

FRAGMENTS OF THE OUTPOST

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“I know I’m human.” —R.J. MacReady

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Shadow on the Wall

The Norwegian sled dog padded silently down the hallway, listening closely to the sounds of the camp. The Antarctic outpost was quiet, save for the muted beat of music and the steady drone of the wind outside. The male dog was a large and powerful Alaskan Malamute, named Magnus by his handler in Norway. The pack animal was bred and trained to pull heavy sleds across the frozen Antarctic terrain. Magnus stood tall, his back coming to the upper thigh on a large man, and he was covered in a double coat of thick fur, a mix of white, gray, and black. His large paws were tough, made for running across hard snow and ice.

A new sound had the Malamute stop and cock his head. A wave of freezing air blew down the hallway as an outside door was opened. The animal caught the strong scent of diesel . . . and human. A camp member who worked on the machinery had entered the compound.

Palmer.

The dog paused for a second, and then did an abrupt about face, moving quickly back down the main hallway in the direction it had come, away from the sounds of the man.

At the far south end of the main hall an open doorway led into the base's communications area. The radio room was quiet, but the dog sensed a someone inside. The radioman, Windows.

To the right side of the hall was a room that smelled of anti-septic and recent death. Medical. An overwhelming odor of threat filled the dog's nasal cavity. It recognized one of the men that had tried to kill him. The man was dead, killed by the leader of this American station. The Scandinavian corpse lay silent and cold. The dog had full understanding of the dead man's language. It could comprehend Norwegian. The animal knew about the dead man, through the memories, knowledge, and interactions with the other Norwegians it had previously taken over.

However, the men at this base did not speak Norwegian. They were American and spoke English. The dog had no in-depth knowledge of English, only the basic understanding of a few learned common phrases and words. The animal's ear heard garbled sounds, but was able to catch the tone and inflection, just like any other normal dog.

The Malamute was far from a normal dog.

Music reverberated from the direction of the kitchen. Magnus slipped silently into a dark side room across the hall from medical. This was immediately recognized as the men's washroom, with strong odors of antiseptic soap and human wastes. There were stalled toilets and showers, and on the far wall, beside a trio of sinks was another door, slightly ajar. Light leaked through the gap, as well as the powerful odor of many men. Men who only showered once a week in this part of the world. This door led to a hallway of bunkrooms. The dog walked to the gap in the door and paused at a sound. A man was moving quickly in the bunkroom hallway. Magnus froze behind the door, listening, his canine senses heightening. He did not want to risk being found wandering the camp and kenneled with the other dogs. At least not yet.

There was a thump and a click, then a man's voice speaking aggressively: "Nauls, will you turn that crap down. I'm trying to get some sleep. I was shot today."

Magnus recognized the voice of the man with red hair, the one who looked tired and aged beyond his years and smelled of cigarettes. The man Magnus had jumped upon when he first arrived at the American base. Bennings. The man was innately leery of all dogs. He had a trivial bullet wound to his left thigh, shot by the same Norwegian who had tried to kill Magnus.

The intercom clicked and after a beat: “Oui bwana, will do.” This static voice was the young black man. The cook, Nauls.

Magnus stood frozen in the shadows of the washroom and waited as Bennings returned to his bunkroom. The music from the kitchen thrummed through the wall and did not waver in volume. There was a new sound now, this one coming from further down the bunkroom hall. A human moving about, the one who had come in from outside. Palmer. He was approaching, coming directly towards the washroom door. Magnus slunk into a dark corner by the stalls, ears perked.

The man was right behind the door.

The dog’s senses sharpened. So close to a vulnerable quarry, alone and in the dark. Magnus tensed, ready to spring. But the man did not come through the door into the washroom. He had moved into one of the bunkrooms. It was quiet for another minute, then two. Magnus heard the man Palmer exit the bunk and walk away, the sounds of his footsteps receding as he moved away, back down the corridor. Magnus waited for another minute.

Nosing the door aside the dog entered silently through into the corridor of bunkrooms. This corridor was smaller and held six rooms, three to a side, where the men shared sleeping quarters. Magnus could sense not all the rooms were occupied but there were at least two men in separate bunks. One man, ahead in his bunk on the right, and another, further down the hall, on the left. A second man. The doors to both bunks were open.

The Malamute started down the corridor at what appeared to be a relaxed walk. On the inside its predatory hunting instincts were off the charts of anything remotely canine, or of this world. Alien.

The dog paused briefly at the door on the right. His keen sense of smell told him this was Bennings’ room. The meteorologist, the man who was shot by his pursuer. Bennings was alone, awake, in mild pain, and agitated. Magnus could smell his wound.

The dog went for the second man. In the last bunk on the left.

Magnus continued down the corridor and paused at the open doorway. A lone man sat at a desk reading a book, his back to the door. A lamp cast his indistinct shadow on the wall.

The Alaskan Malamute entered the room.

Five minutes prior, inside the north foyer coat room, the camp’s secondary helicopter pilot Neil Palmer removed his outer clothing. Heavy cold weather gear was required to venture outside at any time of the year in Antarctica. The temperatures had plummeted sharply the past week as the true winter season had fallen on the isolated research station. And it was only going to get colder. Outside the wind was picking up in gusts and the sky to the north grew dark. The back-up pilot had been outside, to check that the helicopter tie downs were secure after MacReady and Doc Copper departed for the Norwegian camp.

The wind howled at the exterior door and Palmer was secretly relieved the station manager Matthew T. Garry had flat out turned down his offer to make the trip to the Scandinavian camp. Palmer did not envy MacReady. The new pilot was a rookie to The Ice and albeit he seemed to be an experienced pilot he had a 100-mile return jaunt to make this afternoon through unfavorable conditions to locate the Norwegian outpost.

Palmer was born in northern California in 1953, a tall, lanky eclectic character who made it out to Woodstock in the summer of '69. Across the mid-seventies he was in a California biker gang called Barbarians based in San Diego. Palmer became a well-respected ace mechanic for the motorcycle club. In 1977 he was removed from Barbarians for becoming too heavily involved in drugs, mainly LSD, and preaching far out conspiracy theories which alienated him from the club's members. Heading back up to his home city of Sacramento he pursued his aircraft mechanics license and then obtained his helicopter pilot license. He was hired by the National Science Institute for his first winter-over in 1979.

Palmer and Darren Childs, the camp's head mechanic, were good friends and bunkmates, having both done their first winter together at Outpost #31. The NSI pay was decent and the winter long, but Palmer always headed home with a nice balance in the black after a winter contract. He had freedom down here, and his side projects, which the long season gave him lots of down time to focus on. His duties were to remain on stand-by as a back-up pilot—which was not often during the winter—and act as an assistant to Childs. If the station operated smoothly, and his work was completed, the rest of the time was his. And a lot of Palmer's time was good time in his book.

Coming to the T-junction of the north and main hallways, Palmer glanced into the office of the station manager and found it empty. Garry was likely in the radio room hounding Windows with renewed vigor to try and get through to anybody. Oddly, Windows had been unable to reach anyone for the past two weeks, not McMurdo nor any other station on the continent.

The camp was eerily quiet after the morning's disruption. A lot of the men were shook-up by the encounter with the crazed Norwegians. George Bennings, their meteorologist, had taken a bullet in the leg. Bennings was not seriously hurt, but it is not every day one was shot. Especially in Antarctica. And Bennings was a bit high strung to begin with, so this had really set him off. Doc Copper had stitched him up and given him a sedative.

The incident with the Scandinavians put Garry neck deep in international scandal and fallout. He had shot and killed a member of a neighboring base, albeit defending his own men from attack. The Norwegian Polar Institute was going to be enraged and irate, and his superiors at the NSI too. But Garry, while flustered, was steady as a rock. Palmer guessed it was not the first time the station manager had killed someone. The man had been in Vietnam. MacReady and Bennings had served in the war as well.

Palmer could hear Nauls in the kitchen preparing lunch. Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" vibrated down the main hallway. Palmer guessed Clark was with his dogs in the kennel and Childs was in the greenhouse tending to their crop. The greenhouse lay to the rear of the base and that would be Palmer's next stop, but first he had to do a favor for the camp's doctor.

Doc Copper was liked by everyone at the outpost, and Palmer was no exception. In fact, Palmer and Copper were close; maybe Palmer was even closer with Doc than he was with his bunkmate Childs. The doctor was from New England, quirky and charming. What brought Copper and Palmer together was the fact that the doctor, unbeknownst to many at the camp, liked to dabble from time to time in smoking a little dope. Palmer and Childs ran a small growing operation in the camp's greenhouse: potent plants thriving in the coldest, darkest part of the world under special lights and a temperature and humidity level that was downright tropical. It was their second winter-over experimenting with this side project, and they were having incredible success. Garry turned a blind eye, under two conditions—everyone did their work, and no exporting the weed off the continent. What they grew here stayed here.

Copper had discreetly approached Palmer after stitching up Bennings' leg this morning; the agreement was the same as always, Palmer would leave some pot in the doctor's bunk. Garry didn't know the doc partook, and Palmer kept mum.

Palmer entered the doorway leading to the men's quarters. A heavy exterior door lay ahead, a fire safety emergency exit. It was kept clear of snow and ice but rarely opened. Despite this a fine crust of frosted snow lay along the bottom of the sill. Not much could keep an Antarctic winter at bay. The bunk rooms were through a door on the right.

All the men slept in the bunks except for the station manager Garry, who had his own larger private room, and the new pilot MacReady who bunked and spent a lot of his time up in a stilt shack outside the main building. Out of all the men at the base their newest recruit R.J. MacReady was the true solitary one, a real loner. Almost a bit of an outcast, it was not easy to get to know the man. MacReady was an introvert . . . serious, solemn, and seemed to be carrying a dark and pressing weight on his shoulders. Palmer guessed he had come to Antarctica to escape something. That could backfire for many reasons, but one thing was for sure, Antarctica was an easy place to get lost in and forget the rest of the world existed.

Copper bunked with the assistant biologist Fuchs, and their bunk was the last door on the left at the far south end of the hall. The door was open, and Palmer entered the room. The small space shared by the doctor and biologist was simple. Neat and tidy, two made-up bunks, a single desk and chair. Some storage boxes and a large shelf of books sat against the far wall.

Palmer pulled a small tobacco tin out of his jean vest and flipped it open. It held three large joints. He placed one inside the desk drawer amongst pencils, pens, and paper clips. Copper would know exactly where to look. Part of the agreement the two men shared was in exchange for the occasional proffer from the greenhouse, Palmer was given access to Copper's small library. The doctor, an avid reader, had quite the collection of books, the unofficial library of the outpost.

MacReady had given Palmer a paperback copy of *Chariots of the Gods?* by the Swiss author Erich von Däniken when they first met six weeks ago at Operation Deep Freeze in Christchurch. The read was right up his alley, and Palmer had chewed through the book—hook, line, and sinker. Now, scanning Copper's bookshelf for a new title, it was evident the doctor was a huge fan of John D. MacDonald. Palmer pulled out a book at random by the author: *Dead Low Tide*. Reading the back cover, the novel looked to be a decent way to fill his afternoon.

Book in hand, Palmer left Copper's room and headed for his own bunk down the hall at the north end. He slowed his pace at the open door of Bennings' room and caught the meteorologist turning over in his bunk. Bennings had a damn close call this morning. They all had. That Norwegian wielding the assault rifle could have easily killed one of them. Palmer was not regretful at all Garry had nailed him with his pop gun. Sure saved them a lot of trouble.

Palmer and Childs' bunk had a lived-in feel, like a college dorm. The room smelled strongly of weed and faintly of stale sweat. Two bunks, a desk, a TV and VCR, and thick curtains hung against the wall framing a non-existent window. Palmer flipped on a small lamp at the desk, pulled out the chair, and settled in with his book. The lamp's light cast his shadow on the wall across the room over Childs' bunkbed. Stevie Wonder was still singing "Superstition" and the music echoed faintly down the corridor of bunkrooms.

Palmer sensed someone behind him. He turned to look over his shoulder. It was not one of the camp's members, but a dog. The Norwegian dog the two crazed Scandinavians were trying to kill this morning. What was it doing here in the sleeping quarters?

The dog just stood there motionless, staring at him.

Palmer frowned and set his book down. The dog continued to stare, remaining stock still. "Heya boy . . . whatcha doin—"

Magnus moved with blurring speed. He was on top of Palmer before the dazed pilot could even begin to comprehend what was happening. Man and Malamute tumbled off the chair and landed together on the floor in a flurry of limbs. A hissing sound that was neither human nor canine filled the bunkroom.

Across the corridor and one door down Bennings jumped with a start in his bunk. He had been just starting to drift off when a noise pulled him back from the edge of unconsciousness. He raised his head from his pillow, listening. There was another muted thud from out in the hallway. Then silence.

Bennings dropped his head back down. He grimaced and cursed under his breath at the dull throb in his thigh. He still could not believe his bad luck. Shot by a stir-crazy Norwegian.

"Four stitches, barely grazed you," Doc Copper had said.

Bullshit, Bennings thought. His leg hurt. Within a half-minute the painkillers and sedative the doctor had administered pulled the meteorologist back into a drugged slumber.

Twenty-two minutes later the Norwegian sled dog Magnus stepped out into the bunkroom corridor, glanced around and trotted off. Soon, by this evening, it would make itself a nuisance and be kenneled with the other dogs. Just twelve minutes after the dog departed, The Thing that was Palmer emerged from his room. There was a large tear at the bottom of one of his blue khaki pant legs and under his denim vest his shirt was stretched out and torn, looking like he was in a schoolyard scuffle. No one would notice the damaged clothing immediately; he would change his apparel out soon. Under one arm he held a ball of clothing, his shredded undergarments, and in his other hand the paperback *Dead Low Tide*.

Palmer stood in the corridor and listened. He could still hear music coming from the kitchen. He walked towards the short walkway that connected the sleeping quarters to the main hallway. He paused inside the doorway and looked both ways to ensure the hallway was empty before stepping out.

The rec room was unoccupied, and he could smell lunch coming from the kitchen. Palmer moved silently down the hallway towards the kitchen. The kitchen was also empty, with a hot lunch waiting, ready to be served. Palmer could hear the young cook one room over in the dining area setting up for the midday meal. His roller skates reverberated on the plywood floor. Inside the entrance to the kitchen there was a large garbage bin. In one quick motion Palmer opened the lid and smoothly dropped his bundle of underclothes inside the kitchen trash can.

Not a second later Nauls skated into the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. He eyed Palmer quizzically.

"Hey, where you been at?" the cook asked.

English. Full comprehension now, not just the few words and phrases it had known before. It had complete communication through the memories, experiences, and knowledge of the American pilot, Neil Palmer. And soon it would acquire even more.

Palmer looked at the cook. "I was in my bunk reading."

"Yeah, well lunch is ready. Is George still sleeping?" Nauls asked.

Palmer nodded. "I think so."

"I'll call on him. Can you go find Clark and tell him it's lunchtime? I think he's in the kennel. Probably still with that dog." The cook picked up a steaming casserole and rolled towards the dining room, muttering something about MacReady and Doc eating a cold lunch.

"Sure thing," Palmer answered, but the cook was gone, preoccupied with his job of preparing the meal.

Palmer set off down the main hallway towards the kennel to round up the dog handler. It was time to eat. Palmer had to admit, the food did smell good. Nauls was a hell of a cook.

And he was hungry. Come to think of it, Palmer was incredibly hungry.

Icebound

“What is that? Is that a man in there? Or something . . .”

The two men, doctor and pilot, stood before the grisly sight. What looked like human remains lay twisted and charred in the snow, the blackened corpses a sharp contrast against the white background. The doctor did not know what to make of the scene, the picture was an abomination of humanity. Several red steel containers marked *KAROSIN* lay to one side of the burned and twisted bodies. It was hard to tell how many people were in the pyre, some of the torched and grossly twisted limbs did not even look human.

“Whatever it is they burned it up in a hurry,” the pilot replied curtly to the doctor’s query. He shifted the Ithaca shotgun in his gloved hands, looking away from the macabre sight and glancing at the sky, leery of the darkening clouds and building wind. They would soon need to get headed back to their camp. The monstrosity they had found could be studied more closely by the biologists back at Outpost #31. It would be best if they could bring it with them. “Help me find a shovel, Doc.”

Contrary to what his employer and his teammates might believe, MacReady had little experience piloting a chopper in subzero temps and blizzard conditions. Most of his flying time had been tropical; in Vietnam and Florida, with only a few recent months of winter operation in the reaches of northern British Columbia.

Richard John MacReady was in his mid-thirties, a tad shy of six foot, handsome, with a strong face and sharp ice blue eyes. He sported a full beard and matching dark brown locks of thick hair that fell to his collar. He wore a World War II era leather bomber jacket over a blue hooded sweatshirt, and beneath that—oddly—a Floridian style shirt over thick layers of thermal long johns. A large high-crowned campaign style hat with a box-folded brim hung down his back on long stampede strings.

This was the pilot’s first season in Antarctica, having arrived just six weeks prior with five other team members. MacReady was a real rookie on The Ice, quite out of place, being originally from a small town on the Gulf Coast of Florida, but he was adapting. His decision to do the winter-over in Antarctica was quite last minute—a decision made while under severe emotional strain and incredible pressure from business associates, and the law. The past six months of MacReady’s life had been a roiling turmoil of dark happenings, unexpected twists, and unimaginable loss.

But that was a whole other story . . .

He had made the decision to do the winter-over, and there was no going back now. For the next six months he was committed, here, at the bottom of the world through the long, frozen winter until spring. No flights in, no flights out.

Icebound.

The past month and a half MacReady had settled into the routine at the American research base well, until the arrival of the seemingly crazy Swedes a few hours ago.

No, not Swedes—the Doc kept correcting him—Norwegians . . .

Two seemingly insane members from a neighboring Norwegian base—likely gone crazy with cabin fever—arrived at Outpost #31 chasing and attempting to kill one of their own sled dogs, firing at it with a high-powered assault rifle. After landing, the passenger first wielding the rifle was killed and their chopper quickly destroyed by a mishandled incendiary grenade. The surviving pilot, still for some goddamn reason only hell bent on killing the dog, winged their meteorologist

George Bennings in the leg, screaming at them in Norwegian. Their station manager Garry had no choice but to shoot the pilot dead. Leaving no one to answer dozens of questions. And with the radio out they had no way to contact the Norwegians, or McMurdo Station. Or anybody.

It was madness, absolute insanity.

MacReady returned to the helicopter to stow the doctor's medical bag and shotgun. Neither were needed; there was no danger here, nor anyone to assist. They had made the fifty-mile jaunt over to the Norwegian base to try and find out what had happened. They had found the research station to be nothing but a burnt-out smoking shell and the remaining Norwegians were either dead or missing. This was a hell of a way to start the season. The weather was soon going to close in on them and shut things down for the six-month polar winter. They were already a week into the season, and strictly by the guidebook, MacReady was not even supposed to be operating the chopper at this time of year.

The pilot thought of the bottle of J&B scotch he had stashed up at his shack and longed for a drink. Pouring a stiff one on the rocks would be tops on his agenda once he got back. This was not his mess to try and sort out, nor worry about. MacReady had his own troubles on his mind. The wind was picking up swiftly and the flight back to their outpost was going to be challenging. From a rear compartment of their helicopter MacReady pulled out a large white canvas tarp, the material quickly catching and pulling in the wind. He rolled and tucked it under an arm and set out across the snowfield towards the Norwegian's burn pit.

