



# Real Hero

Dave #4: Dark Waters

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# 1 Prologue

The taste of tear gas still burned in Dave's throat as he stared at his reflection in the hotel mirror. Three days since Venezuela, since he'd torn through enemy soldiers like they were made of paper, and he still couldn't wash away the memory. His body, deceptively ordinary with its middle-aged spread and tired eyes, betrayed nothing of what he was capable of. Nothing of what he'd done.

The mission had been straightforward on paper: neutralize North Korean influence in the region, outmanoeuvre CIA interference, prevent Venezuela from sliding into chaos. But paper plans rarely survived contact with reality, and reality had a way of pushing Dave to his limits these days.

He splashed cold water on his face, trying to clear his head. Three years ago, he'd been nothing more than an IT professional, content with his commuter lifestyle and desk job. The kind of man people's eyes slid past without really seeing. Then everything changed. The agency found him – or perhaps he found them – after his abilities first surfaced. They were still a mystery, these powers that let him bend steel like putty and shrug off wounds that should have been fatal. The agency's scientists had given up trying to measure his strength after he broke their last piece of testing equipment. His speed, while not instantaneous, left Olympic athletes looking like they were moving through molasses. But it was his durability that truly defied explanation – the harder something tried to hurt him, the more impenetrable his skin became.

Yet it was Guyana that had shown him something new. When Serj launched those smoke and CS gas grenades, Dave hadn't just powered through like usual. He'd seen things differently. Through the chaos and chemical haze, he'd perceived the soldiers' positions with impossible clarity, as if his mind had shifted into some new form of awareness. Each movement, each target, had been crystal clear despite the smoke that should have blinded him.

Dave's hands gripped the sink's edge, careful not to crack the porcelain. The agency had given him purpose, a way to use these inexplicable gifts for something greater than himself. They operated beyond government control, preventing global disasters and maintaining stability from the shadows. It should have felt noble. Instead, all he could think about was the rage.

In Venezuela, something inside him had broken loose. He hadn't just neutralized threats; he'd revelled in his power, lost himself in a fury that turned trained soldiers into rag dolls. His strength wasn't the problem – it was his control. Or rather, the moments when that control slipped and something darker took its place.

The mirror showed him what everyone else saw: a tired-looking forty-year-old man with an expanding waistline and greying hair. But beneath that carefully maintained facade lay something else, something that could warp industrial-grade steel and move faster than bullets. Something that was still evolving, still revealing new capabilities. And that terrified him more than any enemy ever could.

Dave straightened up, adjusting his rumpled shirt. Tomorrow he'd have to face Cecilia, his handler, and explain what happened in Venezuela and talk about his loss of control. But for now, he just stood there, wondering if the next mission would reveal something else lurking beneath his ordinary exterior – and whether he'd be able to control it when it did.

## 2 Touching Base

Rain drummed against the windows of Cecilia's flat, the sound a gentle counterpoint to the steam rising from Dave's untouched tea. Despite the comfort of being back in the UK, there was an unspoken tension in the air.

For months now, Dave had depended on Cecilia's steady presence during times like these. She carried her authority in every movement, along with the natural grace she brought to even the smallest gestures. Her dark skin caught the afternoon light as she shifted in her chair, the short, tightly coiled hair framing features that had become as familiar to Dave as his own handler's file.

It was her eyes that always commanded attention - sharp and analytical, missing nothing. When she spoke, her Ghanaian accent added warmth to her words, the melodic quality softening what might otherwise have been an intimidating presence. Now in her early thirties, she had mastered the delicate balance between approachability and authority, never needing to demand respect to receive it. Her pragmatic, no-nonsense demeanour had guided countless operations, yet there was always that undertone of genuine care beneath her professional exterior.

As Dave's handler within the agency, Cecilia balances formal leadership with a personable, steady approach. She doesn't coddle, but she knows how to lend support when needed. Originating from Ghana, where her parents still reside, her grounded sense of duty and responsibility shapes her leadership style, making her someone Dave respects both as a handler and as a person.

Cecilia sat across from him, legs crossed, holding a notepad that she barely glanced at. Her posture was relaxed, but Dave knew her well enough to see the sharp focus behind her calm. She was always like that—professional, yet approachable, maintaining the balance of authority and trust that had served her well as his handler.

"Guyana was... messy," Cecilia began, breaking the silence. "But we hit the objectives. North Korea's influence is severed, and we threw a wrench in the CIA's plans. That's no small feat. The agency's satisfied with the outcome." She paused, looking at Dave over the rim of her cup. "How are you feeling about it?"

Dave exhaled slowly. "It's not about the outcome," he said, his voice low. "I know we did what we were supposed to do. But something's bothering me." He stared into the tea, not quite sure how to phrase it. "I'm just not sure I like what I'm becoming out there."

Cecilia rested her cup down, leaning forward slightly. "Go on."

He hesitated, then continued. "Back in the jungle, when things got heavy... I lost control. I mean, I was doing my job—making sure the team was safe—but it wasn't me. I was... something else. Someone else." His voice dropped. "I tore people apart, Cecilia. With my hands. It wasn't just tactics, or necessity. It felt... primal."

It wasn't the power itself that had overwhelmed him back in Guyana—it was his rage. Everyone got angry; it was human. But not everyone had the kind of abilities he did, and when he lost control, things escalated quickly. He knew now that he hadn't been some mindless beast during the mission. His anger had fuelled his strength, pushed him further than he usually allowed himself to go. That was the real problem.

It wasn't the power taking over. It was him. "It wasn't the power that made me go too far in Guyana. I was angry, really angry. And when you have abilities like mine, that's when things get out of hand."

Cecilia's gaze didn't waver, but her voice softened. "You were in the middle of combat, Dave. That kind of intensity... it can bring things out in people. Doesn't mean it defines who you are."

Cecilia let the words hang in the air for a moment. "Look," she said, her tone more casual now, but still firm. "We both know this job changes us. It

has to. But you're still Dave. What happened in Guyana doesn't rewrite who you are. You made calls to protect your team, and you got everyone out alive. That matters."

Dave's jaw tightened, the muscles working beneath his skin. "I'm not sure I want to keep doing this if it means losing more of myself every time. What if the next mission pushes me further? What if I don't recognise myself at the end of all this?"

Cecilia studied him for a moment, then sighed. "Listen, you've got more control than you think. That power you've got—it's a tool. One that's saved lives, your own included. But it doesn't make you a monster. You've just got to learn how to manage it, how to keep it in check. And, if you ever feel like it's too much, you talk to me. I'm here, and I'm not just saying that because it's my job."

Dave ran his fingers through his hair, staring down at his hands. "I just don't want to be someone the team is afraid of, you know? I don't want to be the guy that crosses a line."

Cecilia smiled faintly. "They're not afraid of you. Trust me, Serj would've said something by now if they were. The team knows you've got their back. And so do I."

He exhaled, the tension easing just a little. "I hope you're right."

"I am right," she said with a confident nod. "But take some time to process it. No one's expecting you to have all the answers right away. One step at a time, yeah?"

Dave gave her a grateful look. "Yeah, one step at a time."

Cecilia leaned back, picking up her cup again. "Good. Now, get some rest. We'll debrief properly tomorrow, but for now, try to let this one go for a bit."

Dave stood, setting his mug down. "Thanks, Cecilia."



"Anytime, Dave," she replied, giving him a friendly smile as he made his way to the door. "Get some sleep."

As he left her flat and stepped into the rain, the heaviness inside him hadn't completely lifted, but it felt a little easier to carry knowing he wasn't doing it alone.

### 3 Time for a Pint

Dave sat back in his chair at The Hanged Man, the first cold pint of Guinness sliding down his throat far too easily. After the heat and chaos of Latin America, the stillness of the pub, with its low murmurs of conversation and the comforting clink of pint glasses, was a welcome relief. The thick, black stout was a taste of home, the kind of simple pleasure he'd missed in the jungles and on the battlefield. The Guinness here was as good as it got, smooth and creamy, the kind of pint that made you forget about the weight you carried for just a moment.

Finishing the first pint quicker than he intended, Dave headed to the bar for a second. He let out a small sigh as the bartender pulled the tap, letting the Guinness settle before topping it off with the perfect head. The cool air of the pub brushed against his skin, and for a fleeting moment, things felt... normal. Returning to his table, Dave froze for a second when he saw who was sitting there. Steve and Mick. Of all the people to run into, it had to be them.

"We saw you come in, thought we'd say hello," Mick said, his tone oily, laced with a quiet threat.

Dave gave Mick a hard look, the kind that should've been enough to warn him off, but Mick, recently released and clearly itching for some kind of payback, wasn't about to be brushed aside. Steve, the weasel he always was, just smirked, staying quiet but clearly there to back his mate. They knew Dave was strong, fast even. They'd seen glimpses of it before, enough to be wary, but they had no idea of the full extent. Still, Mick had a chip on his shoulder—Dave had helped put him away for a stint, and Mick wasn't one to let that go quietly.

Dave set his pint down on the edge of the table, barely sparing the two a glance before taking his seat. "I told you before, Steve, stay off my radar. I'm not interested."

Mick bristled at that, his eyes narrowing, fists clenching. "Not interested?" he spat. "After what you did? You're sitting there, acting like you're untouchable. Think you can just put me away and walk free, like we're done? You owe me, Dave."

Dave glanced at Mick, but it wasn't the kind of look Mick was used to getting. There was no tension in his shoulders, no sign of fear or concern. Dave leaned back in his chair, taking a slow sip of his pint, savouring it. "Mick, I'm going to make this real simple for you. Whatever grudge you think you have, it's not worth it."

Mick's nostrils flared, clearly not satisfied. "Not worth it? After all the shit you caused me?"

Dave exhaled slowly, setting his pint down gently on the table. He kept his eyes level with Mick's, calm but firm. "I'm not interested in fighting you. I'm not interested in hurting you. I'm here to enjoy my pint, not settle some petty score you've been brewing while you were inside." He paused, letting the silence linger just long enough for Mick to feel it. "But if you cross the line, if you think you're going to make this a problem for me, I will put you back in your place. Understand?"

Mick leaned forward, trying to project the intimidation he once wielded so well, but there was a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. Dave wasn't rising to the bait. He wasn't giving Mick the satisfaction of fear or anger. That calm, controlled demeanour was something Mick hadn't expected—and it was unsettling.

"You've got no idea what you're dealing with," Dave said quietly, his voice barely above a murmur, but it cut through the tension like a knife. "You think you know me, but you don't. Walk away while you still can, Mick. This isn't a fight you can win."

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat, clearly sensing that things weren't going to go the way they'd planned. Mick, on the other hand, stared at Dave for a long moment, trying to gauge whether he should push further.

But the way Dave sat, relaxed, unworried, sipping his pint as if the whole encounter was nothing more than a minor inconvenience—it made something in Mick's bravado falter.

Dave leaned forward slightly, his gaze never leaving Mick's. "I'm not your problem. But you keep making me one, and I'll make sure you regret it." He picked up his pint again, nodding to the door. "Now leave. We're done here."

For a moment, it seemed like Mick might explode, but then he saw the truth in Dave's eyes. There was nothing to be gained here. No victory, no revenge. Just more trouble. He stood up abruptly, knocking his chair back, glaring at Dave one last time before turning on his heel. "You're lucky this time."

Dave didn't respond, watching as Mick and Steve made their way to the door. As they left, he leaned back in his chair, letting out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. The pint in front of him was still cold, still perfect. He picked it up, took a long, satisfying drink, and smiled to himself.

Peace, for now.

Dave sat back in his chair, the pint of Guinness still half-full in front of him. His thoughts drifted to the team, wondering how they each spent their downtime. He knew Dan well enough to guess what he'd be up to. Dan was always the leader, always in control, and when he wasn't running tactical operations for the agency, he'd be right in the thick of things on the rugby field. Dave could picture it clearly—Dan, the team captain, barking orders and guiding his side through a tough match, applying the same military precision and strategy to rugby that he did to missions. Maybe he'd be at a pub much like The Hanged Man afterward, laughing with his mates, beer in hand, unwinding in his own way.

Then there was Serj. Dave chuckled to himself at the thought. Who really knew what Serj did in his spare time? With his build and intense focus,

Serj seemed like the kind of guy who didn't know the meaning of "downtime." Dave imagined him at the gym, effortlessly pumping free weights, the kind that would make most men struggle, or perhaps practising martial arts, smashing wooden blocks and perfecting his technique with the same discipline he brought to the field. Serj was a man of few words, and Dave doubted he relaxed in the conventional sense. He'd be doing something physical, something gruelling—because for Serj, that was probably as close to relaxation as it got.

But Omar... Omar was a bit more of a mystery. Dave pictured him in the backstreets of some unassuming city, maybe Cairo or Istanbul, walking through a bustling market, blending in with the crowds, always watching, always learning. Omar had that natural ability to disappear in plain sight, and he probably enjoyed being out there, moving through environments that required quick thinking and adaptability. He'd be at ease in places that would make most people uncomfortable—dangerous areas, places filled with shady characters, where a little knowledge of explosives or strategy could go a long way.

Anya, always the tech genius, probably wouldn't stray far from her gadgets and screens. She was one of those people whose mind was always spinning with ideas, constantly searching for ways to push the boundaries of technology. Dave imagined her in her flat, surrounded by laptops, wires, and high-tech equipment, probably hacking into some system or designing the next big thing in surveillance. But knowing Anya, she'd also have something completely unexpected playing in the background—maybe some 80s music or a series of crime dramas, the more complicated the plot, the better.

As for Alicia, she was new to the team, but been through her own share of tough situations, so maybe she liked the quiet nights too. He imagined her curled up on her sofa, wrapped in a blanket with a good book, something more introspective and dark—psychological thrillers or espionage novels, the kind that mirrored her own world. There'd be a glass of wine within

reach, and perhaps she'd reflect on the people she played on missions, the roles she adopted like second skins.

Mei. Dave couldn't help but think about her and the journey she'd been through since the mission that had nearly taken her out of the game. She was tough as nails, no doubt about that, but the injuries had been serious—badly hurt in the field, leaving her sidelined for longer than any of them liked. But she was on the mend now, stronger with each passing day.

Dave smiled to himself. Every one of them had their own way of dealing with the stress, the chaos of their missions. They all had their quirks, their ways of blowing off steam. But as much as he tried to imagine their lives away from the field, the truth was, they were all cut from the same cloth—men and women who thrived on action, on adrenaline. Even in their downtime, they were always preparing for the next mission, the next challenge.

Dave raised his empty pint glass slightly, as if to toast to Mei's return, and smiled to himself. She'd be back on her feet, back in the thick of it where she belonged. And when she was, the team would feel whole again.

## 4      **Something New**

Dave sat across from Cecilia in the agency's sleek, modern meeting room, the glass walls offering a view of the bustling offices beyond. He had a steaming cup of tea in front of him, while Cecilia sipped on her water, her posture relaxed but attentive. They had just finished going over the key points from the Guyana mission, but Dave was clearly holding something back. She noticed his hesitation and raised an eyebrow, prompting him without saying a word.

Dave's spoon clinked against his teacup, the repetitive motion betraying his unease. "There's something else I need to talk about," Dave began, continuing to stir his tea idly as he spoke. "It's about my... abilities. I didn't really think about it until after the debrief, but something happened during that firefight with the Venezuelan army that I can't quite explain."

Cecilia leaned forward slightly, resting her elbows on the table. "Go on."

"Remember when Serj fired those smoke and CS gas grenades to cover me?" Dave continued, his voice low but steady. "That gas didn't slow me down at all. I've already figured my oxygen requirements are different from most people, but that's not the part that's bothering me."

Cecilia her face serious, keeps her eyes on him. "What is?"

"It was the smoke," Dave said, frowning as he tried to articulate what had been bothering him. "I should have been blinded by it, just like the Venezuelan soldiers. But I wasn't. I mean, it's not like I was seeing perfectly, it wasn't in full colour or anything... but I could sense them, almost like I knew where they were, even with all that smoke swirling around. I could still respond, still hit them as targets." He looked up at her, searching for answers. "How is that possible?"

Cecilia took a moment, processing what he'd said. "So, you weren't seeing through the smoke in the normal sense? More like... a heightened awareness of their presence?"

"Exactly," Dave replied, leaning forward slightly. "I wasn't seeing them with my eyes, not in the usual way, but it was visual. I knew where they were. Their movements, their positions... it was like the smoke wasn't there, at least not for me."

Cecilia tapped her fingers lightly on the table, her expression thoughtful. "It could be an extension of your other physical enhancements. We know your body doesn't operate under normal conditions—your oxygen levels, your strength, your resilience. This might be another facet of that. Something in your biology is compensating, allowing you to function in environments where others would be impaired."

"But why now?" Dave asked, frustration creeping into his voice. "I've never noticed anything like this before. Sure, I've always been strong, but this... this is new. I've never been able to sense people like that."

Cecilia studied him for a moment before responding. "It's possible that whatever's happening to you is still evolving. Your abilities might be adapting to different situations, expanding as you face more intense challenges. In Guyana, you were under extreme pressure—both physically and mentally. Maybe that's what triggered this new... awareness."

Dave rubbed his forehead, still trying to make sense of it. "So what, I've got some kind of built-in radar now?" Dave almost laughed, in his head the thought popped up 'I'm Batman!'

