

Chapter 2

Dr. Gail Pym's first step onto Antarctica was a stumble. It had been a long trip from New Zealand to McMurdo station in a C-130, a plane designed to drop tanks on battlefields.

She'd flown as cargo, the hold reeking of fuel. She'd constructed a makeshift gas barrier by breathing through a wet bandana under her cotton, silk and cashmere scarf.

Now, in the open air, Gail zipped up her coat but dared to expose her face to the icy Antarctic air. It was pure. Even just fifty yards from a huge, fume-belching military transport, the atmosphere on the bottom of the world felt clean.

Seconds later, she felt the saliva on her teeth freeze over as her lips cracked, instantly dehydrated. She covered her mouth and headed for the transport.

"Got your kit, ma'am?" one of the bundled-up airmen asked her. Hauling two huge duffels, one on each shoulder, she nodded.

"All right then, stay warm!"

"Thank you," she croaked.

Like almost every other cargo-passenger on her flight, Gail wore a red parka, the uniform for nonmilitary scientists. (Two men wore forest green coats and stuck together, even to the point of stacking their packs on top of one another for a team-carry.) The stream of thickly bundled humans trundled towards an orange and white transport on immense tires. Written on its side was "'Ivan' The Terra Bus.'

Ivan's driver stayed in the vehicle, but someone was outside, doing an awkward jog in place and looking at each passenger as they got close. When she was near, Gail recognized her.

"Patty!" Gail called, and got a hand-wave in return.

"Let me get that other bag!" Dr. Patricia Xiang was a full eight inches shorter than Gail Pym, but she hustled up and seized the bag off Gail's left shoulder so quickly that Pym stumbled to the right and almost fell.

"What are you doing carrying these by yourself, you're going to ruin your back," Patty said, stowing the luggage in the undercarriage cargo compartment, re-arranging what was there so Gail's bags were together on top.

"It's fine," Gail replied.

When they'd gotten their seats, Patty gave Gail's knee a little pat and said, "Your flight OK?"

"Pretty long."

"Yeah, I thought you were going to get on one of the C-17s."

"I thought so too but... nope. Everything OK on this end?"

Xiang sighed. "Davis is out."

"Glenda's out?"

"Shh, OK, take it easy. We have a replacement electrician, she's been down here the whole summer, she knows what she's doing."

"What happened to Davis though?"

"I don't entirely know. I heard health stuff and I heard passport problems. It's possible she just got... heh, you know, cold feet." Patricia gave a chubby-cheeked smile over her pink and blue scarf. It had developed a light cover of frozen and condensed breath while she waited by the van, but that was melting now, dripping, and dropping off into her lap.

"So who's the replacement?"

"Her name's Lynette Boursse." Patricia shook her head, one time. "That took a nice chunk out of the 'unexpecteds' fund, let me tell you."

"Great. We haven't even set out."

"Well you know Gail, once we leave the base, our money won't do us any good."

"True, true. So this Lynette... Burris?"

"Boursse. Comme la Français." Patricia was a linguist. She'd grown up speaking English with her mother and Wu Chinese with her father. She'd gone on to learn Mandarin, French, Spanish and Latin.

"Boursse. She's French?"

"No, another 'Murican like you."

"She knows what she's doing?"

"Mais oui. I have seen her work, it's tidy and complete."

"Does she know what we're doing?"

"She knows we're going along the Transantarctic range, then heading into western Antarctica and exploring between Whitmore and Executive Committee. Seventy-four days before we cross Ross and get back to McMurdo."

"That's what she knows?"

"That's all she knows," Patricia said, sneaking a glance to the right.

"Christ," Gail said, and turned to look out the window at the dimming light.

"When were you planning to tell her?"

"Well... I thought we could give her some time to get to know us. Bond a little. Phase the weird stuff in, you know, gradually."

"What, you want to wait until we're out on the ice to tell her what..." Gail checked herself, looked around, and leaned in to lower her voice. "...what we're *really* after?"

"If you want to tell her, go right ahead?" Dr. Xiang winced as she she said it.

"I think I have to," Gail sighed.

#

"Hey. Welcome to McMurdo city." The man with the amateur haircut probably thought he was being friendly, but Gail narrowed her eyes. She was used to city academics, not men with beard stubble, insulated henleys, and holsters for folding knives on their belts. To Pym, he looked about three tattoos short of lugging amps at SXSW.

"Hello. Have we met?"

"Not before just now," he said, and grinned with a tiny flash of genuine charm.

"Dexter Calhoun. People call me Cal."

"Dr. Gail Pym," she said, and gave him a brief and formal handshake. His hands were warmer than hers.

"Oh, with Xiang-Pym?" he said.

"You've heard of us." Gail turned just a little sideways so she could walk past him. Uninvited, Cal started fell in beside her.

"Yeah, yeah. Baller move going out in winter."

"Um... thanks? I guess?"

"Y'all are paleontology, right?"

"Partially. 'We all' are combining a paleontological and geological dig with some astronomical observations. Hence, traveling at night."

He tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. "Couldn't help noticing that your crew is all women."

That got Pym to stop, turn to face him fully, and drop every sign of friendliness off her face. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"No! Hey, no, don't misunderstand! I'm, not... not sexist at all!"

"Though you felt compelled to comment."

"It's really unusual!"

"Would an all-male expedition have been equally unusual?"

"Well," he fidgeted. "No. I mean, the ratio down here is like ten men for every woman, so, it's... you know..."

"Uh huh."

"Look, I'm sorry," he called after her as she continued away. "I didn't mean to get off on the wrong foot like this!"

"Don't give it another thought," Gail said, without turning around. "I won't."

#

Gail spent the rest of her morning doing obligatory newcomer training—tours, safety videos, the infamous "buckethead" drill to practice for maneuvering in the deafening winds of a whiteout storm. It was late afternoon but felt like night by the time she warmed up and snuck in a short nap. She opened her eyes to the ring of her room phone—it was Xiang, inviting her to meet up with the rest of the team in the station's crowded coffee house.

Gail spied the other expedition leader immediately, holding down one of the circular tables. Patty had opted to wear a pale pink top, and it stood out among the browns and tans of cold-weather construction gear and the indigo of indoor jeans. Dr. Xiang was crowded at a table with four other women, the shortest among them.

To her left, Gail recognized professor Cindithia Ledbetter. They'd last spoken over red wine and a pretty good cheese platter, after an interdisciplinary panel at an Oxford seminar. Next to Patty Xiang's compact form, Cindithia loomed, tall, thin and brown. She blinked behind large round spectacles that made her resemble an elegant owl.