Along one side of the camp Dr. Aaron Copper rummaged about and found a broad-bladed snow shovel. The doctor wore a heavy fur-lined parka, open face balaclava, sheep-skinned ambassador hat, and a pair of Scott ski goggles pushed up on his forehead. He was in his mid-fifties, on the shorter side, with a friendly demeanor but a stern no-nonsense face. He was clean shaven and sported a namesake copper nose ring, as well as large copper bracelets on each wrist beneath his parka.

Returning to join the pilot at the charred remains, Copper eyed the tarp in MacReady's gloved hands and nodded. "Yeah, that should work," he said, and held out the shovel to the pilot.

MacReady's eyes were watering from the bitter wind. He pulled on his large, black-lensed glacier goggles before grudgingly taking the shovel from the doctor. "We'll wrap it in this and tie it onto a skid," the pilot stated. "Whatever it is, it's not going inside the chopper."

Copper didn't object. Whatever it was the Norwegians had burned so purposely he had no intention of sitting close to on the haul back to their camp.

MacReady surveyed the horrid scene. He kicked aside a kerosene can sending it flipping across the snow. "Let's spread out the tarp and drag"—he paused, not knowing how to describe the gruesome find—"this *Thing* onto it."

"Alright," Copper said, swallowing hard. He stumbled in the snow to position himself and held out a corner of the tarp for the pilot and they lay the sheet out flat. The wind kept catching it, trying to whisk it away across the snowfield. Copper stepped his boot on the corner and MacReady did the same with his side. They were close enough now for a putrid stench to hit their nostrils. The frigid temperatures had not yet frozen the recently burned flesh. A sharp and acrid odor hit both men at the same time.

"Jesus Christ," MacReady cursed, holding his arm up in front of his face. "It bloody reeks—it's still warm." He had smelled this unforgettablely horrible odor before, more than a decade ago, in Vietnam. The rank smell of burned human skin and flesh. For the first time since his arrival in Antarctica he wished the wind would blow harder.

Copper's reaction was similar. The doctor let out a breath. The smell was not new to him either. He had inhaled the sharp funk of roasted flesh before as well. The smell was all too familiar and brought back memories of a nightmarish experience he had working as a doctor in the small rural town of Milford, Massachusetts in the early sixties. Late one foggy fall night a thunderous crash and explosion had awoken him at home. A car had gone off the dirt road in front of the house and piled head on into a giant oak tree. The gas tank had erupted, and the car burned for almost half an hour before the fire truck arrived. The blackened figure sitting in what was left of the driver's seat looked more like a monster than a man. Copper would never forget the sickening heavy odor that blew across his front yard. It seemed to linger for weeks. Two decades and almost a half a world away, in the dark and the cold at the bottom of the planet, the doctor was still coming face-to-face with the haunting memory.

MacReady used the edge of the shovel to try and drag the corpse onto the tarp. The body was a lot heavier than he had anticipated. He managed to catch the shovel behind what looked like an arm and pulled. The upper torso flipped on its side and the head jerked up towards him.

"Fuck!" MacReady almost dropped the shovel as he jumped back.

"What is it?" Copper asked nervously, his voice shaking.

MacReady shook his head. "Damn it, look at this, Copper."

The doctor slowly stepped closer and leaned in cautiously. He realized then that there was certainly not just one body here. The head was large and obscene, a twisted face that appeared to be splitting apart into two—or melting together into one. Copper could not tell which.

"What the hell is that, Doc?" MacReady asked,

Copper didn't have a clue. He had never seen anything like it before. Human flesh burned, it didn't melt and run like wax at high temperatures. The faces looked like they could be fusing together. He shook his head. "I don't know. We'll get a better look at it back at the camp. Blair needs to have a look at it. Let's just get it wrapped up."

MacReady could not agree more. He was starting to get chills—and it was not just from the deep cold. Staying as far back as he could, with a struggling effort, MacReady dragged the burned corpse onto the tarp. The snow underneath was melted and stained with a black oily soot. There was a strong smell of burnt kerosene and a stronger smell of something else. Something bad. Something not human, not of this world. Something even worse than burned flesh.

Copper frowned. The corpse—or corpses—were simply not right. Not just the faces, the bodies were blown out of proportion. The legs were longer than any the doctor had seen before . . . like they had been stretched. This Norwegian would have been about eight feet tall.

Using the ice pick, Copper helped roll the monstrosity onto the sheet and they quickly wrapped it up, glad to have the sickly grinning split faces out of sight. Together, breathing hard, their breath condensing on the wind, they dragged it over to the helicopter.

As they worked to lash the tarped remains onto the chopper's skid, Copper thought aloud: "According to Fuchs there were ten Norwegians here. Two made it to our camp, plus the man we found here who took his own life. That leaves seven. But where are they?"

MacReady tapped the bundle with the shovel. "There's what looks like at least two in here, Doc. And I'm willing to bet the rest are dead too." The pilot continued to tie off their find to the chopper's skid, hurrying but ensuring the grisly package was secure.

From his medical kit on the passenger seat Copper pulled out the papers and notes he had found inside the Norwegian camp. He singled out a black and white photo. It was a group shot, six of the Norwegians standing behind what was clearly the ice block he and MacReady had just found at the far end of the camp. A bottle of champagne sat on top of the block. The Norwegians were all

raising full glasses in a toast to the camera. Copper's eyes focused on one of them, second from the right.

"Mac, I think there was a woman here."

MacReady looked up from his work. "What?"

Copper held the photo so MacReady could see, careful not to let the wind whip it away. "I think they had a woman stationed here as a member of the Norwegian team."

MacReady eyed the blonde woman with Nordic features in the picture. He silently wondered if she was now wrapped up in the tarp he was fastening to their chopper. "She's not too good-looking, Doc," the pilot said sardonically. Thoughts of a dead woman brought back recent memories he was trying to bury . . . to run from and bury deep, down here on The Ice. God, he needed a drink.

A noise made both the men look up at the same time. An indistinct sound came from inside the camp. "You heard that too?" MacReady asked. Copper remained silent, listening, his blue eyes round, studying the ruined camp.

Again, the same noise, louder now, a dull whining moan. A wave of fright went through MacReady. They had explored the entire Norwegian camp from end to end. The outpost was vacant, save for the poor bastard they had discovered who had taken it upon himself to commit suicide with a straight razor. There was nobody inside who could make a noise like that. If they indeed had two victims wrapped up in the tarp, then five Norwegians were still AWOL.

"That sounded like it could a person," Copper said, still staring back at the camp. "Did we possibly miss someone?"

"No," MacReady answered with as much certainty as he could muster. "We searched it through. The camp is falling apart, collapsing, Doc. It's just the wind moving through." The pilot looked warily to the sky again. There was just over an hour of daylight left. Barely enough to get back to their camp before nightfall. "C'mon Copper, time to go."

MacReady hurriedly finished tying the tarped remains to the landing skid, preparing to start warming up the bird. Copper was still looking back at the entrance to the camp. The wind was growing stronger. It made ominous whistling noises as it blew through the burned out hulk of the Norwegian outpost. The polar night was closing fast.

Copper shivered and turned to look at MacReady. "Alright, let's get out of here."

"Hey, I'm way ahead of you," MacReady quipped, already having climbed aboard the chopper. He hit the ignition switch. The whine of the engine was comforting and cut through the howl of the wind. Stepping up over the tarpaulin, Copper hurriedly pulled himself into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. The helicopter blades spun up an isolated flurry of blowing snow. As he strapped himself in Copper leaned over and looked down out his window at their morbid cargo.

The tarpaulin moved.

Copper froze and his fifty-five-year-old heart started to hammer wildly inside his chest. He kept his eyes locked on the tarp. It had appeared to him the material heaved, pushed up from below. He turned to say something to MacReady but quickly bit his tongue. The pilot would think he was spooked silly and seeing things. Spooked silly—yes. Seeing things . . .? Copper cast another quick glance at their tarped bundle out on the skid.

Was it a trick of the eye? Just the wind tugging at the tarp?

MacReady worked the collective and throttle and lifted the helicopter from the snow, dipping the machine northeast towards Outpost #31. The pilot's thoughts were solely on his warm shack and a bottle of scotch. He was going to get pleasantly inebriated tonight.

Copper sat back in his seat, his face haunted. He took a few deep breaths and felt his heartbeat finally begin to slow. Trying to force himself to relax, he really hoped that Palmer had remembered

to leave the joint for him as they had discussed. The good doctor would require a smoke this evening. Hell, he might even have some of Mac's coveted scotch too.

Copper was sure he had seen the tarpaulin move. It had not been the wind or a trick of his eyes. Yet that was impossible. Whatever these burnt remains had been—man or something else—they were surely dead. Just spirits now, spirits of something not entirely human. Frozen ghosts from another world.

Copper dared not look down out the window at the tarp again.

It was just the wind . . .

Chariots of the Gods

The olive drab helicopter broke through the icy cloud cover out into the morning sunshine. Stenciled across the side in white lettering read US ANTARCTICA RESEARCH PROGRAM and an Air Force roundel marked the tail boom.

The flight had been tough going. MacReady was fighting the winds constantly. More than a handful of times the gusts had him question his decision to make the trip. The polar wind was cutting steadily out of the southwest at thirty-five knots, pushing the upper limits for their aircraft.

Vance Norris, the camp's hefty Canadian geologist, sat shotgun, checking and rechecking the Norwegian map. They were close to their destination, an area five or six miles northeast of the Norwegian camp where the Scandinavians appeared to have discovered something in the ice.

Palmer sat in the back, quiet, but intently watching the endless white landscape through the windscreen. Garry had all but ordered MacReady to bring Palmer on this risky jaunt. The back-up pilot—acting a bit out of character—also half-insisted to join the party in case something went wrong. Palmer had been turned down hard by Garry the previous day upon offering to make the flight to the Norwegian camp, but he was going along on this trip.

After the events of the past day, they were no longer taking any chances. The last twenty-four hours had been a far cry from the usual routine at the camp, and the mood at Outpost #31 had shifted. The start of what was supposed to be a long quiet winter in Antarctica had been unexpectedly shaken up. Yesterday, MacReady and Doc Copper had flown over to check on the Norwegian base and found the camp destroyed with everyone appearing to be either dead or missing. The pilot and doctor brought back something they found there, something indescribable and horrific. Their senior biologist Martin Blair determined the abomination was indeed human.

Then came the brutal attack on their sled dogs in the middle of the night. The dog that the two Norwegians had been pursuing had apparently not been a dog at all, but some sort of monster imitating a dog. They had killed it, Childs burning the Thing in the kennel with a flamethrower. Three of their own dogs had been killed in the process, and Jonathan Clark, the dog handler, was nothing short of devastated. The men were left confused and perplexed by Blair's attempted explanation as to what they had witnessed, and to top it off, much to Garry's consternation, Windows had still not been able to contact anyone to report either incident. Not a great start to a six-month winter-over.

As the helicopter rose over a rocky ridge and out above an icy plateau the winds abated, and the sun came fully out. MacReady looked thankfully at the clear patches of sky and hoped they did not get caught in a squall. Despite the small break in the weather there was still thick cloud cover all around. A fast-moving early season storm could easily blanket them in a total whiteout. It would not be the first time the pilot had been caught in winter conditions, having to make an emergency landing. Just three months ago this exact scenario did happen to MacReady, in the coastal mountains of northern British Columbia. The pilot's grim thoughts of the chopper going down out here on the barren Antarctic icefields was interrupted by the geologist.

"Half a mile—due east," Norris announced, pointed out the windscreen.

MacReady nodded and adjusted the controls. The three men squinted through the windscreen at the endless expanse of snow and ice. A shape began to materialize out of the desolate landscape. A crater in the ice, almost perfectly circular in shape. And it was big . . . no, it was *huge*.

"What the hell is that?" MacReady asked not expecting an answer.

Norris shook his head. "I don't know."

The crater loomed as they approached. It was massive. By rough guess MacReady figured it was about fifty feet deep and as much as five hundred feet across. The walls of the crater were solid ice, colored a deep glacier blue in the morning light. The floor of the circular depression was snow covered and a darker color. Jagged chunks of ice, some as big as cars, lined the bottom.

“This is it,” Norris stated. “This is their site. That excavation is definitely man-made.” The geologist did not know immediately what to make of the sight before them, but his mind was racing on the obvious question: what could possibly be that size and that deep in ancient glacial ice?

“It’s enormous,” MacReady said as he fought the controls against a gust of wind. “Hang on, I’m going to set us down.”

As they closed in on the massive depression Palmer leaned forward from the rear seat and silently studied the find. MacReady brought the chopper down on a smooth path and settled the machine on hard-packed windblown snow.

The three men exited the bird and together made their way across the snowfield towards the rim of the crater. They were all heavily dressed in clothing suitable for the polar temperatures. MacReady wore his faithful campaign hat with its high crown and wide brim flutter squared on all four sides. The hat was totally out of place in the Antarctic, but the pilot almost always had it on or hanging down his back on long stampede strings.

As they came upon the edge of the crater it became clear just how deep the sunken depression was—they were overwhelmed by the true size of it. The snow along the rim was deep and Palmer almost lost his footing, swinging his arms up to catch his balance. MacReady reached out a quick hand and grabbed Palmer’s arm. The back-up pilot had almost found himself going over the precipice.

The men had their first good look at what lay in the bottom of the circular depression. Their reactions were the same; they said nothing, just silently taking in the unbelievable sight. There was no mistaking what it was they were seeing—at the bottom of the crater lay a ship. A spaceship. For want of a better term or description, it looked to be a flying saucer.

The men watched in awestruck silence as a cloud moved away, across the crater, exposing the ship to a sweeping wide beam of sunlight. The circular craft looked to show damage from either a crash landing or from the thermite charges laid by the Norwegians. Either way, it was clear the ship had been in the ice for some time.

“My God . . .” Norris finally said, letting out a breath. “It’s a spaceship.”

MacReady shook his head. “I don’t believe it.”

There was a shared moment of stunned silence between the men, only their breath condensing in the cold.

Palmer’s face was hidden behind his balaclava. Quite unexpectedly, he blurted out: “You better believe it, Mac. I’ve been saying it for years. I read that book you gave me—*Chariots of the Gods*. Now you’re looking at it—a goddamn space chariot. They’ve been coming here for thousands of years. And those Norwegians stumbled on this one. Shit man, I just knew all this stuff was real.” Both MacReady and Norris were too awestruck and distracted to react or reply to Palmer’s far out musings. Norris turned to MacReady and said, “Mac, I want to go down and check it out. I’d like to get some ice samples—metal too, if possible. We’ve got rappelling gear with us and—”

“Alright,” MacReady cut the geologist off, glancing at the sky. Despite his lingering disbelief and skepticism over the incredible sight before his eyes MacReady was not going to leave without a closer look at the ship. “But let’s make it fast. We’ll have a quick look, you can grab your samples, and then we head for home. It’s already almost noon, and we’ve got squalls all around us.”

“Sure,” Norris agreed, happy and eager. “I’ll set it up fast. We can use the chopper as an anchor.” The geologist was already trudging through the snow heading back to the helicopter to gather the needed gear.

“Palmer, I want you to stay up here,” MacReady said, “I’ll go down with Norris. We won’t be long.”

“Yeah, right. But look Mac—be careful, and stay in sight,” Palmer replied. He seemed perfectly fine with remaining behind and not attempting to rappel down the ice cliff onto the alien spacecraft. “Man,” Palmer continued after a moment, “that Swiss author *was* right. See our chopper there”—he glanced briefly back at their bird and then at the saucer—“these guys showed the ancient Egyptians how to build them, three thousand years ago.”

MacReady ignored the back-up pilot’s ramblings. He was regretting giving Palmer that book back at Operation Deep Freeze in New Zealand. He cast a worrisome eye first at the vertical drop off—a wall of ice close to fifty feet in height—and then at the sky. He was now seriously second-guessing his decision to climb down to the ship. The pilot peered again over the precipice at the spaceship and shook his head. Palmer was right . . . it was a goddamn bona fide chariot of the gods.

MacReady badly craved a drink, possibly more so than ever before.

Norris did not know what to make of the frigid metal alloy in his bare hand. The dull and lusterless matte metal was extremely light, but appeared to be incredibly strong, or should be anyway, as it was part of the spacecraft’s exterior structure. He knelt beside MacReady on the surface of the saucer, sifting through shredded and twisted fragments of the ship.

The two of them had, with a little effort, rappelled down the ice cliff to the saucer. MacReady has been surprised and impressed with how Norris handled the feat. The man was not exactly slim and athletic and was in his mid-forties.

It was hard to tell for sure, but it appeared these metal fragments were blown off recently, likely by the Norwegians with their thermite charges. Norris pocketed the metal piece and quickly gathered up a few more loose remains to take back, before re-gloving his hand.

MacReady pocketed a couple as well. He had a burning desire for a drink and was having trouble processing and coming to terms with the fact he was standing atop an alien spaceship. Hell, a goddamn UFO.

The men stood and surveyed the ship again, stretched out around them in all directions. The enormous disc was at least as wide as two football fields. They started off together, drawn instinctively towards the raised center of the ship, where there appeared to be an open hatch. The hatch was circular, and massive, the size of a barn door. There was heavy damage and destruction to the ship, quite clear now that the Norwegians had done some tampering to the craft with their explosives. The metal surface was super slick under a coating of fresh snow and both MacReady and Norris almost lost their footing more than a few times. The men stopped in front of the enormous hatchway, gaping open. The interior was a void of total blackness.

“Jesus,” MacReady said, looking hesitantly around the breadth of the crater, “how long you figure this has been in the ice?”

Norris took a breath, pausing for a moment before answering. “Well, the backscatter effect’s been bringing things up, from way down, around here, for a long time. I’d say . . . I’d say the ice it’s buried in is a hundred thousand years old. At least.”

“And those Norwegians blew it up . . .”

“Yeah.”

The two men were quiet for a moment, in a state of both shock and awe.

“I have a possible theory, Mac,” Norris stated.

The pilot turned questioningly to the geologist.

“Fuchs said the Norwegians have been stationed here for about eight weeks,” Norris explained, “that’s only two weeks longer than us. Windows first started losing communications a couple of weeks ago. That would have been—approximately—around the time the Norwegians were using thermite to blast this ship clear of ice, exposing the spacecraft for the first time in tens of thousands of years. I think there might be a connection . . . it’s possible this ship might have something to do with blocking or scrambling our radio transmissions. An anomaly.”

MacReady thought this over for a moment. “Maybe . . . It’s an anomaly all right. This is a hell of a lot of foreign metal. I just don’t know.” He turned to look again at the sky.

Norris could sense MacReady was eager to leave, and quickly voiced what was on his mind. “Rick,” Norris said, using the pilot’s given name, “I’d like to have a look inside the hatch.”

MacReady turned to stare at the geologist, and then shook his head. “No way. I’m not going inside, Norris.”

“Not you, just me. I’ll go, I’ll be quick—”

MacReady cut him off, “Look, we’ve still gotta climb back outta this hole and it’s a forty-five-minute flight back home. If we get caught in a white out—”

This time Norris cut the pilot off: “I know. I just need to see what’s in there and I’d like to get some ice samples from around the entrance.”

MacReady was shaking his head. “You’re nuts . . . Those crazy Swedes probably went inside and look what happened to them. God knows what they found.” He paused for a minute to think. MacReady had known Norris for half a year, longer than any of the other men at the outpost. They had met in the far north of Canada, in British Columbia. It was through Norris that MacReady got an in with the National Science Institute—and the helicopter pilot position at Outpost #31.

