – Alison. She was my primary contact. My only surviving relative is my gran. But I didn’t want her to hear about any bad news from anyone but Alison.’

‘I see ... maybe a little misunderstanding. Although it was good news, in a way, given the circumstances – disappointing, of course, that your stay on Antarctica was much shorter than expected.’

She gets up. ‘So, I will leave you in peace now.’

‘Monika, just a second please: these lads – Stefan and the other two ...’

‘Torsten and Frank, yes. You will meet them again on the ship.’

‘If they aren’t too busy, they could ... I mean, I wouldn’t mind. I’d like to ...’

‘I know, Siobhán. But I don’t think that that would be a good idea right now. They were asking about you, but I told them not to bother you. I have to draw a line. If I let these three in, everyone else will want to see you too. You are a bit of a celebrity at the moment, and I do not want the whole nosey team parading through the hospital – two teams, as a matter of fact, outgoing and incoming. Try to get better first. What you need now most of all is rest – and water.’ She indicates the bottle on the bedside cabinet.

Then she spots the kit bag. ‘I saw that you have plenty of clothes here. That is all you really need on the journey home. The boys found the bag on a snowmobile when they left Aurora. And since it had your name on it, they took it. Yesterday evening, when I looked for fresh clothes for you, I noticed that you have a very nice camera in there too. If you have films left, you will be able to take some great photographs on the ship.’

‘We will take you to the ice-breaker in the same way as you came here – in the snowcat. So, I promise you do not have to get on a snowmobile again. And it is a short trip this time. The docking site is only about ten kilometres from here.’

‘We will begin to move out to the *Polaris* at about six o’clock in the evening. I will be in the last group to leave the station, and it will probably be best if you come with me. Then we can bring you on board without creating a lot of excitement around you – you know, when all the others start partying already and are busy meeting old friends from home, who are doing research on the ship. But before we leave, we still have plenty to do – pack up the last boxes and bring them to the ship. That’s what this noise is about outside in the corridor.’

She walks to the door, where she turns back. ‘I will check on you again in a few hours. Then we decide what medication to give you for the night. By the way: your watch is still running, but on Falklands time. You should set it forward by four hours, to synchronise with us.’



My relative ... was that really a misunderstanding? Would the Institute have used that term, had they spoken to Alison? Her family name, being different from mine, would not naturally suggest a kinship between us.

Otherwise, it could only have been Gran. Her name and address would have been in my personal records, but they would have had to look up her phone number. Knowing that I had explicitly asked them not to contact her in case of an emergency, they would only have done that had they been unable to reach Alison after several attempts. And that would imply that she must have been away from home for days, outside of regular working hours ...

The sabbatical, of course. If the watch still shows the correct time, the date should be correct too – the 3rd of February. With an arrival here yesterday, after a two-day journey, we would have left Aurora on the 31st. Then the fire and the botched evacuation would have happened two days prior, on the 29th. And Alison would have been on her sabbatical since the previous weekend. So, that seems to be the solution: she had already left for Dublin when the Institute attempted to contact her.

And yet, something feels wrong about all this; as if something bad happened, unrelated to the evacuation and the accident; some vague fear from before the fire, now creeping back; like the distant memory of a nightmare, unreal but nevertheless menacing.

This might not seem too surprising at the moment, when everything is in a state of confusion and uncertainty. But there is still that persistent foreboding that something has gone terribly wrong; that the second chance I was given by the rescue out of Aurora will come at a price.

CHAPTER TEN

THE LAST TWILIGHT

The steep flight of stairs rises threateningly up ahead, undulating like a wave, ready to break at any moment, while the feeling of heaving and rolling increases with every laboured step.

Below, the steady droning of the diesel engines is too determined for them to be just idling. We really appear to be on the move now, cutting through the windswept sea. Still, it would be unfair to blame the dizziness and nausea on the swell alone. My sense of balance must be completely out of order, with seasickness setting in for the first time in my life.