On Dr. Xiang's right was Jane Psalemon, the youngest of the group. When she spoke, she revealed discolored teeth, and she gestured with heavy callused hands. Cindithia's cold-weather gear was high quality and broken-in. Jane's was military surplus and stained all over the thighs, belly and forearms with oil, grease, and chemical stains. Jane was smiling and chuckling over something. Cindithia wasn't.

The last woman Gail knew by name was Dr. Margo Scott. Her thermal clothes were so new, the folds from being packaged were still visible, and her space-age ice boots had only a few scratches from wear. Margo had the longest hair of any of them, collar-length and curly. She was smiling widely and got up to hug Gail.

"At last, our leader!" Dr. Scott said.

"Co-leader at best," Gail said, but she smiled too.

"Dr. Pym, please let me introduce you to Lynette Boursse," Patricia said, standing and gesturing to the table's last guest. Lynette Boursse's Antarctica wardrobe was not only broken in, it was showing wear and tear. She had windburned skin, unruly brown-blond hair, and sharp blue eyes.

"Doctor." Lynette stood to offer a strong handshake.

"Please, call me Gail. Thanks so much for bailing us out at the last moment."

Lynette shrugged and smiled just a little. "Well, the price was right and my boyfriend broke up with me right before flying out of here."

"Classy," Jane said.

"Eh, there were always issues. Why not hop on this adventure?"

“Why not indeed?” Cindithia said quietly.

They sat around the table for close to an hour, drinking coffee and chatting. It was awkward at first. They were from the US, Great Britain, China and the Tsalal islands. Among the five of them were three Ph.Ds and one DO. Even among the academics, there was little overlap—Ledbetter was a geologist, Pym a paleontologist, Xiang a linguist and Scott both an anthropologist and an osteopath. But all of them were, in some proportion, nervous but excited about being in Antarctica. To some extent, each seemed eager to test herself against a continent that, more than any other, was inimical to human life.

#

Gail caught up with Cindithia over an uninspiring supper—dishes made from canned goods with dried spices, served in a long and mostly beige buffet. After finishing and saying their good nights, Gail pulled out her phone to text Lynette Bourse before remembering that there was no texting at McMurdo. There just wasn't sufficient bandwidth. They'd all been issued pagers to use instead, and every room had a phone, so she frowned and fumbled a call request over the old technology. After getting her reply, she made her way to a workshop, where Lynette was packing up her personal tools, frowning at a printout of the expedition's electronic repair supplies.

“Hey Lynette.”

“Dr. Pym.”

“Please, call me Gail.” She looked around. “Anyone else here?”

“Nope, just us chickens.”

“Great, great.” Gail sat in an old office chair whose gray plastic cushion had been mended with a plaid pattern of electrician's tape. “So... you know we're going into the mountains, in the winter. In the dark.”

“Right.”

“And you're OK with it.”

Lynette sighed and took a seat on a plain wooden stool, about a foot higher than Gail's chair. “All right, look, the fact is... I got bills to pay. You're from the 'States, you know how it is. My family... medical debt. You know? And along comes Patty Xiang and she's *desperate* for an electrician. Can't wait another month or two to find and ship another one to the bottom of the world, it's

perfect. You know? I'm not... *dying* to run off into the coldest mountains on Earth. But I can do it, I need the dough, and I'm worth it."

Gail gave her a long, level look, then nodded. "All right. So. Have you ever heard of the Pabodie Expedition?"

"Oh, from... Miskatonic, right? Total shitshow in the 1930s?"

"Well, kinda."

"Yeah, yeah... they got lost in the mountains, disastrous weather, only a couple survivors. Is that right? Didn't someone go crazy and, like, kill all the dogs and half the men?"

"That's the story," Gail said delicately. "Have you... heard about the William Dyer testament?"

"No," Lynette said, her face briefly clouding.

"Well, Dyer was on the Pabodie Expedition and was one of the few survivors. Him and Paul Danforth, and he swore they found... a city."

Lynette gave one slow blink. "What?"

"Dyer said they found a city. He said some pretty amazing things. I mean, stuff that was difficult to... to believe." She shifted from side to side a little. "He said they found ancient life forms, these—plant things that looked capable of independent movement. Like big lozenges, with star-shaped heads and limbs."

"Oh wait! This was *that* guy?"

"So you *have* heard of him."

"I heard he was... ehm, not to put too fine a point on it..."

"Go ahead," Gail said, resigned.

"I heard he went apeshit crazy. Talked about goo monsters full of eyes and huge cities and all kinds of bonkers sh— er, stuff."

"I also heard he wasn't, eh, quite right in the head," Gail replied. "A funny story if you're cruel, or a cautionary tale about people who go too far with their theories, or about people whose minds snap when their bodies are under terrible strain. I didn't believe it either."

"Yeah?"

“Not until I saw it.”

There was a moment, and then Lynette laughed. “You’re having me on.”

“I promise you I am not.”

“You saw... what? What did you see? You’ve been down here before, did you...?”

“Not here. In China. We were digging for dinosaur bones in Liaoning... big international effort, paleontologists from France, Germany, Australia... even Japan.”

“‘Even’?”

“Look, if you want the full psycho-historical perspective on bad blood between China and Japan, ask Margo. I just know this was supposed to transcend petty nationalism, blah blah blah, and we wound up with access to a really deep seam, exposed in this valley. Badly overgrown, completely wild and we had trouble hiring labor to clear it, had to bring down workers from Fuxin, but the rock was old. Really old, probably a billion years.”

“So... before the dinosaurs?”

“Way before. The only things on land at that time should have been fungi and bacterial mats. Multicellular life was confined to the oceans, but it was primitive, just getting started with specialized organs.”

“OK.”

“We found a footprint.”

“A billion year old footprint?” Lynette was clearly skeptical.

Gail tilted her head from side to side. “It was a partial, and yeah, it could have been a coincidence of geology that it was so symmetrical—you dig enough rocks, you’re going to see some funny shapes. But then we found artifacts.”

“What do you mean by...?”

“I mean worked objects! They were like... coins or figurines or statues,” Gail said, crossing her arms to hug herself. “They were complicated and asymmetrical but identical. Two complete and one partial. Three different geologists couldn’t agree on their composition. Whatever it was, it was *hard*—imagine what a substance would have to be like to survive a billion years of geological shifts and pressure! But two of them were as alike as... as Pringles in a can.”

“So maybe they were some kind of petrified plant that just...?”