Cecilia chuckled lightly. "I wouldn't jump to that conclusion just yet. But it's worth investigating. We need to run more tests, figure out exactly how your body and senses are operating under these conditions. If this awareness of yours is something we can harness, it could be a game changer."



Dave sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I just don't want to lose myself in all of this, Cecilia. Every time something new happens, it feels like I'm drifting further away from who I used to be."

Cecilia's expression softened. "You're not losing yourself, Dave. You're evolving. And that doesn't mean you stop being who you are—it just means you're becoming something more. You have control over how far you let this go. But for now, let's focus on understanding it. We can work on the rest as it comes."

A muscle twitched in Dave's jaw, feeling a bit more grounded. "Yeah. Okay. Let's figure it out."

Cecilia smiled, her professional edge softening for a moment. "Good. We'll schedule some time in the lab. In the meantime, keep paying attention to how your body's reacting. This could be bigger than we thought."

"Right," Dave agreed, taking a sip of his tea. "And maybe next time, we'll have some answers before I'm dodging bullets in a cloud of smoke."

Cecilia chuckled. "Let's hope so."

## 5 Eye Test

Dave squinted at the ever-shrinking letters on the far wall. The familiar eye chart had become a challenge now, each row pushing his vision further than the last.

"Line fifteen," Kessler called out, his pen hovering over his clipboard.

"T, R, P, E, L, F." Dave rattled off the letters without hesitation. He could feel Kessler's surprise even through the observation window.

"Remarkable," Kessler exclaimed, loud enough for the intercom to catch it. "That's past 20/10 vision. Better than any Olympic marksman we've tested, but..." He trailed off, scribbling furiously.

"But not superhuman?" Dave finished for him, a hint of amusement in his voice. These baseline tests had become almost routine - establish the normal before pushing into the extraordinary.

Kessler tapped his pen against the glass. "Precisely. Your vision is enhanced, certainly, but it's still operating within human parameters. What interests me is how it might adapt under stress." He reached for the environmental controls. "Ready to make things more interesting?"

Dave rolled his shoulders, preparing himself. "Hit me with the smoke."

The chamber filled with the first wisps of synthetic fog, and Dave felt his other senses beginning to sharpen. This was where things always got complicated - where the line between enhanced and impossible started to blur.

"Tell me what you see now," Kessler's voice came through the speakers, barely audible over the hiss of the smoke machine. "And Dave? Don't hold back. I want to know everything."

Despite the haze, Dave performed well. His reactions were still sharp, and he could easily track the movements of the lights and objects around him, but when it came to the Snellen chart, something was off. The letters were still visible, but they were harder to focus on, their shapes slipping away as the smoke thickened.

Kessler raised the smoke level further, the room now fully engulfed. The cloud was so thick that from his vantage point outside the chamber, he could barely make out Dave's outline any more. Inside, Dave's vision was even more obscured. The chart might as well have been invisible.

"Let's push it further," Kessler murmured to herself, increasing the smoke to the point where no normal person should have been able to see anything. "Dave, can you see anything at all?"

To his surprise, Dave responded without hesitation. "I can see you."

Kessler blinked, looking down at his own form. From outside the chamber, there was no way he should be able to see him through the dense smoke and reinforced glass. "You can see me?" he repeated, curiosity sparking in his tone.

"Yeah. I can see your shape, your face. Not in detail, but clearly enough."

Kessler reached for his clipboard, raising it up. "What about this? Can you read what's on the clipboard?"

Dave squinted, focusing on the object she was holding. "I can see the clipboard, and I can see there's paper on it, but the writing... no, I can't read that."

Kessler frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It's like..." Dave hesitated, searching for the right words. "I can see the three-dimensional shapes of everything in the room, including you and the objects, but anything flat—anything two-dimensional, like the writing or print on the eye chart—I can't make it out. And the colours are gone too. Everything's just... grey shapes and textures."

Kessler lowered the clipboard, intrigued. "That's fascinating. It's almost like your vision has switched modes. You can still perceive the physical dimensions of objects, but not the flat surface details. Which explains how you were able to keep track of your opponents during the firefight—if you could 'see' their shapes even through the smoke."

Dave ran a hand over his face, still processing the strangeness of it. "But how is that possible? I mean, I'm not seeing through the smoke, not in a normal sense. It's like I'm... sensing the depth, the contours of things. It's hard to explain."

Kessler pursed his lips, jotting down more notes. "It could be that your brain is processing visual information differently in those high-stress, impaired-visibility situations. We've seen people who have heightened awareness in low-light conditions, but this... this seems to be something else entirely."

He paused, then looked up at him through the smoke and glass. "If I had to guess, I'd say your brain is compensating for the lack of traditional vision by relying on some sort of spatial awareness. Almost like an enhanced form of depth perception, but one that allows you to function even when your standard sight is impaired. You're not seeing through the smoke—you're perceiving the surrounding space in a way that lets you detect movement and objects without needing clear visual input."

Dave shook his head slightly, still trying to wrap his mind around it. "So, that's why I could see the soldiers, and terrain, but not the fine details?"

"Exactly," Kessler said. "It's like your brain is prioritising certain information—three-dimensional shapes, movement—and in the absence of light, there are no colours, no black, no white. It's fascinating, and likely a by-product of whatever changes have occurred in your physiology."

He tapped his pen against the clipboard thoughtfully. "I'd like to run more tests, especially to see if this ability extends to other visual impairments,

like darkness or bright light. If your brain is this adaptable, we might be looking at a completely new sensory capacity."

Dave sighed. "More tests, huh?"

Kessler smiled faintly. "Don't worry, Dave. This could help us understand what you're really capable of—and how to control it."

He nodded, though his mind was still racing. This was more than just physical strength or stamina. This was something deeper, something that changed the way he perceived the world. The thought unsettled him, but it also opened up a world of new possibilities. What else was his body hiding from him? And how far could it go?

The darkness inside the chamber was absolute. Dave stood in the middle of the room, his hands resting at his sides, waiting for Dr. Kessler's next set of instructions. Outside, Kessler monitored him closely through the glass, though he could no longer see him at all. The room was entirely sealed off, and the lights had been shut down, leaving Dave in pitch blackness.

"Alright, Dave," Kessler's voice came through the intercom, calm but focused. "We're replicating the same test, but this time, there's no light at all. Let's see how you respond."

Dave took a deep breath, focusing on the surrounding space. At first, there was nothing but the heavy weight of darkness. Then, slowly, he felt the shift again—like a switch flipping in his brain. The room wasn't black any more, not in the usual sense. He still couldn't see in the way he would with light, but he could sense the layout. The walls, the furniture, even Kessler on the other side of the glass, all came into focus, though devoid of colour or detail. Everything was a series of three-dimensional shapes, as though the space itself was being revealed to him in some strange, innate way.

Kessler's voice broke his concentration. "Can you see anything at all?"

"Yeah," Dave said, his voice steady. "I can see the room, but not like usual. Again, I can't see colours or anything flat—no charts or writing. But I can see you, the walls, everything that has depth."

Kessler leaned forward, tapping the screen that monitored his vitals. "Same as the smoke test?"

"Exactly," Dave replied. "It's like the room is being outlined for me, and I can still move around like normal, but I wouldn't be able to read anything or see small details."

Kessler paused, deep in thought. "Alright, now we'll introduce low light."

The darkness in the room eased as dim lights flicked on, bathing the chamber in a faint, almost moonlight glow. The environment shifted for Dave. Now, in the low light, something strange occurred—his normal vision came back, but with an odd overlay. Colours returned, and the flat details of objects like the clipboard and the Snellen chart were visible again, but there was still that three-dimensional "awareness" layered over it. It was as if he had two types of sight working in tandem—one for normal vision and one for perceiving depth and shapes in a way no human eyes should be able to.

Dave looked around, a bit disoriented by the dual sensation. "I can see everything now. Colours, details, the writing on the clipboard... but the other part is still there too. I can still feel the shapes, like I'm seeing it all in layers."

Kessler tilted his head slightly, intrigued. "An overlay... That's consistent with what we've observed during the smoke tests. Your brain seems to be compensating, providing extra sensory information where it can. But this... it's far beyond anything we've ever encountered."

Dave looked at him, his brow furrowed. "But how is this possible? How can I be seeing in the dark, through smoke, with this kind of... overlay? I've never heard of anything like it."

Kessler's fingers drummed against her clipboard, deep in thought. "That's the mystery, isn't it?" He walked over to the control panel, turning the lights back on fully and observing how his reactions shifted. "We know your body doesn't function within normal parameters—your strength, your oxygen consumption, even your stamina. But vision? This... this is unprecedented. It's as if your brain has developed a secondary way of interpreting the world around you, something that operates independently of light or traditional sight."

"But why would my brain do that?" Dave asked, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "It's not like I've not been in total darkness before."

Kessler tilted his head, understanding his confusion. "We don't know why yet. Maybe it's a survival mechanism your body has developed as your abilities evolved. Or perhaps this is something deeper—something that was always a part of you but is only now being triggered under these extreme conditions." He paused, frowning slightly. "But how your brain manages to process this kind of spatial awareness is beyond me. I've never seen anything like it."

Dave exhaled, feeling the weight of these revelations settling in. "So, what now? More tests?"

Kessler smiled slightly, but his focus was intense. "More tests, definitely. We need to push this further. We need to figure out how your brain is creating this three-dimensional map of your surroundings and why two-dimensional details—like writing and colour—are being ignored. This could be groundbreaking, Dave, but we have to understand it."

He gave a weary nod. "Right. Because if I don't understand this, I can't control it."

"Exactly," Kessler replied, his tone serious. "And control is everything. Your abilities are evolving, and if this is part of that, we need to know how far it goes."

As the lights returned fully to the room, Dave stepped out of the chamber, rubbing his eyes. The "overlay" feeling lingered even in the brightness, though it was faint now, a distant hum in the back of his mind. He knew Kessler was right. If this new layer of perception was growing stronger, he needed to be ready to control it—because the next time he was thrown into a mission, he couldn't afford to be caught off guard.

Dave leaned back, remembering the battery of tests he'd endured in the agency's labs. The early experiments with fire stood out - a mishap that had cost him his hair and eyebrows, though thankfully both grew back. Heat had never caused him real pain, just discomfort. Even when they'd tried an oxyacetylene torch, the searing flame that could cut through steel merely felt hot against his skin. If he focused, he could push past even that sensation of heat, as though his mind could override his body's natural instinct to avoid fire.

The strength tests had been an exercise in frustration - for the lab techs, at least. Every piece of equipment they'd tried had failed before Dave had even begun to strain. Industrial-grade steel bars warped like putty in his hands. Weight machines crumpled under loads he could lift with ease. They'd finally given up trying to quantify his strength when they ran out of equipment to break.

His speed was different - less explosive than his strength, but still far beyond human norms. The few measurements they'd managed showed him running at sixty miles per hour, and he hadn't been pushing himself. He wasn't quick enough to vanish in the blink of an eye, but placed next to Olympic athletes, he moved three times faster without breaking a sweat. His reflexes operated on a different level entirely - bullets seemed to crawl through the air, giving him plenty of time to react.

And now this new ability - this enhanced perception that kicked in when his normal vision was compromised. As he sat there, Dave couldn't help but wonder what other capabilities might surface. Every time they thought they understood the extent of his abilities, something new emerged. The



agency's scientists had long since stopped trying to explain how any of it worked. His skin's resistance to penetration alone defied physics - the harder something tried to break his skin, the more impenetrable it became. This "game mode" vision he'd developed was something new, it made him wonder what else lay over the horizon.

## 6 Geoscience

Anya sat at her desk, the faint glow of her laptop illuminating the otherwise darkened room. The screens were filled with code, lines of text flowing as she ran through some simulations, but her focus was elsewhere. A message notification blinked in the corner of her screen. Her first instinct was to dismiss it—she rarely got anything personal during work hours—but something about the sender's name made her pause.

It was from an old colleague, someone she hadn't heard from in years. They used to run in the same circles, deep in the world of cyber-ops and covert information warfare, but since Anya had moved on to the Agency, contact had been scarce. The message was brief, cryptic, and unsettling. No introduction, no pleasantries, just a few short lines of text that seemed carefully chosen, as if the sender was trying to say something without really saying it.

"Influence shifting. Ecological forces at play. Trust no one."

That was it. No detail, no further context. Anya frowned, her mind running through the possibilities. The message was too vague to decipher outright, but the mention of "ecological forces" tugged at something in the back of her mind. It wasn't a term her old contact would use lightly, and the fact they reached out after all these years made it more troubling. Even with the advanced encryption algorithms she and her network used, it seemed like they were being careful—too careful.

Concern crept in. Anya immediately fired back a response, using a secure channel. She asked for clarification, tried to establish a more direct line of communication, but hours passed, and there was no reply. She tried again, rechecking the channels, making sure the encryption held, but still nothing. The silence weighed on her.

Whoever had sent that message clearly didn't want to—or couldn't—say more, and now the radio silence was eating at her. It wasn't like her contact

to go dark after such an unusual outreach. Anya sat back in her chair, chewing on her lip, her mind racing with possibilities. If this was connected to something ecological, it might point to a larger issue, something potentially dangerous, but without more information, she couldn't be sure. All she knew for now was that the lack of response wasn't a good sign. And that made her uneasy.

Hunched over her laptop, Anya's fingers flew across the keyboard as she delved deeper into her old colleague's history. The initial searches turned up the expected—a steady climb through various high-profile positions in scientific institutes. Data analysis, advanced modelling, and research into cutting-edge fields. It was typical for someone as brilliant as her old contact to move from one exciting role to another, always chasing bigger challenges and higher salaries.

Each job change was logical, moving through the ranks of prominent research organisations that focused on everything from climate science to quantum computing. But the final position was different. EarthWise Geoscience. The company had a clean reputation, on paper at least. They were involved in geological research, everything from mineral exploration to environmental monitoring. Anya had run all the usual background checks—corporate filings, leadership, past lawsuits or controversies—and nothing stood out. No obvious skeletons in their closet, no secret scandals buried under layers of shell companies. By all accounts, EarthWise was legitimate.

But there was something about the name that gnawed at her. "Ecological forces." The phrase from the message had been rattling around in her mind, and the connection to EarthWise made her uneasy. The company's work in geoscience, their focus on natural resources, and the subtle but significant influence they had on environmental policies... it all started to fit together in a way that sent a chill down her spine.

Anya leaned back in her chair, her mind racing. The message wasn't just a warning about a generic ecological threat. It felt personal, like her contact

had stumbled onto something bigger—something they couldn't fully reveal. EarthWise Geoscience seemed legit, but her gut told her otherwise. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, an instinct she'd learned not to ignore. There was something about this company, something under the surface that didn't sit right. Maybe it wasn't the company itself, but something—or someone—inside it.

She quickly pulled up EarthWise's internal documents and public filings, cross-referencing employees and recent projects. What had her colleague been working on before they went dark? Whatever it was, it had to be big enough to warrant a cryptic message, and now, Anya was determined to find out what.

Anya leaned back in her chair, her eyes sore from the hours spent staring at her screen. The coffee cup on her desk had long since gone cold, but there was no time to worry about that. Her focus was on something far more troubling. EarthWise Geoscience was proving to be a harder nut to crack than she'd anticipated. It was supposed to be a standard research company, but the level of security she had encountered was anything but typical.

She had started with the usual methods—running network scans, identifying potential vulnerabilities, and probing for weak spots in the system's defences. But right from the start, it became clear that EarthWise's systems were locked down tight. Firewalls were layered upon firewalls, and every piece of data seemed to be behind multiple levels of encryption. For a company that was supposed to be focused on geological research, their cybersecurity was more advanced than many corporations she'd hacked in the past.

Over the following days, Anya ramped up her efforts. Social engineering came into play—creating fake personas to target specific employees with spear-phishing emails, hoping to coax them into clicking on a link that would provide her a point of entry. Even this required finesse, as EarthWise's staff were clearly trained to be cautious, making her work twice as hard for any nibble. Eventually, one small opening appeared: an

employee from a mid-level department clicked on a well-crafted phishing email, giving Anya a foothold.

But once inside, it was clear she wasn't dealing with an ordinary research facility. The system she breached barely gave her access to surface-level data, and even that was tightly monitored. Everything was firewalled to the extreme, and network traffic was encrypted in ways that suggested someone was pouring serious resources into ensuring that no one—not even the most skilled hacker—could get too far. The company's low-level communications, project timelines, and research logs were there, but they were scrubbed clean of anything truly sensitive. It was like being invited into a spotless foyer but finding every door inside locked tight.

Frustrated but not deterred, Anya pulled out the big guns—black hat 0-day exploits, vulnerabilities that hadn't yet been publicly reported or patched. These were the types of attacks no system could defend against, not if the administrators weren't even aware of the flaw. She'd only use these in rare cases, knowing the risks they carried, but EarthWise had left her no other choice. Hours bled into days as she wove her way through encrypted traffic, bypassing security measures that would have shut down most intrusions within minutes.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she cracked a weakness. A minor, overlooked vulnerability in a rarely accessed system allowed her to breach deeper into the network. She was in—at least, into one of the lower-tier data vaults. What she found there was concerning but still cryptic. Geological data, environmental impact reports, and satellite imaging that seemed out of place for a typical research company. But what unsettled her most was the level of encryption and protection surrounding even these relatively mundane files. Someone was going to great lengths to ensure that prying eyes wouldn't get far.