Up on the landing, the music is even louder than on the deck below and clearly emanating from the forward part of the ship. Also audible now is the buzzing of many excited conversations – too many, and far too excited. Neither my nerves nor my stomach would currently be capable of withstanding the exertion of socialising, particularly with a group of happy people, who are returning from a unique and wonderful adventure they shared.

Fortunately, with everyone else at the leaving party, the corridor is empty in both directions. A green sign is pointing left, away from the commotion and probably towards an exit. It will be miserably cold outside, after lying in bed for more than a day. But more than anything else, open space and a steady horizon is what I need right now – something reliable to focus on.

The corridor ends at a steel door, painted white, with a small, round window. It opens onto a narrow gangway. Freezing air hits instantly, biting into the lungs and eyes. Nonetheless, the view remains obstructed by two red life boats.

It must be late at night already. Only a faint natural shine lies around the ship – except for the few exterior lights on the deck above. Despite the fading sunlight, the view from there might still be better.

A ladder leads up, its metal rungs slippery with frozen sea spray and fog. Should I lose my grip now ... should I fall here ... The injured legs are screaming in protest, but it is only a few more steps.

The red navigation light comes into view, and the illuminated instrument panels behind the windows of the bridge. All other rooms on the upper deck lie in darkness.

Finally, the safety of the railing ... But the wind is even stronger up here, howling past the funnel and the radar tower of the bulky ice-breaker. At least the noise from the party is blocked now, while the regular humming of the engines lies dampened far below.

Petrels circle all around us, taking for granted their freedom and effortless mobility. Watching their graceful movements, after a few deep breaths of the crisp air, the senses become sharper, and the nausea subsides. It is as if all the cooped up negative energy that accumulated over the past days were absorbed by the wind and carried away.

Negative energy ... funny, who used to say that?

Claire, of course ... Claire again – silly, superstitious, loyal, old Claire. What she might be doing now? Still living at the old place in St Andrews – with a better flatmate, perhaps, or with a boyfriend?

Strange how, after all this time and halfway around the world, there she is returned to memory, and as vivid as ever.

However, it is too soon to turn the mind back home, not while we remain under the spell of the Southern Ocean.

Here on port is only the dark expanse of the open sea. But Antarctica may still be visible on the other side. Just to see it one last time, to offer a grateful farewell to this tragically beautiful continent, which almost refused to let me go.

On the open deck, the only way across the ship seems to be up another ladder, past the aft windows of the observation room, and onto the platform above the bridge.

Someone is already standing there: a lone figure in profile, outlined against the glow of the sinking sun, and looking back towards the vast snowfield in the distance. I am not alone up here after all, not alone in solitude.

Stefan does not hear me approach over the noise of the wind and the excited birds.

He is startled when he realises that I am standing right beside him. ‘Hello, Siobhán. I did not notice ... How are you?’

‘All right, I guess. I’m just really weak – tired, somehow.’

‘Yes, I noticed. You fell asleep almost as soon as we were in the snowcat and began to drive away from the station. We were talking a little about something, and I got worried when you did not respond anymore. I even checked your pulse, to be sure everything was okay. You did not even wake up when we brought you on board. That is why I was surprised to see you now all the way up here.’ There is a mild tone of reproach in his voice.

‘You’re right. Strictly speaking it is far too early for this kind of excursions. But when I woke up, I felt claustrophobic in my cabin. I had to get some fresh air and see the horizon. And I have to say, it was worth the effort.’

Stefan nods and gazes back towards the retreating edge of the ice shelf. He seems uneasy around me; perhaps due to the forced closeness that existed between us for the duration of an emergency, rushing ahead of true familiarity, and against the ordinary rules of social contact; an experience he remembers, but I don’t. And now we are back on the level of common courtesy that is acceptable between almost strangers.

He looks tired. He probably has not slept much during the past week. And the physical and mental strain of the rescue mission has clearly taken a toll on him.

‘Stefan, with the hectic during our departure, I never got the chance to thank you and your two mates for getting me out of this mess.’