“No! Come on, I’m a paleontologist, I know what petrified plants look like and nothing from that era would even come close. Under the microscope, the structure was... iterative, a repeated framework that almost looked geodesic. Which is probably why it held its shape so well. You could... from one angle, it all lined up to look like a pine branch. From another angle, a sort of star with an oval and wavy lines in the middle. Well, you can imagine our excitement, right? We were taking pictures and throwing out theories, each bolder than the next, and then Dr. Fong, who was in charge of the expedition, took all our phones and computers. The next day, all photos of the objects were gone. So were the artifacts themselves.”

“No evidence? How convenient.”

“I promise you it's not convenient at all.”

“You expect me to believe this Fong guy just... took them?”

“Not only Fong. Miller, Schwartzwald, Dansereau and Shen, they all must have been in on it,” Gail said. She couldn’t meet Lynette’s eyes and she was blushing.

“‘In on it’? In on what?”

“The coverup. Miller was the one who talked to me, said it had all been a hoax and I’d look pretty foolish if I let myself get fooled. And these... these were giants in our field. Scientists we all admired, the people steering grant money and tenure decisions. So of course everyone knuckled under, had a laugh, said it was crazy to think. One of the workers got blamed and fired.” Gail pensively picked at a strip of loose skin on her lip. “I think most people from the trip bought the party line, you know? That it was another Piltdown Man. The expedition leaders all agreed, they were the rock stars of paleontology.”

“You knew better than them, then?” Lynette crossed her arms as well.

“I’d looked through the microscopes! Seen the structures! I knew that whatever the explanation, it wasn’t something a Chinese manual laborer threw together in three days, between getting hired and getting to work. So I tore the page out of my journal and hid it.”

Lynette sat quiet for a moment, her brow furrowed. “Could you have gotten the date wrong on the rock?”

“We could, I suppose. If the uranium-lead dating was wrong. If four different geologists all agreed on exactly the wrong explanation. If the layers above and below it were also misidentified. But I don't think they were.”

Gail stood up and started to pace. As she did, she continued. “I kept my mouth shut like a good little girl, but I kept my eyes open too. And I saw papers from the Pabodie expedition. Rubbings and sketches—material stuffed in a back archive at Miskatonic, forgotten and ignored. At the bottom of one of the boxes, a yellowing old photo someone had missed, showing artifacts found in with Dyers' supposed ‘plant men’. Some of it had the same shapes—the form like a pine branch, and the one like a star and oblong.”

“But that's... it's...”

Lynette trailed off. Gail just waited.

“I'm waiting to hear a theory or explanation that goes beyond ‘Gail, you must be mad or else a liar’.”

Lynette opened her mouth, then closed it without speaking. Gail glanced at the door, and Lynette followed her gaze.”

“You perhaps understand, now, why I don't want to be overheard?” Dr. Pym said.

“Does Dr. Xiang know about this?”

Gail gave a cold little smile. “Patricia Xiang found *me*. She's had her own... misadventures with out-of-place artifacts. She'd heard about the expedition from one of Fong's assistants, got a list of everyone involved, and started asking questions of the English speakers.”

“Only the English...?”

“She didn't want to take her chances with the Chinese academics. They... seemed to feel everyone had a lot to lose by this coming to light. Risks of looking foolish, balanced against risks of looking like they were covering something up. We Americans weren't as touchy about it—an expedition on foreign soil with no physical proof? Why even discuss it? The hoax narrative in those circumstances is nearly impossible to overcome. Occam's Razor slashes apart the idea that we're just *wrong* about the planet's history.”

“But you agreed with her?”

Gail shrugged. "'Agree' is a strong word. We have some very different theories about what we'd seen, but we do both acknowledge that we're looking at one single thread and trying to guess the pattern on the blanket it came from. She'd seen objects belonging to private collectors that she was certain—absolutely positive—were of nonhuman origins." Her chilly little smile returned. "So that's who you're going off with, into the dark mountains. Those are the things we believe."

"And... and the others...?"

"If you still come with us, you'll have plenty of time to ask them yourself. We'll be isolated together for weeks on end, but... if you aren't coming with, you probably shouldn't bring it up."

"A sensitive topic, huh?" Lynette was staring at the far wall. She looked a little stunned.

"Margo's first career got tanked over this stuff. Cindithia was next to me at the microscope in Liaoning. As for Jane, I don't quite know her whole history, only met her once before, but her family's from Tsalal... Margo met her there doing research, vouches for her."

"What...?" Lynette looked up at Gail, brows lowered intently. "What are we looking for? What are we really trying to find out there?"

"A city," Gail said. "A city that was old before humankind came."

"How can you think it's there though? I mean satellite images show nothing!"

"Yeah, I know. And hey, if we're wrong, you spend a couple months with some harmless crackpots and then get a second big check. I, um, I presume Patty paid you a retainer?"

"...she did..."

"Cashed it yet?"

"I have."

"Not too late to back out and pay it back," Gail said, leaning to meet Lynette with an intense expression.

"No. I'm in. I'm not sure I believe there's an invisible city in western Antarctica, but... I need that money."

"Thank you capitalism and health-care debt," Gail said, with an ironic little smirk.

#

Bright and early the next morning, Gail set out to inspect the Xiang-Pym expedition's vehicles. She dressed in layers, of course—thermals next to her skin, jeans and sweater, insulated bib overalls and her red scientist parka, along with gloves inside mittens and her high-tech brown plaid scarf. Moving around the cavernous garage, she wondered if she'd overdressed. Then one of the doors rolled up. A blast of white, fine as the sugar on a powdered donut, blew in with a truck, on a wind as cold as death itself.

The vehicles within were a mixed lot, mostly pickup trucks in various states of dismantlement, some with tires and some with treads. Hulking farther back were the heavier vehicles—bulldozers, cranes and SnoCats. Four huge PistenBullies were parked off to the left. Two of the four were hers.

Each had a bubble cockpit, round and glassy in front of flatbed cargo plates or boxy enclosed cabins. Two had snowplows on the front, and all had heavy, wide caterpillar tracks. The pair earmarked for the expedition didn't look any newer than the others, because they weren't. Rather than pay for brand-new vehicles and pay again to ship them to the bottom of the world, Patricia had negotiated for two that were in place. One was from an American geological expedition that had wound down when the petroleum concern funding it shifted into fracking. The other originally belonged to a New Zealand astronomy and weather-measuring expedition at the nearby Ross station.

Examining each of the vehicles with the eye of a horse-trader checking a stallion's teeth, Gail frowned and nodded and then found herself facing Dexter Calhoun once more.

"Doctor," he said.

"'Cal'," she replied, smile tight and eyes narrow.