After a strained hesitation MacReady relented. “Alright, you got two minutes.”

“Two minutes,” Norris agreed with relief, and grinned. “And Mac, they’re Norwegians. They’re from Norway, not Sweden.”

“Just make it fast,” MacReady replied, ignoring the quip. He was in no mood, cold and edgy. Norris had not seen the ruins of the Norwegian camp. And the memory of what MacReady had seen in the kennel in the early hours of the morning was still vivid in the pilot’s mind.

With some difficulty in his thick winter gear, Norris started to climb the raised slope of metal leading up to the circular hatch. He was about to grasp the lip of the open hatchway when he heard yelling coming from a distance. Both MacReady and Norris turned in unison to look up at Palmer standing on the precipice of the crater. Palmer was close to a few hundred feet away and fifty feet above them. He was waving his arms and yelling to get their attention, but it was difficult to make out what he was saying over the distance and wind.

“What does he want?” Norris asked, still poised on his perch at the hatch.

MacReady squinted up at Palmer and raised a hand in acknowledgement. “I don’t know, but I don’t like it. He’s going ape shit. We need to find out what he wants. Forget about going inside this thing, Norris. We’re leaving.”

“Shit,” Norris cursed and started to back down from the hatchway. He had heard the dead set tone in MacReady’s voice and knew there was no arguing his case with the pilot this time.

Palmer watched the two men down on the saucer from atop the crater, while continuing to wave his arms and yelling for them to return. He saw that he had got their attention—MacReady signaled back with a raised arm, and then Norris was coming back down the sloped rise to the open hatchway.

His objective had been met. The Thing that was Palmer had stopped Norris from entering the ship. He did not want the man going inside. He could not go inside. Palmer watched intently through his darkly tinted goggles as the pilot and geologist made their way slowly back across the surface of ship towards him, nearing the base of the ice cliff. Palmer held one of the rappelling ropes at the ready. He had pulled the balaclava down from his face so they could hear him more clearly.

As MacReady got within earshot he yelled up, “What is it, Palmer?”

“You guys gotta come back . . . there’s something up here!” Palmer called down to them. “I see a hole—something else they cut out of the ice!”

“What? Where?” MacReady asked.

Palmer looked off to his right and pointed a gloved finger along the perimeter of the crater. “I found something . . . I found something in the ice . . .”

The Keys are Key

The ring of keys hit the plywood floor with a metallic hollow thud. The radio operator turned and bolted from the storeroom, sheer panic and terror coursing through his veins. As Windows' footsteps hammered away down the north hallway the storeroom was filled with a wet and visceral slithering sound.

The small room was packed with an overflow of extra gear—skis, firehoses, folding tables, cans of paint, old maps, and unused outdoor clothing. The storeroom's single door opened directly into the much larger supply room.

Just seconds after Windows took off running towards the north foyer, Palmer stepped around the doorway and entered the storeroom. His expression was at first flat and without emotion, but he stared with growing interest at the abomination that was once the meteorologist George Bennings. Bennings now stood in the far corner of the storeroom, shirtless, hunchbacked, and covered in a glistening red substance from head to foot. His arms were long, impossibly long, ending not in hands but long skeleton-like fingers.

Several long, rope-like crimson-colored tentacles were slowly retracting from around his body, returning to where they first emerged from under the blanketed Norwegian-Thing. The Thing that was Bennings looked over at Palmer, the red jelly clearing rapidly from its face and torso. A wordless exchange of warning was passed between the two entities: *The men were coming*. Bennings abruptly crossed the storeroom in a jerky stop-and-go motion and pulled a parka from a hook with a long bony talons. The creature struggled to pull the coat on over its extended deformed limbs. The parka was made for a man, not a monster.

Palmer bent down and snatched up the keys. He quickly found the key he was looking for, slipped it from the ring, and dropped the keyring back on the floor. He stood and glanced again at Bennings who had hastily donned the parka. The men were almost here, three of them approaching quickly: Windows returning, with MacReady and Fuchs.

Palmer looked to the single window in the rear of storeroom, signaling Bennings. Bennings trudged forward towards the window, stumbling. Palmer picked up a single two-by-four plank from a stack that lay along the far side wall and used it to punch out the double-paned window. He stepped back as Bennings clambered up a pile of rolled sleeping bags and threw itself out the window. Palmer dropped the plank and turned, slipping quickly out of the storeroom, and moving back into the shadows of the dark supply room.

Seconds later, MacReady, Windows and Fuchs came rushing in together, passing right by Palmer who was hidden in a shadowed alcove. A single beat passed, and Windows voice yelled out: "Bennings was right there, Mac—I swear to God it had ahold of him!"

Palmer stood frozen in the dim light, his back against a stack of cardboard boxes containing dynamite as the three men came running back out of the storeroom, through the supply room and into the north foyer again. He heard yelling down the main hallway, and somebody hit the station's klaxon fire alarm. Over the wailing siren there was a flurry of men rushing into the foyer, pulling on coats and boots.

Palmer waited a few more seconds, hesitating briefly at the doorway. He exited the supply room into the north hallway and came hustling into the foyer, joining the group of men, his expression displaying the appropriate surprise and concern. Norris was already running outside, and Garry and Childs were rapidly shrugging on heavy coats.

“What’s goin’ on?” Palmer asked the station manager over the sound of the klaxon’s wail, his eyes bugging wide.

“Something about Bennings,” Garry replied curtly, trailing behind Childs, heading out the door. Palmer, looking appropriately confused, grabbed a coat from the rack and followed them out into the Antarctic night.

Just over an hour later Palmer was back in the storeroom, working on replacing the broken panes of glass. . He still had the single key from Garry’s ring secure in his pants pocket. There were problems . . . Bennings did not get far, he was quickly surrounded by the humans and trapped. The pilot MacReady had not hesitated in the least now, torching the rushed and incomplete imitation of the meteorologist. After the man had burned Bennings and the remains from the Norwegian camp and kennel, Garry had ordered the storeroom window repaired and sealed immediately. Ironically the job was assigned to the man who had smashed the window out.

Needing a second pane of glass, Palmer threw on a coat and head out the north foyer to the storage shed, an outbuilding located about a hundred feet diagonally from the tool shed. At the storage shed he lingered for a time. The small building was isolated from the main compound . . . and an excellent spot if he was to find himself alone with one of the men.

Palmer would need to be extremely careful. Bennings had been caught quickly, and now the men knew for certain they could be taken. Palmer had had the perfect opportunity to take over his roommate Childs last night but did not. It was too risky; if either of them was found out the other would be suspected immediately. It was better to hide, to wait, and make the men paranoid and mistrusting of one another. Exactly like what had happened with the Norwegians. Already the senior biologist Blair was suspicious of the dog handler Jonathan Clark.

Selecting a replacement pane of glass, Palmer heard a gunshot ring out in the still night. The sound came from somewhere deep inside the camp. He froze, then quickly moved towards the storage shed’s window. He caught movement outside, a man running from the helicopter towards the north entrance. It looked like MacReady. What was he doing out at the chopper? Palmer hesitated, waiting. He set the pane of glass down, immediately more curious to learn first what MacReady was doing out at the helicopter than the origin of the gunshot inside the camp.

Exiting the storage shed Palmer cautiously approached the tarped helicopter, stopping at the sound of a second gunshot from within the outpost. Changing plans, he decided to head directly inside and see what the commotion was. One of the men had come apart under mistrust and paranoia. As he was heading towards the north entrance, Palmer turned to see Childs running towards him from across the snowfield. The big mechanic was coming from the south entrance at the other end of the outpost. His parka was hanging open, he was not wearing a hat or gloves, and marked concern was etched across his face.

Palmer called out to him. “Hey, what’s going on, Childs?”

Childs ignored the query and did not slow his pace. Breathing hard, he said, “Go check that tractor, see if it’s OK.”

Palmer nodded in agreement and stated to double back towards the Skidozer.

Childs went straight for the helicopter, hopping up on the skid and pulling the tarp aside. The mechanic surveyed the heavy damage to the controls. Goddamn, MacReady was right. “Shit . . .”

he cursed and stepped back down to the snow, looking over to the Skidozer. Palmer was leaning inside the machine.

“Is it OK?” Childs yelled, his breath steaming in the frigid night air.

Palmer poked his head back out and stared bug-eyed at the mechanic. “Shit no, it’s smashed all to hell.”

“Dammit!” Childs cursed again. “He got the chopper too.”

“What? Who?” Palmer asked, “What’s going on?”

“Blair’s gone berserk. He’s smashed up our machines—the radio too. Totally lost his shit. The chopper’s ruined. I need you to look at that tractor and the chopper. See if they are repairable. I want to check on the dogs.”

Before Palmer could reply Childs took off running, heading in a loop for the north entrance, leaving him alone again. The back-up pilot took another look at the destroyed gauges and console in the Skidozer and made his way over to the chopper. He glumly viewed the damage that MacReady and Childs had seen. The helicopter was indeed ruined. Blair had made quick work of any mechanized transportation away from the outpost. Not good. The biologist had effectively cut them off. Palmer already knew Blair had also likely dispatched the sled dogs.

Palmer stepped down from the helicopter’s skid and followed Childs’ path into the camp. Entering through the north foyer, he hesitated. At the far end of the north hallway Palmer saw Childs whip around the corner and head down the main hallway. The mechanic had found the sled dogs killed; he was returning to the men with the news. Palmer slinked up the north hallway and heard commotion coming from the far end of the camp, down by the radio room. He started down the main hallway and was surprised to see Clark come running at him full speed. The big dog handler rushed past, smacking shoulders with Palmer as he dodged around him in the tight hallway.

“Clark, what is it man?” Palmer asked.

“The dogs!” Clark cried out in obvious distress, not slowing his pace. “Blair killed the dogs!”

Palmer turned to watch Clark go, pounding down the hall towards the kennel. He paused, listening to smashing sounds coming from the radio room and Blair yelling. The biologist had effectively cut the camp off entirely now by destroying the helicopter, tractor, radio, and killing the remaining sled dogs. Palmer edged down the hallway towards the radio room, keeping out of sight. He could see MacReady and Garry crouched across the hall from the radio room.

The sounds of smashing electrical equipment and Blair’s howling rants carried towards him: “You think that Thing wanted to be an animal? No dog’s gonna make it a thousand miles to the coast . . .” Breaking glass and destruction; by the sounds coming from inside the communications room Blair was effectively destroying the radio equipment. “No, you don’t understand . . .” Blair lamented, “that Thing wanted to be us . . .!”

Palmer saw Norris come running out of the lab holding a folding table. He decided the best thing to do was not intervene, let the men try and stop Blair.

Blair continued his tirade from inside the radio room: “If a single cell gets out, it’ll imitate everything on the face of the Earth!”

Palmer heard Childs’ voice speaking to Blair in a forced calm tone, and then five rapid gunshots followed. Palmer saw MacReady, holding the folding table in front of him, rush into the radio room, flanked by Norris and Garry. There were a couple of loud crashes, and it seemed the group had overpowered Blair. Doc Copper and Fuchs came out from where they were watching the scene unfold in the south hallway and ran into the radio room to assist.

Palmer made his way down the hallway, appearing to be a late arrival to the melee. MacReady and Norris were now watching as Doc Copper and Childs, supporting Blair between them, brought the senior biologist out of the radio room.

“Holy shit, man . . .” Palmer muttered to no one in particular, making his presence known.

Garry helped Windows out of the radio room. The radioman was bleeding from his forehead and looked shaken up and dazed. Blair had given him a beating.

Garry did his best to take charge of the situation. “All right look,” the station manager said, “take Blair into the rec room . . . Childs I want you watching him tonight. All night, you hear me?”

The big mechanic grumbled a reply as he and the doctor dragged Blair down the hall. Childs shot his bunkmate a hard look. Palmer returned the expression and then his eyes went to Garry’s waist. The key ring was back on his belt. The station manager had got his keys back from where Windows had dropped them earlier this evening on the floor of the storeroom. This was good. When he executed his plan of sabotage, thwarting a possible blood serum test, all eyes would be on the station manager and the doctor. Palmer would just need to get the key to the blood storage fridge back on the ring.

Vance Norris woke early when the rest of the camp was still dark and quiet. He bunked with Nauls and the young cook was still sleeping when Norris left their bunkroom and started his day. As Norris finished up his morning routine in the camp’s washroom his mind was going over the crazy events of the past two days, since the arrival of the Norwegians chasing their dog. He was still in disbelief that Bennings was dead, and surprised at how MacReady had changed, he had really stepped up and taken charge. He was a different man than the one Norris had first met up in British Columbia.

Norris had vouched for MacReady to his superiors at the National Science Institute, and in turn they had brought the pilot onboard the team at Outpost #31. MacReady’s first month at the camp had shown him to be a real loner, and a bit more of a heavy drinker than Norris had anticipated.

The thick-waisted geologist made his way down the main hallway towards medical. He wore his thick acrylic gray sweater that kept him toasty warm on the polar continent. The camp was silent in the early morning hours, with all the other men sleeping. They had kept Blair under a regular dose of morphine and in the rec room under the watchful eye of Childs. They had also taken a vote—led by MacReady—this morning they were to lock the biologist out in the tool shed.

Clark was utterly depressed over the loss of his three remaining sled dogs. Buck, Chinook, and Charnauk had fallen under Blair’s axe. Archangel and Jack had been killed by the Thing in the kennel and Nanook took a slug in the chest from MacReady’s shotgun.

Norris was spooked, more so than he would admit to the others or even himself, and today he was going to keep focused on tracking a storm slated to hit them in less than twenty-four hours. The meteorologist Bennings was no longer with them, and it was Norris’ job now to track the weather systems.

A noise from the medical room caught his ear. Curious, he moved down the hall towards the doorway to medical to see who was up this early. Maybe Copper or Fuchs were making an early start, already back at work trying to determine just what in the hell they were dealing with.

Norris rounded the doorway, looking into the dimly lit medical room and was completely surprised and taken aback to see Palmer standing in front of the blood storage fridge. The back-up pilot just stood there, staring at the fridge. Norris didn't move, his heart rate picking up, wondering if Palmer saw him. Slowly, Palmer turned to look at Norris, his face blank and expressionless.

"Palmer," asked Norris, "are you all right?"

"Yes," Palmer replied calmly, not seeming to be alarmed at all about being discovered alone in medical with the lights off at this early hour.

"What are you doing in here?" Norris asked, his voice unsettled. The geologist was immediately alarmed that something was not at all right.

"I heard something," Palmer explained, looking away from Norris, back at the fridge. "I was up checking on Childs and Blair in the rec room." After a beat, Palmer continued, "You're not going to believe this Norris, come and see what I found."

Norris was suspicious and did not know what to make of Palmer's bizarre behavior, but after a moment's hesitation he stepped across medical towards the fridge.

"What is it?" Norris asked, approaching Palmer.

"The fridge . . . look," Palmer said, still staring at the fridge.

Norris moved within an arm's reach of Palmer and looked at the fridge. There appeared to be nothing wrong with the stainless-steel refrigerator. The door was closed, and the compressor hummed.

"What Palmer? What's wrong with—"

Palmer moved fast. Faster than any human could move. The back-up pilot was on top of Norris before he could comprehend what was happening, and the two men tumbled to the floor. Medical was filled with violent hissing sounds.

Nineteen minutes later Palmer paused to place the key on a table beside the fridge and walked to the doorway leading to the main hall. He looked both ways and seeing that the corridor was empty he set off for the dining room. Inside medical the Thing that was Norris was sitting upright on the floor in front of the fridge. He was completely naked and covered in a thick, red-tinted gelatinous substance. His clothing, relatively undamaged, lay scattered and crumpled beside him, boots open with the laces pulled loose. His long johns however were totally stretched out, shredded and soiled with the crimson sludge. He reached forward, grasped his trousers and struggled to pull them on.

Norris got to his feet slowly, appearing as if finding his balance for the very first time. He pulled up and buttoned his pants and slipped on his boots one at a time. He shrugged on his shirt and then pulled the thick gray sweater over his head. Norris bent and scooped up his underclothes, balling up the long johns and setting them aside on the table. He picked up the key Palmer had left on the examining table.

He would need to work fast. The other men would be waking soon.

Norris used the key to open the fridge. Twelve plastic bags of blood hung suspended in the cooler, a pint for each man at the outpost.

Norris found a scalpel among the supplies and quickly slashed the blood bags open. In the dim light the blood poured out as black as oil, spilling inside the fridge, and running out onto the floor. Norris quickly closed the fridge and relocked it, pocketing the key. He picked up his torn long

johns and crossed over to the doorway to the main hall. Finding the hallway vacant he exited medical and went right, headed towards the radio room.

The demolished radio room was silent and dark. Nobody would be going in here again soon. With inhuman effort Norris tore the stenciled name tag out of his ruined undergarments and tossed them into the trash can inside the radio room. He swiftly exited back into the main hallway, crossing towards Garry's private quarters. Stopping at the door to listen, Norris could hear a shower running in the adjacent washroom.

The station manager was up.

Moving fast and fluid, Norris entered Garry's room. The bunk was already made up and the door leading to the adjoining men's washrooms was slightly ajar. Norris crossed the room to Garry's desk. The ring of keys on their clip were sitting on the desk, along with the station manager's .357 Magnum and ammunition belt. Norris picked up the key clip and slipped the fridge key back onto the ring. Without being noticed, he quickly and quietly slipped out of Garry's room back into the main hallway.

Norris strode up the hall, returning past medical, coming upon the dining room. He glanced inside and saw Palmer seated at a table by himself. Palmer was sipping a coffee and listening to music on his headphones. He looked up at Norris. The two men exchanged a glance. Expressionlessly, Norris broke the eye contact and continued up the hallway towards the kitchen. He could hear Nauls moving about in the kitchen, starting the breakfast meal. Norris jogged to the right, heading into the adjoining side corridor that led to the bunk rooms. Passing the row of bunkroom doors, he could hear men snoring.

Norris went through into the washroom. Garry was finished with his shower now, and stood at a sink shaving, wearing a blue bathrobe with yellow trim. He glanced at Norris and grunted a greeting.

"Good morning," Norris returned.

"This is a hell of a real fine mess this is turning out to be," Garry grumbled, scraping stubble from his face. "No radio, the chopper's ruined, our senior biologist out of commission—we're going to put Blair out in tool shed first thing this morning, right away."

Norris nodded. "I think that's a good idea," he said agreeably. The vote last night was unanimous—the consensus was to isolate Blair outside. Quite fortunately, the human Norris had offered to be the one who would bring Blair his meals.

Garry stopped shaving and turned to look at Norris. "I can't believe Bennings is gone," he said. There was grief, pain and deep concern in the station manager's face. After a moment he seemed to shrug it off. "Look, MacReady has really stepped up to the plate here. I'm certainly glad you found him for us. But aside from MacReady, right now you're really the only one I trust Norris."

Norris nodded again, understanding completely.

The Third Man

The Thing that was Norris trudged through the Antarctic night carrying a steaming tray of hot food towards the tool shed. A late dinner for Blair. Tension and paranoia had run high at the isolated outpost since the discovery of the sabotaged blood this morning.

Suspicion was cast on three innocents: Garry, Clark, and Doc Copper. All three men were now tied down together on the couch in the rec room and drugged with morphine, watched over in shifts by Childs and MacReady. Norris had been eyeing the approaching storm closely. The timing was more than ideal. The blizzard would be hitting the camp that night, a few hours after midnight, and it was looking to sock them in for two days straight.