Whatever EarthWise was hiding, it wasn't just about geological research. Anya knew she was only scratching the surface. The deeper secrets—

whatever had spooked her old contact—were still buried further inside the network. But now she was in, and there was no turning back.

Anya stared at the maze of geological data filling her screen. It was far outside her wheelhouse, but data analysis? That was her playground. Patterns, anomalies, trends—those were things she could spot, and if she couldn't do it manually, well, that's exactly what AI was built for. She'd worked with enough advanced systems to know that the more data she could feed the AI, the better the results. The challenge wasn't in processing the information, but in gathering it without raising any red flags. EarthWise's system was too well-guarded for a brute-force approach; any sudden spike in data extraction would trigger alarms and shut her out before she could get anywhere close to the answers she needed.

"Slow and steady," Anya muttered to herself, fingers flying over the keyboard as she set up the extraction protocols. She needed to siphon off the data gradually, in small packets that wouldn't trip the IT security measures. EarthWise's network was sophisticated, but if she played it smart, she could get what she needed without drawing any attention.

She set up a continuous feed into the AI, pulling geological data from EarthWise's internal systems and combining it with open-source data from scientific journals and peer-reviewed studies on geologic research. The goal was clear: find something that didn't fit, something that broke the pattern. Whatever it was that had spooked her contact had to be hidden in the details. Whether it was a manipulation of environmental data, an attempt to cover something up, or a secret project disguised as legitimate research, Anya needed the AI to sift through the noise and pick out the signal.

It was going to take time. Anya knew that. But the AI would work tirelessly, running through the algorithms and scanning the data for anything unusual, anything that defied the logic of normal geological activity. Every day, she'd feed it a little more, balancing the data extraction

against the need to stay invisible. The gradual process was frustrating, but it was the safest way to avoid detection.

As the AI began its analysis, Anya leaned back in her chair, watching the progress bars slowly move. She couldn't shake the feeling that she was on the verge of something big, something dangerous. The longer she dug into EarthWise, the more uneasy she felt. Whatever was buried in their data wasn't just scientific curiosity—it was something far more significant. She just had to find out what.

Anya leaned forward, staring at the screen as the AI worked through the new data stream. On a whim, she had added the cryptic message—"Influence shifting. Ecological forces at play."—along with its date and digital envelope into the system. She hadn't expected much, but within moments, the AI began to react, mapping connections that hadn't been visible before. The phrase seemed to unlock something. Patterns started emerging, linking back to that exact date of origin. The AI began cross-referencing events in scientific research, and suddenly, everything fell into place.

The system flagged a series of studies monitoring the thickness of the polar ice caps and glaciers, research that documented the accelerating ice melt across various regions. Nothing surprising there—climate change had been a known factor for decades—but what caught Anya's attention was how rapidly things were progressing in one specific region. According to the AI's analysis, this region was melting at a rate far beyond what any current climate models had predicted.

Anya's eyes narrowed. "This doesn't make sense," she muttered frustratedly. But the AI kept digging, connecting dots she wouldn't have thought to look for. Satellite imagery from the same period revealed an alarming pattern of retreating ice shelves. The visuals were stark—where solid sheets of ice should have remained, gaping stretches of open water were appearing far too quickly. And it wasn't just the surface-level melt.

The AI linked the data to unusual geothermal activity beneath the surface. Something was happening below the ice.

"Geothermal... seismic," Anya whispered to herself, her heart racing now. The AI's analysis hinted at significant underground seismic activity, possibly causing the ice to melt from below, destabilising the region from within. The models predicted gradual shifts, but this? This was different. It was as if something beneath the ice was awakening, shifting the ecological forces that had been stable for millennia.

This was it. This was the riddle her old colleague had been sending her. They weren't talking about just global warming or natural climate cycles—something deeper, more dangerous, was at play. Underground forces, maybe geothermal or seismic, were shifting the natural balance, accelerating the melting of the ice shelf far ahead of any models. And if EarthWise was involved, then there was more to it than simple scientific curiosity.

Anya felt a chill despite the warmth of the room. "What the hell are they hiding?" she murmured, feeling a growing sense of urgency. This wasn't just about climate change. Something was happening beneath the ice, and whatever it was, it had the potential to change everything.



## 7 Getting Involved

Anya paced her small apartment, her mind racing as she considered the next steps. This was too big for an email or a message. She needed to meet Cecilia face-to-face. Whatever was happening with EarthWise, it was on a scale far beyond what she'd first expected, and it required immediate attention from someone high up in the agency. She grabbed her phone and dialled Cecilia's number.

"Anya, what's up?" Cecilia answered after a few rings, her usual calm tone coming through the line.

"I need to see you, Cecilia," Anya said, her voice clipped with urgency. "There's something serious. It's connected to a possible ecological disaster, and it's not just the usual corporate stuff. I've uncovered something big, and we need to bring someone from the agency's scientific team in. It's... well, I'll explain everything when I see you. But trust me, it's bad."

Cecilia was quiet for a moment, then replied, "Alright. I'll pull some strings and get someone from the science division to join us. Meet me at HQ in an hour. We'll go over everything then."

Anya hung up, her pulse quickening. She grabbed her laptop and the external drives containing the data she'd extracted from EarthWise's network, double-checking the files before heading out.

An hour later, Anya found herself in the Agency's glass-walled briefing room. Cecilia was already there, seated at the long table, along with Dr. Angela Morgan, a top-tier environmental scientist from the agency's research division. Morgan was known for her work on climate change and environmental anomalies—exactly the kind of person who could help decode the larger implications of what Anya had found.

Cecilia gave Anya a nod as she entered, gesturing for her to sit down. "Alright, you've got our attention. What's going on?"

Anya placed her laptop on the table and plugged in the external drive. "First, I want you both to know that this isn't coming from some random source. Jonathan Carlisle, an old colleague, sent me a message a few days ago. He's not the kind of guy to reach out unless it's serious. We used to work together on environmental simulations and digital systems. He's methodical, cautious, and wouldn't risk contact unless he had no other choice. For him to communicate in such a cryptic way tells me he's likely in danger or under some kind of watch."

Dr. Morgan raised an eyebrow. "Jonathan Carlisle? I've read some of his work. He's a respected figure in geoscience circles. What did he say?"

Anya brought up the message on her screen, the cryptic words highlighted. "This is all he sent: 'Influence shifting. Ecological forces at play.' No detail, nothing to clarify what he meant. It was vague, but it got my attention because Carlisle never talks like this—he's precise. So, I started digging, tracing his recent employment history. He's been working at EarthWise Geoscience, a company that's involved in geological research, but their security is... excessive for a research firm."

Cecilia frowned. "Excessive how?"

"Everything is locked down—encrypted traffic, multi-layered firewalls, the works. It took me days of social engineering, spear phishing, and black hat techniques just to get a point of entry. Even then, I had to use an unreported zero-day exploit to get access to anything meaningful." Anya paused, then tapped a few keys, bringing up satellite images and encrypted geological data. "What I found... it's alarming. The data points to rapid ice melt in a specific region, well ahead of any known climate models. The ice shelf is retreating faster than we thought possible, and it's being driven by underground geothermal activity—seismic forces beneath the surface."

Dr. Morgan leaned forward, her face serious now. "That's unusual. Geothermal activity in polar regions is documented, but nothing that would

accelerate ice melt like this. Are you saying there's more to this than natural phenomena?"

Anya's fingers drummed a rapid pattern on her tablet as she processed the information, a habit that emerged when her analytical mind was piecing together complex data. "Exactly. This isn't just climate change. Something's happening beneath the ice that Carlisle is trying to warn us about. EarthWise has been monitoring it, but they're not being transparent. For Carlisle to send a message, knowing the risk, it means whatever they're dealing with is big—and dangerous."

Cecilia exchanged a glance with Morgan before turning her attention back to Anya. "You think this is an intentional cover-up? Or could it be that EarthWise has stumbled onto something they don't understand yet?"

"I don't know," Anya replied honestly, "but the fact that Carlisle went dark right after sending the message concerns me. He's been off the grid for days. I've tried every back channel, and there's no sign of him. He was too cautious to make a mistake. Someone, or something, is stopping him from reaching out again."

Dr. Morgan sighed, clearly uneasy. "If the data you've pulled is accurate, and there's unusual seismic activity beneath the ice, it could destabilise the entire region. But without more details, we don't know what EarthWise's role is in all this."

Cecilia tapped her fingers lightly on the table. "Anya, send us everything you've got. We'll need to cross-reference it with our own data and get a better understanding of what we're dealing with. If Carlisle is in danger, we'll figure out a way to trace his last known location. But you're right—this needs immediate attention. And if EarthWise is hiding something, we'll uncover it."

Anya's posture shifted forward, her movements precise and efficient as she began accessing the encrypted files. "I'll get the files over to you now."

Whatever EarthWise is up to, we can't afford to ignore it. And if Carlisle is in trouble, we need to act fast."

Cecilia stood up, her expression firm. "We'll move on this. Thanks for bringing it to me. This could be bigger than any of us thought." She paused, giving Anya a long look. "Stay sharp. We're just getting started."

Cecilia sat at the head of the glass-walled briefing room, the familiar hum of the agency offices muted behind the doors. On the table in front of her, a series of documents, digital files, and satellite imagery were spread out, along with a laptop displaying the data Anya had uncovered. She had just put out the call and now waited for the four agents she'd assembled.

One by one, they entered the room.

Anya came in first, her expression serious, as she took her seat near the front. She glanced at the materials on the table, nodding briefly to Cecilia. Serj followed closely behind, his imposing frame taking up space even in the large room. He gave a curt nod to Cecilia, taking a seat with his usual calm and collected demeanour. Next came Omar, moving quietly as he always did, slipping into a chair as if he were trying to make as little noise as possible. Finally, Dave walked in, the tension of the last mission still lingering on his face, but his posture was relaxed—ready for whatever was next.

Cecilia glanced at each of them before speaking, her tone clipped but focused. "Thank you all for coming in on short notice. We've got a situation that needs immediate attention, and it's not like anything we've dealt with before." She paused, making eye contact with each of them. "Anya's uncovered something concerning involving a company called EarthWise Geoscience. Their operations seem clean on the surface, but we believe they're hiding something much more serious—something tied to unusual ecological activity in the polar regions."

She gestured to Anya, who leaned forward and began to explain. "I received a cryptic message from an old colleague of mine, Jonathan

Carlisle. He's a geoscientist, someone I trust completely. He hinted at 'ecological forces' shifting and warned me not to trust anyone. The problem is, he went dark immediately after. I hacked into EarthWise's systems, and it wasn't easy—someone is heavily protecting their data. What I found is disturbing."

She pulled up satellite images and data on the screen. "There's rapid ice melt happening in a specific polar region, far beyond anything our climate models have predicted. What's even more worrying is the cause. It appears there's underground geothermal or seismic activity accelerating the melt, but EarthWise has been monitoring it closely. They know something, and they're not sharing it with the scientific community."

Serj crossed his arms, his brow furrowing. "Why would a research company cover that up? What's their angle?"

"That's what we need to find out," Anya said. "I think Carlisle stumbled onto something too big to handle alone. He's the cautious type—if he reached out, he knew the risk. We have to assume he's in danger, or worse."

Omar leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. "If they're going to this length to protect their data, and Carlisle has gone missing, then it's more than just a scientific issue. We're dealing with a major threat here, maybe even corporate conspiracy."

Cecilia's expression darkened as the implications settled. "Exactly. And that's why we're moving fast. I've assembled this team because we need a balanced approach—technical expertise from Anya, infiltration and sabotage from Omar, and muscle from Serj and Dave." She glanced at Dave. "You'll be leading the charge on the ground, but this mission will require all of your skills working in sync."

Dave leaned back in his chair, nodding. "What's the plan?"

The room fell quiet for a moment, the gravity of the situation sinking in. Anya looked at the surrounding faces, knowing this team was their best

shot at uncovering the truth. Dave, Serj, and Omar all had their unique skills, and she trusted them. But as they left the briefing, she couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that this was only the beginning of something much larger.

Cecilia leaned forward, her hands resting on the table as she made eye contact with each of the team members. Her voice was calm but firm, cutting through the tension in the room. "Germany. That's where we need to go. EarthWise's main office is located there, and it's the most direct place to start. We'll need to get a feel for their operations, see what we can dig up, and, most importantly, try to trace Carlisle. If he's gone missing, we need to know whether anyone at the company has noticed."

She glanced at Anya. "Anya, I want you to continue running your digital surveillance while you're on the ground. If Carlisle's been off the radar, we need to know if EarthWise is covering it up internally. See what records you can pull and keep digging into the encrypted data. But we also need to get a sense of how things look from the inside."

Cecilia then looked to the rest of the team. "Serj, Omar, Dave—you'll be on-site. I want you to make sure we aren't missing anything physical. Blend in, talk to people, see if you can get a sense of who's running the show there. I want to know if Carlisle was onto something that could make him a target. If there's even a whisper of his name among EarthWise staff, we need to hear it."

"Understood," Dave said, already mentally preparing for the task ahead. He glanced at Omar and Serj, both of whom nodded.

Cecilia straightened, her eyes narrowing. "This isn't just a fact-finding mission. Be ready for escalation. If EarthWise is hiding something and they get a whiff that we're onto them, they won't hesitate to push back hard. But for now, we go in quietly, no direct confrontation unless necessary. We don't want them knowing we're coming."

The team stood, ready for what lay ahead. Germany awaited, and whatever secrets EarthWise had been hiding beneath the ice, they were about to get a lot closer to uncovering them.

Cecilia closed her laptop and stood up. "This is a high-stakes mission. If EarthWise is hiding the kind of activity we think they are, it could destabilise entire regions. And if they've silenced Carlisle, they won't hesitate to take extreme measures to protect their interests. Be prepared for anything."

## 8 Ice and Salt

The smell of diesel mixed with sea salt filled Malik's lungs as he steered the small fishing boat back toward Nuussuaq's harbour. The hold was nearly empty - again. Just a few cod and a handful of halibut, barely worth the fuel it took to get out to the fishing grounds. Ten years ago, this time of year would have seen them struggling to haul in nets bursting with fish. Now...

He cut the engine as they approached the dock, letting momentum carry them the last few meters. His son Inuk, moved to secure the ropes with the fluid motions of someone born to the sea. The boy was seventeen, the same age Malik had been when he'd first taken charge of his own boat. But the waters Inuk knew were different from the ones Malik had grown up fishing.

"You're back early," Aksel called from the dock. The older fisherman was mending nets, his weathered hands working the rope with practised efficiency. His own boat hadn't left the harbour in days.

Malik shrugged as he stepped onto the dock. "No point burning fuel to catch nothing."

"That bad?"

"Worse." Malik gestured for Inuk to start unloading their meagre catch. "Water temperature's all wrong. Fish are deeper than usual, if they're there at all. Even the seals are hunting in different places."

Aksel's weathered hands gripped the dock railing, knuckles whitening. "Remember when you could set your watch by the cod runs? Now..." He shook his head, leaving the thought unfinished. "The ice is different too," Inuk added, hauling a plastic crate of fish onto the dock. "Uncle says the hunters are having trouble finding stable paths. Places that were safe for generations aren't any more."



Malik watched his son work, pride mixing with worry in his chest. The boy knew more about changing ice conditions and shifting fish patterns than he did about the traditional hunting grounds that Malik's father had taught him about. Knowledge passed down through generations was becoming unreliable, forced to adapt to rapidly changing conditions.

"My grandfather," Aksel said, setting aside his nets, "he used to say you could read the seasons in the ice. Now?" He gestured toward the harbour mouth where sheets of ice floated past, broken and thin. "Now it's like trying to read a book with half the pages torn out."

Other boats were returning to harbour now, most riding high in the water - their holds as empty as Malik's. The dock slowly filled with fishermen, their quiet conversations echoing the same concerns. Poor catches. Changing patterns. Unstable ice.

"The company men say it's just a cycle," someone commented. "That it'll go back to normal."

Aksel snorted. "Company men don't have to feed their families from these waters." He turned to Malik. "Your father still hunting?"

Malik shook his head. "Not since last winter. Says he doesn't trust the ice any more. After Pipaluk fell through..." He trailed off. Everyone remembered how close their community had come to losing the experienced hunter when a previously reliable ice route had given way beneath him.

"We adapt," Inuk said suddenly, straightening up from the crates. "That's what we've always done, right? Learn the new patterns, find where the fish have gone."

The older men exchanged glances. Youth and optimism - sometimes it was hard to remember having such certainty.

"We adapt," Malik agreed, resting a hand on his son's shoulder. "But some changes come too fast for adapting. Sometimes you're just trying to survive until you can figure out the new rules."

They stood in silence for a moment, watching more boats return with empty holds. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the harbour, glinting off ice that grew more unpredictable with each passing season. Tomorrow they would head out again, burning fuel to chase fish that might not be there, following patterns that made less sense with each passing year.

But they would go. Because that's what they'd always done. Even if the waters they fished now were strangers to the ones their fathers had known.

## 9 Frankfurt

The hum of the Lufthansa jet's engines gradually quieted as the plane began its descent into Frankfurt. Outside the window, the landscape of Germany's financial heart unfolded—endless rows of buildings interspersed with green spaces, highways snaking through the city, and the distant skyline dominated by gleaming skyscrapers. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the city as the plane touched down with a gentle thud on the tarmac.