"You ready to wrangle one of these monsters for a few months on end?" he asked, giving a proprietary slap to the vehicle's hood.

Her reply was a slow blink. "Does it seem reasonable to you that I've arranged all this, paid for all this, and flown down here if the answer to that isn't a resounding 'yes'?"

He chuckled. "OK, sure, it was dumb, I was just trying to make conversation."

"Try harder!" she said, but softened it with a smile. "And what has brought you to here?"

“‘Here’ meaning Antarctica, or to this garage?”

“The garage,” Gail said. “I... don’t think I’m ready for your life story.”

“Maybe when you’re back from the mountains, we’ll get you... um, something you won’t be taking with you, whiskey or hot chocolate or something... and I can tell you, and you can tell me what you found out there.” His smile was something a more interested woman would have called ‘roguish.’

“Are you asking me for a date? Because I’m just asking why you’re standing by my trucks.”

“Fine, fine, you can’t blame a guy for... all right, I’m in the garage ‘cause I work in the garage. Make sense? Ask your gal Jane. I’m actually one of the chief mechanics here.”

“Oh! Great. I’ll expect everything to be in tip-top shape, then.”

“As you should,” he said, spreading his hands.

“Gail! Gail, there you are! Oh, hi Cal.” Patty’s chipper tone cooled as she saw who was standing by her colleague.

“Patty! Lovin’ that scarf,” he said, wiggling his fingers to indicate the sparkles on Patricia’s neckwear.

“Thank you so much. Gail! Ready for some thrill-packed inventory checking?” Patty gestured with her clipboard, which was made from clear plastic and colored neon pink.

“Been dreaming of it,” Gail said dryly, and the two women excused themselves and turned towards the four heavy-tracked trailers where their supplies were being loaded.

“What’s up with that guy?” Pym asked, voice low enough to be lost in the background of rumbling engines and rattling power tools.

“Oh, who knows? Probably just trying to fucky-fuck the new bi.”

“Patty! Jesus Christ. Ew. Does he... do that?”

“I don’t know, but he seems the type, right? I wasn’t here for long before he was chatting me up, acting all interested in the expedition.”

“Far be it from me to give the guy benefit of the doubt, but maybe he actually *is*?”

"I suppose. He's some kind of old hand, been here for years and years."

Gail braced a foot on the tail of the first trailer and used it to lever up the sliding door. "I'm surprised he didn't go after Cindithia."

"Maybe he did," Patty said, scrambling inside. "Or maybe he's a racist. Maybe you look like his old high school crush. Or his mom. One could make all kinds of hypotheses."

"Not one of which matter to me. All right, this is trailer one? Where we're going to sleep?"

"Correct."

"...where?"

The interior was crowded, and Gail had to hunch a little to avoid the feeling that her head was about to hit the roof.

"Four fold-down bunks," Patty said, reaching up on the walls to deploy them. The last of them didn't emerge all the way, getting stuck on an MRE crate until Patty hauled it aside and rested her paperwork on it, pulling a pencil out of an inside pocket. "Each has one mattress, check, one inflatable pillow, check, three hypoallergenic pillowcases, three hypoallergenic fitted sheets, three hypoallergenic topsheets, check, check and check."

"Last two sleep on the floor?" Gail asked.

"Yes, there should be a box around with the floor mattresses, where is it?"

They briefly searched among packages of first aid supplies, water purification and snow-melting gear, and high-carb protein bars until Gail said "Found it," and they carefully checked off the contents.

"Sleeping bags over here?"

"Six different colors so we can keep them straight," Patty said. "Dibs on the magenta one."

"Fine by me."

"OK, lets... yeah, let's go through the medical supplies. This stuff's all first aid, everyday stuff. The specialized medicines and serious tools are in trailer three, we'll have Margo check that over when we get to it."

"What's Margo up to this morning, then?"

“Last minute checks of medical bureaucracy, making sure Lynette doesn't have distemper or the plague,” Patty said, pawing through sanitary napkins and different sized bandaids, while Gail checked them off on their list. “Not that I'd drop her for anything short of... I don't know, advanced stage leprosy.”

“That hard up for an electrician?”

“They're not thick on the ground around here. Especially not ladies. You want to add some snorting bull to this crowded pasture?” she said, gesturing at the cramped sleeping arrangements.

“We hire the most qualified applicants,” Gail said lightly. “Though I won't deny that being all women has some... conveniences.”

“Some inconveniences too,” Patty muttered. She reached up to one of the bunks and gave it a few hard, rhythmic shoves. “Feels like these couldn't handle much hanky-panky anyhow.”

“Send a note to the manufacturer.”

Patty bit her lip and glanced at Gail, one eye narrowing. “Gail... speaking of medical checkups...”

“I'm fine.”

“OK.”

“I got checked six months ago. Cancer free. Not a trace.”

“Great.”

“I wouldn't do this if I didn't feel a hundred percent. All right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I just...”

“Had to ask.”

“You know.”

The two looked away from each other. Gail pushed a knuckle into her upper lip for a moment, cleared her throat and said, “What's next?”

“We should fold these up to get at what's underneath them—more food, lights, some heaters. Then the floor underneath folds up on a hinge in the middle, the big food cans are under that, so we're actually walking on our future meals right now, like subs in World War II.”

“Appetizing!” Gail replied.

#

The plan was that one engine would pull trailers one and two, and the other would pull three and four. The supplies were so divided that, if one cargo pod foundered and had to be disconnected, or was lost entirely, some portion of essentials like food and fuel would be retained. But for the most part, the provisions and warming supplies were in the first, while the third held electronics, tools, spare parts and scientific equipment.

They'd exhaustively inventoried the first unit when Jane and Cindithia joined them. As Patty handed over the list for the back trailer, Jane informed her that it was not yet loaded.

“What? Why not? We're supposed to leave *tomorrow!*” Patty said.

“That one's the heavy gear, right? Digging equipment and...” Jane looked at the papers. “...fuel, the fuel got loaded two days ago, we can check that off...”

“Make sure it's still there,” Pym said. Jane looked up with a little frown.

“You think someone would steal it? This ain't like Port Tampa Bay where you can't throw a rock without hitting some sticky-fingered motherfucker with a substance problem. I mean, even if someone jacked our fuel, where would they, like, *fence* it?”

“I don't want to accuse anyone,” Pym said, looking around as if expecting to see Dexter Calhoun lurking amidst the trucks and snow machines. “But a little mistake can have big, big knock-on effects once we're out past the Ross Ice Sheet and into the hills. I'd rather not have to pay someone to airlift us fuel if someone loaded a fifty gallon drum of potato salad instead of diesel. Do you want to be part of an all-woman team that fails?”