There had been fallout and conflict following the discovery of the tampered blood. The men now knew with absolute certainty that someone among them was no longer human. It had been a long day for them all. Norris had turned down the offered leadership of the camp from Garry. It is what Norris the man himself would have done, and what his alien imposter also wanted: to keep all eyes, scrutiny, and judgement off itself.

Because Norris had work to do.

A new man was in charge now, the pilot R.J. MacReady. MacReady had quickly shifted from the quiet loner to taking full command of the camp. Securing control throughout the day, MacReady had the guns in the cabinet locked back up with a chain and padlock, ordered the destroyed blood bags burned and proclaimed his humanity to the others, quickly isolating the three suspects. The man would need to be dealt with, and soon.

Norris had known MacReady longer than the other men at the camp, first meeting him half a year ago in the small mining town of Stewart, British Columbia. MacReady seemed to be a renegade, and was also proving himself unpredictable, which made him dangerous.

With the camp's senior biologist Blair having effectively destroyed all radio communications, as well as the helicopter, tractor, and killing the sled dogs he had cut them off entirely. Blair had been well ahead of the other men from the get-go. To depart the camp now transport would be required, a vehicle to shuttle over to a neighboring base. Or depending on available power resources, off the continent entirely. There was enough material for a craft to be constructed, secretly, until a departure could be made.

With the radio hopelessly destroyed, Mark Windows no longer had a job to do. He was out of place in Antarctica, having taken the job solely for the money, to help fund a move to New York City to pursue a hopeful acting career. Along with Nauls, Windows was one of the youngest at the camp, and his fear and anxiety were high. Of all the men he wanted out of this claustrophobic situation the most. Windows had panicked this morning, upon realizing he had dropped the keys and was the last one seen with them, also realizing that someone in the camp—someone who was now clearly no longer human—had used the keys to sabotage their blood supply. It had tried to get Bennings, but it had successfully and surely got to at least one another.

After lunch, in the snow out behind the camp, Jonathan Clark had buried the three remaining dogs that Blair had killed with a fire axe, and he was depressed at the loss of his canine companions. Clark was a quiet gentle giant, first attending the University of Oregon before training sled dogs professionally in Anchorage. He found the canine handler position with the NSI in 1980 and did his first rotation at Outpost #31 that same year. Clark was surprised and initially confused as to why the men did not trust him and resigned to let himself be tied to the rec room couch and drugged. But his anger—especially at MacReady—was building.

Dr. Martin Blair had been locked out in the tool shed since the morning. The senior biologist looked a good bit older than his fifty years. He grew up on a ranch in rural Utah, attended the University at Salt Lake City and worked as a veterinarian for years before coming onboard the NSI in '78. Blair's first winter-over at Outpost #31 was the following year and the young Patrick Fuchs was assigned as his protégé. Blair was pleased, as Fuchs proved himself to be an excellent research scientist, intelligent, and quick to reach conclusions and make connections.

Blair had pieced together what he was witnessing take place at the outpost much faster than anyone else. The unfolding scenario had caused him to be extremely disconcerted, fearful, and paranoid. He shared as much surprise and disbelief over the synopsis of a hostile alien invader as the other men. The grim revelation of his computer analysis, the attack and death of Bennings, coupled with a half pint of vodka had pushed him right over the edge last night. And, as of yet, the men hadn't even told him about this morning's incident: the sabotaged blood.

Blair had remained locked in his room until the men assembled outside, burning the remains of Bennings and the other Things. Then he had methodically killed the remaining sled dogs in the kennel and slipped outside to take the fire axe to the tractor and helicopter. MacReady almost caught him out at the chopper, before he ran back inside the north entrance, headed straight for the radio room where he attacked Windows and cut off all communications for good.

No one was fixing that radio. And no one was coming near him. Blair had spent an hour this afternoon fashioning a noose from old sled rope. If it came to it, he would surely hang himself before anyone of those Things got to him . . .

Sitting quietly in the tool shed, brooding over the situation, his mind still slow from morphine, Blair looked up, hearing a shuffling noise outside the door. His pulse immediately quickened.

Norris had arrived at the shed. Shifting the food tray to one hand he slid back the dead bolt and shouldered the door open. Blair was seated at a small table, wearing his thick parka. His eyes were filled with trepidation. A single bare bulb burned overhead, and a noose hung from a support beam in the ceiling. A small propane heater kept the tool shed relatively warm.

"Blair, I've got a hot dinner here for you," Norris said amiably, entering the shed. The geologist smiled disarmingly at the scientist and used his hip to close the door behind him. "Damn, it's almost as cold in here as it is outside. You'll like what Nauls put together for you, beef stew—"

Blair cut him off: "Don't come any closer!"

Norris feigned a hurt questioning look, taking another step forward. "What's wrong? How are you feeling, Blair?"

The scientist stood from the table and moved himself away from Norris, backing towards the far corner of the tool shed. "I said don't come any closer. I'm not all drugged up anymore. I know what's going on here."

"What are you talking about?" Norris held up the tray as an offering. "Look, I brought you some food and want to see how you're doing, that's all."

"I don't want any food, and I'm fine. I'm not crazy. I may be the only rational man left here. I stand by my actions—I did the right thing. Nobody can leave this camp. You understand me?"

"Well, Blair, I'm in charge now. Garry has put me in command of the camp," Norris lied.

Blair looked at the geologist even more suspiciously. "You? Why? What happened?"

Norris ignored the question and moved closer towards the table, pushing aside the noose. Blair backpedaled to the far wall, crashing into a workbench, sending tools clattering to the plank floor.

Norris set the tray down on the table. "I guess Garry trusts me, Blair. You should too."

The geologist circled around the table, towards Blair. The older scientist drew back again, tripped over an ice core drill, stumbled, and fell to the floor. Cowering, he looked up at Norris in terror.

“Stop! Stay away from me!” Blair shrieked, holding up a hand in defense, horror on his face.

Norris loomed over Blair, blocking out the light from the bulb. Norris’ face was cast in darkness, but Blair already knew it was not Norris.

Blair breathed in a final gasp of shock as the Thing that was Norris fell upon him.

The Thing was working much more quickly now.

Only fourteen minutes later Norris exited the tool shed, empty meal tray in hand, and set out for the main compound. In the tool shed Blair was looking more like his human self again with every passing second. The senior biologist was only dressed in tattered and soiled long johns, covered from head to foot in the same thick, dark red, visceral substance that had coated Bennings and Norris. The Thing that was Blair pulled itself slowly up from the floor. His undergarments were badly stretched and torn, but no one would see the damaged material under his heavy winter clothing. Blair re-donned his outer gear, moving slow and deliberate, like he was dressing himself for the very first time.

Blair was the third man taken at Outpost #31. This number would have been held by Bennings, but Bennings had been discovered by the men far too quickly, before it had time to finish. It had been risky to take the meteorologist in the supply room. MacReady did not only not hesitate in torching Bennings but burning all the others as well. He was catching on, not taking any chances. But now it was three men strong: Palmer, Norris, and now Blair. Three men taken and one man down. A third of the camp.

Blair could now see the day as Norris had. He could see everything . . . every memory and experience of Norris, and Palmer, and the sled dog Magnus, and three of the Norwegians. He knew what he had to do.

Palmer had taken over Norris and the blood had been successfully sabotaged, thwarting Doc Copper’s blood serum test. That was good. Because unbeknownst to the men the blood serum test would have worked—and worked well. But it seemed now Blair’s assistant, the young scientist Fuchs was busy working on another test. It was possible Fuchs could discover a test . . . he had access to all of Blair’s notes. He would need to be stopped, fast.

And MacReady was the man in charge. The pilot was proving to be an adversary and a serious problem. He would also need to be stopped. Taken over or framed, like the others, set up so his own men no longer trusted him, and killed him.

Blair took a moment to look around the tool shed. He had an objective now, to solve a problem that, as a human, ironically, he had created. Last night he has isolated and cut off the outpost, destroying the radio, helicopter, tractor, and killing the dogs. Now the Thing would need to find a way off this frozen continent. To reach warmer climes before the long dark winter set in. It would need to create and build a vehicle to escape the camp. It had the technical know-how, and from what it could glean from Norris’ observations, there was just enough parts and materials at the camp.

Conveniently, they had locked him in the tool shed . . .

The men had left Blair entirely alone out here, alone to work on what he needed to do. It would be only Norris coming to check on him, but if any of the other humans came out to the tool shed, they would find what looked to be Blair, patiently waiting, and asking to be let back inside. And if one of them came alone . . .

Outside the wind was already picking up. The approaching storm was only hours away and would provide the perfect cover. From the tool shed Blair would now have the run of the camp at night, in the blizzard, to gather what was needed . . . items and pieces from the greenhouse, kitchen, radio room, supply room, helicopter, and the tractor. And he had both Palmer and Norris working together to assist him. Aside from constructing a craft, their first target would be Fuchs, and then the damnable pilot MacReady.

They had lots to do. And needed room to work, lots of room. The biologist looked down curiously at the planks of the tool shed flooring under his boots. The boards rested loosely on compacted glacial snow almost as hard as ice.

Blair knelt and pried up one of the boards.

The Tape

“I’m going to hide this tape when I’m finished. If none of us make it, at least there’ll be some kind of record. The storm’s been hitting us hard now for forty-eight hours. We still have nothing to go on. One other thing, I think it rips through your clothes when it takes you over. Windows found some shredded long johns, but the name tag was missing. They could be anybody’s. [Nobody . . . nobody trusts anybody now. And we’re all very tired.] There’s nothing else I can do, just wait. R. J. MacReady, helicopter pilot, U.S. Outpost Number Thirty-One.”*

*MacReady rewinds and records over this line.

Two days after Blair’s encounter with Norris in the tool shed, MacReady sat alone at a desk in the quiet room at the far end of the south hallway. Beside him sat the flamethrower unit, Garry’s .357 Magnum, and a forty-ounce bottle of scotch. He had just finished recording his message onto a cassette tape and was now contemplating where to hide the tape. Thinking back to the destruction of the Norwegian camp it seemed like anyplace inside the main compound might not be a good idea.

MacReady poured the last of the J&B into a highball glass—he’d given up on the ice—and took a sip. He had a growing feeling of unease building the past forty-eight hours as the blizzard raged. He had not slept at all, nor eaten much of anything, and had been drinking heavily and steadily. His thoughts were becoming slowed and his outlook and affect deteriorating. Feelings of paranoia, mistrust, and fear were extreme among the men. Clark, Garry, and Copper were still tied to the couch in the rec room and Fuchs, under pressure from MacReady, was desperately working on ideas for a new test and getting nowhere.

The men all agreed with Norris’ theory that the alien ship, upon being exhumed from the ice by the Norwegians, interfered with their radio transmissions, deducing why Windows had not been able to reach McMurdo, or any other station on the continent. The radioman had made half-hearted efforts to repair the smashed electronics, but it was obvious he didn’t have a clue where to begin. Blair’s axe had done a number on the sensitive communications equipment. Windows hid in his bunk or in the rec room, strumming his guitar, sipping beer, and kept a wary eye out on the three men tied to the couch.

Childs remained camped out in the rec room, watching the trio of suspects. Nauls was mostly sticking to the kitchen, staying busy fixing them regular meals, although like MacReady, not many of the men had much of an appetite. Fuchs had been sleeping in the lab, working almost around the clock on trying to discover a new test to determine who was human, and who was not.

Tossing back the remainder of the scotch, MacReady ejected the cassette tape from the recorder and slid it into the pants pocket of his flight suit. Standing, from the back of the chair he retrieved his blue hooded sweatshirt and bomber jacket, shrugging into both. Picking up the .357 and holstering it, MacReady hoisted the flamethrower from the desk and exited the quiet room. He found the south hallway vacant. Entering the foyer at the far end of the hall he set down the flamethrower. The wind whistled at the exterior door; a frosting of snow had found its way through the door’s seal. He flipped his hood up over his head, and from the coatrack he donned a pair of clear goggles and gloves. With a grunt, he again picked up the double fuel tanks of the flamethrower unit and heaved the heavy weapon onto his back.

It was fully dark outside, and the gale howled. The blizzard had not abated in hammering them for two straight days now. MacReady left the outpost through the south entrance and fought his way through the storm. He followed the roped guideline up towards his shack. The path was marked with blue beacon lights and black triangular flags whipping in the wind. Blowing snow and ice pellets stung his cheeks, condensation from his breath quickly freezing and forming frost in his beard.

MacReady had not spent much time out at his shack the past few days, being preoccupied with the events taking place inside the camp. The last two nights he had stayed inside the main compound, helping Childs watch the three men on the couch, and sleeping alone in the quiet room. MacReady had temporarily moved in there with a bag full of his clothing and gear.

Through heavy blinding snowfall MacReady climbed the double set of switchback stairs that led up to his shack and burst through the door, escaping the onslaught of the Antarctic blizzard. He flipped on the lights and stamped snow from his boots. The old oil furnace was still reliably chugging along. The interior of his shack was colder than he liked it, he would keep it warmer, but it was an absolute pain to refill the fuel tank.

MacReady shrugged the bulky flamethrower to the floor and removed his goggles. Pulling off his gloves, he knelt in front of his bed along the far wall. From beneath the bunk MacReady withdrew a small handmade wooden chest about the size of a shoe box. Carved into the top right corner of the box was 'MAC' in block letters. MacReady had bought the box in Da Nang on his first tour in Vietnam and whittled his abbreviated surname in the wood with a Ka-Bar knife. On a whim, and under the circumstances at the time, he had decided to bring the box with him to Antarctica. Setting the wood box on the bed he unhooked the nylon corded loop from around a screwhead and flipped open the lid.

MacReady had not opened the box in a long time, not for years now. Inside was a mix of papers and trinkets from his time in the war: a Zippo engraved with 'R.J. MacReady' and the dates of his tours, '1969 – 1971', a pack of nudie playing cards, a ping pong ball, a single die, a shark tooth, a swizzle stick and umbrella, a key on a brass tag stamped '64'—stolen from his R&R hotel room in Bangkok, a Playboy magazine dated February 1971, newspaper clippings from the war, and a single 7.62 mm cartridge. Inside were also his two medals, a Bronze Cross and a Distinguished Flying Cross. Too many memories from another time, another life.

MacReady took the cassette tape out of his pocket and slid it among the newspaper clippings at the bottom of the box. Closing the lid, he pushed the box back under his bed. He stood and took a moment to survey the damaged and dark Chess Wizard computer game sitting on his desk. A fleeting moment of regret passed over him at wrecking the game in a moment of alcoholic bad temper, just before the arrival of the Norwegians. That was only four days ago this morning. It felt like a month.

On the desk beside the broken electronic game, sat a fifth of scotch, the bottle just a little over half full. MacReady twisted the cap off and took a sharp swig. He slowly replaced the cap and regretfully set the bottle back down. He vowed to make the booze last, this bottle was his only one left.

Taking a final glance around the shack, MacReady had no desire to return to the outpost. Given the choice he would rather stay out here and drink himself into oblivion and wait for spring. The harsh reality of the situation dictated that it was best maintain a level of sobriety and head back inside. He needed to check in with Fuchs.

Gathering up the flamethrower and redonning his gear, MacReady flipped off the lights and reluctantly opened the door to the gale outside. He was almost back to the south entrance when he

saw someone outside, across the camp's yard, approaching through the blowing snow. The man raised a hand in signal. MacReady paused just outside the entrance, raising a hand in return, and saw that it was Norris. Norris was carrying a kitchen tray. It took a second for MacReady to realize that Norris was out bringing Blair his dinner at the tool shed. Concerned, MacReady wondered if Norris saw him go up to his shack.

Norris trudged through the snow towards MacReady, calling out to him. "Hey Mac, why're you outside?"

MacReady nodded towards his shack. "I was looking for a bottle of scotch I had stashed up there."

"Find any?"

"No, I'm out. There's only what's left at the bar inside now," MacReady replied, turning to head into the foyer. He wanted out of the cold.

Norris nodded with a wide grin. He said, "Too bad we aren't stocked like the Glacier Inn back in Hyder."

MacReady raised his eyebrows and had to smile wanly at that. He had met Vance Norris the previous fall—fall in the Northern Hemisphere—at the bar in a small Alaskan mining town on the Canadian border. "Right. That would sure make this goddamn winter a lot better," MacReady agreed.

The two men entered the foyer together, Norris behind MacReady, and the geologist closed the outside door against the storm. As MacReady started to peel off his gloves and goggles Palmer came into the foyer from the south hallway. He was wearing his parka and holding his gloves and a balaclava face mask in hand.

MacReady looked questioningly at Palmer. "Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Outside," Palmer quipped, "we got a loose door at the greenhouse, snow's coming in. Wind must have pried it open. It's only gonna get worse with this storm. I gotta fix it."

MacReady was suddenly conscious of Norris right behind him and felt a jolt of nervousness being sandwiched between the two men. He stepped to the side wall along the coat rack to keep both men in his direct line of sight. It was obvious to both men he was keeping his distance. MacReady said, "Alright, make it quick."

Palmer gave MacReady a leering look and nodded. He moved towards the door . . . towards MacReady. MacReady felt his concern and suspicion mount and edge quickly on fear. He had become entirely too uncomfortable with the two men. Internal alarm bells were going off. He quickly side-stepped Palmer, moving towards the door to the foyer and the open safety of the south hallway. Norris and Palmer stood side by side, staring at him. MacReady had the ominous feeling he had just escaped a trap. Or he was just extremely paranoid like the rest of them. He held the gun of the flamethrower in gloved hands, the nozzle aimed loosely but unthreateningly at the two men.

"How was Blair?" MacReady asked Norris.

"He seems fine, much calmer," Norris replied. "He was asking to come back inside."

MacReady shook his head. "No chance. Make it quick with that door, Palmer. Then meet us back in the rec room. I'm going to check with Fuchs and see if he has come up with anything yet."

Both Norris and Palmer nodded and watched MacReady leave, heading up the corridor. The two men exchanged a glance, their faces expressionless. Palmer nodded silently, his face dead pan. He pulled on his balaclava and gloves and Norris opened the outside door and let him outside into the storm.

Palmer bent into the wind, moving through the blowing snow. He had lied to MacReady. He was not headed around back to the greenhouse to repair a loose door. He had another destination

in mind. Palmer wanted to see what MacReady was doing up at his shack. The Things that now looked and sounded and acted like Palmer, Norris, and Blair were all suspicious and wary of MacReady. They didn't take him in the foyer; the pilot had the flamethrower and Fuchs was close by, in the lab at the end of the hall. Their collective plan was to frame the pilot and turn the remaining men on him.

Following in MacReady's fresh tracks up towards the shack, Palmer ascended the stairs and entered the small stilt-raised outbuilding. He flipped on the lights and at first glance saw nothing odd or seemingly out of place. He spent the next few minutes searching the shack. Palmer really did not know exactly what he was looking for . . . but possibly a signal, a note, or a message of some kind. Left to warn the humans to come in the spring.

Finding nothing of consequence, Palmer reached inside his coat and pulled out a piece of green material. It was the remains of a half a shredded shirt, one of the standard-issue NSI apparel the men were given for the winter-over. Stenciled inside the collar in black block letters was the name R.J. MACREADY. Palmer had lifted it from MacReady's gear bag in the quiet room less than ten minutes ago when the pilot was outside, quickly tearing it.

Approaching the shack's oil furnace, Palmer stuffed the tattered shirt behind the heating unit, jammed it against the wall, leaving a flap of the material clearly exposed. Then he quickly exited the shack, leaving the lights on.