‘Oh, no problem. You would have done the same for us. I wanted to visit you earlier, when we were still at Helios, to see how you are doing. But we were not allowed to go into the hospital room. Monika had put a sign on the door, you know: Entrance *Verboten*.’

‘I see. And you don’t mess with that, do you?’

‘No, not with Monika.’ A more relaxed grin spreads across his face. ‘So, how are you? Your ribs are still broken, obviously, but your legs?’

‘Not as bad as they could be, I suppose. They just don’t look very pretty, do they?’

‘No.’ He is shocked by his own spontaneous response. ‘I mean, with the bruises ... but they will go away, the bruises, in a month or so.’

He is evidently embarrassed about his intrusion into my private sphere. ‘I’m sorry I had to, you know ...’

‘Don’t worry about it, Stefan. I’m a big girl. Actually, I meant to ask you about what happened, after you found me.’

‘You don’t remember it at all?’

‘I’ve got these blurred scenes circulating in my head, but I can’t suss out which are real and which are fantasy, or in which order they occurred. It’s driving me mad. The last thing I’m sure about is leaving our base with the others. I know I must have had an accident with the snowmobile. But after that, it’s all confused. Somehow, I must have managed to get back to the base, since that is where you found me. Until you got there, nothing significant could have happened. I must have been just sitting around somewhere, waiting for ... something, I don’t know – to die, probably, by the end of two days. Then you three arrived, and there had to be a fair amount of activity and excitement. But even so, all I have from that moment on are vague recollections – mostly hallucinations, I’m sure – of falling or flying, of indistinct figures without faces, or of hearing the sound of voices without words.’

‘I know, that was my fault. I messed up the analgesic. I had no idea how strong this new fentanyl stuff really is. Based on your reaction, I think I must have given you a dosage that was a little too high.’

‘Yes, that would explain things ... But I imagine I wasn’t complaining too loudly at the time.’

Stefan laughs. ‘No. You fell asleep almost immediately. That was the problem. I was afraid that you would stop breathing, or something like that. That would have complicated things. With anaesthesia, you have to supply oxygen, and we did not have that. Also, I did not know then what kind of injuries you had, and I needed to talk to you, to find out. Therefore, I was definitely not trying to put you to sleep.’

He is unsure how to continue. ‘You know, in the end, it was much less dramatic than we thought it would be. When we left Helios, all we knew was that there was a fire in your station, and that you had got lost during the evacuation. About you, we only knew your name – sort of. Otherwise, we had no idea about what had happened to you, where we could find you, and in what state you would be. The drive to Aurora was mostly boring. There was not much to see with all the snow in the air. Torsten and Frank took turns driving, while I chatted with whoever was awake, or I tried to sleep myself. When we got there, the weather was so bad we knew we had no chance of finding you outside. So, we went down into the station, just to see if it was completely destroyed. And, suddenly, there you were.’

‘When I saw you first, half lying on the floor, with blood all over your face, I thought you were dead. Then I noticed that your eyes were moving a

little. You did not speak, but you were conscious. You responded when I said hello. You shook my hand, remember? You had taken your gloves off, and I could feel that your hands were very cold. I was not sure whether it was only your hands, or whether you were really hypothermic. Well, as I said, I gave you the pain killers, and then ... The return trip was a bit more entertaining with you for company. Mostly I was trying to keep you hydrated, when you were awake. But if you cannot remember, you did not miss very much.'

I wonder ... 'So, when I *was* awake, how was I – mentally, I mean. Did I say anything?'

He is definitely uncomfortable now. 'You know, at the beginning, when we found you, you were in shock. But that is not surprising, everyone in that situation would have been: after the fire and getting lost during the evacuation; having to find the way back to the burnt-out station; then two days on your own, without knowing if someone was going to pick you up, injured and in a lot of pain. The fact that you were still alive is remarkable enough. And on the way to Helios, under the influence of the drugs, you were kind of ... a little worried.'

Right, "worried" ... it must have been pretty bad then – a major tantrum, no doubt. And that is probably the real reason why he treads so lightly around me, as if I were mentally unstable. But that cannot be changed now. I simply have to try and be as sane as I possibly can for the rest of the journey.