“No,” Jane said, shuffling her feet and pouting just a little.

“Great, so we're agreed, check what's already in there, make sure it's all present and accounted-for.”

“First though,” Patty said, with a pained little expression, “Please explain why the earthmovers and snowmobiles that are supposed to be in there are not.”

“They're over in another bay,” Jane said with the eye-roll of a young person contemplating her elders' follies. “The ramp got damaged when someone

backed into it, and the lift that could handle their weight was already spoken for. Someone could go now and see if it's free, I guess."

"Why don't you come with me and we'll see about that together," Pym said grimly, when Dr. Ledbetter, from a bit further down, called out "Trailer four is empty too! What the *shit!*"

"I'm sure it's the same thing," Jane said.

"If anyone's messed with my drills, I am going to make ever such a fuss," Cindithia said, fuming.

"You stay here and help Patty with the one that *did* get loaded, that's all relatively light stuff, right?"

"We'll need to wait for Margo to do the medical materials. Where is she?" Patty asked. "How long does it take to do paperwork?"

"I'll call her," Pym said, moving closer. Then she lowered her voice and said. "So the crates from Indonesia...?"

"Oh, I've kept a close eye," Xiang said with a nod.

"Check them again, just for my peace of mind?"

"They're in number three."

Dr. Pym stretched her back a little, glanced at Jane and then said, "You know what? Before we go, I'm going to reposition the cabs, maybe double-check the couplings and hitches."

"Sure," Jane said. "I can do that, no problem."

#

"Well, we can't do it, there's a problem," Jane said twenty minutes later, looking exasperated.

Gail took a deep breath. "OK, we are problem-solvers, what's the issue?"

"In addition to the broken ramp, now the crane's disabled."

"Disabled how?"

"They didn't say."

“Let’s go see.”

When they arrived, the crane operator was looking at his phone.

“Hey!” Gail said, smiling. “Do you know what’s wrong with your equipment?”

He looked up with a dour expression and raised a single eyebrow.

Gail laughed. “OK, bad phrasing on my part. But gosh, we really want to get our gear shifted, and the ramp’s down, and *now* it seems like this won’t work,” she said, gesturing.

“I don’t know what the problem is. Gears don’t seem to catch.”

“But it still starts OK? It’s not an electrical problem?”

“Doesn’t seem to be,” he said, shifting from one foot to the other. “She still sparks up, yeah.”

“Why don’t you pop the hood, let us take a look?”

“I dunno...”

“Cal said it was OK,” Gail said, and flashed him another smile. He glanced at Jane, who was already casting an appraising eye on the tools racked on the wall.

“He told me he couldn’t get anyone in until Wednesday,” the operator said, but opened up the engine casing for them.

“Tell me about the gear assembly,” Gail said, leaning in. “The transmission fluid is...?”

“Nah, that’s good, it’s not the fluid. If the clutch slipped, Christ, that’s going to take forever to fix, probably don’t have the parts any closer than South America.”

“Was it grinding or halting?” Jane asked rolling up beside them and scowling down into the machine’s cavity.

“No, it was running fine yesterday. Maybe burning a little oil but nothing you’d rebuild over.”

“Hm. You want to run it for us?”

“OK, but you’ll see,” he said dubiously, climbing into the cab.

"You work on motors?" Jane asked Gail, once he was turning the key.

"Family business was marine engines, but we did some cranes. Some big rigs too," she said.

"I suppose you paid your way through school long-hauling?" Jane asked, with her sly smile.

"No, working in the library." She tilted her body to make eye contact with the operator and said "Can you try to engage it?"

As he did, the women watched, and it was Jane who next instructed him to "Gun it a little!"

It whirred and roared, and she made a cutting gesture until he turned it off.

"I think we need to access this lower part, there's a disconnect. Y'wanna help me with that air wrench over there?" Jane asked.

"Yeah, sure," the man said.

Fifteen minutes later they had the panel off and Jane up underneath it. Twenty minutes of poking and experimenting after that, she crawled out and said "It's a belt."

"No *shit*? All that and it was just a snapped belt?" The driver seemed genuinely peeved. "I can't believe Cal said... man, he's gonna slap himself."

"Eh," Gail said lightly. "Just tell him you fixed it, don't rub his face in it."

"He'll probably come at you for every other repair job after this," Jane said, before setting out to find a replacement.

"Like I don't have enough work now. Though, hey, thanks for getting me back to it before everything stacks up, I owe you one."

"No problem," Gail replied. "Though honestly, if you *want* to do me a favor?"

"Sure."

She lowered her voice. "Don't tell Cal it was me and Jane. I don't want him to hire her away, you know?"

He shrugged. "I dunno..."

"OK, how about this, you don't tell him until we're out on the ice?"

He smiled back and held up a fist for a bump. "Deal."

#

Of course it was a long, cold hassle to get their heavy gear moved from where the crane deposited it to the bay where the trailers were. But at least it gave Jane a chance to lean in towards Gail while they were shoving rhythmically at a crate of sealed drilling components. "Hey. Pym. Something weird about that crane."

"Yes?" Gail replied, huffing as she tried to straighten the heavy cargo.

"The belt wasn't broken, it was gone."

Gail paused and gave her a narrow-eyed look, through her goggles and over her scarf.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if it had frayed through and broke, the busted one would have been somewhere in there. It was closed on the bottom, we had to remove the panel to get to it, so unless it fuckin' flew into the pistons or some shit, it should have been there. But there weren't even, like, the little crumbs that freeze off belts down here before they burst."

"What does that mean?"

"Dunno."

"Speculate."

Jane gave a huff and with a single, powerful exertion, aligned the pallet. "It could be that I just missed it. But it could be that someone pulled the panel like we did, cut the belt, and put the panel back on."

"Sabotage."

"Dunno."

"Lovely," Gail muttered.

That was when her pager buzzed.

"Who's that?" Jane asked, flexing her neck and shoulders.

"Cindithia," Gail replied. "Christ, I hope that Calhoun character isn't being a pest."

When they returned to the garage with their gear, Cindithia and Dexter were face to face, shouting, as Patty and assorted drivers looked on with varying degrees of discomfort and amusement.

"This is bullshit. This is harassment!" Cindithia said.

"Look, the hours are the hours." Cal wasn't looking at her, he was looking up and away.

"If you and your people had done their damn jobs, there'd be no problem, but they didn't, so now we have to do it and the least you can do is let us do what we need to and *you* can't."

"Look, you're making a fool of yourself..."

"No, the fool is you!" Cindithia shouted, and with a British accent, it sounded devastating to any American listening.