Palmer made his way back down the two flights of stairs, following the marked path back towards the main camp. About fifty feet from the south entrance, Palmer stopped and reached into his coat again. He pulled out another shred of clothing, also pilfered from MacReady's gear in the quiet room. This was a pair of pants, also stenciled with the name R.J. MACREADY, torn and shredded by Palmer.

Palmer tossed the ripped pants to the side of the path, where they would easily be spotted by anyone coming out of the south entrance. Upon discovery, the clothing would immediately and effectively frame MacReady as no longer human. The men would turn on him and kill him.

Palmer head inside, making for the fuse panel in the radio room.

Lights Out!

Palmer blew a fuse in the radio room, and across the hall the laboratory was slowly plunged into darkness. The only ambient light in the lab was a ghostly blue glow from the exterior marker lights casting in through a single window. Moving quickly in the shadows, Palmer donned his flamethrower unit and circled out of the radio room, stopping just outside the door to the lab. He stood motionless in the main hallway, waiting.

Candlelight flickered from within the lab. Palmer remained perfectly still, invisible in the recessed darkness, his back against the wall. He heard the assistant biologist Patrick Fuchs moving about, slowly approaching the doorway. There was a loud hollow metallic clang as Fuchs stumbled into something in the dark.

Moving fast, Palmer stepped across the doorway, a shape in the night, a shadow among shadows.

“Who’s that?” Fuchs’ voice called out.

Palmer strode quickly down the main hallway, rounding the corner into the south hallway, past the empty and dark map room, heading towards the south foyer. He could hear Fuchs following closely behind in the darkness. The biologist had taken the lure. Palmer passed straight through the foyer, exiting the camp, leaving the heavy outer door open for Fuchs to surely follow.

The storm had unexpectedly abated, the wind dying off from a steady gale to lightly falling snow flurries. Palmer trod out into the night, towards the cache of fuel drums near a support building that lay to the southwest. Again, he slinked back behind the building and waited in the darkness, watching the entrance to the camp. On cue Fuchs came running out of the exterior foyer. He had stopped in the coat room to throw on an open parka and gloves and he had exchanged the candle for a flare. Fuchs sparked up the flare and it hissed, giving off billowing smoke and a brilliant magenta light. Palmer slunk further back and watched as Fuchs’ scanned the area and came towards him. In the light of the flare the young biologist easily spied the bait, the remnant of MacReady’s torn pants Palmer had thrown to the side of the marked pathway.

Fuchs approached and circled the clothing. He knelt in the snow and picked up the shredded material, studying it. He read the name, not believing his eyes. Ten block letters stenciled on the dark fabric: R.J. MACREADY.

The Antarctic night seemed to grow impossibly more frigid. Fuchs’ blood ran as cold as the ancient glaciers surrounding him. His breath came out in rapid bursts as the impact of the discovery dawned on him. The man he had trusted the most was no longer a man.

Shock swept through Fuchs, and he shivered uncontrollably. In his hasty departure from the compound the only polar winter gear he had thrown on was an unzipped parka and gloves. The night temperatures were pushing close to a hundred below from the passing storm. He would need to return inside. But who would he approach with this revelation? If MacReady was no longer human, then whom could he trust now? Norris? Childs? Possibly Palmer . . .? If this Thing got to MacReady, how many of them had been taken over?

MacReady was the man Fuchs had put his trust and confidence in. Fuchs had approached MacReady first after finding Blair’s terrifying notes: *It needs to be alone and in close proximity with a life form to be absorbed. The chameleon strikes in the dark. There is still cellular activity in these burned remains, they’re not dead yet.*

Fuchs’ mind raced. If MacReady was a Thing, then why didn’t he—it—attack him in the lab less than twenty minutes ago? They had been alone together, and it would have been an opportune

time to strike. It did not add up. A piece of MacReady's torn clothing was not proof positive of his infection. Maybe this Thing was one step ahead of them all, playing games.

Fuchs was getting dangerously cold. Regardless of who he was going to approach first with this news he needed to get back inside. He stood and started out for the entrance to the camp and stopped dead.

A solitary figure stood on the walkway not twenty feet away, blocking the path. Whoever it was stood completely still, eerily back lit by the blue marker lights. Their thick fur-lined hood was up, hiding their face in deep shadow, and they wore the portable backpack flamethrower unit, the gun nozzle held in gloved hands.

Fuchs froze in alarm. He raised the flare to try and throw light onto the hidden face.

"Who goes there?" Fuchs called out.

Heart hammering against his ribcage he took a few tentative steps toward the mysterious figure. Other than the flare in his hand Fuchs had nothing to defend himself with. In the lab he had kept a glass beaker of sulfuric acid close at hand to throw on any would-be attacker.

"Who the hell is that? Who are you?" Fuchs said loudly. Through his fear, anger was rising at the figure's unresponsiveness.

He took a few more cautious steps closer and then stopped abruptly as the figure moved. Unexpectedly the silhouette raised the nozzle of the flamethrower, pointed right at Fuchs.

"Oh shit . . ." Fuchs let out under his breath. He yelled again, terrified—and furious. "Goddamn it! Who the hell are you!"

With unexpected speed the menacing figure started out straight towards him, boots crunching in the snow. Fuchs backpedaled a step, his adrenaline surging. Sheer panic overtook him as his brain negotiated fight or flight. When the shape was just ten feet from Fuchs, it stopped abruptly. Fuchs could now vaguely make out the man's facial features in the magenta glow of his dying flare.

"Palmer . . .?" Fuchs voice was tight with disbelief.

The imposing figure raised the flamethrower and aimed the nozzle point blank at the biologist. The weapon's blue pilot light looked as bright and as hot as the sun. Too late, Fuchs chose flight. He turned to run. A burning stream of compressed fuel slammed into his body with enough force to almost knock him off his feet. The frigid Antarctic night around him was swallowed by an intense searing heat.

The incendiary fuel covered Fuchs from head to foot and he became a human torch. The pain was immediate and beyond anything Fuchs had ever fathomed possible. He screamed only once, uncontrollably, and inhaled super-heated flame and vapor into his lungs, scorching them. With every muscle in his body contracting in violent tortured spasms he flopped to the snow and tossed about. Already most of his clothing was burned away, his hair and beard gone, glasses knocked off, skin blistering and blackening. In less than a minute his struggles slowed, his body twitching in the melting snow.

Palmer stepped forward and hit Fuchs with another blast from the flame unit. The prone figure in the snow became only an atrocity now, barely recognizable as human, melting itself further down into the snow, the charred flesh steaming and hissing. Both lenses in Fuchs' wire framed glasses had popped and cracked in the intense heat.

Palmer watched what was left of Fuchs start to flame out, the super-heated corpse already half concealed, sinking into the snow. Fuchs had needed to be eliminated quickly. A new test could not be allowed to be discovered, as the Norwegians had successfully done. The young biologist was

close to a possible breakthrough. As the only one who was working to disclose a test, Fuchs' disappearance and murder would leave the men further paranoid and scrambling.

Emotionlessly, Palmer turned from the grisly pyre and started back towards the south entrance of the camp, walking briskly through the steadily increasing snowfall. The storm was beginning to build again rapidly, and the icy wind howled.

Fifty minutes after Fuchs' death the entire research station fell under a cloak of total darkness. The rooms and hallways of Outpost #31 were darker as a witch's bedroom and haunted with black and blue shadows—light coming in the frosted windows from exterior marker lights. Panic broke out in the rec room where Childs and Norris were watching the three men tied to the couch. Doc Copper, Clark, and Garry were heavily doped with morphine and lashed together side by side.

At the far south end of the main hallway, back in the radio room, Palmer had thrown the main breaker. He now stood motionlessly in total darkness and listened. He heard Nauls yell out from the kitchen to the men in the rec room. There were shouts in return, back and forth up and down the main hallway. Overlapping voices: Childs, Norris, Nauls, and now MacReady, all yelling amongst each other, disoriented in the blackness, and frightened. Palmer could hear MacReady taking charge again, ordering the men to stay in the rec room.

Keeping to the shadows, Palmer set out down the main hallway towards the rec room. Ahead, he could see a swinging flashlight beam pierce the dark and a flurry of commotion. He moved towards the entrance to the rec room and slipped inside, bumping right into Nauls. The cook had his back to the doorway and did not see or hear Palmer come into the room and nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Jesus Christ!" Nauls cried out, jumping back against an Asteroids arcade game. MacReady quickly put a light on Palmer. "Palmer?" Nauls said breathlessly, "you scared the shit outta me man. Don't do that!" While the cook was catching his breath, MacReady and Childs both eyed Palmer suspiciously.

"Sorry," Palmer shot back. "Hey," he asked the group, "where's Windows? I ain't seen him."

MacReady kept the flashlight aimed at the back-up pilot and ignored his query. "Palmer, I want those lights back on *now*. Find out what happened and fix it."

"Alright, give me a sec, Mac." Palmer unslung the flamethrower's fuel tanks from his back and set the unit down on the pool table.

"Where you been?" Childs asked his bunkmate with an apprehensive glare.

Palmer started to defend himself, "I was out fixing that door on the greenhouse—"

"Palmer," MacReady cut him off, "both you and Childs go and get those lights back on. *Now* goddammit."

The two men gave MacReady a hard look. Norris, who had been stumbling about in the dark behind the bar, finally found and switched on a second flashlight. He brought it out and handed it to Childs. "Here, take this with you," Norris said.

The big mechanic gladly accepted the offered light. He turned to MacReady. "Windows is missing."

Nauls was spooked. "Man, I don't like this . . ."

"I know. I'll find him. Just go get those lights on, fast," MacReady ordered.

Together Palmer and Childs head out into the main hallway working their way south, towards the radio room. MacReady swept his flashlight around the rec room and took stock. Garry, Copper, and Clark were still tied in place, half oblivious to what was going on around them. “Anybody know where Windows is?” MacReady asked.

Norris shook his head. “We haven’t seen him in a while now.”

“What about Fuchs?”

“He should still be in the lab,” answered Norris.

“Dammit.” MacReady narrowed his eyes and his lips pursed. “Why hasn’t he called out?” The pilot circled the dark pinball machine to the hallway door. He swung his flashlight beam up and down and corridor. He could see Palmer and Childs and the beam from their flashlight at the far south end. They were already past the lab. If Fuchs was in there he should have come out by now to see what was going on. Something was not right. Hearing a noise from the opposite direction MacReady swung the beam around to catch Windows coming out of the door to the bunkrooms across the hallway. The radioman held his hand up to his face to block the light from his eyes, a terrified expression on his face.

“Windows, for Christ sakes, where the hell were you?” MacReady asked.

“I was sleeping in my bunk,” Windows stammered, his voice trembling. “I heard yelling and woke up in the pitch dark. The goddamn lights are out.”

“Get in here,” MacReady said gruffly, and guided the radioman into the rec room with the flashlight beam. MacReady turned and looked towards the far south end of the hallway again. He yelled down the corridor: “Childs, get those fucking lights on!”

The seven men in the rec room waited in hushed and tense silence for Palmer and Childs to fix the lights. MacReady prayed the battery in his flashlight had a good charge. The three men tied on the couch were quiet, breathing heavily in their oblivious drugged slumber. The pilot was envious.

Mark Windows was beyond terrified. He was only relieved it was dark so the other men could not see that he was visibly shaking. He was scared—and quietly pissed. A full three days ago he had first suggested they should burn the horror that Mac and Doc had brought back from the Norwegian camp. First, Bennings had brushed him off: “*You can’t burn the find of the century. That’s gonna win somebody the Nobel Prize.*”

Now Bennings was dead. It had taken MacReady another entire day to finally decide to torch all the remains and their sabotaged blood. Windows had had a bad feeling about everything since the beginning. The Norwegian-Thing spooked him sideways, and he could have sworn he saw it move under the blanket in the storeroom right before it attacked Bennings. Then yesterday afternoon he had found a pair of shredded long johns in a trashcan in the radio room. Size large, but most of the men wore a large size . . . and the name tag had been torn out.

Unexpectedly, Garry announced in a commanding but slurred voice, “MacReady, I’ve gotta take a piss.”

MacReady ignored the station manager and wished Childs and Palmer would hurry up. Norris looked at MacReady with a questioning look regarding Garry’s request. MacReady shook his head, his face stern. No way.

A long minute went by. Garry asked again, his voice drugged and slow. “I’ve really got to take a leak, MacReady. Untie me.”

MacReady continued to ignore his station manager. There was no goddamn way he was going to untie Garry now and take him to the can. He would let the station manager wet himself if need be. MacReady still heard the hum of the generator from below them and felt warm air coming from a wall vent. At least the camp’s heat was still on.

“God damn . . .” Garry stammered, aggravated. “There’s gonna be bloody hell to pay unless somebody unties me. I have to take a fuckin’ leak.”

“Mac!” Nauls pleaded, looking from the station manager to the pilot. “I can take him.” The rec room’s bathroom was close, right beside the pinball game. MacReady shook his head at the cook, remaining resolute.

The lights flickered once. A couple of the men took a sharp breath. The lights flickered on again, went dark for a few long seconds, and then came back on and stayed on. The rec room was lit up brightly. All the men together breathed a collective sigh of relief. The Asteroids arcade game and Heat Wave pinball machine came back to life along with the jukebox, neon blue Busch beer sign in the bar, and the hanging billiard chandelier over the pool table. MacReady glanced around; Doc Copper looked to have slept right through the ordeal with his head on Clark’s shoulder. Clark appeared to be out as well. The lucky bastards slept through the scene.

“Thank Christ,” MacReady muttered with a sigh, switching off his flashlight. Windows let out a quick prayer under his breath, and Norris shook his head with relief.

Thirty seconds later Palmer and Childs came back into the rec room. The mechanic looked to MacReady. “Not much to fix, the main breaker was flipped off, but a fuse for the lab was blown out—deliberate.”

MacReady digested this info, his concern growing. “Shit . . .” he said blankly, his thoughts again turning to Fuchs.

Palmer spied the radio operator suspiciously. “Windows, where have you been?” he asked.

“I was sleeping in my bunk Palmer—” the radioman retorted sharply.

Palmer cut Windows off, yelling back, Childs joined in, and a heated argument broke out between the three men. Windows stepped back from the two bunkmates ganging up on him and grabbed a parka from a hook behind the bar and shrugged it on, defending himself and cursing loudly. The arguing grew in intensity and Norris looked desperately at MacReady.

“Alright, stop!” MacReady’s voice roared above them all.

The men ceased fighting and looked at the man in charge. MacReady had all eyes on him. For a moment, he was uncertain what to tell them. All he wanted to do was forget about this entire bloody mess and go up to his shack and drink himself into sweet oblivion. But he needed to act, and fast. Fuchs was missing and at least one man among them was no longer human. They would first need to find Fuchs. A test to determine who was who was the only direction to start sorting this mess out.

“Anybody see Fuchs?” MacReady asked, looking at each of the men in turn. “Somebody blew out a fuse in the lab. Lights were out in there for an hour, anyone of us could have gotten to him.”

MacReady's Shack

The fierce wind whipped the guideline around like a skipping rope gone wild. The storm had returned to its full fury and conditions again were reduced to a total white out. No person should ever venture outside into the onslaught of an Antarctic blizzard, let alone at night. Yet the two men, pilot and cook, pushed through the storm, following the towline, their umbilical cord lifeline from the camp up to the shack.

Nauls gripped the guide rope with a thickly gloved hand and leaned into the howling gale to keep his balance. He trudged through the drifting snow just behind MacReady. Both men wore clear plastic goggles to shield their eyes from the wind and blowing snow. Nauls had the weight of the flamethrower's fuel cylinders strapped on his back, but in the current conditions he didn't mind. The extra weight helped him keep his footing in the strong winds. He also liked having the operating end of the flamethrower aimed at MacReady's back. But it wasn't just the pilot Nauls did not trust. From now on he would no longer turn his back on any of the other men at the camp.

Twenty-two-year-old Trevon Nauls was born in Chicago and took the position of the kitchen cook with the National Science Institute to get away from the streets, drugs, and gangs of the city. They pay was good and it kept him thousands of miles away from the gangbanger life he was slowly being sucked into. But right now, Nauls wished he was back on the relatively safe streets of inner-city Chicago, fleeing from the Crips on his roller skates, instead of trapped at the bottom of the world with a malevolent alien lifeform intent on taking over his body.

Nauls was terrified and had been doing his best to not let it show. He was still in a state of semi-shock at just discovering the burned body of the assistant biologist Fuchs. Somebody had killed him. Not somebody, some *Thing*. Nauls did not at all agree with MacReady's suggestion that Fuchs had burned himself before the Thing had tried to get to him. He could not see Fuchs torching himself up with a flare, or any other means. Personally, Nauls would rather take his chances and let the monster have him than turn himself into a human torch. Fuchs was trying to find a test to determine who was human. He was purposely killed . . . eliminated. And the last man to see Fuchs alive was MacReady. Now MacReady had singled Nauls out, leading him up to his shack . . . because somebody has left the lights on?

Out front, MacReady held a flare high, lighting the path up to the shack. He turned to look back and check that Nauls was still with him. MacReady's wide-brimmed campaign hat jerked around crazily on his back in the frigid storm.

Nauls grimaced against the bitter cold and wondered why MacReady persisted with his stupid hat at the South Pole. Through the camp's grapevine, Nauls had heard the hat had special meaning for the pilot, and that MacReady had got it back in Vietnam. Fighting his fear, the cook pushed on, wearily following in the footsteps of the pilot.

Ahead of them, through the blowing snow, a light burned in the solitary window of the shack. MacReady did not like the scenario at all. The other men in the camp would not trespass in his personal space. He was sure that whomever or whatever had gone up there after him had a malicious agenda and was no longer human. MacReady had lied to Nauls and Windows when he told them he had left his shack yesterday. He had been up there less than two hours ago, hiding his message of warning, the recorded cassette tape.

The shack was constructed on stilts, elevated a good ten feet above the icy ground, high above the blowing and drifting snow. Finding their footing up the snow-covered steps, the men climbed the double flights of switchback stairs to the shack's door.

MacReady could make out a new set of second footprints. Someone had been up to the shack since he was here last, and they had purposely left the light on to draw him here. MacReady was willing to bet it was also the same person who likely killed Fuchs. And that they had possibly found his hidden message.

MacReady tossed the flare away into the blowing gale and grasped the door handle. He turned his head to Nauls, his voice dimmed by the howling blizzard. "Stay close with that torch."

MacReady shouldered the door, and it swung open. A quick scan revealed there was nobody inside the shack. The single overhead light was on, the heated interior quickly sucked out past them into the frigid night. The men felt the pleasant warmth on their numb faces. After only a moment's hesitation they gratefully entered the shack and MacReady struggled to get the door closed behind them, sealing off the howling wind.

The men raised their snow goggles and looked around the small room. Nothing immediately looked suspicious or out of place. Without Nauls taking notice, MacReady wanted to have a look inside the wood box under his bed and be sure the tape was still where he had left it.

MacReady motioned to the far side of the room. "Take a look along that wall . . . around the bookshelf and furnace, see if you can see anything outta place or missing."

"Like what?" Nauls asked, turning to look questioningly at the pilot.

"Like anything. Somebody's for sure been up here."

Nauls shrugged, lowered his hood, and glanced around MacReady's abode. He had only been up here a couple of times previously, during seasons past, before MacReady came onboard at Outpost #31 and took over the stilted shack. The space was not half bad, a hell of a lot bigger than the bunk back in the camp he shared with Clark. MacReady seemed to have everything he needed out here, he'd set up shop quickly. Travel posters advertising tropical destinations covered the walls: Hawaii, Tahiti, Bora Bora. Against the opposite wall was an unmade cot bunk covered with thick blankets. A large computer chess game sat on a desk, beside it, unsurprisingly, a half full bottle of scotch.