If only the cruise was something to enjoy, to appreciate, as the unique opportunity that it clearly is. If only there was not this overpowering desire to get back home; born of a constant fear, a foreboding that some danger remains hanging in the air.

'So, at least five weeks on the ship before we get to Germany. Do you know what you'll be doing during all that time?'

Stefan nods tentatively, but without much conviction. 'I thought I could work a little on my doctor thesis. It was a great holiday down here, but now I have to get back to normal research. The seismological measurements that I was making at Helios are part of a global network. And the topic of my dissertation is to use all that data to try to distinguish natural earthquakes from nuclear tests. But things happened so quickly while we were on Antarctica. Two years ago, when I got the subject, we were still in the Cold War, remember. Now it is all different. We are not even returning to the same country that we left – although from what we heard, the West has not

changed very much. So, who knows what is going to happen. The Russians are maybe not the only scary people on this planet.'

'No, perhaps not. There might well be others. We just need to rummage round a bit.'

He laughs and then becomes serious again. 'I was looking forward to the cruise. But now ... I want to be *somewhere*, you know, either here, or there – not stuck between two worlds ... a little stupid, I know.'

'No, Stefan. That's not stupid at all. In fact, I know exactly what you mean.'

He glances over. 'Now it is probably good for you to be here on the ship, until you are healthier. But you could go from board in Cape Town.'

'Cape Town?'

'Yes. We will be there in about two weeks, only for a short stop. But you could get a flight to London from there. It is very expensive, of course, but it is possible. I am thinking about it myself.'

'Are you anxious to get home?'

'Anxious? No, not really. No doubt it is going to be very different. Hamburg is a big and busy place. And we have been away for more than a year. But I am more anxious that, as soon as I get back, everything here ... well, *there* on Antarctica, will feel very far away, like a dream, you know, as if it never actually happened.'

Like a dream ... yes, that is exactly how it feels: a dream that evaporated, and a nightmare that materialised in its stead.

Stefan watches the petrels, which continue to follow us, sailing close to the waves and diving for the food that is being churned up in the wake of the big ship.

It is difficult to size him up. He must be in his mid-twenties, but he comes across as an overgrown boy. Out of the thick survival suit he is skinny, and with his regular glasses instead of the glacier goggles, he looks more like an academic than a tough Antarctic explorer. But he has done his job well. And now he can return home with his head held high, and with a collection of very special memories that will last a lifetime. He probably has a nice girlfriend waiting for him, just as quiet and blond and blue-eyed as he is, who wrote sweet letters to him, telling him that she is thinking of him every day, and that she misses him; someone he could think of and miss and rely on, while he was in this harsh and unforgiving place.

He squints into the low sunlight. ‘Do you believe you will go back there sometime?’

‘I don’t know. I might – eventually. It was a close call for me the first time around. But then again, of all the places to be dead in ...’

‘You will be okay, Siobhán. We are both a little depressed today. But tomorrow, everything will be better. It will be a good journey. And when we are in Cape Town, you can decide whether you are fit enough to fly back from there.’

He nods confidently and makes an effort to lighten up. ‘By the way, there is a party going on right now, down in the bar on B-Deck, to celebrate our departure. It started up here when we left, but the others went inside very soon. It is warmer there, and there is more to drink. Maybe you do not want to stay very long. And with the drugs you are taking, you should definitely not drink any kind of alcohol. But it would be good if you would come anyway. I could introduce you to the others. Then you are one of us, not some mysterious stranger, who was secretly carried on board under the cover of darkness.’ He gives me a cheerful wink.

‘Sure, good idea. I’ll join you in a minute.’

The sharp edge of the white coastline slips farther and farther away, as *Polaris* continues on its steady course, heading northeastwards, away from the last rays of the setting sun.

Antarctica, once again, is bathed in a dense twilight – the last twilight over Antarctica I may be seeing in a long time.

For now, I am going home.