"What seems to be the problem?" Gail said loudly, approaching the pair.

Cal turned with a conciliatory expression and raised his hands. "Hey, hi there. I'm real sorry that your stuff didn't get loaded, circumstances were..."

"Apology accepted, why are you arguing with Dr. Ledbetter?"

"We... cannot stay open to let you load that stuff tonight."

"Why not?"

"It's against regulations."

"What regulations?"

"Regulations, er, governing the operation of this garage," Cal said, not meeting her eyes.

"Show me."

"The hours of operation are clearly posted! They're on the *doors!*"

"And you've never, ever made an exception to the rules?"

"Oh, he did just five months ago," Patty piped up, coming to stand next to Cindithia.

"That was an unusual circumstance, practically an emergency," Cal said.

"Someone's truck broke down, you see, and they wanted to use it the next morning, so they towed it in here to be fixed," Patty explained.

"Oh, outstanding, there's precedent. We want to use our equipment the next morning too." Gail had gotten closer, and Cal now had women from the Xiang-Pym expedition on three sides of him. Jane followed Gail, silent and wide-shouldered.

"I'm sorry, I really am..." Cal started.

"Great, we'll take that to mean we can stay and do our bloody jobs," Cindithia snapped in reply.

"No, I'm sorry, we're closing on time," he said.

"Why?" Patty asked.

"We don't have the budget to stay open twenty-four hours, we can't... the staff can't..."

"Would one of you be willing to stay here, while we do all the work, for two hundred dollars?" Patty called, turning to look around her. Slowly, one man raised his hand.

"Bruce, goddammit," Cal said, and the man lowered it again.

"So much for your staffing problem then," Patty said, beaming. "We'll just load up while Bruce here sees to anything that requires official input."

"Why don'tcha just let 'em have it, Dexter?" someone called from a far doorway.

"Why don't you mind your own fucking business, Mick?" Cal roared back.

"This doesn't look very good for you," Gail said quietly. "I mean, the way you were kind of clinging to me, that's neither here nor there, it's deniable, but when combined with this kind of foot-dragging it rather does look like you're trying some kind of sexist power play."

"That's ridiculous! All I'm doing is what I'm 'sposta!"

"Is that why you sabotaged the crane?" Gail asked.

"*What?*" Cindithia cried.

"You sound crazy," Cal said, looking rapidly from side to side at the women encircling him.

"Yo, anyone ever investigate who vandalized the ramp?" Jane asked, chin up belligerently.

"No one *vandalized* it, it was damaged in an accident!"

"What's amazing about *McMurdo* is how *contained* everything is," Gail said, getting close and dropping her voice. "If someone had... I don't know, say, cut an engine belt, that cut belt would still be *somewhere*. What would it look like, for you, if we had that belt, and proved that you were trying—for whatever asinine reason—to screw with our expedition? Hm?"

"There's no cut belt," he said, matching her gaze with a glare of his own.

"Use logic, 'Cal.' We have our machinery now. How, exactly, did you think we got that here without fixing the crane? Hauled it on our broad, muscular backs?" She shook her head.

"Listen, everything has gotten heated, if we just take a breath and a moment..."

"Take a moment? We've been waiting *all damn day* because you're either incompetent or actively blocking us!" Cindithia shouted, right by his ear, making him flinch. "I don't care whether you *can't* do your job or just *won't*, but I'll be damned if I just stand by and keep *us* from doing it."

"Well said, professor Ledbetter." Gail stepped back and looked at Patricia. "The inventory on trailer three is complete?"

"Mm hm!" Patty nodded vigorously.

"Great. Cindithia, start checking your gear, Jane will help you load it on four. I'm getting Margo, then coming back to load two."

"No, you're not!" Cal said.

Gail folded her arms. "How are you going to stop us? Throw us out by force? Call the cops? Lock the doors until we give up? Whatever it is, start now."

"You all have to leave!"

"No," Gail said calmly. "They all have to stay. I am the leader of the expedition, and they have their orders." She looked at the women. "You understand what's required of you?"

"Damn straight, skipper," Jane said with a grin.

Cal glowered, then threw his hands up in the air.

"Crazy bitches," he muttered, striding away.

"Oh! Very telling, that!" Cindithia shouted after him.

#

It took them most of the night to complete the load in, and they decided without real discussion to just drive out when it was done.

"Not that one," Gail said as Jane started to climb into the closest PistenBully.

"But...?"

"Ours are those two," she said, gesturing.

"But you were looking over this one earlier when you were checking the linkages."

"I must have made a mistake," she said, her face poker-blank.

Jane shrugged and went towards the indicated vehicles.

"Do you really think they'd be sabotaged too?" Patty asked, as quietly as she could around the rumble of the heavy motors.

"I wouldn't lay money on it. They'd probably just do one. They're still trying to win by running out the clock."

"'They'?" Patty said, with a humorless smile.

"Yeah. You know. 'Them'." Gail's return grin was equally bleak.

They got the vehicles connected without incident and set forth. Gail took the lead in what they'd termed "X-Ray Papa One" towing the first pair of trailers. Jane drove behind her with "X-Ray Papa Two" and pods three and four.

Gail's driving seat was thickly padded and high up, but the vibrations of the powerful engine still shook her, like heavy bass tones resonating in her bones. Hot

air, lightly perfumed with fuel, blew powerfully across a pine-scented air freshener which danced in its artificial breeze.

Cindithia was riding shotgun in a similarly deep seat. Behind them was a broad bench with little leg room, unless the rider there—in this case, Lynette—sat with her feet near the big gearshift on the floor. Packed in the corners behind the seats were books, tissues, snacks, and a big old-fashioned boom box. (It had been agreed that X-Ray Papa Two would be the headphone van, if no one there wanted to talk.)

The two short trains of the Xiang-Pym expedition cruised noisily through the silent, coal-gray streets of McMurdo at midnight. After months of summer with no sundown, the antarctic autumn was now edging into dark days.

They drove across the Ross shelf for six hours before deciding to stop and make camp. They'd planned to drive farther on their first shift, but they'd also planned on starting four hours later and having a full night's sleep, instead of going straight from packing to travel.

It was Gail's first view of true antarctic wilderness, with their little caravan the only human works in sight, unless some of the lights above them were satellites. It was flat, gray, dark... *visibly* cold.

Lynette made some noises about just sleeping in the cab, but Gail was insistent they all get in the sleep chamber. "The pod has far better insulation and I don't want to fuel two heaters all night unless necessary," she said.

It turned out Margo and Jane both snored.