Nauls moved towards the far side of the shack and his eyes wandered across the bookshelf. There was a flipped through copy of Penthouse and a travel book for French Polynesia. This was MacReady's place to get away from it all, although there was not much to get away from on a winter-over. Nauls found most of the men enjoyed each other's company in this desolate and frozen place. Maybe not so much now in their current situation . . . Nauls shook his head, frustrated. He had no way to know if any of MacReady's belongings were moved or missing. He turned to see MacReady was bent down at his bunk, looking under his cot.

"I can't tell if anything is missing, Mac," Nauls stated.

"Just keep looking," the pilot replied from across the room, irritation in his voice.

"For what?"

"Look, just give me a minute."

The cook scowled and continued to look over the pilot's books. He found it incredibly warm inside the shack. "You know," Nauls said, his eyes roaming over the bookshelf, "there *is* shit missing from the kitchen. Two days ago, the food processor disappeared. Yesterday, the blender. Now the microwave and other stuff too."

From where he was kneeling, MacReady looked over and cocked his head at the cook. He could not make any sense of Nauls' revelation. Nothing added up. He pulled the wooden box out from

under the bed. Casting another furtive glance at Nauls and seeing the cook scanning the bookshelf, MacReady flipped open the lid. A quick search found the cassette tape still safely hidden inside. With relief, MacReady quickly closed and returned the box under the bed. The pilot got to his feet slowly. He was cold, tired, frustrated, and disheartened. He crossed over and eased himself down into the chair at his desk. The black mirror screen of the defunct Chess Wizard stared back at him, cold and dark.

He twisted the cap off the bottle of scotch, and took a serious slug, the warm liquid heating his insides. MacReady felt something inside the pocket of his bomber jacket. Reaching inside he discovered he still had Clark's pocketknife. MacReady had taken it from the dog handler when Garry had relinquished his command two days ago. His thoughts then returned to Fuchs' death with a rising concern. MacReady savored the drink and slowly shook his head. "I don't know," he said under his breath.

Nauls turned to see MacReady sitting at his desk, shaking his head. The man looked beaten, defeated. "What is it, Mac?" Nauls asked.

"It's Fuchs," answered MacReady. He held out the bottle, offering it to the cook.

Nauls shook his head. "What about him?"

MacReady took another sip of the scotch. "He didn't kill himself; he was murdered. Fuchs was trying to find a new test. He was the only one of us who could possibly come up with something. Somebody got to him."

Nauls nodded once. "I think you're right on that one, bwana. And whoever killed Fuchs was probably the same person who ruined our blood supply."

MacReady had his head down, looking at the bottle of scotch. "This Thing is always one step ahead of us. Playing us."

Nauls was watching the pilot, concerned with MacReady's apathy and dejection. MacReady was the man in charge, and to see him defeated was newly concerning. Nauls' suspicion of the pilot was lowering, somewhat. "How're we gonna find out who is who?" Nauls asked. "How're we gonna find out which one of us got to the blood? Got to Fuchs?" The young cook's face was strained, his voice high and tight, almost pleading.

MacReady was silent for a moment, and then he shook his head. "I don't know." He looked longingly at the remaining scotch in the bottle. A chill went through him, and he glanced over at the old oil furnace that kept his shack heated. He held Clark's pocket knife out to Nauls. "Here, can you check the level on that tank? I don't want it running dry and having this place freeze up."

"What's the knife for?" Nauls asked.

"To scrape the frost off the gauge."

Nauls did not reply, but grudgingly complied. He stepped forward and accepted the knife warily, before crossing back to eye the fuel gauge above the furnace in the far corner of the shack. The oil tank itself sat on a raised platform outside the shack. The furnace was running, humming softly, and Nauls checked the temperature dial. MacReady had it set at a downright tropical seventy-three degrees. If Garry saw that MacReady would catch shit.

Nauls used the edge of the blade to scrape the frosted glass and bent to examine the fuel gauge. There was just under half a tank left. Something else then caught Nauls' eye. What looked like a piece of torn material was wedged behind the furnace and the wall. It appeared to have been stuffed back there, and that the blast of wind from opening the shack's door had dislodged it.

Nauls was just about to let off on MacReady to be more careful with fire hazards when what he was seeing fully dawned on him. He snapped his mouth shut. Trembling, he turned his head

slightly to see MacReady out of the corner of his eye. The pilot was still sitting at the desk, J&B in hand, appearing to be contemplating the bottle deeply.

Taking a breath to steal himself, Nauls quickly pocketed the knife in his parka and reached out to snatch up the torn garment. The material came loose with an easy tug. Keeping his back to MacReady, Nauls' worst thoughts were confirmed. The material was shredded clothing, the remnant of a shirt. The cook's eyes went wide when they found the stenciled nametag.

R.J. MACREADY.

Silent seconds ticked by as Nauls fully realized the dangerous corner he was in. MacReady was no longer MacReady. No longer human. Nauls was alone with one of those Things . . . trapped in its goddamn lair.

"How's that tank?" MacReady asked.

Nauls jumped at the pilot's voice. He barely got out a mumbled reply, his mouth already going dry. "Huh?"

MacReady was short with the cook. "Damn it, do I need more fuel or what?"

"No, you've got plenty—half a tank," Nauls replied as coolly as he could, licking his lips. Fumbling with his parka zipper, as unnoticeably as possible he slipped the shredded shirt inside his coat.

"Good," MacReady said. He took another pull off the bottle, enjoying the numbing warmth starting to spread throughout his limbs. The alcohol was tamping down his anxiety, allowing his thinking to clear.

Nauls slowly turned to face MacReady. He scanned the pilot's bearded face for a sign, any sign or tell that would give the monster away. He saw nothing. MacReady was still staring blankly at the bottle of scotch. Nauls began to make his way over to the door. "We'd better get heading back," he said. "It's been almost fifteen minutes since we left Windows."

"Yeah, all right," MacReady replied, fatigue in his voice. He was not looking forward at all to going back out into the cold, but it was his own rule that they all were to all meet back in the rec room in twenty minutes. The pilot debated whether to have another shot of the J&B, and regretfully recapped the bottle, deciding it might be better to have a clear head. He replaced the scotch back on the table beside the Chess Wizard.

Nauls stood at the door, trying not to appear too rushed or edgy, watching MacReady closely. The pilot seemed to have forgotten he gave Nauls the knife. The cook had to let the others know about MacReady. Or whatever the hell it was that now looked like MacReady. He could not be let back into the camp.

If needed, the cook hoped he had the guts to hit MacReady with a burst from the flamethrower. Nauls had not yet used the torch, but he was sure he would not hesitate. The cook got queasy at the thought of burning someone alive. Fuchs' blackened corpse was still fresh in his mind. MacReady looked and acted and sounded like MacReady. This was not like Childs torching the abomination in the kennel, or Bennings out on the snowfield. Those were monsters; MacReady still at least looked human.

But that's exactly what it wanted him to think, wasn't it? That MacReady was human. No, MacReady was an imitation. Just a perfect imitation, as Blair had said. Nauls' heart froze with fear as MacReady stood and approached the door.

"What's wrong?" MacReady asked, noticing Nauls was acting strangely. He could feel the new alarm and tension coming from the younger black man.

The cook shook his head. "Nothin'."

The pilot gave Nauls a hard look, and then donned his gloves and goggles. “Let’s get moving. If we’re not back soon we’re gonna have some explaining to do ourselves.”

“Right,” Nauls replied simply, keeping his voice even. He slipped his goggles back over his eyes and pulled up his hood. The cook’s anxiety spiked again as MacReady brushed past him and pulled open the door. Cold air and blowing snow rushed into the shack. MacReady flicked off the shack’s light and the two men stepped out onto the landing. Impossibly, the storm had increased in intensity. MacReady struck a fresh flare, and the men carefully descended the two flights of stairs. The wind blew unbelievably strong, flinging ice pellets and snow. MacReady looked towards the main camp and saw nothing—it was a total whiteout.

He held the flare high into the howling storm with one hand and braced himself holding onto the first marker beacon with the other. He turned his head to yell at the cook. “Hold tight to the towline. You don’t want to get blown loose. I can’t see the camp.”

Nauls nodded, pulling up his balaclava. MacReady was right, the main building was not visible through the raging blizzard. The guideline and marker lights disappeared into a blur of swirling nothingness. Without the towline a person would never be able to find their way blindly back to the camp in the storm.

Together they set out down the path, the fierce wind whipping around them. Nauls kept the torch aimed at MacReady’s back. More than once he debated just pulling the ignitor and torching the pilot. But if MacReady was one of those Things, why didn’t it try and attack him in the shack? They were alone together; it would have been the perfect time.

It was obvious now. MacReady had effectively taken control of the camp. This was out of character for the reclusive pilot. This is not what Nauls had witnessed the past six weeks. When he first came to the research station MacReady wanted only to further isolate himself from the men and the activities at the camp. Now he was running the show. It was one of those Things in charge now. Nauls could feel cold sweat break out across his back under the heavy parka.

Nauls kept pace with MacReady, trying desperately to think of a way to somehow get ahead of him on the towline before they reached the camp. With a jerk on the line, his thoughts were answered. Out in front MacReady stumbled and tripped on a drift and he went down hard. The flare tumbled into the snow, going dark.

“Damn!” MacReady cursed, his voice carried away on the wind. He struggled to get back on his feet and regain his balance in the tempest.

Nauls saw his chance and took it. Keeping a tight grip on the line, he quickly stepped around and overtook MacReady on the towline.

As he went by, Nauls called out. “I’ll lead. Let’s keep going.”

MacReady was angry with himself for falling, and he was surprised to see the cook step around him. Beyond exhausted, feeling the deep cold creeping in, he did not reply and got to his feet, setting out after Nauls. Fighting through the blizzard, MacReady swore he was going to gather everyone together in the rec room when he got back inside and keep them there, in sight. Nobody was wandering off anywhere. Then he was going to sit himself at the bar and have more than a few drinks. He had no plan other than that. With Fuchs dead, there was little way of finding a test to uncover who was human and who was not. He didn’t know what, but something up at the shack had Nauls spooked.

MacReady saw that Nauls was moving fast, getting far ahead of him on the towline, disappearing in the blowing snow.

“Hey!” MacReady called out. He saw Nauls turn to glance quickly back. MacReady increased his pace to catch up, careful not to slip and fall again, keeping a tight grip on the line. Ahead, the

cook was now just an obscure shape in the storm. Something was not right. His concern growing, MacReady pulled himself forward on the line, moving faster. With a sudden jerk the towline gave way completely, going slack in his glove and MacReady landed flat on his back in the snow.

Clark's pocketknife had made quick work of the towline. The rope let go with a snap as Nauls sliced through, and the recoiling backlash almost knocked him off his feet as well. Nauls struggled to maintain his balance and held onto the end of the line leading to the camp like his life depended on it. Because it did. If he got lost in the storm, he would perish in the cold. It seemed the three doors facing the men all held nasty outcomes behind: get burned alive, freeze to death in the blizzard, or be consumed by a monster. There was no escape at the bottom of the world.

Behind him through the whistling wind he could hear MacReady yelling. But was it really MacReady . . . or something else? He was now one of those Things, and the cook had escaped a trap.

Gripping the towline, Nauls repocketed the dog handler's knife, struck a flare and set out as fast he could for the camp.

Break & Enter

The blizzard had become an all-consuming raging tempest. Visibility was down to zero, the night a frozen black oblivion. From where he lay in the snow, MacReady pulled himself to his knees and quickly reeled in the length of slack towline. He looked at the frayed end in his gloved hand, eyes blazing behind clear plastic snow goggles.

Nauls had cut the line.

“Son of a bitch . . .” MacReady said through a rapidly frosting beard. He dropped the useless guideline. The only direction the line would lead him now was back up to his shack. Which wasn’t a half bad idea, given the circumstances. Drown himself in scotch and to hell with it all. The pilot arduously retrained his focus on the direction in which he had seen the cook heading, scanning for tracks. Nauls’ footsteps ahead were rapidly dissolving in the blowing and drifting snow.

The storm was hitting so heavily now that the blue marker lights leading from his shack to the camp’s south entrance were barely visible. From one you could not see the next. If MacReady went off course, he would end up stumbling down a drop off onto a glacier that lay to the south of the outpost. Too far north, and he would walk into an endlessly barren landscape of snow, ice, and pressure ridges. The length of the camp’s west wall should lay directly ahead—if he could keep his sense of direction.

MacReady got slowly to his feet, swaying, feeling himself rocked over by the violent wind. He did not have another flare and he had dropped the one he had been holding when he first tripped and fell. Not that a flare would do much good in this blizzard. What he needed was the towline. MacReady trudged forward through the bitter cold, trying to walk what he felt was a straight line back towards the camp. The entire main structure of Outpost #31 stretched 120 feet across from end to end, it should be relatively easy to walk right into the side of the building. Unless he got real goddamn unlucky.

What reason did Nauls have to cut him loose from the line? What had suddenly set the young cook off up at the shack? MacReady would be gone far longer than twenty minutes now. The men would surely gang together and turn on him, enforcing his own rule. He was likely as good as dead even if he made it out of the storm. But he was certainly going to die if he stayed out in this blizzard. He could feel his face and hands starting to become dangerously cold, frostbite setting in.

Stumbling forward blindly, trudging through snow past his knees, trying to find the footpath or see the next marker light, MacReady realized with massive relief he had hit the camp. He had come unexpectedly upon a large sloping drift that piled up against a wall. He reached out and touched the gray painted wood in front of him and looked right and then left, seeing a window. He recognized it as the kitchen. The closest entrance from here was the north foyer, off to his left. He followed the drift along the wall, past the bar and rec room windows until he came upon the corrugated dome shelter of the exterior foyer. Ducking inside, grateful to be out of the freezing wind, MacReady approached the door, hard-packed snow crunching under his boots. He stopped and listened. He could hear men on the other side of the door, in the interior foyer, inside the coat room. He moved closer, against the door, to hear better over the storm.

Through the wind, MacReady could make out Nauls talking, sounding out of breath, brief patches of dialogue: “. . . stashed in his old oil furnace . . . wind must have dislodged it . . . I don’t think he saw me . . . made sure I got ahead of him, on the towline . . . I cut him loose . . .”

“MacReady?” Windows’ voice now, questioning.

“He’s one of ‘em,” Nauls replied.

You bastard, Nauls, MacReady thought. If he got back inside and had the chance, MacReady decided he would probably shoot the cook, just on general principles.

“When do you think it got to him?” Windows sounded panicked.

Men were speaking but MacReady could not make out what was said. Then Childs spoke loudly, clearly: “If it did get to him . . .”

“Hey, look Childs . . .” The cook’s voice was defensive, pleading.

Palmer said: “When the lights went out . . .”

Norris, adding quickly: “That would have been the perfect time . . .”

Palmer again, raising his voice: “Right. You said guys were missing, and Windows, where were you?”

The radioman now yelling back: “Palmer, I told you to shut the—”

There was a flurry of loud shouting and overlapping speech, the men arguing amongst each other, and a scuffle broke out. MacReady heard Childs’ commanding voice and then Norris yelling over him: “That’s exactly what it wants—to pit us against each other!”

Leaning against the door, MacReady winced. He was freezing. The pain in his hands and feet had become a deep ache and he could no longer feel his face. He had no choice. He had to get inside, out of the cold. Had to take his chances with facing the men. MacReady grasped the door handle with a gloved hand, slowly twisting the latch left and right. The door was locked. There was no key for the exterior door. It was locked from within; someone had thrown the sliding deadbolt.

There was a new silence from the men inside. They had seen the handle turn. They knew he was at the door.

Palmer’s voice, barely audible: “Let’s open it.”

Childs’ reply was immediate, curt, and hushed. “Hell no!”

MacReady let go of the handle. There was no way the men were going to let him inside now. He was way over the timeline and Nauls had presented some damning evidence he had found at the shack. They were going to let him freeze outside.

Windows: “You think he’s changed into one of those Things?”

Norris: “He’s had plenty of time.”

MacReady needed to come up with a plan, and fast. The only weapon he had was Garry’s .357. The gun had been outside in extremely deep cold, the lubricant could become gummy, making the weapon seize. He couldn’t trust the revolver.

Childs: “Nothing human could have made it back here in this weather without a guideline . . .”

Moving quickly, MacReady exited the exterior foyer heading out again into the storm’s full onslaught. He cut around to the right, circling a large snowdrift slanted up towards the dark supply room window. Pulling himself up the drift on hands and knees, he threw his elbow into the pane of glass with all his bodyweight behind it and the window shattered.

The men would come, but MacReady knew he had purposely locked the inside door to the supply room. The keys were in his pocket. He used his leather-jacketed elbow and a gloved fist to smash away the remaining glass. Grabbing the sill and hustling himself up the drift with his legs he tumbled headfirst through the window, crashing onto the floor of the supply room along with a mountain of snow.

His body numb, MacReady picked himself up, powder tumbling from his clothing in the ambient blue light coming in the open window. He got to his feet quickly and tore off his goggles,

scanning the shelves for the specific boxes he was seeking. He could hear the men now, amassing in the north hallway outside the door to the supply room.

Childs voice, no longer hushed: "Dammit, he's got the keys."

That's right, Childs, you SOB.

As he hunted for supplies MacReady called back through the supply room door, keeping his voice controlled and calm. "What's going on inside? The towline snapped."

MacReady heard Nauls' quick reply: "That's bullshit Childs, he's got to know damn well I cut it."

Two seconds later there was a large splintering crash against the door. They were coming through, chopping at the supply room door with a fire axe. The pilot's adrenaline spiked, and he no longer felt the cold. In the dim blue light he sifted frantically through the boxes on the shelves.

Childs cried out as he chopped savagely at the door: "You're a dead man MacReady! Or a dead whatever the hell you are!"

MacReady found what he was looking for. With little feeling left in his gloved hands, he numbly pulled a roll of dynamite—a half dozen sticks—from a box and held it tucked under one arm. Childs continued to chop at the door as the pilot scrambled and grabbed a flare from another box. The big mechanic had stopped swinging the axe and started kicking at the door, once, twice, three times. The door flew open and in a mad jostle MacReady struck the flare alight, dangerously close to the explosives.

In the open doorway stood Childs, flamethrower in hand, aimed into the supply room directly at the half-frozen pilot. Palmer and Windows flanked Childs in the hallway.

MacReady quickly juggled the burning flare into his left hand and the dynamite sticks in his right, holding them up threateningly, out in front for the men to clearly see. There was a moment of tense standoff as Childs saw the dynamite and knew immediately if he torched MacReady they would all die.

Staring Childs down, his face white with frostbite, beard crusted with ice, eye hollow and haunted, MacReady spoke bluntly. "Anyone messes with me and the whole camp goes. C'mon Childs, burn me."

A beat passed and no one spoke. The pilot was again the man in charge, in control, and calling the shots.

"Put those torches on the floor and back off," MacReady ordered.

Exiting the camp through the north entrance, Nauls trailed Norris around the large drift outside the exterior foyer, both men immediately seeing MacReady's fresh tracks. They hauled themselves up the deep bank of snow to the busted-out window and without hesitation Norris started to climb through into the supply room. The geologist seemed hell bent on ambushing MacReady and had scaled both the drift and window with little effort.