As the team disembarked, the cool autumn air hit them, a refreshing change from the tense atmosphere of the plane. The bustle of the airport terminal surrounded them—the constant hum of announcements, the clatter of luggage wheels on the polished floors, and the murmur of conversations in multiple languages. Dave glanced around as they moved through customs, passing by shops and cafes full of travellers, a mix of businesspeople in suits and tourists with backpacks.

Waiting for them outside was a sleek black Mercedes V-Class, its driver standing by with a sign that read simply "Agency." The driver, a quiet professional in a tailored suit, gave a respectful nod as they approached. The team piled into the vehicle, the spacious interior offering enough room for them to stretch out. The soft leather seats and tinted windows added a sense of privacy, giving them a moment to relax after the long flight.

The Mercedes glided through Frankfurt's streets, its tinted windows offering a barrier between them and the bustling city. Dave watched Anya's reflection in the window as she typed rapidly on her phone, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Anything?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head without looking up. "EarthWise's security is tight. Even their public-facing systems are locked down harder than most government facilities."

Omar leaned forward slightly. "Speaking of security, we passed their building about two blocks back. Looks innocent enough, but I counted four cameras just on the main entrance."

Serj's eyes narrowed as he glanced back through the rear window. "Noticed that too. High-end equipment, military-grade. Not your typical corporate setup."

The driver turned onto a broader avenue, and the JW Marriott's gleaming facade came into view. Dave felt the familiar tension settling in his shoulders – the calm before the storm.

The hotel loomed ahead, a towering, elegant building located in the heart of the city. The JW Marriott's modern façade, with its sleek glass and stone exterior, gleamed in the evening light. The driver pulled up to the entrance, where uniformed doormen greeted them with practised efficiency. The lobby inside was equally impressive—spacious and sophisticated, with marble floors and high ceilings, polished chrome accents, and large abstract art pieces on the walls. The scent of fresh flowers lingered in the air, and soft music played in the background, creating a serene atmosphere.

The lobby's marble floors echoed with quiet footsteps and hushed conversations in multiple languages. As Anya approached the check-in desk, Dave positioned himself near a large tropical arrangement, seemingly admiring the flowers while actually scanning the security cameras' positions. Old habits.

"Welcome to JW Marriott," the receptionist smiled, her English carrying a slight German lilt. "Do you have a reservation?"

Anya returned the smile, every inch the tired business traveller. "Yes, under Wagner." The agency's cover identities were always thorough – right down to the corporate credit cards and booking histories.

Serj and Omar had already disappeared into the background, doing their own subtle surveillance of the space. Standard procedure, even in a luxury hotel. Especially in a luxury hotel.

The lift was silent, each of them lost in thought about tomorrow's tasks. Dave's room was first, 1214. He swiped the key card, noting how the light above the handle blinked green almost instantly. Good electronics – it would make Anya's job easier if they needed to access other rooms.

"Get settled," Anya said quietly as she continued down the hall. "One hour. We need to talk strategy."

Dave's expression remained neutral, but his eyes flickered with understanding as he pushed open his door. But before he could fully enter, he caught Omar's subtle hand signal – two fingers brushed against his leg. Check for surveillance. Right. Even here, they couldn't be too careful.

Dave stepped into his room first, taking a moment to absorb his surroundings. It was luxurious yet understated—neutral tones of beige and grey, plush carpeting underfoot, and a king-sized bed with crisp white linens. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a stunning view of the city below, the lights of Frankfurt twinkling as the evening set in. A small desk sat in the corner, next to a sleek leather armchair, and the ensuite bathroom was fitted with marble, the rainfall shower and deep soaking tub exuding elegance.

Anya's room was similar, though her focus was already shifting to setting up her laptop and equipment on the desk. Omar moved quietly through his space, methodical as always, while Serj's room, minimalistic yet comfortable, offered the perfect vantage point for him to assess his surroundings—a habit he couldn't shake, even in such a refined setting.

The team settled in, each taking a moment to regroup, knowing that tomorrow, they'd dive head-first into the mission. The hotel provided a brief respite, a moment of calm before they'd need to begin their work. But for now, they allowed themselves to breathe, the comfort of the JW Marriott a stark contrast to the challenges they knew awaited them at EarthWise.

Fifty-eight minutes later, Dave stepped into the hotel bar, automatically noting the exits. The space was perfect – public enough to avoid suspicion, private enough for quiet conversation. The soft jazz and murmur of other patrons would mask their discussion from casual eavesdroppers.

Serj had already claimed the corner booth – the one with clear sight lines to both entrances and minimal risk of being overheard. As Dave slid into the booth, he noticed the small signal jammer disguised as a phone on the table. Anya's work, no doubt. The JW Marriott's bar was a study in modern elegance. Low, ambient lighting cast a warm glow over the space, illuminating the rich dark wood panelling and plush velvet seating. A sleek marble bar ran along one side, with rows of premium spirits gleaming on glass shelves, while bartenders expertly crafted cocktails with precision. The space exuded a quiet luxury, the kind of place where deals were made in hushed tones and business travellers relaxed after a long day. Muted jazz music played in the background, blending seamlessly with the soft murmur of conversation.

Dave took a sip of his bourbon and leaned back, glancing around with a half-smile. "The accommodation here is certainly a step up from Guyana," he remarked dryly, the memory of the sweltering jungle heat and cramped safe house still fresh in his mind.

Omar chuckled softly. "Yeah, we won't be missing the humidity or the bugs this time." He swirled his drink thoughtfully before continuing. "Speaking of which, tomorrow I'll take a look around the EarthWise offices. I'll keep it subtle—blend in, see what I can pick up without raising any alarms."

Anya's gaze turned inward, that familiar calculating look crossing her features as she mentally ran through her plan. "Good. While you're doing that, I'll keep digging through EarthWise's personnel files. There's got to be something on Carlisle in there, at least an address or point of contact. Once I've got his home address, we can decide how to approach."

Serj, ever the quiet presence, spoke up next. "Dave and I will cover the visit to Carlisle's place once Anya has the location. We'll also scope out the nearby areas—see if there are any spots where Carlisle or EarthWise staff might hang out, places where we might pick up chatter."

Dave nodded in agreement, his gaze steady as he focused on the task at hand. "Yeah, we'll keep it low-key, no direct contact unless necessary. But we need to get a feel for the people who work at EarthWise. If Carlisle's gone dark, someone might've noticed—or they might be trying to cover it up."

Omar leaned forward slightly, his voice dropping a notch. "I've got a feeling EarthWise won't be as straightforward as it seems. Their security measures are too tight for a company just doing geological research. They're protecting something bigger."

Anya's fingers drummed a precise rhythm on the table as she processed the implications. "I agree. I'll keep working on those encrypted files, but whatever they're hiding, they're doing a damn good job of it."

Cecilia had made it clear that this mission was sensitive—low-profile, no unnecessary attention. The team would have to work in the shadows, quietly gathering intel before making any moves. Tomorrow would be the first step in peeling back the layers surrounding EarthWise and whatever Carlisle had stumbled onto.

As the team finished their drinks and settled back into the calm of the bar, there was an unspoken understanding between them. The luxurious setting and comfortable surroundings of the JW Marriott were a far cry from the intensity of their usual operations, but the mission was no less critical.

Each of them knew their role, and tomorrow, they'd begin digging into the secrets EarthWise was so desperate to protect.



## 10 EarthWise

Omar stood across the street from the EarthWise Geoscience headquarters, blending into the bustling crowd as he took in the sight of the building. It was a sleek, modern structure of steel and glass, standing tall amidst the corporate offices of Frankfurt's business district. The building was imposing but didn't stand out—by design, no doubt. It was a place that could easily be overlooked as just another corporate hub. Yet, knowing what lay beneath the surface, Omar felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

The entrance was understated, with a large glass revolving door and a small, tasteful plaque displaying the company's name: EarthWise Geoscience. Planters lined the front with neatly trimmed bushes, and a few people in suits moved in and out, briefcases in hand. Omar adjusted his collar and crossed the street, slipping through the revolving doors into the lobby.

Inside, the reception area was just as polished. The floors were a dark, glossy stone, and the walls were a mix of clean, white panels and wood accents. Large potted plants added a touch of greenery, and abstract art pieces hung on the walls, giving the space a sophisticated, modern feel. The air was cool, with the faint scent of freshly brewed coffee drifting from somewhere behind the scenes.

The reception desk was front and centre, a sleek counter where two receptionists sat behind computer screens. One, a middle-aged man in a sharp suit, looked up with a professional but practised smile. "Good morning. How can I help you?"

Omar gave a casual smile in return, walking up to the desk. "Morning. I was in the area and figured I'd stop by—heard EarthWise is doing some pretty cutting-edge work. Thought I'd see if there are any vacancies or if you guys are open to new people joining the team."

The receptionist's posture shifted slightly, clearly used to inquiries like this. "We do have a few positions listed on our website. EarthWise is always looking for talent in data analysis, geological research, and environmental sciences. You can apply online or—if you're interested—I can connect you with someone in our HR department."

Omar tilted his head with an easy smile, his body language relaxed and open. "That sounds good. I've got a background in logistics and operations—worked with a few companies that dealt with environmental monitoring. Just figured I'd ask around, see if there's a more personal way in." He leaned on the counter slightly, keeping things casual. "Place looks impressive. You guys must have a lot going on. Any major projects in the works?"

The receptionist hesitated briefly, just long enough for Omar to notice. "We're always involved in multiple research initiatives, but I'm afraid most of that's confidential. If you're interested in learning more, I'd recommend checking out the public projects section of our website."

"Of course," Omar replied smoothly, sensing the need to tread carefully. "Wouldn't expect any trade secrets. Just curious. I'll definitely look into it." He paused, making his next question seem like an afterthought. "I heard about one of your guys in the news a while back—Jonathan Carlisle? He still around? I've followed some of his work; really impressive stuff."

The receptionist's professional demeanour faltered slightly, his eyes shifting ever so briefly before replying. "I believe Dr. Carlisle is on a leave of absence. I'm not sure of the specifics, but he hasn't been in the office for some time."

Omar's instincts flared. "Ah, too bad. Was hoping to meet him—maybe even chat if I managed to get in here. Still, I'll keep my fingers crossed. Thanks for your help."

The receptionist, relieved to steer the conversation back to normal. "No problem at all. Let me know if you'd like to be connected to HR or if you need any other assistance."

Omar gave a final nod and a friendly smile, but as he walked away from the reception desk, his mind was racing. A leave of absence, and the way the receptionist had reacted to the mention of Carlisle—it was all too convenient. Carlisle wasn't just taking time off. Something was going on, and EarthWise was trying to keep it quiet. Omar casually made his way to the exit, making note of the layout, the security cameras, and the staff movements as he left the building. This was just the beginning, but it confirmed his suspicions: there was more to EarthWise than met the eye.

Omar gave the receptionist a polite nod, playing along with the brush-off. He knew there were no vacancies listed on EarthWise's website—he had already checked. The HR connection offer was just a line to get rid of him, a way to keep him from asking too many questions. As he turned and walked away, he made a point of taking in the details of the lobby without appearing too obvious about it. The polished corporate veneer was in place, but something about the air here was off.

His eyes subtly scanned the room, and that's when he saw them—two men positioned near the far side of the lobby, moving in synchronised patterns, constantly scanning the area. They weren't dressed like typical corporate security, either. These guys weren't the kind you'd find working the door of a nightclub or walking the floor of a department store. Their posture was too precise, their movements too deliberate. Omar recognised the signs immediately. These men had military training, no doubt about it.

Their presence didn't sit right with him. For a company like EarthWise, even one involved in research and potential environmental projects, this level of security—especially with people of this calibre—seemed excessive. He'd seen enough during his career in infiltration to know the difference between regular security staff and the kind of people used to handling serious threats. These men were keeping watch, not just over the

reception area, but over something far more valuable, something they couldn't afford to let slip.

Omar passed one of the guards, noting the way the man's hand instinctively shifted toward his concealed weapon. Their eyes met briefly - there was none of the bored indifference of typical security. This guy had seen combat.

"First day?" Omar asked casually.

The guard's response was clipped, professional. "Sorry sir, I can't discuss security matters."

Military. The accent, the stance - everything screamed special forces.

He continued to walk toward the exit, making sure not to look back. But in his mind, the pieces were coming together. EarthWise was hiding something, and whatever it was, they were going to great lengths to protect it. The "leave of absence" for Carlisle, the brush-off from the receptionist, the high-level security presence—this was all wrong for a typical geoscience company. The secrets they were guarding went far beyond geology and research.

As Omar stepped out into the cool Frankfurt air, he tapped a message into his phone, sending a coded update to the team. Security's tight. Military type. Carlisle's not on a break—they're covering for something. Keep digging.

Omar pushed through the sleek glass doors of EarthWise and stepped out into the bustling Frankfurt street, the receptionist watched him go, his professional smile fading as soon as the door shut behind the agent. His fingers hovered over the phone on the desk for a moment before he picked it up, talking in hushed tones to the person at the other end of the line.

Anya sat hunched over her laptop, fingers flying across the keyboard as she tried to pry into EarthWise's secure system. Her usual methods—

decoys, backdoors, bypasses—weren't working, and it was infuriating. The security protocols guarding the personnel files were unlike anything she'd encountered. They weren't just robust; they were over-engineered, designed to keep out even the most advanced cyber-attacks. It took longer than expected, and the extra encryption layers felt like they were meant to protect far more than just the personal details of employees. But after hours of relentless hacking, Anya finally breached the final barrier, her screen flooding with data. She exhaled a sharp breath of victory, only to be met with disappointment when she opened Carlisle's file.

There was nothing. No red flags, no odd notes, nothing that suggested Carlisle was anything more than a run-of-the-mill employee. He had a spotless record—no complaints, no disciplinary actions, not even a vague reprimand. His performance reviews were mundane, filled with corporate jargon about teamwork and leadership, but there wasn't a single line that raised Anya's suspicions. For someone with such high-level access at EarthWise, it was almost too perfect, and that only deepened her unease. She scoured every detail, hoping to find something unusual hidden between the lines, but there was nothing. Carlisle was just another anonymous employee, blending into the fabric of a vast corporation. Anya's instincts told her there had to be more beneath the surface.

After cross-referencing the data, Anya made a note of Carlisle's address: Schweizer Straße 28, 60594 Frankfurt am Main. Pulling up the location on satellite view, she scanned the neighbourhood. It was a quiet street in Sachsenhausen, not far from the EarthWise office—close enough for Carlisle to walk to work if he wanted. The building looked like an older, renovated apartment, nestled among residential homes and boutique shops, a place where someone could live without drawing attention. Anya couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. The difficulty of accessing the file, coupled with how ordinary it seemed, was unsettling. She leaned back in her chair, staring at the screen, her mind racing. There was nothing on paper, but maybe the real secret lay elsewhere.

Serj and Dave sat at yet another café, nursing cups of coffee that had long gone cold. They'd spent most of the morning weaving in and out of various lunch spots near the EarthWise offices—coffee shops, delis, bakeries—trying to see if anyone had spotted Jonathan Carlisle in recent days. It was a long shot, and they knew it. The reality was, most people grabbing a sandwich on their lunch break barely glanced at the staff, let alone built relationships with them. And no one seemed to remember anything useful about a man fitting Carlisle's description.

Just as they were about to finish up and move to the next spot, Dave's phone buzzed on the table. A message from Anya. He glanced at Serj, raising an eyebrow as he opened the message. The text was short and to the point: Carlisle's address. Here's the link to maps and satellite imagery. Time to knock on doors. Beneath it was the address, and Dave tapped on the map link, quickly scanning the location. It wasn't far—a 20-minute walk from the business district where they currently sat.

Serj leaned over to look at the map. "Could take the train," he suggested, but Dave shook his head.

"By the time we mess around getting to the station and waiting for a train, we'll have wasted more time than it's worth. Let's just walk."

Serj's eyes flickered briefly over the street before he fell into step beside Dave. The two of them left the café, blending into the foot traffic of Frankfurt's streets. The walk took them away from the high-rise buildings of the business district, where gleaming towers slowly gave way to more residential areas. The streets grew quieter, the pace slower, as they moved into a neighbourhood lined with trees and older, mid-century apartment buildings. Small parks dotted the streets, and the scent of fresh bread and coffee lingered from corner bakeries they passed on their route. The contrast between the bustling city centre and this quieter area was stark, but the calm of the neighbourhood only heightened the tension in Dave's

mind. This was where Carlisle lived—where he might have gone to ground, or worse, where something could have happened to him.

As they neared the address, Dave checked the satellite imagery again. The building was a five-story apartment complex, typical for Frankfurt's older residential areas. It had a clean, almost nondescript façade—light grey stone with simple, boxy windows. There was a small entrance courtyard lined with neatly kept flowerbeds, and a metal gate with a secure entry pad at the front. The building itself looked quiet, well-maintained, with balconies on each floor that faced the street. A few people milled about—residents, by the looks of them—coming and going with shopping bags or walking their dogs.

Serj glanced at the entryway. "No obvious security. Just the standard keypad."

Dave's eyes traced over the building's facade, cataloguing every detail. "Looks like a normal, middle-class apartment. Nothing that screams high security."

Serj took a step forward, scanning the area once more. "Still, let's not assume it's just a routine visit. If Carlisle's hiding, or worse, if someone's after him, this place might not be as quiet as it seems."