#

"If you want, I can take a turn driving some time," Lynette offered the next morning, on the first full day of the expedition. They were five hours into their travels and preparing for lunch. The grudging sun cast long, dim shadows off their vehicles. The ice was a close wide blur, and the sky a distant gray one.

"If you're not certified on this size rig, we can't have it. Insurance stuff." Gail replied. Cindithia and Jane had switched places so the geologist could try to get some more sleep in X-Ray Papa Two.

"I have the license though. Didn't Patty mention?"

"Either she forgot or I did," Gail said. "Where's it from?"

"Hm?"

“What country?”

“Argentina, actually.”

“OK, I’ll check if that’s on the list of licensing acceptance exchanges in our insurance... it’s on one of the laptop hard drives, I’ll dig it out tonight. If Argentina isn’t part of the group though... just not worth the liability hassles.”

“Oh. All right. Just thought I’d get that out there.”

“Hey, I appreciate the can-do spirit,” Gail said, eyes still on the pale plain before them, slightly tinged by the gold of their blazing headlights. “But the insurance people? Not so much.”

“Are we on track?” Lynette asked.

“Hm?”

“It just seems like we should be seeing the mountains,” Lynette said.

Jane gave a short laugh. “My first trip here, I had a half-hour commute every day from McMurdo to US Science. Didn’t see the bigass mountain off to one side for a month, until the light got better.”

“Still, we should be able to see something,” Lynette insisted. “Have we got optics in here?”

“Trailer three, sorry,” Gail replied.

#

Gail was dozing when Jane abruptly said, “OK, someone talk to me, I’m starting to drift off.”

“I really could take a turn at the wheel...” Lynette started, before Gail and Jane said “Insurance!” in near unison.

“It’s not like they’d ever find out,” Lynette said.

“Their spies are everywhere,” Gail told her, readjusting the wadded up blanket she was using to support her neck. It wasn’t doing a very good job.

“Antarctica,” Lynette intoned, deep and impressive as a movie voiceover. “A land beyond the jurisdiction of all nations... but not beyond the grip of State Farm.”

Jane gave a brief guffaw, then a yawn. "Why are you so anxious to handle this monster?"

"I'm not *anxious*, I just want to pull my weight." Lynette moved over towards the center of the back seat and gazed at the poorly lit dimness ahead of them.

"You'll get your chance. Never been on a trip like this where they just ran out of work," Jane said.

"You been out in the field a lot?"

"This is my fourth time," Jane said. "Not like Gail over there... you're busting your Antarctica cherry this go, right?"

"I was promised it would be the best experience of my life," Gail mumbled.

"And kicking it off with the Mountains of fuckin' Madness," Jane continued. "Well, I suppose after this everything else will seem pretty tame."

"You really think we're going to find an alien city?" Lynette asked.

"I think there's something. Something weird and messed up."

"Maybe something marvelous," Gail said, and yawned.

"So you're from... what's the place? Salal island?" Lynette asked Jane. "That's like... southwest of Australia?"

"It's pronounced 'Tsalal.' Not to be a bitch about it," Jane said.

"No, I mean, I want to say it right. It's going to take me a while to get that little click-hiss at the top."

"You just flick your tongue. Tsalal. And I'm not... I mean, I was born in California. Only lived on Tsalal for a few years, when... you know, after I moved out of Mom's place."

"I see." Lynette sat back a little, fiddling with her parka's puffy hood.

"OK, it's like this." Jane dropped one hand off the wheel to briefly turn and glance back. "Dad moved from the islands to California, met Mom, they had me, it was... you know, a nice nuclear family for a while, and then it turned into kind of a nuclear bomb family, the D-I-V-O-R-C-E, and he moved back to his homeland for a while. I spent a few years there but... it's a real shithole." She sighed.

"What do you mean? I haven't heard much about it, except that they have like... naturally occurring mineral water?"

"Yeah, Tsalal water, it's weird stuff. Can't stand it myself. It's like... like *thick*, and too blue, and it tastes like pennies and batteries. But I guess there are some

people who'll pay twenty bucks for twelve ounces, so almost all of the island is bottling plants and a few cruddy ports for anyone who's doing shit near Antarctica. Everything's cheap and jankety... it's like colonialism's chewed-up gum, stuck under a table."

For a little while, they rumbled on across the ice without speaking. Eventually, Lynette said "If you grew up in California, the cold must have been a real shock."

"Eh, yeah, but honestly? I always hated the heat. Couple times in high school, I wound up in the hospital for heat prostration, no matter how much I'd fuckin' hydrate. Eventually we moved into the mountains, and that was a lot better. So maybe I'm genetically adapted. Fat enough, I guess."

"*Finally*, all those Ring-Dings and chicken wings are working for me!" Lynette laughed a little, gripping her stomach through her coat and giving it a shake. Jane laughed too.

"So... can I ask you something?" Lynette said.

"Sure, fire away."

"How'd you wind up on *this* expedition?"

"Well, they needed a mechanic. That's the big thing."

"Sure, but... still. Do you really think we're going to see mystic mountains that don't show up on Google Earth?"

Jane was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke her voice was less jocular and more contemplative. "Let's just say I'm more open to it than most people. The folks on Tsalal... lot of legends about the bad white south. Tekeli li."

"What? Is that... the Tsalal language?"

"Tsaluoli, yeah. 'Tekeli li' is the big taboo. I mean, the culture's wrecked, but that part stuck. People there won't wear white clothes... hell, even posters and letters? They print it on yellow or gray. No white paper. That and a little of the language is about all that remains of aboriginal Tsalal society. Which, all right, don't tell Margo I said this but... it sounds like it was kind of a shitty culture?"

"It's your culture!"

"All right white girl, you think everyone should be proud of everything their ancestors did? Hope your grandpa wasn't German or Belgian or English or Portuguese or yadda yadda ya."

"Is 'yadda yadda ya' more tsaluoli?" Lynette asked with a little smile.

"That's right, and you white bastards stole it from us," Jane said, chuckling.

They drove on.

“So... why do you say the Tsalal culture was so bad?”

“Mainly ‘cause I have a uterus. There was... right, in the old pre-contact days, there was a king, but it wasn’t a hundred percent blood royalty. To take the throne, you had to be yampu, and not everybody qualified.”

“What’s ‘yampu’?”

“Um, like ‘wearer of the black’? That was the yampu caste’s mark of honor, they were allowed to wear black furs. To get to be yampu, you first had to prove you were a mighty hunter—there were these critters with white fur and *red teeth*, if you can believe it...”

“Red *teeth*?”