Riding a wave fear and adrenaline, still half frozen himself, Nauls followed the madly determined geologist through the window. Rolling himself over the sill and stepping down lightly into the darkened supply room, snow slick under his boots, Nauls advanced with Norris in the lead. There were rows of shelving units, and they could hear the pilot on the far side, rummaging through boxes. Norris turned in the dark, brought a bare finger to his lips and gave Nauls a shush. The cook

nodded and the two men crept forward in the dark, their sounds covered by Childs at first chopping through and then kicking down the door.

There was a flash of bright magenta light as MacReady lit a flare. They heard the pilot threatening the men at the door, telling them to drop the torches and back off. There were sounds of the flamethrower being set down out in the hall. MacReady was moving forward, towards the doorway, giving Norris and Nauls space behind to move in. They closed in on MacReady, flanking from the rear.

“You asshole,” the pilot said as he stopped in the doorway.

From out in the hallway, Childs replied, “You’d have done the same thing.”

“Don’t argue with him,” Palmer advised, his tone flat.

Hesitating, his eyes darting nervously, MacReady asked, “Where’s the rest?”

Norris and Nauls had moved up on the pilot, and now they both pounced on MacReady at the same time, grabbing an arm. The pilot reacted violently, throwing them off, one man to each side, the lighter cook first and then Norris. MacReady remained on his feet, and backed himself away rapidly, retreating into a corner, holding the flare and the dynamite dangerously close together.

“So help me I mean it!” MacReady barked.

Nauls saw the dynamite for the first time and went immediately defensive. From where he lay knocked on the floor against a shelf, he raised a gloved hand and said, “It’s cool MacReady, it’s cool man, c’mon!”

From out in the hallway Palmer said, “Yeah—yeah man, just relax.”

MacReady looked from Nauls to the men in the hallway. “Anybody touches me—and we go.” There was an insane lilt in the pilot’s voice, he raised his eyebrows, grinning at them earnestly, madly. None of the men doubted for an instant the pilot’s threat, he would set off the dynamite if they pushed him.

The Thing that was Norris had taken MacReady’s left elbow square in the chest and gone down hard, falling backwards into a shelf. Norris knew immediately something was wrong with its human form. Minutes ago, just before Nauls had arrived back at the camp, the Norris had experienced severe pain in its chest. The Thing quickly understood there was an incipient error with the copy of the human it had assimilated. Vance Norris had a heart condition, a heart condition that was replicated perfectly, and his alien imposter had at first experienced a mild heart attack. It had been working to try and correct the issue, while also orchestrating—along with assistance from Palmer—in goading the men to kill MacReady.

When MacReady hammered Norris in the chest the Norris-Thing had a fatal myocardial infarction. As the imitation of Norris’ heart stopped and it took its last breath it could hear the men’s voices; MacReady’s dire warning, and then Nauls was on top of him.

“He’s not breathing!” the cook shouted at MacReady.

The men were going to try and help save the life of their man Norris, a man who had died almost three full days ago when the Thing took him over.

The monster was cornered now, trapped, and would need to go on the offensive, out in the open, in front of them all, under the bright lights of the medical room.

Lost in the Storm

Darren Childs leaned listlessly against the wall in the north foyer. Through heavily frosted glass he watched MacReady, Nauls, and Garry head out into the storm. The three men were going out to the tool shed to give Blair the blood test. There was no denying that the blood test idea MacReady had come up with worked—and worked well.

This was Childs' third winter-over at Outpost #31, and his third bunking with Neil Palmer. They had both been hired together in '79. Childs was from Brooklyn, born and raised, where he worked at a garage before scoring the mechanic position with the National Science Institute. The job was a solid bump in pay, his new bunkmate Palmer was a good match—laid back and easy-going, as were most of the men, and even the station manager Matthew T. Garry was alright. But none of them had been expecting anything like what they were currently experiencing during an isolated polar winter.

MacReady had left for the tool shed with the station manager and cook, instructing Childs that if Blair returned to the camp without them, he was to torch the biologist. Again, they were to be gone no longer than twenty minutes. Childs pulled back the thick sleeve of his navy-blue parka to check his watch. It was fourteen minutes past one in the morning.

The big mechanic was mentally and physically spent. The nightmarish scenes he had witnessed had left him numb with shock and horror and disbelief. Childs was still trying to process what his eyes had seen. Inside of the past two hours, five more men were now dead: Norris, Doc Copper, Clark, Palmer, and Windows. Norris, who they all quickly discovered was no longer human, had brutally attacked Copper, severing the doctor's arms. The poor doctor died from shock and blood loss as the men were far too distracted to help him—Norris had exploded and transformed before their eyes, his inverted head sprouting legs and scurrying away. MacReady had torched the hybrid Spider-Head as it scurried out from medical into the main hallway.

Under order from MacReady, it was Childs and Clark who had together hauled Copper's body—a corpse missing both arms below the elbows—from medical onto the pool table in the rec room. Less than thirty minutes later, Clark was himself lying dead on the billiard table beside Copper. With no hesitation at all, MacReady had shot Clark dead with a single .357 round in the forehead when the dog handler came at him with a scalpel.

Then came MacReady's improvised blood test . . . a heated tip of wire dipped in a petri dish of each man's blood. "*When a man bleeds,*" MacReady had said, "*it's just tissue. But blood from one of you Things won't obey when it's attacked. It'll try and survive. Crawl away from a hot needle say.*"

The test worked. It was Palmer who was immediately and terrifyingly revealed by MacReady's blood test to be a Thing—the most surprising of all to Childs. The two men had been close, bunkmates.

The Thing that was Palmer attacked poor Windows, whose own hesitation, and MacReady's malfunctioning flamethrower, cost him his life. It was only later, that Garry was privately thankful the pilot's flamethrower did not work . . . the station manager would have been badly burned and possibly even killed had MacReady fired the weapon. Garry was seated and bound on the couch tied shoulder to shoulder with Palmer.

The Palmer-Thing tore free of its bonds and was ultimately torched by MacReady, bursting through the rec room wall, outside, where it was blown to pieces by the pilot. Windows—in the process of being assimilated—was mercilessly burned alive in front of their eyes.

After torching the doomed radioman without mercy or delay, MacReady had taken a few minutes to head back outside and use the flamethrower to torch the pieces of what had once been Palmer, reducing them to blackened cinders in the melting snow and ice. Any remains he might have missed or were still alive at a cellular level would freeze, and hopefully remain frozen forever.

Nauls, Childs, and Garry, all tied and helpless, watched over their shoulders as the flamethrower-wielding pilot returned inside and leaned the ping-pong table against the gaping hole in the rec room wall, piling chairs up against it to temporarily keep out the wind and cold.

Childs' relief had been genuine at his blood not reacting to the hot wire. He had no idea how this Thing worked, he was not a biologist and scientist. Was he human or was this monster inside him already, waiting to burst out when his blood was burned? Had he been taken over? Did Palmer get to him at some point? Was he human? He was questioning his own reality, his own existence. Hadn't that alone proved he was human? It turned out, yes.

After Garry was the final man cleared by the test, it was Childs and Nauls who had the ghastly task of dragging Windows' torched corpse outside and burning it to black ash.

Now, the adrenaline from these overwhelming events was fast wearing off, leaving Childs utterly exhausted and disquieted. To top it off he had only slept a few hours here and there over the past three days. He had trouble even recalling the day or the date, his thoughts unclear. The mechanic stood six-four and pressed the scale to 230 pounds, all solid muscle, and considered himself to be one tough bad-ass, but the enactments of the past five days since the arrival of the two Norwegians and their sled dog had left him terrified.

The men all had a heightened sense of fear, paranoia, and mistrust ever since the blood supply had been discovered to be sabotaged. It was from that point they had known with absolute certainty that at least one man among them was no longer human. With MacReady's improvised blood test they had been able to find out who was human and who was not. Two men had been taken over. Childs had no idea between Palmer and Norris who had been taken first, or when, nor which of them had got to the blood. But one of them assuredly had.

The biggest shock for Childs had been his bunkmate, Palmer. Less than two hours prior to discovering Palmer was no longer human, Childs had been alone with him, searching for Fuchs. They had been off together in the far south end of the camp, both appearing quite spooked and keeping a close eye on each other. There had been absolutely nothing about Palmer that had made Childs suspicious at all. The way he looked, the way he acted . . . Childs never would have known in a million years. They had checked out the greenhouse and discovered an exterior door had been left wide open, letting their crop of marijuana plants freeze. Palmer had been as seemingly pissed off as Childs at finding their grow-op ruined. There was not a single tell or sign that had made Childs suspect that Palmer was no longer human.

But Childs felt lucky. Only the first night had he and Palmer had bunked together—the night the Norwegian dog attacked their sled dogs. That was it, from then on Childs slept—when he could—in the rec room with the others, first watching over Blair the second night, before they locked him in the tool shed, and then watching over the suspects, Copper, Clark, and Garry the third and fourth nights. If he had bunked with Palmer, Childs was sure he would no longer be human. His totally bravado “Let's do it” before the blood test may have yielded a different result.

Childs had only two things on his mind.

The first—how only he, MacReady, Nauls, Garry, and Blair—if Blair was found to be human—were going to ride out the remainder of the long winter together. Four, maybe five, men to run Outpost #31 until spring. From the group, they had a good balanced group of survivors: a station manager, a pilot, a mechanic, a cook, and possibly a biologist.

The second—why the hell had he agreed to stay behind and watch the camp, alone? After all this, all they witnessed and learned, why did MacReady split them up? Wasn't that the absolute worst thing to do? The mechanic shifted uneasily against the wall; the flamethrower's fuel cylinders heavy on his back. Was he just paranoid? Damn, maybe, maybe MacReady—

Childs turned from the window with a start.

A sharp noise caught his ear over the moaning wind. The sound had come from outside the foyer, in the north hallway. Up the hallway was the door he had hacked down to the supply room, then Garry's office, opposite the office were the stairs down to the generator room, and at the far end of the hallway the gun cabinet and corridor leading to the kennel. Childs was by himself, the only person in the main outpost building now.

Unsettled, and more scared than he would like to admit, the mechanic let out a breath and shook his head. There was nothing there, there couldn't be . . . there was nothing left, everything was dead and burned. He was simply scared, understandably, jumping at shadows and things that go bump in the night. He turned to look back out the window, trying to make out the tool shed through the blowing snow. The row of blue marker lights and towline dissolved into the swirling gale. There was no sign of either the shed or the three men through the pounding blizzard.

The first thing Childs felt was the cold draft on the back of his neck. It took him all of two seconds to figure out where it was coming from. They had not yet repaired the smashed window to the supply room where MacReady broke back inside. The supply room was adjacent to the coat room foyer. Directly behind Childs was another door from the foyer leading into the supply room.

Somebody—*something* had just opened the door.

Childs turned quickly in a rising panic and found himself face-to-face with Blair. The mechanic had no time to raise the flamethrower in his hands. He was knocked back hard against the wall and quickly overpowered.

The Thing that was Blair had come from the basement beneath the camp, moving silently up the stairs into the north hallway. It entered the supply room through the door that Childs had chopped open. It ambushed Childs in the coat room, entering from the supply room's second door. The mechanic was correct, he had indeed felt the wind from the broken window, but he had not been nearly fast enough.

As MacReady, Nauls, and Garry were discovering the escape vehicle in the snow cavern under the tool shed, Blair was rapidly taking over the camp's mechanic in the north foyer. The Thing was working incredibly fast now. Nine minutes later the Thing that was Blair had already departed, heading back down the stairs to the basement from where it came, to the dark recesses of the generator room. The Thing that was now Childs finished dressing itself, pulling on another undamaged and clean parka from the foyer's coat rack that looked much like his own discarded and torn jacket, which it hung back on a hook. Childs reached down and picked up the gold hoop earring from the plywood floor, replacing the jewelry in his right ear. It had learned about things like piercings, fillings, scars, and tattoos.

Childs hoisted the flamethrower unit from the floor and heaved it onto his back. He had a clear objective—to distract the men out at the tool shed and lead them away from the ship it had been constructing, to lure them back to the camp. Childs unbolted the exterior door and stepped out into the howling blizzard. He left the door wide open behind him, quickly draining the camp's heat.

Childs stood just outside the north entrance, swaying in the storm's wind, and looked up in the direction of the tool shed through the blowing snow. He could sense one of the men had seen him, watching him from the door of the tool shed.

Nauls.

Childs raised a hand to signal the cook to his presence and then started out, heading south across the compound's snowy grounds, into the storm.

Deep within the bowels of the outpost, in a large basement complex under the camp that housed the generator, the Thing went on the offensive. It had been using the hidden cavern it had carved, scraped, and melted out under the tool shed, along with the basement complex below the camp, to move about and work on its project over the past two days. It had assistance from Palmer and Norris, all of them gathering parts, moving openly among the men. It had created many secret tunnels, alcoves, and hiding spots in which to work, down in the dark.

The Thing had also separated, splitting apart into two separate entities, one that still looked—at times and in part—like the human senior biologist Martin Blair, and another . . . larger, stronger, and totally inhuman. This monster now seized upon the camp's generator, tearing the machinery free in a burst of steam and sparks and flame, dragging it away into the far reaches of the old storage room, one of its lair-like dens. The entire camp was cloaked in darkness, the temperatures plummeting quickly. Then the monster hid, in a sub-terranean cavern deep in the ice below the basement. It hid and waited.

The men would come.

Childs watched the tool shed explode into a fireball of burning and scattered fragments. The flames licked high, up into the frozen night, and it immediately knew the escape vehicle had been destroyed. There was no way out. It was trapped here now. They were all trapped, man and monster together. To freeze.

It would take as many of the men as it could before they died. In the spring more humans would return to the outpost. It would thaw again. It would be ready.

Childs returned inside the camp through the south entrance. Flamethrower in hand it moved up the pitch black and deserted south hallway, past the dark map and radio rooms towards the greenhouse. At the opposite north end of the camp the three men were returning from the tool shed, coming back inside, to regroup, to form a plan.

The Thing had a plan of its own. Childs would hide and wait, then when they were at their weakest it would reappear, claiming to have become lost in the storm, taking over the sole survivors before they all froze in the long Antarctic night.

The Old Storage Room

Wielding the flamethrower, Nauls led MacReady and Garry back through the storm towards the camp. Diffuse and ghostly blue light came from the exterior marker lights, running on backup emergency batteries. Approaching the north entrance, the men found the outside door had been left wide open, snow already drifting into the darkened coat room. Any heat left in this end of the camp would have been quickly sucked out into the polar night.

There was no sign of Childs.

The men stumbled into the coat room, escaping the full brunt of the blizzard. They all had varying degrees of frostbite setting in. Garry set down a five-gallon can of gasoline he had lugged from the tool shed and struggled to close the outside door behind them, but the snow was already drifted too deeply in front of it.

“Forget it,” MacReady said gruffly, sparking a fresh flare. “Let’s head into supply.”

The station manager and cook exchanged a disturbed look and wordlessly followed the pilot through the door in the foyer into the blackness of the supply room. From the window MacReady had smashed out two hours ago a long drifting run of snow had blown in; shelves and boxes were dusted with a thick white coating. Hunting by the light of his flare, MacReady located a gas lantern. As he worked to fire it up, Garry asked, “What’s your plan, MacReady?”

MacReady looked first at the station manager, and then the young, frightened cook. The pilot’s thick beard was entirely coated with frosted ice, his blue eyes red-rimmed and weary, but defiant.

“We’re going to destroy the entire camp,” MacReady stated. “As simple as that. We’ll give it no choice, no place to hide. The three of us will hole up together in my shack . . . we’ll stock up on food, supplies, and fuel oil. We’ll wait it out. It’ll come for us, or it’ll freeze.”

Nauls’ eyes—the only part of his body exposed behind his face covering—displayed abject terror.

Garry pulled his clear snow goggles down around his neck, his mouth set in a hard line, eyes unfocused. “Can we last the winter in the shack?” He seemed to be posing the question more to himself than the pilot.

MacReady shook his head. “It doesn’t matter.” The lantern lit, he held it aloft, surveying the supply room. “Gather up all the explosives you can, flares too. I’ll get the detonator. Bring gas—all you can carry. We’ll make Molotovs.”

“Where’re we headed?” Garry asked.

“The rec room,” MacReady replied. “We’ll set up shop there. We’re staying together now, none of us gets out of sight of the other.”

The men set to work on their grim task, gathering up dynamite, flares, and a corded T-handle box detonator. Each man slung a canvas satchel over a shoulder and loaded it full of flares and dynamite, dozens of eight-inch cylinders. MacReady carried the detonator under one arm, Garry cans of gasoline, and Nauls wore the backpack flamethrower.

The trio instinctively paused at the kicked-in doorway from supply into the pitch dark north hallway. MacReady looked from the wild axe marks in the door to the two men beside him. “Keep an eye out for Childs,” he warned. The station manager and cook said nothing, only nodding.

MacReady held the lantern high, and Garry switched on a headlamp flashlight he had found and donned. They moved together through the jumping and shifting shadows, up the north hallway and around the blind corner into the main hallway, slowly but steadily moving towards the rec room. They found the rec room was as black as ink and the temperature had already fallen to a

deep cold, well below the survival line. Snow had been billowing in around MacReady's haphazard patch job to the hole in the wall where the Palmer-Thing had burst through. Clark and Copper's bodies still lay together side by side on the pool table, now frozen solid. A strong odor of seared flesh still lingered in the room, and the corner by the hallway door was blackened and smoke-stained where MacReady had hit Windows point blank with the flamethrower.

The men set the cache of explosives and supplies on the bar and pool table. Working together under an oppressive cloak of silent dread they began to make Molotov cocktails. They dumped out liquor and wine bottles, re-filling them with gasoline, and tore up strips of material for wicks. The men loaded the makeshift crude firebombs into the satchels, so each man carried a half dozen, plus as many sticks of dynamite and flares.

"Alright," MacReady asked, "are you two ready?"

The station manager and cook again only nodded in reply.

"First we're going back outside," said MacReady.

"Christ, what for?" Garry asked.

"We're going up to my shack."

"Again?" Nauls asked. "Now what the hell for?"

"Because Blair never got to that bulldozer. We're going to use it to bring supplies up to my shack . . . and then we're gonna drive it right into the camp."

They used the bulldozer to bring a load of supplies up to the shack. Canned and dry food and drums of fuel oil. It was a futile effort; Garry knew the three of them could not survive the entire season until spring in MacReady's shack. Barring an alien lifeforce hunting them down, it would take an incredible run of luck—hell, a bloody miracle—even if they could keep that old oil furnace going all winter.

From the shack, with Garry and Nauls hanging on inside the cab, MacReady, like a wild man, drove the bulldozer straight through the wall of the camp into the rec room. Garry only realized later it was a goddamn wonder they didn't crash straight through the floor into the basement generator room. The Caterpillar D3 bulldozer weighed more than 15,000 pounds.

They started at the south end of the camp, blowing the greenhouse first, followed by the quiet room, map room, and radio room in sequence, before moving up the main hallway. Nauls would throw a stick of dynamite into a room and MacReady would follow it with a flaming Molotov. They had seconds to move on before the flames touched off the explosives.

Moving methodically down the main hallway they hit medical, the lab, the bunkrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, and the rec room. They moved fast, blowing room after room, efficiently and systematically leaving the outpost in ruins. Regrouping at the north hallway they hit the kennel and Garry's office. All were destroyed by the explosives and quickly consumed by flames. Garry tossed dynamite into the supply room as Nauls shrugged off the flamethrower. The men stood together in the intersection of hallways, looking back at their path of destruction. They were left with one last area of the camp before blowing supply, the north foyer, and heading for the shack.