Dave's muscles tensed imperceptibly as his guard went up. "We go in easy, no knocking down doors unless we have to."

With that, they approached the gate, ready to find out what Carlisle's apartment—and his silence—might reveal.

Serj rang the doorbell once, twice, then a third time. Each time, there was only silence. Dave exchanged a glance with Serj, who raised an eyebrow—time to gain access another way. This wasn't a high-security complex, just a regular middle-class apartment, but breaking in without raising suspicion was always a delicate task.

They skirted around the side of the building, following a narrow path that led to the rear. The back of the apartment building was much like the front—clean, well-maintained, and unremarkable. A small patio with a couple of potted plants stood outside what was likely Carlisle's unit. Serj knelt by the rear door, pulling out a small lock-picking kit from his pocket. Despite his large frame and massive hands, Serj had a finesse to him that always surprised Dave. Within seconds, the lock clicked open, and Serj swung the door inward with a quiet ease.

Both men slipped inside, closing the door softly behind them. Immediately, their eyes scanned the interior, searching for any sign of security measures—alarm panels, cameras, motion sensors. Nothing. The place wasn't wired with anything more advanced than your standard locks. Still, they moved cautiously through the apartment, ensuring they hadn't tripped any unseen alarms.

The interior was tidy, almost meticulously so. The floors were polished wood, clean and free of any clutter. To the right was an open-plan living room, furnished with simple but modern pieces. A grey sofa faced a low coffee table and a flat-screen television mounted on the wall. Bookshelves lined one wall, filled with a mix of scientific journals, geoscience books, and a few classic novels. A few personal touches—framed photos of landscapes, a small plant in the corner—gave the place a lived-in feel, but nothing screamed "homey." It was functional, utilitarian, much like Carlisle himself.

The kitchen was to the left, sleek and modern, with stainless steel appliances. No dishes were left in the sink, and the counter tops were spotless, suggesting either a man who cleaned up after himself or one who hadn't been here for a while.

Dave stepped toward the bedroom while Serj moved through the hallway, checking each corner. The bedroom was just as tidy as the rest of the apartment. A neatly made bed with white linens stood in the centre, flanked by two simple night-stands. One had a lamp and a stack of papers, but



nothing out of place. Dave checked the wardrobe, sliding the door open. Inside was a mix of clothing—workwear, suits, and more casual outfits separated neatly. The drawers beneath held socks, underwear, and neatly folded shirts.

It was the suitcase that caught Dave's eye. A large travel case sat on top of the wardrobe, unused by the look of it. But as he scanned the room, he wondered—if Carlisle had left, had he taken anything with him? The place didn't feel abandoned, yet there was an unmistakable absence of personal items. He crouched down and checked under the bed. No smaller travel bags or cases, nothing tucked away that suggested Carlisle had packed for a long trip.

Serj stepped into the room, having checked the rest of the apartment. "No signs of struggle," he said quietly. "But something feels off."

Dave gave a brief acknowledgement before pulling open the drawer of one of the night-stands. A few personal effects—pens, a notebook, and what looked like a small journal—sat inside, but nothing stood out. "If Carlisle left, it looks like he took just enough for a short trip. Some clothes are missing, but nothing that would suggest he packed up for good."

Serj glanced at the suitcase on the wardrobe. "Big one's still here. Maybe he has a smaller case, something he'd use for a quick getaway."

"That's what I'm thinking," Dave replied. "He's been gone for long enough that it shows. But it doesn't look like he planned to vanish for good. This place isn't abandoned."

Serj walked over to the window, parting the curtains slightly to peer out at the quiet street below. "He left in a hurry. Question is, why? And where did he go?"

Dave turned back to the wardrobe, thumbing through the hanging clothes. It was a strange feeling—Carlisle had left, but not with the sense of someone disappearing permanently. He hadn't packed up his life; he'd just

left the essentials. A few items missing here and there, but nothing drastic. Carlisle hadn't planned on being gone long.

"We need to figure out where he went," Dave checked the bedside table again for any clues. "If he left in a hurry, someone either scared him or he was heading somewhere important."

Serj drummed his fingers against the windowsill before stepping away. "Let's search the place for anything else. Maybe he left a clue about where he was headed."

As they began to search the apartment more thoroughly, the sense of urgency mounted. Carlisle had left, but where—and why—were still the pressing questions. Whatever had driven him from this place, it hadn't been ordinary.

As Serj spoke quietly with Anya over the phone, relaying their findings, Dave continued scanning the apartment, his eyes darting around the living room. Something gnawed at the back of his mind—a feeling that something wasn't adding up. He glanced toward a desk in the corner of the room, set up like a home office, but something was off. Dave's home setup flashed in his mind—the usual desktop PC tucked under his desk, dual monitors, and the usual peripherals to make working from home more comfortable. But here, Carlisle's desk was completely bare.

The chair tucked into the desk was worn, clearly used regularly, but there was no sign of a screen, keyboard, or mouse. No laptop either. It looked far too empty for someone who likely did complex data analysis and research from home. Dave stepped closer, frowning.

"Serj," Dave called softly, catching his attention as he held up the phone to Anya. "Take a look at this."

Serj walked over, his eyes following Dave's to the empty desk. "What are you seeing?"

Dave gestured at the space. "There's nothing here. No monitor, no PC, no peripherals. The chair looks like it's used a lot, but the desk is spotless. If Carlisle worked with data, he'd need something better than a laptop. No one works long hours just on a laptop touchpad—it's inefficient. This desk should have something. A missing setup like this tells me someone's been through here."

Serj's face darkened as he turned back to the phone, relaying Dave's observation to Anya. Anya's voice, coming through the speaker, echoed Dave's thoughts. "You're right. No way Carlisle would rely solely on a laptop for the work he did. If there's no sign of his PC, peripherals, or even a monitor, it suggests someone's been through there and taken anything sensitive. They've likely cleaned the place up."

Stepping back from the desk, Dave simply stated, "Makes sense. The place is too tidy in that one area. If Carlisle took anything with him, he wouldn't have left his workspace completely empty. Someone cleared this place out—probably to remove anything incriminating."

Anya's voice crackled through the phone again. "This changes things. It's not just that he's missing; someone's covering their tracks. We need to move fast."

Serj agreed. "We'll finish up here and see what else we can find, but you're right. We need to figure out who's behind this and what they've taken."

Dave glanced once more at the empty desk, the unease settling deeper. Carlisle hadn't just disappeared—someone had cleaned his life out, and whatever they had taken might be the key to what he'd uncovered.

Dave stood in the small bathroom, taking in the details. The shower cubicle still had shampoo and body wash, both half-used, sitting on a shelf. Yet, the toothbrush and toothpaste were conspicuously absent. It was a small thing, but it caught his attention. He ran his hand over his stubbled chin, thinking. If someone had taken Carlisle, or if he'd gone on the run, they would have

taken everything he'd need. But the personal hygiene items left behind hinted that he'd travelled light, potentially by choice.

"It's something," Dave observed. "If this was staged, wouldn't they have taken the small things like this? Maybe he left in a hurry but expected to come back."

Serj leaned against the hallway wall, arms crossed, as Dave rejoined him. "Or they're trying to make it look that way. Could be a double bluff. But I agree—it leans more toward him travelling light, fast, and not planning on being gone too long."

With nothing else in the apartment standing out, Dave and Serj shifted their focus to the neighbours. The building was quiet, but there were a handful of residents who might have seen or heard something. They started knocking on doors, keeping it casual, asking if anyone had seen Carlisle recently.

The responses were the same at each door: "He's a quiet man, keeps to himself," "I wouldn't remember if he came or went," and "Barely see him around." No one seemed to know much about their reclusive neighbour, and it struck Dave just how disconnected people had become. Carlisle had lived here, presumably for a while, but no one knew him. He wasn't surprised, but it was a stark reminder of how insular city living had become.

As they knocked on another door, Dave thought to himself, I should connect with my neighbours more. We're all becoming too wrapped up in our own worlds these days. It was ironic—here they were, trying to find someone who had vanished, and not a single person in the building could say when they last saw him.

After a few more dead-end conversations, Dave and Serj regrouped in the hallway. "Nothing," Serj said flatly, frustration creeping into his voice.

Dave sighed. "Yeah, Carlisle seems like the type who kept to himself. The neighbours don't even know when he was last here."

Serj crossed his arms. "We're running out of leads. Let's get back to Anya and see if she's picked up anything new."

The neighbours had been a long shot, but they weren't walking away empty-handed. Carlisle's sparse packing, the missing tech, the subtle clues—it all suggested he hadn't disappeared willingly or permanently. There was more to this story, and they were getting closer to the truth.

## 11      **Viagra**

As they gathered in the dimly lit hotel bar once more, the atmosphere was far less casual than the night before. Dave and Serj sat discussing the frustrating dead ends they had hit at Carlisle's apartment. Omar, leaning back in his seat, was deep in thought, replaying the day's events at EarthWise in his mind. Anya, however, was focused on her phone, quietly scrolling through her inbox, when something odd caught her eye.

It was an email—one that should have been blocked by her meticulous spam filters. The subject line was typical junk: Cheap Viagra—an advertisement for something ridiculous. Normally, she'd ignore it, but this one had made it through her filters, which was rare. She clicked it open, not because she cared about the contents, but because she wanted to see how it had bypassed her protections.

At first glance, it appeared to be the usual spam—poorly worded offers with a link to a dodgy website. But something about the phrasing made her pause. It was off. Just subtle enough to catch her attention, as if crafted to avoid classification as spam. Clever. If this was a new tactic, someone had put real effort into getting it through the cracks. Maybe a new trick for her future arsenal for spear-phishing?

Curiosity piqued, she began examining the digital envelope. That's when she noticed something strange—an IP address embedded in the message headers where it shouldn't have been. It was highly unusual. Most spam didn't bother with that level of complexity, and the presence of an IP address in the headers suggested something deliberate, something hidden.

She pulled up the agency tools on her phone and quickly scanned the IP. A single piece of information came back: it was linked to a digital handset, an IP phone.

"Wait," Anya's words silencing the surrounding conversation. Her voice was tense but controlled. "I'm onto something."

The others stopped mid-sentence, watching as she connected a call to the mysterious IP address, her mind racing. Who would send a message like this, and why? As the line connected, she heard a faint click, followed by a pause.

Then, a voice—one she hadn't heard in years, but immediately recognised.

"Hello."

Anya's heart skipped a beat. It was him. The voice on the other end belonged to Jonathan Carlisle.

Her eyes widened as she glanced at the team, her breath catching in her throat. Carlisle was alive, and this carefully crafted message was no coincidence.

Anya, still gripping her phone, stood up abruptly from the table. "I need to take this in private," she said quietly to the team, her tone leaving no room for argument. Dave and Serj exchanged a glance but gave her a nod, knowing better than to press. Omar raised an eyebrow but stayed silent, understanding the gravity of the situation from Anya's body language alone.

Without another word, Anya slipped out of the bar and hurried to the lift, making her way back to her room. Her heart pounded in her chest, the adrenaline of hearing Carlisle's voice again still fresh. Once inside the privacy of her room, she closed the door, locking it behind her. She sat on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath before speaking.

"It's OK," she said softly into the phone. "I'm alone now."

There was a pause on the other end, a faint crackle of static, then Carlisle's voice, low and cautious. "Good. Listen, I can't say much. They're watching everything."

Anya's fingers tightened around the phone. "Jonathan, what's going on? We've been looking for you. Your apartment—"

"Stop," Carlisle interrupted, his tone sharp. "I can't explain it over the phone. It's not safe. You shouldn't even be calling from a traceable device."

Anya frowned. "Then why did you reach out like this? You know we're trying to help you."

There was another pause, and when Carlisle spoke again, his voice was barely above a whisper. "Because I have no other choice. They're closing in. I need to disappear, but not before I give you what you need. Meet me in Berlin. The next ICE train. Come alone."

"Berlin?" Anya repeated, caught off guard by the sudden demand. "That's not a lot of time, Jonathan. Why—"

"I don't have time to explain!" Carlisle snapped, urgency creeping into his voice. "I'll give you the answers when we meet. Be on the next train. If anyone else comes with you, the deal's off. Understand?"

Anya took a breath, glancing at the clock. She didn't like it. It reeked of desperation, and the lack of specifics gnawed at her. But this was her only lead, and if Carlisle was truly in danger, she couldn't afford to ignore it.

"Fine," she said, her voice steady. "I'll be there. Alone."

Carlisle paused again, his breath heavy on the line. "Good. Berlin Hauptbahnhof. I'll find you."

The line went dead.

Anya stared at her phone, her mind racing. She knew she'd have to tell the team, but Carlisle's instructions were clear. She'd have to convince them to let her go alone. And the clock was ticking.



Anya burst back into the hotel bar, her face tight with urgency. "Dave, you have to get on the ICE train to Berlin. Now! Go!" she commanded, her voice leaving no room for debate.

Without missing a beat, Dave shot to his feet and rushed for the hotel exit. Anya turned quickly to Serj and Omar. "I've got to be on that train too. Get a conference call going—we'll talk while we run," she said, her words rapid as she followed Dave out of the hotel.

By the time she reached the street, Dave was already climbing into a taxi, looking back just in time to catch her eye. He paused, waiting for her to join him, but Anya gave him a barely perceptible shake of her head and waved him on. She flagged another cab for herself, knowing they needed to maintain distance. Carlisle's conditions were strict, and she wasn't taking any chances.

As both taxis sped toward the train station, Anya slipped her earpiece in and joined the conference call. Her voice came through smoothly despite the rush of the city outside. "As you probably guessed, that was Carlisle. He gave me instructions—be on the train to Berlin, alone, or he'll disappear again. But I needed backup."

There was a slight pause before she continued. "Dave's got that every man face. Sorry, Serj, but no one could miss you on a train." The truth hung in the air—Serj's presence would be too obvious, his size and demeanour standing out like a beacon. But Dave? He could blend in with the crowd, unnoticed by everyone except those who needed to see him.

Dave's voice crackled over the line. "Got it. I'll stay low-key. Blend in, grab a coffee, maybe a newspaper. Keep things casual."

Anya exhaled, relieved that Dave was on board with the plan. "Exactly. Just be yourself, but stay alert. When we get to Berlin, Carlisle will find me. Keep eyes on him—if anything feels off, I'll signal. If all goes well, I'll call you in, and we'll get him to safety."

There was a moment of quiet on the line before Serj's low, calm voice came through. "Good plan. We'll be monitoring from here. Keep us posted on everything."

Anya gripped the phone tighter, her knuckles whitening as she felt the weight of what was to come. "Roger that. This is our only shot at finding Carlisle. Let's make it count."

With that, they ended the call, and Anya's taxi sped toward the station. She glanced at her watch. The next ICE train to Berlin was leaving soon, and she couldn't afford to miss it. The chase was on, and now it was a matter of time.

## 12 ICE, ICE Baby

As the taxi sped through the busy Frankfurt streets, Dave's fingers tapped rapidly on his phone screen. He logged into the ticketing app, quickly navigating through the options. Selecting the next ICE train to Berlin, he opted for no seat reservation. The free seating would give him flexibility to move between carriages and adjust his position depending on where Anya ended up. It was all about staying discreet, moving fluidly, and keeping eyes on her without being obvious.

The taxi pulled up to the entrance of the Frankfurt Hauptbahnhof, the station's grand facade looming ahead. Dave handed the driver a quick thank you, grabbed his bag, and hurried through the revolving glass doors into the station. The constant rush of travellers filled the air with the sound of rolling suitcases, announcements echoing overhead, and the chatter of people moving between platforms. The ceiling arched high above, a blend of modern glass and historical architecture, while electronic boards displayed the departures and arrivals.

Dodging through the crowd, Dave kept his focus sharp. He followed the signs leading to the platforms, glancing up at the digital displays until he spotted the train number for Berlin. He still had a few minutes before departure, so he slipped through the automatic gates and walked briskly to the platform. The sleek white and red ICE train awaited, its carriages stretching out in a long line, the modern high-speed machine humming with quiet anticipation.

The ICE trains were known for their comfort, speed, and efficiency. As Dave approached, the doors of the nearest carriage opened with a soft hiss, and he stepped aboard. The interior was clean and modern, with wide aisles and seats upholstered in a smooth grey-blue fabric. Overhead storage bins lined the carriage, and large windows gave passengers a clear view of the tracks and countryside beyond. The lighting was soft, with individual reading lamps embedded into the seat backs.

Dave found a seat in a sparsely filled carriage, one of the unreserved sections, and settled in by the window. He strategically chose a spot where he could see the entrance to the carriage without being too close to it. The train was relatively empty for now, mostly a few travellers scattered about—businesspeople checking emails, tourists with their guidebooks. This gave him plenty of space to move if necessary.

The low hum of the train's engines starting up vibrated underfoot as passengers continued to board. A few moments later, Anya appeared at the end of the carriage. She walked steadily, scanning the available seats. As she passed Dave, she gave him a quick, barely noticeable glance. She moved ahead a few rows and took a seat facing forward, far enough ahead that Dave could still see her but close enough for him to keep her in his sight-line without drawing attention.

Dave leaned back in his seat, pulling out his phone and pretending to read an article. He kept his posture relaxed, his eyes occasionally drifting to the window. From the outside, he looked like just another traveller killing time, but his focus was entirely on Anya and the surrounding movement. The train's departure announcement came over the speakers, a calm, automated voice informing passengers that the train to Berlin would soon be leaving the station.