“Naturally red, yeah. They’re extinct now, they were somewhere between a thylacine and a wolf, only Antarctic. So the yampu would hunt them. Or, if they were really badass, there were these other things that were like black-furred grizzly bears. They weren’t taxonomically bears, but they were big and would fuck you up with a realness. Plenty of meat on them, so if you killed one, you were a mighty hunter and could become a yampu.”

“After the hunting, what was the next part?”

“Two dudes who want to be yampu enter, one yampu leaves.”

“What, like... they’d fight to the death?”

“Naked,” Jane clarified. “Naked death fight. Real caveman stuff.”

There was a pause while Lynette thought about it.

“And of course, there were no lady yampus,” the electrician eventually said.

“Of course not! So anyhow, the yampus pretty much ran the show, and usually the kings raised their sons to fight, but now and again a king wouldn’t sire a son, or his heir would snuff it trying to do violent yampu stuff, and you’d get a new line on the throne after all the other yampus fought for it. Women and non-yampu men were basically slaves. They could marry, but if you weren’t yampu and a yampu wanted your wife—or your husband, it turns out the culture was surprisingly bi-positive—well, there wasn’t much you could do about it. It was oppressive, is what I’m saying. So I have, what, a hundred or more generations of that on my dad’s side. Which is why I’m not such a fan of ‘ancestral pride.’ That and growing up black in California.”

“Yeah that’s... it’s a lot.”

“Hey, I’m sorry if I bit your head off though,” Jane said.

“No! It’s fine. I mean, you didn’t.”

“It’s ancient history anyhow. The yampus didn’t last two months once the white guys showed up. Although, gotta say, they died like they lived—ignorant and violent.”

“What happened?”

“OK, so the context is that the color white *terrifies* them, right? It’s more than, like, a superstition from those red-tooth beasties. There’s this prophecy—it’s lost now, only the yampus were allowed to know it and, as I’ll explain, they didn’t last—but even the peons knew that tekeli li was bad, evil, the worst, a white doom that would one day come to Tsalal. What was supposed to happen then, no one knows any more. The legends are gone, buried with the last yampu. Or, wait, I think they set bodies adrift in the sea?”

“What happened? How did the yampus collapse?”

“This boat called the *Jane Guy* showed up, an American ship, all huge white sails, and the first natives to see it *freaked the fuck right out*. But when people started coming off it, people with weird skin, the first yampu chief to meet them played it cool. He must have been some ice-cold sneaky bastard because he made friends, lots of gifts and parties, and convinced most of the crew to come to some big celebration at his house. To get there, they go through this narrow valley, and the chief’s slaves had busted their asses prying at the stones on the top of it, the soil, everything. So when the sailors are in the middle, they just bury them alive.”

“Wow.”

“Next, they go after the ship, and that’s where the surprises start. I think they’d seen guns shoot and maybe knew the cannons were weapons, maybe not? For certain though, they hadn’t been briefed on chain shot, and when the skeleton crew on the ship sees the big war rafts and canoes coming out, they just blasted... I dunno, a good forty percent of the yampus into red coleslaw. But the yampus had gone all in on this attack and the remainder got on board the ship, slaughtered everyone and set it on fire.”

“Uh huh?” Lynette leaned forward, rapt.

“The other thing the Tsalal tribe didn’t know, was what a powder magazine was. Most of the island’s population was gathered on the beach, watching the boat burn, when that went up.”

“Oh God.”

“Yeah. What’s *really* interesting—at least, Margo thought so and I kinda agree—is that the non-yampu majority overthrew their rulers after the shipboard

massacre. I mean, it was your basic apocalypse scenario, more than half the *inhabitants* were dead in one day and, for once, it was the oppressor class who took it on the ass. There were probably three to five yampus left, each trying to be chief, when the hundred servile chumps realized that they were never going to outnumber the bastards who'd been stealing their food and raping them more than right then. They went apeshit and then it was kind of benign anarchy for a while. Other yampus from nearby islands tried to show up and restore order, but once they heard that the tekeli li had befallen, Tsalal was off limits."

"Benign anarchy almost sounds like a happy ending."

"Well, it was less than a decade before westerners came back."

"Yeah?"

"Christian missionaries, bearing the gift of smallpox."

"Oh."

Jane shrugged. "So that's it, more or less. Night fell on Tsalal. The prophecy of the yampus was lost when the Portuguese declared the island a 'protectorate,' massacred the black-furs, hunted the weird animals until they dropped below a reproductive critical mass, and forbade the islanders to blacken their teeth."

"Wait, they did what to their teeth?"

"Oh yeah, my ancestors used to rub this local bark stuff on their teeth to stain them. You hardly wanted whiteness in your *mouth* right?"

"And you think their myths had something to do with... with what Dyer and the Pabodie team saw?"

"I dunno, but when I read that the creatures Dyer saw were screaming out 'tekeli li'... I got a chill, I'm not gonna lie. It seems like too much of a coincidence."

"So you're heading towards it instead of away?"

"Hey, everyone's gotta die somehow. If I die down here, at least I knew the risks. Better than having a trigger-happy cop called on me for an open container violation or something. And who knows? The yampus were bullies and assholes. Maybe their doom is something cool. If nothing else, it'll be a kick knowing how much I'm pissing off their ghosts."

The radio crackled with Patty calling for a dinner stop.

"Whoa, where'd all the time go? Hey, thanks for keeping me company during the haul," Jane said, slowing down and glancing in the rearview.

"My pleasure. It was interesting," Lynette said.

Gail yawned.

#

The next day, Margo and Cindithia rode with Gail. When they stopped for the night, they cooked dinner over a camp-stove in the open—a tiny, propane-blue beacon on the gray ice, under a cloudy black sky.

“So,” Patty said, stir-frying spam and onions in sesame oil. “Lynette asked me to check on whether she could drive or not.”

“I presume you told her no, the insurance thing?” Gail said.

“I did.” Patty threw a little fish sauce into the pan. “There was also some discussion about whether we’re on track.”

“Yeah?”

“She has her own GPS, it turns out.”

“Oh ho. You gaslight her about that?”

“I tried but, you know, we hired her on as *our electrician*. I could hardly spin technological bullshit enough to dazzle her, I just had to say ‘huh that’s funny, all our GPSes agree that we’re doing fine.’ Tomorrow, we’re supposed to rendezvous with the geo-team from Starkweather. I think she’s going to notice when we don’t.”

“By then, it will be too late, now won’t it?”

#

The third day of the expedition, when they were supposed to meet up with the incoming Starkweather vehicles, they’d been moving for three hours when a bullet crashed into the front of X-Ray Papa One.