"Generator room," MacReady said purposely, announcing their final target and struck a fresh flare.

With the pilot in the lead, holding the flare, the three men started down the stairs, into the dark basement complex.

Garry worked quickly, unspooling the detonator wire in the light of his headlamp. He made his way deeper into the old storage room, planting his charges. The station manager had gone along with MacReady's crazed plan simply because he had no other idea of what to do. His head was still foggy with heavy and repeated doses of opiates. MacReady was running the show, and despite the definitive outcome of the blood tests, Garry was apprehensive about his motives. The pilot seemed to be on a suicide mission.

Almost five days ago, Garry had had to shoot and kill a man, a seemingly insane Norwegian from a neighboring base. Four days ago, he had watched his close friend George Bennings, a man he had known for a decade, since Vietnam, get attacked and killed by some type of bodysnatching alien abomination. There were no words or name to describe what they were battling. It was just a Thing. The last five days had been absolute madness. Out of the dozen men at the outpost only two of his men were left alive. Three, if Childs was thus far still with them, but Garry doubted the mechanic—who had gone AWOL—was still alive.

They had been unable to get word out to anyone about their predicament. With winter set in no one would be coming until spring, a half a year away. If he did somehow survive, Garry could only imagine trying to explain this to his superiors at the National Science Institute. At the outset of all this, Garry had been at first disgruntled with the NSI; he had never received any notice at all that the Norwegian Polar Institute had set up a research base just fifty miles to the southwest of Outpost #31.

Like the other men, Garry was at the end of his rope with exhaustion, all his adrenaline spent long ago. Until just a couple of hours ago he had spent the previous forty-eight hours drugged up and sedated with morphine and tied on the couch alongside Copper and Clark. Garry has not been under pressure or stress like this since the Vietnam War. In fact, the events of the past five days in a lot of ways were worse than Vietnam. Far worse. This enemy was unknown . . . a mystery in how it operated. First it hid, inside them. And then it went on the offensive and attacked. Garry was at a loss and baffled at how to proceed. It was a monster from outer space, for Chrissake. A Thing from another world.

Bending over to place another charge of dynamite the light in his headlamp dimmed, flickered, and went out.

"Oh, God . . ." Garry muttered under his breath. Frustration and fatigue cloaked his voice. He set the charges down and stood up to take a few steps away, peeling off his balaclava and the headlamp. The light was flickering on and off wildly, likely a loose connection and hopefully not a dying battery. Stepping forward to pause by a corner, he gave the headlamp a few hard shakes. The light flashed on and off a couple of times, and then went dark for good.

In the dim firelight from the missing generator Garry sensed someone beside him and turned his head to look, expecting to see Nauls.

Blair.

The senior biologist was staring right at him. Before the station manager could react, Blair reached out and grabbed Garry by the face, pushing him backwards against the far wall of the storage room.

Garry felt pressure and a surging pain as Blair's fingers dug into his mouth, impossibly strong, spreading his cheeks apart. Effectively gagged and unable to cry out the station manager tried to scream against the crushing heaviness on his face. Something foreign and incredibly powerful burst out of Blair's palm, forcing its way first into his mouth. An all-consuming burning sensation ignited deep inside Garry's skull as he was taken over, assimilated at a DNA level. Unable to breathe, his face continuing to stretch and morph, seemingly to melt . . . his brain penetrated by the Thing . . . Garry's eyes rolled wildly as his existence disappeared in a blinding and searing white agony.

He relented to the monster.

Working with a flashlight tucked under one arm, Nauls finished setting his charges around the base of the missing generator, placing his last bundle of waxed dynamite sticks atop a stack of fuel drums. He worked his hands slowly inside his gloves, fingers stiff from the deep cold. They had all been exposed to the sub-zero temperatures for close to an hour now. From the far south end of the basement complex a quick movement caught the cook's eye. A shadow, a shape . . . from within the old storage room. Where Garry was planting his explosives.

Nauls moved closer for a better look, taking slow cautious steps, his boots crunching on the snow-covered floor. Was it Garry that he had seen? MacReady was only twenty feet behind Nauls, kneeling, setting up the detonator. They were planning to blow the basement generator room from outside, bringing the entire camp down into the ice. Nauls had not slept or eaten in three days, and his judgement was off. He was exhausted, his mind burnt from constant fear and paranoia, and he was suffering from frostbite and hypothermia.

The old storage room was dark, lit by scattered ambient firelight that threw wild shadows all about. Nauls paused for a moment at the entrance to the storage room, and walked forward, scanning the piles of camp refuse, all long frozen and frosted over with years of ice. Nauls was gripped with terror, but he was numb to it. He had been scared for so long, he could no longer recall *not* being scared. Ever since the incident in the kennel—four long days ago—when he was the first man to shine a flashlight on the monster Childs had torched, he had had a strong unrelenting fear and unease.

Almost desperately, Nauls wanted to know what it was he saw down in the old storage room. Was it man or monster? Either way, insanely, he needed to know. Was the fast-moving shape in the dark Garry? The station manager should be just ahead of him . . . what the hell was he doing? Nauls continued to walk forward, farther into the cluttered and dark confines of the storage room. All thought of not separating and staying in sight of the other men was abandoned.

It was Garry . . . it had to be Garry. There was nothing down here in the dark with them. And if there was, the cook now wanted to know. No more hiding.

Without warning the ice floor under Nauls' boots opened, and the cook fell through into what seemed a black, bottomless abysmal chasm.

Nauls didn't have a chance to scream. His flashlight went flying and he landed flat on his back ten feet down on a subterranean ice floor. He was inside a cavern *beneath* the basement complex.

The wind was knocked completely out of him. As he gasped for breath, unable to call out, Nauls tried to determine what had happened and where he was. The flashlight lay off to one side, still lit, and his satchel of Molotov cocktails, dynamite, and flares had scattered across the ice. The cold fumes of spilled gasoline from a broken bottle hit his nose. Somewhere in the blackness around him an intense hissing sound began. A wave of total panic flashed through Nauls' body, a new fear, more intense than any he had felt yet. The Thing was here.

The cook struggled to sit up, trying to catch his wind to call for MacReady. Or scream. From the beam of the flashlight he could make out that he was in a carved out ice cavern, much like the one they had found under the tool shed. It had been here, below them the entire time . . . beneath the tool shed, beneath the camp . . . beneath the planks laid across the glacial ice that made up the floor of the generator room.

He was in its lair. Trapped.

There was no longer any question as to what had happened to Garry. Or Blair. Or Childs. It was here, all around them. With them. Becoming them.

Nauls' heart hammered in his chest as the hissing grew louder. There was movement in the darkness. He was frozen with fear. Squeezing his eyes shut and trying to gasp for a lungful of air, Nauls' single wish was that he was back home at his lousy little apartment in Chicago. Given the choice, he'd take his chances with the gangs and the streets.

Opening his eyes, he turned and saw it, the monster hulking over him, enormous, glistening in the beam of the flashlight. There was no escape, no way to get back up into the storage room above him, he was cornered and alone with the monster down in the dark.

Nauls was never able to catch his breath to scream as the Thing pounced on him, absorbing him, encircling his body with tentacles, piercing his flesh with long talons and razored fangs.

Checkmate

Sunday, March 7. Half past two in the morning.

Outpost #31 lay in ruins, the entire camp burning brightly, flames licking high into the black and starless Antarctic night. The American research station and its men had suffered the same mirrored fate as the Norwegians a week prior.

The sole survivor, Richard John MacReady, stumbled brokenly across the frozen grounds of the outpost. He was suffering from severe hypothermia, the ravages of frostbite visible across his face—hands and feet freezing inside his gloves and boots. The leather bomber jacket he wore—even with layers of thermals and underclothes—was not nearly enough protection for this length of exposure to the polar winter. His beard was covered in ice crystals reflecting the surrounding firelight. Through it all, resting against his back still sat the high-crowned, wide-brimmed campaign hat. Ever since first acquiring the headpiece more than a decade ago—in much warmer climates but circumstances almost as dire—MacReady had always carried an ominous feeling that although the hat brought him luck over the years, he would die wearing it.

It had come at him from beneath the ice. MacReady had found himself alone, and it came for him, it came for him from under the ice, from under the basement floor . . . exploding upwards . . . part man, part dog, all monster. By the time he threw the stick of dynamite at the beast the wick was down to the blasting cap.

He had survived the chain reaction of explosions mostly unscathed, escaping the basement complex by way of a set of stairs adjacent to the generator room that led up and outside to the rear of the camp. With flames billowing overhead, in the flickering firelight the pilot had got numbly and dazedly to his feet, circling around the fiery remains of the greenhouse and the camp's south end. The radio room and communications dome were destroyed, however, oddly the corrugated steel foyer to the south hallway still stood, leading nowhere now, no longer an entrance or an exit, flames licking all around it. The ambient heat from the fires felt nothing short of wondrous.

MacReady smiled faintly at the fleeting warmth and trudged on. He was headed for his shack.

Before blowing the main compound, MacReady, Garry, and Nauls had used the bulldozer to haul a stash of food, supplies, and oil drums up to the shack. It was to be their last stand, a holdfast bunker to wait out the monster . . . and try to survive the winter. The fuel oil for the old furnace would only last for so long. Certainly not for six frigid long months until spring.

MacReady had no idea what had happened to Garry and Nauls. Both men had disappeared in the same place, back in the old storage room. The ship discovered under the tool shed and the abomination that attacked him from beneath the ice of the generator room left little guessing as to what Blair's fate was. The Thing had taken Blair, likely days ago, when he was first locked outside, alone. Futilely, the pilot realized that was the last thing they should have done with Blair. He should also never have left Childs alone to guard the camp, nor let Nauls wander off.

Too late. It didn't matter now . . . there was no going back.

As for Childs, the odds of him still being human were next to zero. Disappearing into a blizzard and leaving the camp's door wide open . . . too suspect.

Climbing the stairs to his shack stiffly, MacReady entering the stilted structure and found his abode dark and cold. When the camp's generator went—wherever the hell it went—power to the shack's oil furnace had been cut. MacReady knew he was not going to fire up the portable generator to power the old furnace. No last stand, no trying to survive the winter. He had already made his final decision.

Fumbling in the dark, he removed his gloves from his unfeeling hands and switched on a flashlight. MacReady knelt before his bed and from under the bunk he pulled out the wooden box. Flipping it open he dug inside and with half-frozen fingers removed the cassette tape and pocketed it in his bomber jacket. From the box he also retrieved his Zippo lighter.

Moving slowly, with forced effort, MacReady pulled a heavy blanket from his bed and wrapped it around himself. He was no longer shivering, the effects of serious hypothermia setting in. He opened the fuel cap to the small portable generator and using what strength he had remaining he pushed the generator over on its side. Gasoline spilled out across the floor of the shack.

With a hand that felt anesthetized, MacReady picked up the J&B from his desk, twisted off the cap, upended the bottle and took a solid swig. He could not feel the glass on his lips, but the ice cold scotch burned hot and was deliciously warm going down. Taking another hit, he savored the heat of the alcohol for a moment, wavering on his feet, basking in the glow. Yes, it was about to get a lot warmer around here.

Hesitating for only a moment, he flicked the Zippo alight and tossed the lighter onto the pooled gasoline on the floor. Surprisingly, due to the deep cold, it took the fuel some time to catch. The spilled fuel burned slowly at first as it heated, flames creeping lazily across the floor. After a couple of minutes, the fire bit into the plywood flooring of the shack, the growing flames leaping upwards.

The heat and warmth felt glorious. MacReady stood in the radiant glow of firelight, slowly pulling his gloves back on and the blanket tighter around himself. He was in no hurry but was forced to step back as the flames started to spread, jumping towards him, and climbing the rear wall of the shack. Bottle of scotch grasped tightly in a gloved hand, MacReady stepped back to the door, watching as the fire spread throughout the shack . . . eating up the bookshelf, moving swiftly across his bunk, and then his desk, flames licking around the Chess Wizard, blackening the computer console. As thick smoke started to billow overhead the pilot turned and left his shack for the last time, closing the door behind him and descending the stairs to the field of ice and snow.

MacReady's shack—an exterior single-room on stilts that held the technical name of 'Outbuilding B2'—was fully ablaze. The last structure at Outpost #31 to burn. The fire quickly engulfed the entire framework, flames eating up the walls, lighting the two windows brightly from inside. MacReady watched his shack burn emotionlessly, until it turned into a complete and roaring blaze. The intense heat warmed and thawed his frozen face, which only brought back sensation and stinging pain. Slowly he turned from the towering pyre and set out for what was left of the camp.

The multiple explosions had rocked and blown Outpost #31 into hundreds of splintered and burning pieces, scattered across the grounds. The pilot stepped around them; these fragments of the outpost.

Little was remaining to be recognized of the research station. The men had done their job well . . . there was not much left after the Molotovs and dynamite. Any standing ruins were now afire. Heat from the many fires provided some light and warmth, for now. The flames were already starting to die.

MacReady made his way towards where the rec room used to be. It seemed the natural place to go. In the burning and smoking remains, strangely, he could see no sign of the Caterpillar bulldozer. Here MacReady, with Garry and Nauls riding shotgun in the cab, had crashed the dozer through the wall. Cautiously, MacReady approached a little closer and saw that the blackened machine had tumbled through the floor, down into the generator room below. Flames were still dancing up through the charred metal chassis.

MacReady moved sluggishly away, stumbling over the debris. He was unsure where to go, stopping briefly to turn and look at the destruction around him. He needed somewhere to sit down, to rest, to drink . . . to die.

Running on no reserves, he saw what looked like as good a spot as any, and eased himself down before he fell down, leaning against the remnants of a wall. He knew it was the last time he would sit. There was no getting up. The blanket provided little protection from the deep cold . . . it would not be long. For the second time in his life, he contemplated the strong possibility he was going to freeze to death. The first had been less than three months ago, in the far northern reaches of British Columbia. The pain was already considerably less this time, his level of heat loss severe.

MacReady would be dead soon. As dead as the four human souls he had taken during his lifetime. The first, a Viet Cong colonel a decade ago. The most recent, just hours ago . . . he had been forced to shoot their dog handler, Jonathan Clark, when the man made to attack him with a scalpel. Both George Bennings and Mark Windows were no longer human when the pilot had torched them. They didn't count, but there were two others that MacReady had taken the lives of: a man and a woman. Both were from another part of his life, previous, but recent chapters . . . another story entirely. He had no guilt over their deaths. MacReady needed to end their lives to save his his. It was kill or be killed. Either way now, he would be joining them all soon.

The pilot was about to take a good hard pull of the scotch when he sensed someone—some *Thing*—behind him. With a struggling jerk he whirled around, knowing there would be little he could do to defend himself.

Childs.

The camp's mechanic stood before him, not ten feet away, flamethrower in hand, the nozzle aimed point blank at the helpless pilot. There was a moment of silence, just the crackling of the fires, as the two men studied each other closely.

Childs spoke first. "You the only one who made it?"

"Not the only one," MacReady answered. He silently sized up Childs. The man looked as spent and as frozen as himself.

"Did you kill it?" Childs asked, the flamethrower not wavering.

MacReady ignored the question, his eyes locked on the mechanic. "Where were you Childs?"

"Thought I saw Blair," Childs replied. "Went out after him. Got lost in the storm." With a grunt, he slowly eased himself down opposite MacReady.

The pilot said nothing and readjusted himself against the remains of the wall. He shook his head once, letting out a weak chuckle of disbelief, looking again at the mechanic. He did not at all believe Childs' story. It was an obvious lie. It did not add up. Why leave the camp and go out into a blizzard, why leave an exterior door open behind you? And if Childs had found Blair . . .

"The fire's got the temperature up all over the camp," Childs said, slowly surveying the destruction around them. "Won't last long though."

With no will, resolve, or fight left in him, MacReady said, "Neither will we."

"How will we make it?"

"Maybe we shouldn't."

Childs studied MacReady for a moment. "If you're worried about me . . ."

"If we've got any surprises for each other . . . I don't think we're in much shape to do anything about it." MacReady's face had a sickly humorous grin.

"Well," Childs asked, raising his eyebrows, "what do we do?"

"Why don't we just . . . wait here for a little while . . . see what happens?"

A few beats passed and Childs gave a small nod of agreement. With an effort, MacReady slowly leaned forward and held the bottle of scotch out for his teammate, watching the man closely. An offering. A test of trust. The big mechanic leaned forward and accepted the bottle. He held it up in solid appreciation and took a sip of the drink.

Leaning his head back down against the wall, MacReady settled himself in and broke into a weak chuckle. Childs, or whatever was Childs, was still playing the game. A silent minute passed between the two men, the fires quickly burning down, the cold deepening around them.

Childs held the bottle back out for MacReady. The pilot raised an arm, and leaned himself forward, reaching for the scotch with a gloved hand.

It happened in a blur.

MacReady did not believe or trust Childs, and knew the man was no longer human, but he was also not at all prepared for or expecting the violent attack. The big mechanic sprang up in a full rushing assault, launching himself at MacReady, landing on top of the pilot, the two toppling backwards together. MacReady did not resist. The fight was not in him any longer, and even if it was, he did not have the strength to try and ward off the Thing that was Childs. A monster hiding in man's flesh.

The Thing's final move, it had played a clever game, and won.

Checkmate.

MacReady's first thought went to the cassette tape in the pocket of his bomber jacket. His recorded message of warning for whomever would find them in the spring. No matter where he might have hidden the tape, the Thing would now learn about the recording and destroy it. The monster would learn everything about MacReady, his body, his thoughts, his personality, his memories, his entire life . . . and his secrets. It would become him, and he in turn would become the monster.

Anyone searching the ruined outpost would only find their frozen bodies, perfect imitations . . . They would thaw—the rescue team would be caught unaware and helpless. The cycle of horror would begin again.

MacReady's last human thoughts were of a woman he had known and loved, recently, before coming to Antarctica. A woman with whom currently he was supposed to be with in the South Pacific, spending carefree days together on lush tropical islands under a hot sun. A brilliantly hot sun.

MacReady found he was no longer cold.

If you enjoyed *Fragments of the Outpost*, you may also appreciate the connected backstory novel *Snowblind* by the same author . . .

SNOWBLIND

This dark and twisted noir tale follows the exploits of Mac, a hard drinking, down on his luck Vietnam vet working as a helicopter pilot in the Florida Keys. Lured by money and adventure Mac slides fast into the wild and treacherous drug smuggling underworld. Inside a whirlwind freefall of risk and revenge a lethal game of cat and mouse ensues stretching from the sun-drenched Bahamas to the sleepy barrier islands of Florida's Gulf Coast. In early 1982 Mac finds himself headed for the coldest place on the planet—Antarctica.

Snowblind is available (print and digital) on Amazon: www.amazon.com/dp/B096W9QG2T/

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Cameron was born in Montreal, Canada in 1974 and raised in small town rural Ontario. His early pursuits were athletic—skateboarding, bodybuilding, swimming—before finally settling down and focusing on writing; a passion he has had since childhood. Todd has owned and operated a shark diving venture, and he is a certified ocean lifeguard, scuba diver, and swim coach. Todd is the author of *Snowblind* and founder of Outpost31.com, a fandom community for the 1982 cult classic sci-fi/horror film *The Thing*. He was the first fan to find the remote filming location in northern British Columbia, Canada. Todd enjoys reading, movies, fitness, travel, shark diving, and being out on the water. He lives in South Florida.

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