As the train began to glide smoothly out of Frankfurt, Dave settled in for the journey, mentally preparing for whatever awaited them in Berlin. All he had to do now was stay close, stay alert, and blend in, keeping a quiet eye on Anya while the countryside blurred past the windows.

Ten minutes into the journey, Dave stood up from his seat, casually making his way toward the Bordbistro—the onboard café. He had already resigned himself to the fact that finding a decent cup of tea while travelling was impossible, especially outside the UK, so he opted for a coffee instead. But this wasn't just about the caffeine. Walking through the train gave him the chance to scan the carriages, catch faces, and observe any passengers who seemed out of place.

As he moved along the narrow aisle, his eyes flicked from one person to the next, cataloguing the ordinary. Businessmen glued to their laptops, a young couple quietly chatting, a mother soothing a restless child. Nothing immediately stood out, but Dave's instincts were always on. It wasn't just about what was visible—it was about the subtle shifts in the air, the energy of a space. And right now, everything seemed calm.

Meanwhile, back in her seat, Anya stared out the window, her thoughts half-focused on Carlisle's cryptic message and the complexity of the mission. Her body language was calm, composed, but the tension in her mind was palpable. When Carlisle appeared beside her, she didn't flinch. She had expected something like this—Berlin wasn't the true destination. Carlisle had used it as misdirection, and she was ready for the sudden twist.

Carlisle slid into the seat next to her with a sigh, offering an apologetic smile. "Sorry for the cloak and dagger routine, Anya," he said quietly, glancing around to make sure no one was paying them any undue attention. "But you need to understand how serious this is. EarthWise... they're involved in something much bigger than anyone realises."

Anya's gaze was steady, but she could sense the urgency radiating from him. She waited, giving him the space to explain.

Carlisle leaned in closer, his voice a hushed whisper. "EarthWise is directly involved in events in the Arctic that could cause a global cataclysm. They need to be stopped..."

Before he could finish, the chilling sound of a suppressed gunshot broke through the stillness of the train. Anya's blood froze as Carlisle's body jerked violently, his head snapping to the side. Blood and brain matter spattered the seat, the window, and her lap in a horrific, gruesome display.

Carlisle slumped lifelessly next to her, the weight of his body pressing against her as she sat motionless for a split second, her mind reeling. The words still hung in the air—global cataclysm. And now, Carlisle was dead.

Anya is momentarily frozen, trapped beneath Carlisle's lifeless body. Blood soaks into the fabric of the seat, and she feels its warmth as it pools under her, but the shock is already morphing into adrenaline. The EarthWise agent who shot Carlisle is closing in, approaching the aisle with a silenced pistol in hand, scanning for any movement from her direction.

Anya knows she has seconds to react. Her mind races, and instinct kicks in. She manages to shift Carlisle's body just enough to slide her hand under her coat. There, concealed, is a small tactical knife. She grips the handle, keeping her movements minimal and deliberate to avoid drawing attention.

As the agent steps closer, standing almost over her now, Anya makes her move. Using all her strength, she heaves Carlisle's body forward, tipping it toward the approaching agent. The sudden shift of weight catches him off guard, and Carlisle's body slams into the agent's legs, causing him to stagger back. Anya takes advantage of his surprise, kicking hard against the base of the seat, propelling herself out from under the dead weight.

Now freed, Anya moves swiftly. She rolls out into the aisle, crouched low, her blade already drawn. The agent stumbles, trying to raise his pistol, but she's quicker. With a fluid motion, she slashes upward, catching his wrist and causing the gun to clatter to the floor. Before he can recover, Anya drives her shoulder into his midsection, sending him crashing into the adjacent row of seats. The passengers around them scream in terror, but Anya blocks it out, focusing on the agent in front of her.

Before the agent can regain his balance, Anya finishes him with a swift, brutal strike to the throat. The agent gags, clutching his neck, and collapses. Anya takes a breath, her eyes darting to check for any more threats. She grabs the discarded pistol, tucks it into her waistband, and quickly scans the area for Dave.

Dave had just picked up his coffee at the Bordbistro when his senses sharpened. Two men were walking purposefully behind him. They moved with precision, and the man at the rear was clearly trying to hide something

in his jacket. Dave's trained eye caught the awkward bulge, the subtle hunch of his shoulders.

Dave left the coffee behind, his instincts fully alert. He trailed the two men through the next carriage, keeping his distance while assessing the situation. As they entered the vestibule between the carriages, Dave made his move, picking up his pace. He "accidentally" bumped into the man at the rear, who turned in frustration. It was exactly the opening Dave needed.

In one swift motion, Dave grabbed the man's right wrist with his left hand. As he suspected, there was a suppressed pistol in his grip. Dave's fingers tightened like a vice, crushing the bones in the man's wrist with frightening ease. The agent's face twisted in agony as the gun clattered to the floor. Without missing a beat, Dave drove his left elbow into the man's chin, knocking him out cold.

The leader, sensing the attack, reacted quickly. His suppressed pistol was already in hand, and he fired twice, hitting Dave squarely in the chest. The rounds thudded into him, but Dave barely flinched. His fury flared as he lunged forward, driving his fist into the agent's stomach. He pulled the punch to avoid killing him, but the force was still devastating. The man folded over in pain, gasping for air, and before he could recover, Dave grabbed him by the collar and slammed him face-first into the connecting doors. The agent crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

As the man collapsed, the train suddenly jerked, and the emergency brakes were triggered. Dave staggered backwards as the train screeched to a halt, barely maintaining his balance. His heart pounded, but there was no time to assess the situation. He turned and bolted back to the carriage where Anya was sitting.

Bursting into the carriage, Dave's eyes immediately locked on Anya. She was safe, but Carlisle wasn't. His lifeless body lay crumpled on the floor, a pool of blood spreading from his head. Another body—likely another EarthWise agent—lay nearby. The other passengers were frozen in terror,

some screaming, others trembling in their seats. The atmosphere was sheer panic.

"Anya, we have to move, now," Dave said, his voice low and urgent.

They quickly assessed the situation. The train had come to a dead stop, and there was no way they could stay onboard without being caught. Someone had pulled the emergency brake—whether it was one of the agents or a panicked passenger didn't matter. They had to get out.

There were only two exits: the doors or the emergency windows. Dave decided they'd take the more subtle route. He walked over to the nearest set of doors and, using his inhuman strength, forced them open. The metal groaned under his grip as he bent the mechanisms until the door buckled and slid open. Cool air rushed in, and without another word, Dave and Anya slipped out into the evening dusk.

They vanished into the countryside, leaving the train, the bodies, and the chaos behind. The mission had taken a dark turn, but for now, their priority was to disappear—and fast.

Back at the hotel, Dave and Anya slipped into her room, the weight of what had just happened hanging heavily in the air. They were shaken but composed. The rest of the team—Serj and Omar—had been waiting, sensing something had gone wrong. Without wasting time, Anya immediately filled them in on the incident: Carlisle, shot dead right in front of her, the train, the agents, and their narrow escape.

Serj's eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched, while Omar remained quiet, processing the information. This wasn't just a slip-up; this was a calculated strike.

"We need to talk to Cecilia," Anya said, pulling out her phone. She connected to the Agency's secure line and called Cecilia. The screen lit up as Cecilia's face appeared on the video call, her expression calm but focused.



"You're both alright?" Cecilia's first question cut through the tension, her concern evident despite her professional tone.

"We're fine," Dave answered. "But Carlisle's dead. Shot right in front of Anya before he could give us much. EarthWise is more dangerous than we thought."

Anya leaned into view of the camera. "Carlisle barely got a few words out. He confirmed EarthWise is directly involved in events in the Arctic, something that could lead to a global catastrophe. But he couldn't tell us more before they took him out. We've got witness statements to worry about and the CCTV on the train."

Cecilia didn't miss a beat. Her voice, sharp and direct, took control of the situation. "I'll handle it. I'm sending agents to deal with the fallout on the train. They'll delete the CCTV footage before the local authorities can access it. If we can't erase it in time, we'll manage the situation through witness statements. I've got people on the ground who can manipulate the digital records as soon as they're filed."

Serj folded his arms, still standing as he stared at the screen. "This confirms our suspicions. EarthWise isn't just involved—they're pulling the strings. Whoever's running the show is willing to kill to keep things under wraps."

"Christ," Cecilia exclaimed, rubbing her temples. "We know EarthWise is neck-deep in this mess, but—" "But what?" Dave interrupted. "But Carlisle was our best lead, and now he's dead. We're running blind here, and these bastards are always two steps ahead."

Omar, who had been silent until now, spoke up. "We need to identify the players at EarthWise. Find out who's orchestrating this. Carlisle may have been just one piece of the puzzle, but the larger players will have left a trail. Someone's funding this, running it from the shadows."

"Agreed," Cecilia replied. "Keep your eyes open. Anya, I want you to dig into EarthWise's upper management. Find out who's running the key projects in the Arctic, and follow the money. Serj and Dave, keep investigating the local scene—find any connections Carlisle may have had in Frankfurt or Berlin."

The team felt the tension in the room shift from shock to resolve. Cecilia's swift handling of the situation on the train ensured that there wouldn't be any immediate blowback. But EarthWise was now fully on their radar, and the game had just escalated.

"Alright," Cecilia said, her voice a final command. "Let's keep moving. I'll make sure the train incident disappears from the official record. We can't afford to leave any trace."

As the call ended, the room fell into a brief silence, the weight of the next steps pressing on them. They had just survived one hit, but EarthWise wasn't going to stop. And neither could they.

## 13      **Dead End**

Frustration gnawed at Anya as she stared at her screen. Every attempt to breach EarthWise's systems, from personnel files to financial transactions, had been met with reinforced firewalls, and each lead she had followed turned into a dead end. It was clear—EarthWise had anticipated her next moves, and they had locked down their systems tighter than ever. Days had gone by, with each attempt yielding nothing but blocked pathways and encrypted walls.

"Alright," Talking to no one but herself, "If we can't get in through the front door, we'll try the back."

Shifting her focus, she dove into a different strategy—examining EarthWise's competitors. The market for geoscience research, especially in the Arctic, was narrow and highly specialised. The key players in the field were few, which meant if anyone left their role and went dark, it would be noticeable. If EarthWise had hired people from rival companies, perhaps there was a trail to follow.

Anya began trawling through the HR files of EarthWise's competitors, searching for employee movements over the past few years. She knew what she was looking for—scientists, engineers, or project managers who had suddenly disappeared from one company's radar and hadn't reappeared anywhere else. The kind of people who had quietly shifted into EarthWise's secretive world.

It took days of careful research, sifting through profiles, cross-referencing employment histories, and analysing company rosters. But finally, a pattern began to emerge.

There were several names, employees from different geoscience firms, all highly specialised in Arctic exploration, environmental impact studies, or data analysis. All of them had left their companies within the last three years, and after that, there was no trace of them in any known organisation.

They hadn't registered with any public projects, hadn't moved to other known firms in the field, and hadn't published any papers—anomalies in an otherwise tightly-knit scientific community.

Anya jotted down a few of the more promising leads. One stood out—a geophysicist named Dr. Elias Keller, formerly of Geotherm Innovations, a competitor in geothermal research. He had left Geotherm two years ago, but his trail had gone cold after that. No new employment records, no publications, no public data. He fit the profile perfectly. There were a few others—environmental scientists, data analysts—but Dr. Keller stood out as someone who might have been recruited into a secretive project like the one EarthWise was running.

Anya leaned back in her chair, tapping her pen against the desk. She had a few names to work with now. This wasn't the direct line into EarthWise she'd hoped for, but if she could track these individuals, there might be another way to crack the mystery of EarthWise's Arctic projects.

Omar stood outside the nondescript apartment building on the outskirts of Tallinn, Estonia. The neighbourhood was typical for someone looking to live quietly, without drawing attention—worn-out, quiet, with buildings that had seen better days. Estonia was a digitally connected country, but this place had an almost analogue feel, like it hadn't kept pace with the rest of the world. Omar had traced Dr. Elias Keller to this address, a lead from Anya's deep dive into EarthWise's missing links.

He approached the door and knocked, listening to the dull thud of his fist on wood. The silence that followed felt heavy, expectant. No one answered. Omar knocked again, more forcefully this time, but still nothing. Glancing around, he noticed a few passers-by but nothing suspicious. He headed to the neighbouring apartments, trying to sound out the locals. As expected, no one knew much about Keller. The neighbours barely

remembered him and repeated the same refrain: "He was a quiet man, kept to himself."

It was a familiar pattern, one Omar had encountered before. People like Keller disappeared into the background, unnoticed until they were truly gone. When he finally decided to gain entry into the apartment, it didn't take much effort to bypass the lock. Inside, the stale air greeted him with the unmistakable scent of abandonment.

Dust covered everything. The flat surfaces of the small living space were untouched, the once-modern appliances now dulled by a thin layer of grime. Omar walked through the apartment carefully, each step leaving faint impressions in the dust. There was no sign of recent activity. Checking the wardrobe and suitcase in the bedroom, he found everything in place, untouched. Clothes hung neatly in the closet, a suitcase lay under the bed, unused.

Moving to the bathroom, he noticed a toothbrush still resting in its holder, the bristles frayed with age. It hadn't been used in months. Back in the small kitchen, a mug sat on the counter next to a plate with the remnants of what once must have been breakfast. The coffee inside had long since dried into a moulding sludge, and the plate held a crust of something unidentifiable.

Next to the mug was a newspaper, the date catching Omar's eye. It was from six months ago. The apartment was a snapshot frozen in time, as if Keller had gone out one morning and never returned. He looked around, feeling the eerie stillness of the place. It was as though Keller had simply vanished, leaving behind a life paused mid-routine. No signs of struggle, no hasty packing or flight—just an ordinary day cut off abruptly.

Omar's mind raced as he pieced it together. Keller's disappearance was deliberate, but by whom? And why leave everything in such a state? EarthWise? Another force? Whatever had happened, Keller had been taken or forced to leave in a way that erased him completely. But the apartment

gave one crucial detail: Keller hadn't planned this. He had been living his life, one morning like any other, and then, suddenly, he was gone.

The clues were sparse, but it was something. Omar needed to report back. The hunt for Keller had just begun, and this empty apartment was the first step in what was shaping up to be another dangerous trail.

Serj and Dave pursued the next name on Anya's list: Dr. Viktoras Liska, a renowned geophysicist from Lithuania. Dr. Liska had worked extensively in seismic research, contributing to groundbreaking studies on tectonic shifts and geothermal energy. His name had appeared as a potential link to EarthWise after suddenly dropping off the employment radar two years ago.

Following the trail, Serj and Dave arrived in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, where Dr. Liska had been last employed at a major research institution. The institution's HR records, however, had not been updated in quite some time. When they inquired about Liska, the staff were hesitant at first, but eventually, they learned the truth.

Dr. Liska hadn't disappeared into the shadows of corporate espionage or secret Arctic projects; he had been diagnosed with a terminal illness—an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer. His condition had worsened rapidly, and he had retired quietly, moving to a countryside home with his family to live out his remaining time in peace. The HR records simply hadn't been updated to reflect his retirement due to ill health, leaving a gap in the digital trail that had led them to believe he might have vanished.

It was a sobering discovery. Liska wasn't involved in EarthWise or any clandestine projects. His disappearance from the professional world was due to personal tragedy, not conspiracy. Serj and Dave, understanding there was no further lead here, respectfully closed the investigation on Dr. Liska, returning with the knowledge that not every missing link was part of the larger puzzle they were trying to solve.

With one name crossed off Anya's list, it was time to move on to the next.

The final name on Anya's list was Dr. Maria Sokolova, a Russian environmental scientist specialising in Arctic ecosystems. Dr. Sokolova's research focused on climate change impacts on permafrost and marine biology, making her expertise highly valuable in the field of geoscience. Her last known address was in Murmansk, a port city in the far north-west of Russia, known for its proximity to the Arctic and its long winters.

Serj and Dave arrived at Dr. Sokolova's last known address in Murmansk, the cold air biting at their faces as they approached the old Soviet-era apartment block. It was typical of the city—grey, weathered, and nondescript. Serj took the lead, as his fluent Russian would allow for smoother interactions with the locals. They had already gathered that Dr. Sokolova had dropped off the employment radar, but there was hope in tracking down her last known contacts.

After knocking on Sokolova's door and receiving no response, they began canvassing the neighbours. Eventually, they found an elderly woman who remembered Sokolova quite well.

"Maria? Of course, I remember her," the woman said in fluent Russian, leaning on her door frame as she spoke to Serj. "She was always very polite, a good neighbour. She told me she was leaving for a new job."

Serj gave a friendly nod, keeping his tone light. "Did she mention anything about where she was going? What kind of job it was?"

The neighbour's face lit up. "Yes! She said it was research in the Arctic, a big project. She was very excited about it, said she would be gone for long periods. It stuck in my mind because she had to give me her cat. I remember thinking how sad it was that she couldn't take it with her. The Arctic, she said, wasn't a place for a cat."

Serj's interest piqued. "The Arctic? Did she mention which company or organisation she was working for?"

The woman frowned, thinking hard, but then shook her head. "No, I don't recall the name of the company. She was so excited, but I don't remember her saying who it was. Just that the job sounded important, and she'd be away a long time."

Serj tapped his pen against his notebook thoughtfully, absorbing the details. "Did she give any indication when she'd be back, or if she kept in contact after she left?"

"No, nothing. I haven't heard from her since she left six months ago. She was such a lovely young woman, but it's like she vanished after she started that job."

Serj thanked the woman, exchanging pleasantries before he and Dave walked back toward the car. Once they were out of earshot, Dave turned to Serj.

"Sounds like Sokolova didn't just disappear—she's out there, involved in whatever's happening in the Arctic."

His face serious, Serj said, "We have something to go on. She's linked to a project up north. We just need to connect the dots. This could be our way in."

They had found the first real lead—a direct connection to the Arctic. Now, it was time to dig deeper and figure out which project Sokolova had been pulled into, and whether EarthWise was behind it.



## 14      **Landslide**

Cecilia called an emergency debrief, the urgency clear in her voice. The team assembled quickly, knowing something big had happened. On the screen behind Cecilia, images from satellite feeds and geological data flickered, showing the results of what had just occurred in the Arctic.

"A landslide," Cecilia began, pointing to the monitor. "This was picked up by the USGS and ESA. It's been flagged as a natural disturbance, but some geologists are already speculating that the Arctic's unstable methane hydrate reserves could be involved."

Anya leaned forward, her face serious. "Methane hydrates... that's not something to take lightly."

Cecilia's fingers traced the edge of the satellite image as she spoke. "Exactly. The shock wave from the landslide travelled through the water, forming rogue waves. They weren't catastrophic by global standards, but they were big enough to impact local communities and shipping lanes, tipping small vessels and causing minor structural damage to Arctic outposts."

The team exchanged glances, the gravity of the situation sinking in.

Dave was the first to voice what they were all thinking. "We've been digging into EarthWise and their operations in the Arctic. It'd be foolish not to connect the dots here."

Omar folded his arms, frowning. "Especially with what we know about their covert activities. This can't be a coincidence."

Cecilia's gaze was steady as she continued. "We're treating this as connected to EarthWise until proven otherwise. If their operation, has triggered this event, the consequences could be far greater than just a rogue wave or some structural damage."

Anya pulled up the data on her tablet, her fingers moving swiftly as she scanned the information. "If they've disturbed the methane hydrates... it could mean more instability to come. And if that landslide is just the beginning, this could spiral out of control."

Cecilia's tone was firm as she wrapped up the briefing. "This is going to hit the media soon, and when it does, there'll be questions. But we're ahead of the curve—we know EarthWise is involved. What we don't know is how deeply. You need to be prepared for the fallout. Find that ship. Find out what they've done."

The room fell silent as the team absorbed the weight of the mission ahead. They were no longer just chasing a corporation; they were chasing an environmental disaster with global implications.

Gathered around a large table in the agency's secure briefing room, the walls lined with screens and maps, the team assessed the situation. It had been a long few weeks of chasing leads, but now everything pointed in one clear direction: the Arctic. The only question was, where exactly in the vast, frozen expanse had Dr. Maria Sokolova gone?

Cecilia stood at the head of the room, her arms crossed as the team debriefed. Serj relayed the conversation he'd had with Sokolova's neighbour, while Anya and Dave filled in details from their investigations.

"All signs point to the Arctic," Serj said, his voice calm but certain. "But there's still a lot of ground to cover. We need to narrow it down."

Anya, ever the analyst, tapped away at her laptop, pulling up data on the screen. "Sokolova left Murmansk about six months ago, around the time EarthWise's Arctic projects were escalating. She would have needed a way to get there—flights, possibly through Denmark or Iceland to Greenland. If we track her flight path, we might get a better idea of where she was headed."

Cecilia agreed. "Good. Let's start there. But flights to the Arctic are rare and not always straightforward. She could've used smaller charter flights once she reached Greenland."

Anya began tracing flight records, working with the date range they had. Flights from Murmansk to Greenland weren't frequent, and they often routed through major hubs like Denmark or Iceland. The flight paths weren't too complex, but what they needed was a specific internal flight in Greenland. These flights were often chartered or part of research projects, meaning they'd likely require special permits.

"We'll need to dig into any permits or visa requirements Sokolova might have applied for to enter Greenland or other parts of the Arctic," Anya said, her fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard. "If she was going for extended research, she would've needed special clearance. That could give us the destination."

Dave leaned forward, eyeing the map of Greenland on the screen. "Any records we can trace through local government permits for research teams in Greenland or any protected areas? She was heading somewhere remote, that's for sure. Likely one of the places restricted for ecological or scientific research."

Anya's fingers flew across the keyboard as her eyes scanned multiple windows. "Exactly what I'm looking for. I'm cross-referencing her name with known research permits issued within that time frame. She would have needed clearance to work in any restricted Arctic zones."

As she worked through the data, something pinged on the screen. "Got something. There's a permit issued in her name, filed through an intermediary company—likely a front for EarthWise. It gave her access to a restricted research zone in the Nuussuaq Peninsula Greenland."

Cecilia's eyes narrowed. "That's it. If EarthWise is behind this, they would've needed permits for any scientific work in those areas. It also lines up with the time frame we're working with."

Serj crossed his arms. "So now we know where she went, or at least close to it. The Nuussuaq Peninsula Greenland."

Cecilia stepped forward. "We need boots on the ground. If Sokolova was involved in this, we can bet there's a facility or site EarthWise is using. That's where we'll find answers—and likely the next threat."

Serj rubbed his jaw, his expression grim as he studied the map. "It's rugged terrain. If they're hiding something up there, it won't be easy to reach."

Dave studied the map. "So that's our location. If EarthWise is behind the Arctic catastrophe Carlisle warned us about, this is where it's happening."

Cecilia's voice was decisive. "Nuussuaq Peninsula it is. Now we have a target. We'll need to put a plan together, get a team on the ground, and figure out exactly what EarthWise is doing there." She paused, meeting the eyes of each member of the team. "This could be our only chance to stop them."

With the Nuussuaq Peninsula in their sights, the team knew they were closing in on the truth behind EarthWise's Arctic operations. It was time to prepare for the next step: a field mission deep into the Arctic wilderness, where the real answers—and the danger—awaited.

## 15 Nuuk

Cecilia worked swiftly to organise the logistics of the team's mission to Greenland. Getting the right permits was the first step, but the agency had dealt with these situations before. Using a shell company as a front, the team could pose as an ecological survey group conducting research on the environmental impact of climate change in the Arctic. This gave them a credible reason to be in the region without raising any red flags, and with the agency's resources, the paperwork and permits were quickly processed.

But getting to the Nuussuaq Peninsula, one of the most desolate regions of Greenland, would be far more challenging. The first part of the journey, from the UK to Nuuk, would be straightforward enough, but reaching Nuussuaq from there was another story.

Cecilia organised for a Hägglund BV206, a versatile all-terrain vehicle capable of handling Greenland's rugged terrain, to be airlifted to the peninsula. This would serve as the team's primary means of transportation once they were on the ground. The BV206 was the perfect choice for the mission—reliable, mobile accommodation with enough capacity to carry the supplies they would need to operate in such harsh conditions. Additionally, she secured a snowmobile to help them navigate the more remote areas where the BV206 wouldn't be able to go.

The plan was to fly the team into Nuuk first, where they would have a few days to prepare while waiting for the necessary equipment and vehicles to be transported. From Nuuk, they would travel to Ilulissat, a small town in western Greenland. From there, a helicopter would fly them to a remote location near the Nuussuaq Peninsula where the BV206 and snowmobiles would be waiting.

As the team gathered at the agency's offices, Cecilia briefed them on the logistics. "It's going to take a few days for everything to be ready," she said, pacing in front of the map pinned on the wall. "The BV206 and

snowmobiles are organised, but getting them into place, along with the supplies, takes time. You'll have to be patient while everything's arranged. Once you're on the ground in Nuussuaq, you'll be completely isolated, so make sure you're prepared."

Their mutual understanding of the gravity of the mission was palpable. The wait was frustrating, but they knew the importance of arriving incognito and being fully prepared for the hostile environment they were about to face. All that was left to do was to wait until deployment, knowing that once they arrived, it would be a fight against both the elements and EarthWise's hidden operations in the Arctic.

The team's journey to Nuuk began with a long series of flights, first departing from London to Copenhagen, where they would catch a connecting flight to Kangerlussuaq, Greenland's main airport. The team moved quietly through the airports, blending in with the usual business travellers and tourists, their mission hidden behind the front of an ecological research trip. Each flight was uneventful, but the sense of anticipation hung in the air.

The final leg of the journey took them on a smaller plane, flying low over Greenland's breathtaking landscape. Jagged mountain peaks, immense ice fields, and frozen fjords stretched out below them. The harsh, remote beauty of Greenland was unlike anything any of them had seen before. The vast white expanses and the sharp contrast of dark, exposed rock left a powerful impression.

As they began their descent into Nuuk, Greenland's capital, the landscape shifted from ice-covered mountains to rocky coastline, the sea stretching out into the distance. The town of Nuuk came into view—small, colourful buildings clustered along the rugged coastline, dwarfed by the towering mountains that rose behind them. Despite being the largest city in Greenland, Nuuk had a quiet, almost isolated feel to it.

The plane touched down on the tarmac, the wind whipping around as the team stepped off the aircraft into the biting cold. The temperature was well below freezing, even though it wasn't the harshest part of winter. The air was crisp, the kind of cold that burned your lungs with each breath. The sound of the wind was constant, a low howl that seemed to follow them as they moved through the small airport.

The team gathered their bags and made their way outside, where a shuttle from the Hotel Hans Egede was waiting for them. The journey from the airport to the hotel was short, taking them through the small streets of Nuuk. Colourful houses in red, blue, and yellow stood out against the grey sky and rocky landscape. The sea was visible from almost every point in the town, vast and cold, with chunks of ice floating in the harbour.

The weather was harsh—cold, overcast skies, and the ever-present wind cutting through the town. The buildings huddled together for warmth, and despite its status as a capital, Nuuk felt like a small, tightly-knit community. The streets were mostly quiet, with the occasional car passing by and pedestrians bundled up in thick coats.

As the shuttle pulled up in front of the Hotel Hans Egede, the team took in the sight of the modern hotel, which stood out against the traditional Greenlandic landscape. The hotel was one of the few luxurious places to stay in Nuuk, and it had all the amenities the team would need to prepare for the mission. The façade of the hotel was sleek and contemporary, a blend of glass and steel that contrasted with the rugged surroundings.

Inside, the warmth was immediate. The lobby was spacious, with modern furnishings and warm lighting, creating a cosy atmosphere despite the cold outside. A large fireplace crackled in one corner, and the scent of fresh coffee lingered in the air.

The team checked in swiftly, and the hotel staff, used to accommodating researchers and explorers, were efficient and helpful. Their rooms were

allocated on one of the upper floors, offering a view of the harbour and the mountains beyond.

The rooms were comfortable and modern, each equipped with large windows that let in the natural light, though today the skies were overcast. Each room had a plush bed with crisp white linens, a small desk, and a private bathroom with modern fixtures. Despite the remote location, the hotel spared no effort in ensuring guests had every comfort—there was even a small spa and fitness centre on-site.

The hotel's restaurant, A Hereford Beefstouw, offered a mix of local cuisine and international dishes, and the team made a mental note to try some Greenlandic specialities later.

Once in their rooms, Dave sat on the edge of his bed, taking in the view of the harbour. The water was dark and cold, and the jagged mountains in the distance stood as a reminder of the harsh environment they were about to enter. The team had a few days to prepare and gather their supplies before heading out to Nuussuaq, but the weight of the mission was already pressing on them.

The silence of Nuuk, broken only by the occasional gust of wind, felt like the calm before the storm.

The team gathered in the bar of the Hotel Hans Egede, a cosy retreat from the biting cold outside. The bar itself was a blend of modern Scandinavian design and warm, earthy tones, with large windows offering a stunning view of the snow-covered harbour and the looming mountains beyond. The dim lighting created an intimate atmosphere, while the crackling fire in the corner added a sense of warmth. Locals and travellers alike sat at small tables, talking quietly or sipping on local beers and spirits. The soft hum of conversation blended with the faint sounds of jazz playing in the background.

Dave, Serj, Omar, and Anya sat at a corner table, their drinks untouched as they discussed the upcoming mission. The weight of the Arctic operation



hung over them, and the apprehension was palpable. The conditions they were about to face were unlike anything they had dealt with before.

"Nuuk's been an interesting stop, but we all know why we're really here," Dave said, his voice low but firm. "We're waiting on the logistics to get the BV206 and snowmobile to the peninsula, but operating in these conditions... it's going to be brutal."

Omar pulled his jacket tighter around himself, his face thoughtful. "It's not just the cold. It's the isolation, the terrain. One mistake out there, and it's game over."

Serj, always the calm voice of reason, chimed in. "Cecilia's planned for this. The next few days of Arctic training are going to be critical. Our Swedish expert, Erik Nyström, specialises in these conditions. He'll teach us how to survive and operate out there. But we need to be ready."

Dave, who had already felt the bite of the cold when they arrived in Nuuk, rubbed his hands together. "Yeah, I've never seen snow like this in the UK. And we've had to pack so much gear for this. Already grateful for this," he said, tugging at the Canada Goose Expedition Parka he had been wearing since they landed. "This thing's a lifesaver, but it's just the start."

Anya, scrolling through her notes, looked up. "Nyström's going to put us through rapid acclimatisation. The cold, the snow, the way your body reacts out there—it's all going to be different. The next few days are going to be tough, but if we're going to operate on the Nuussuaq Peninsula, we need to be prepared for the worst."

The team exchanged glances, knowing the challenges ahead. The Arctic wasn't like anything they had experienced before. The cold was unforgiving, the terrain dangerous, and the mission required them to be in top form physically and mentally.

"The amount of gear alone is overwhelming," Dave stressed, still amazed by the sheer volume of equipment they'd had to bring. "But I'd rather carry extra weight than freeze to death."

Serj adjusted the straps on his thermal suit, testing the fit. "It's survival gear. Out there, you can't afford to take shortcuts. And Erik will make sure we know how to use every bit of it."

The atmosphere was tense but focused. The team had a few days of intense training ahead before they could even think about heading to Nuussuaq. This stopover in Nuuk wasn't just about waiting for transport—it was about preparing themselves for the extreme conditions that awaited them.

As they finished up the conversation, the fire in the corner crackled softly, and the wind howled outside the windows, a reminder of the harsh environment they were about to enter.

The next morning, the team gathered in the hotel lobby, waiting for their Arctic survival expert, Erik Nyström. The tension was palpable—everyone knew the days ahead would be challenging. Erik arrived promptly, a tall, grizzled Swede with weathered features that told the story of a man who had spent a lifetime in extreme conditions. He greeted them with a firm handshake, his icy blue eyes scanning the group with a mixture of experience and expectation.

"Morning," Erik said in his deep, gravelly voice. "Before we head out, I need to check your gear. Out there, a small mistake can kill you, so I want to make sure you've got everything right."

The team gathered their equipment in the lobby as Erik inspected each item, making sure they were prepared for the brutal conditions. He checked Dave's Canada Goose Expedition Parka, the snow boots, thermal layers, gloves, and even their basic survival tools. He frowned at a few items, making small adjustments, but for the most part, the team had what they needed.

Once the gear check was complete, Erik looked at the group and shook his head slightly. "Three days... it's just ridiculous for these conditions. Normally, you'd need three to four weeks to really get prepared for what's coming. But we work with what we have. This isn't a game out there—you have to be on point. The Arctic is unforgiving."

Knowing full well that this crash course would have to suffice, the team stood resolute.

Erik motioned for them to follow him out to the minibus parked outside the hotel. "Let's go. We've got a lot to cover."

The minibus ride was short but took them through the outskirts of Nuuk, the rugged landscape growing harsher as they left the small town behind. They arrived at a remote training facility, nestled in a windswept area just beyond the city limits. Snow drifted across the ground in swirling patterns, and the biting wind was a reminder of what lay ahead.

The facility was basic—a few sheds for equipment and storage, but nothing luxurious. Erik led them to a clearing where several tents had been set up, the same kind they'd be using once they reached the Nuussuaq Peninsula.

"Say goodbye to your hotel comforts," Erik said with a smirk. "Tonight, you sleep in these. These tents are as good as it gets where we're going, so get used to them."

The tents were sturdy but compact, designed to withstand the Arctic's brutal weather. Erik laid out the schedule for the next three days, his tone serious and direct.

"Day 1," he began, "we'll cover cold weather survival basics—how to keep warm, manage your gear, and navigate through harsh conditions. Emergency signalling will be key if things go wrong. Day 2 is all about vehicle handling and maintenance. The Hägglund BV206 is a beast, but it needs to be handled with care in these conditions. We'll also cover snowmobile operations. Day 3 focuses on first aid for cold injuries—

hypothermia, frostbite, and how to treat each other out there if things go sideways. We'll finish with team dynamics and decision-making—how to work together in these extreme environments, because if you don't, you won't last long."

The team stood silently, absorbing the reality of what was ahead. Erik's straightforward approach left no room for doubt—this was about survival, not just completing a mission.

"Let's get started," Erik said, motioning toward the tents and equipment.

As the wind howled around them, the team knew the next three days would be a harsh but necessary awakening to the reality of Arctic survival. The mission ahead wasn't just about facing EarthWise—it was about surviving one of the most extreme environments on the planet.

Erik moved through the training with methodical precision, his voice carrying the weight of decades spent teaching others to respect the Arctic's lethal beauty. The basics of survival in extreme cold were deceptively simple - yet forgetting them for even a moment could mean death.

Through the facility's windows, the grey Greenlandic daylight cast long shadows across the training area. Dave listened, absorbed the protocols, went through the motions of proper gear checks and emergency procedures. But beneath his careful attention, something nagged at him - a subtle disconnect between Erik's warnings of the cold's devastating effects and his own experience of temperature. The same disconnect he felt when others spoke of exhaustion, or pain, or the limits of human strength.

He pushed the thoughts aside, focusing instead on Erik's instruction. Whatever made him different didn't change the mission's requirements. The team needed this knowledge, these carefully honed protocols that kept humans alive in one of Earth's most hostile environments. His own mysteries could wait.

The day wore on, Erik's lessons painting a vivid picture of survival in a realm where human vulnerability was stripped bare by ice and wind. Dave caught Anya watching him occasionally, her expression thoughtful, but she remained focused on her own preparation. Here in Nuuk, they were still in the realm of normal human adaptation. The true test of limits lies ahead, though none of them yet knew how far those limits would be pushed.

## 16 Intense

That night, after a gruelling day of training with Erik, the team sat huddled together in the cramped confines of the tent at the training facility outside Nuuk. The wind outside howled relentlessly, and though the tent was designed to withstand the harsh conditions, the cold still seeped in, making the small propane heater at the centre of their makeshift camp seem like a fragile defence against the freezing Arctic night.

The ground beneath their sleeping bags was hard and unforgiving, despite the insulated pads they had been provided. Every breath they took came out in clouds of steam, and the bitter cold gnawed at them, even inside the tent.

Dave rubbed his hands together, trying to shake off the chill. "This is rough," his voice barely audible above the wind battering the tent. "I've been in some cold places, but nothing like this. How the hell do people live in conditions like these?"

Sitting beside him, Serj's posture shifted subtly. "This isn't just about surviving—it's about adapting to it. I've done a lot of extreme training, but these conditions are something else entirely. Even with all the right gear, it's relentless."

Anya, who had spent most of the day practising emergency signalling and navigation techniques, glanced up from her maps. "Everything's harder. Even simple tasks—like adjusting your gloves or picking up equipment—become difficult. My hands felt like they were freezing after just a few minutes of being exposed."

Omar, leaning back against his pack, let out a low chuckle. "I've done desert survival before, but this is a whole other level. The cold crystallized their breath into frozen diamond. Erik wasn't kidding when he said three days wouldn't be enough training. Three weeks still wouldn't be enough."

Serj looked over at Erik, who was adjusting one of the tent flaps, making sure everything was secure. "What are we even going to encounter on the Nuussuaq Peninsula?" Serj asked, his voice thoughtful. "The cold's bad enough, but once we're out there, what else should we expect?"

Erik turned around, his weathered face illuminated by the dim light inside the tent. "The cold is just one part of it," he said in his deep Swedish accent. "The terrain is unpredictable—ice crevasses, blizzards that can roll in without warning, and long stretches of complete isolation. You'll encounter wildlife too—polar bears are rare but not unheard of, especially in more remote areas. The real challenge is keeping your head clear when the elements are constantly working against you."

Dave sighed, already feeling the weight of the mission ahead. "Sounds like we've got our work cut out for us."

Erik sat down beside them, his calm demeanour reassuring in the storm raging outside. "You've all got the skills to make it, but remember, it's not just about the cold. The isolation plays with your mind. The Arctic strips away everything else. It's just you and the elements."

The team fell silent for a moment, each of them reflecting on the challenges ahead. The Arctic wasn't just about surviving the environment—it was about enduring the mental and physical toll it would take on them, day after day.

"I guess this is just a preview," Anya said quietly. "The real test will be out on the peninsula."

Omar continued, "We're going to have to be sharper than ever out there. No room for mistakes."

As the night wore on, the wind outside seemed to grow even stronger, rattling the tent's fabric. The team settled into their sleeping bags, trying to get whatever rest they could before the next day's training. Each of them lay awake for a while, listening to the sounds of the Arctic night and

wondering what they would face when they finally reached the Nuussuaq Peninsula.



## 17 Nuussuaq

The helicopter ride to Mittarfik Qaarsuarsuit, a small airstrip on the Nuussuaq Peninsula, was both awe-inspiring and unsettling. The five-man team—Dave, Serj, Omar, Anya, and Erik—huddled together in the tight interior of the Arctic-modified chopper. Outside the windows, the landscape of Greenland sprawled out in endless white and grey, broken occasionally by sharp, jagged peaks and deep fjords cutting through the frozen expanse.

As they flew over the peninsula, the biting cold outside seemed to seep into the helicopter, even though the heaters worked to keep them warm. Anya stared out the window, her eyes scanning the unforgiving terrain, while Omar shifted in his seat, adjusting the layers of gear that still felt cumbersome despite the training. Dave, seated near the front, had his eyes on the distant horizon, the sense of isolation growing with each passing minute.

Erik's voice crackled through the comms as they neared their destination. "Mittarfik Qaarsuarsuit ahead. It's a basic airstrip, nothing fancy. We'll set down, grab the BV206, and snowmobiles, then get moving to the next point."

Below, the airstrip came into view—nothing more than a thin line of cleared snow and ice on an otherwise desolate landscape. The airstrip was isolated, surrounded by towering cliffs and the endless Arctic plains stretching toward the sea. The helicopter descended, buffeted by the powerful wind, and landed with a shudder on the cleared strip. Snow swirled around them, the propellers kicking up a flurry as the team disembarked.

The cold hit them immediately—an intense, biting wind that cut through even the best thermal gear. The sky was heavy with thick grey clouds, and the low, dim light cast long shadows over the snow. There was a constant

hum of the Arctic wind, a sound that felt like it came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

As they gathered their equipment, Erik pointed toward the waiting Hägglund BV206, parked off to the side of the airstrip. The vehicle, with its two articulated sections, stood sturdy against the elements, its rubber tracks half-buried in the snow. Attached to the back was a trailer carrying a snowmobile, ready for when the terrain became too rugged for the BV206 alone.

"The BV206's fully stocked," Erik said, gesturing toward the second compartment. "We've got tents, rations, fuel—all the gear you need for a week out here. But remember, the conditions are brutal. We'll have to ration fuel carefully."

The snowmobile, sitting atop the trailer, gleamed against the backdrop of white, ready to be deployed when they needed to scout areas too remote for the BV206. The back of the vehicle also contained mobile accommodation—tents and supplies packed tightly, designed to be used for survival in the most extreme conditions.

Erik checked the gear, nodding as he pulled the straps tighter on the supplies. "Everything looks good. We'll need to get moving soon though—this weather isn't going to get any better."

The team moved quickly, securing their gear and preparing to embark on the journey deeper into the peninsula. The wind howled as they climbed into the BV206, the cold seeping in even as they closed the doors behind them.

Inside the vehicle, the air was slightly warmer, but the sense of isolation remained. Outside, the Arctic wilderness stretched on in every direction, vast and unforgiving. Erik started the engine, the rumble of the vehicle's powerful tracks cutting through the wind.

"Let's move," Erik said, his voice steady. "We've got a long way to go."

As the BV206 began its slow trek across the snow-covered landscape, the team knew they were venturing into one of the most dangerous and desolate places on Earth. The Arctic wasn't just a backdrop—it was a force, and they would have to face it head-on if they were going to survive.

After landing at Mittarfik Qaarsuarsuit and settling in with their equipment, Omar and Serj decided to head to Qaarsut, the small settlement near the airstrip. It was a quiet, remote village, with only a handful of residents. The locals here were familiar with anyone who passed through, making it the perfect place to gather intelligence.

The two of them walked through the village, their boots crunching on the packed snow, as they made their way to the local gathering point—a small café where most of the village gathered for warmth and conversation. The air inside was thick with the scent of wood smoke, and the low murmur of Greenlandic conversations stopped as the pair entered. Omar, ever the diplomat, started chatting with the locals in broken Danish, making enquiries about any unusual activity in the area.

It didn't take long for the small community to point them toward something. Qaarsut didn't see many outsiders, so the presence of exploration groups stood out. One of the older men spoke up, describing how a small group of explorers had recently passed through, heading north-west. They'd been well-equipped but light—nothing heavy like the industrial equipment Omar and Serj were expecting to find from a larger operation. But the direction was telling.

Serj's mind was already working, piecing together the clues. "If they're going north-west with light equipment," he said in a low voice to Omar, "then the real operation must be bringing in heavier gear by sea. No one's moving drilling or seismic equipment through a village this small. The people heading north-west are probably meeting up with the main operation."

Omar, his expression thoughtful replied, "I'd say that makes sense. The Arctic coastline is rough, but it's possible to bring in heavier equipment by ship, especially with the sea ice receding. They're likely staging their operation out further north."

They thanked the locals for the information and returned to the BV206, relaying the details to Dave, Anya, and Erik.

"The best course," Serj said as they huddled inside the vehicle, "is to head north-east, toward Nussaq. If EarthWise is running a full-scale operation, we'll find them somewhere in that direction. They're likely meeting up with the team spotted by the locals. This might be our only chance to intercept them."

Erik grunted in agreement as he fired up the engine of the BV206. "North-east it is. We've got enough supplies for a week, but we'll have to be smart about how we use them. The terrain's going to get rougher the further we go."

With the decision made, the team turned the BV206 around and began their trek toward Nussaq, the rubber tracks of the vehicle crunching over the snow and ice as they left Qaarsut behind. The Arctic landscape seemed even more unforgiving as they ventured deeper into the wilderness.

The sense of isolation grew with every passing hour, but the team pressed on, knowing that somewhere out there, EarthWise was conducting a dangerous operation that could have global repercussions. Their mission was clear—find them, expose the operation, and stop whatever catastrophic plans EarthWise had in motion.

Four hours after leaving Qaarsut, the BV206 rumbled into Nussaq, its tracks grinding through the thick snow. The journey had been slow and unforgiving, the Arctic wilderness pushing back at every turn. Even with the heaters running inside the vehicle, the cold was ever-present, seeping through their layers and making every breath feel heavy. The surrounding

landscape was stark and desolate, with nothing but endless snow and rock stretching out to the horizon.

As the BV206 came to a stop, Serj and Omar prepared to scout the small settlement. The locals, wrapped in thick layers against the cold, were few but wary of outsiders, their eyes following Serj and Omar as they approached. Omar, ever the smooth talker, took the lead, engaging with them in a calm and reassuring manner.

"We're here for ecological reasons," Omar explained, keeping his voice friendly but firm. "Looking for a group that may not be as concerned about the environment as we are."

The locals, though initially cautious, warmed to Omar's approach. One older man, his face weathered by years of Arctic living, stepped forward. He gestured with his hand, pointing toward the north-west.

"Large group," he said in broken English, "on the coast, not far. They come with equipment, stay away from us, but we see them."

Serj, standing back and listening, took in the details. "How long have they been there?" he asked.

"Few days. Maybe a week. They don't come here, but we see the lights at night. They have machines—big ones."

That was all they needed to know. Serj raised a hand in gratitude, and he and Omar made their way back to the BV206, where Erik, Dave, and Anya were waiting.

"They've spotted a group to the north-west," Serj said as they climbed back inside. "They've got heavy equipment, been there for a few days, but they're keeping to themselves. It sounds like EarthWise."

Erik glanced out at the quickly darkening sky. "We're not going to make it there today. We're losing light, and the terrain's getting worse. I suggest we

set up camp here for the night. We can make a move in the morning and do a proper recon."

Dave agreed. "Makes sense. We've got enough fuel and rations to stay put for now. No point in rushing and risking something going wrong in the dark."

Anya, already reviewing the map on her tablet, added, "We can plot the exact route tonight and go in with a solid plan tomorrow."

With the decision made, the team set to work setting up camp. They pitched their tents in the lee of a snow-covered rise, using the BV206 to block some of the biting wind. The night would be cold, but they were prepared for it. The real challenge lay ahead, just north-west, where EarthWise's operation was hiding—and whatever secrets they were protecting.

As the team set up their large tents for the night, the cold Arctic wind howled outside, but inside the tent, there was a sense of camaraderie and relief. They had made it to Nussaq, and tomorrow would bring the next challenge. For now, they focused on settling in, unpacking their gear, and trying to create some sense of normalcy in the desolate, freezing landscape.

Dave, true to his English roots, immediately set about making tea. He had come prepared this time—tea bags, a flask of milk, and a small camping kettle. As he heated the water on the portable stove, the others teased him good-naturedly.

"Tea, again?" Anya grinned, shaking her head. "We're in the middle of the Arctic, and you still can't go without it."

Dave smiled back, shrugging. "It's a necessity, not a luxury."

Serj chuckled. "You're a walking British stereotype, Dave. What's next? Biscuits?"

Omar leaned back, warming his hands near the portable heater. "Hey, as long as he shares, I'm not complaining."

They couldn't help but laugh as Dave produced a packet of Digestive biscuits.

The group settled down for their evening meal. The food was basic but hearty, designed to keep them going in the extreme conditions. They ate dehydrated meals—things like beef stew, chicken curry, and pasta—rehydrated with boiling water and packed with the calories needed to survive in such a cold environment. The smell of rehydrated beef and vegetables filled the tent as they ate from their small metal tins, warming their bodies after a long day of travelling through the snow.

Just as they finished eating, Erik pulled a bottle from his pack. It was a tall, slender bottle, the label marked with the unmistakable word: Akvavit.

"This," Erik said, holding it up with a grin, "will take the chill from your bones." He unscrewed the cap and poured a small shot for each of them, the pale golden liquid catching the light of their portable lamps. "A traditional Swedish liquor. We call it Akvavit. Strong, but perfect for a night like this."

The group looked at the shots with curiosity. The cold outside seemed to seep into everything, even through their layers, and the idea of a drink to warm them was tempting.

Erik raised his glass and said with a grin, "Skål!"

The others followed suit, clinking their small glasses together and repeating, "Skål!"

As they drank, the Akvavit hit their taste buds with a sharp, herbaceous flavour. It was strong, with notes of caraway, dill, and a hint of spice. The alcohol burned its way down their throats, but it left a warmth in its wake—a sudden rush of heat that spread through their chests, fighting the cold.

Dave made a face as the liquor hit him, coughing slightly. "Bloody hell, Erik, this stuff is potent."

Anya laughed, her face flushed from the burn of the alcohol. "It's... interesting. Definitely warms you up."

Omar, who had taken the shot with a grin, raised his chin in approval. "I could get used to this. Better than our rations, that's for sure."

Serj, ever stoic, downed his shot in one gulp and simply smiled at Erik. "It does the job."

Erik smiled, pouring himself another small shot. "It's strong, yes. But out here, you need something to remind you that you're alive."

The warmth from the Akvavit spread through the group, mixing with the camaraderie of a successful day and the anticipation of the mission ahead. They settled in for the night, huddled in their sleeping bags, the cold Arctic air pushing against the thin walls of their tent. Outside, the wind continued to howl, but inside, they felt a little more prepared for whatever the next day might bring.



## 18 **Ursus Maritimus**

The early morning light cast a dim glow over the frozen landscape as Dave and Serj prepared for their reconnaissance mission. The wind had died down a little, leaving an eerie stillness that seemed to stretch on forever. The snowmobile, now unloaded from the trailer, gleamed in the weak sunlight, its treads biting into the snow as Dave double-checked the controls. Serj stood nearby, adjusting the FN SCAR-H slung across his back, the sleek rifle equipped with Leupold Mark 6 optics and a Surefire suppressor—perfect for silent, precise engagements should the need arise.

Erik stood beside them, his breath fogging in the cold air. "You know the drill. Stick to the route I marked for you and stay clear of the coast at first. If EarthWise has set up camp there, they'll have eyes on the shore. Stay back, observe, and don't get seen."

Dave mounted the snowmobile. The two-seater was designed for this terrain, its powerful engine growling as it idled, ready to cut through the snow. Serj climbed on behind him, adjusting his pack and gear for the ride.

"Let's do this," Dave said, glancing back at Serj before throttling the snowmobile forward.

The snowmobile roared to life, its treads kicking up powder as they pulled away from the camp. Dave guided the machine away from the coast, following the plan to stay inland and out of sight. The Arctic tundra stretched out before them, vast and featureless, a white desert of snow and ice broken only by the occasional ridge or outcrop of rock. The cold was relentless, cutting through their layers despite the heavy gear they wore, but the adrenaline of the mission kept them focused.

The ride was rough, the snowmobile bouncing over uneven patches of ice and snow, but Dave expertly handled the machine, his hands gripping the handlebars tightly as they sped across the frozen landscape. Serj, ever watchful, kept his eyes on the horizon, scanning for any signs of

movement. His rifle sat strapped securely to his back, ready to be deployed at a moment's notice.

The wind picked up as they drove further out, a sharp blast of icy air that made conversation impossible. The only sound was the steady hum of the snowmobile's engine and the occasional crunch of snow beneath the treads. The sun hung low in the sky, casting long shadows over the landscape, making the snow seem to glow with a pale, eerie light.

After nearly an hour of driving, they veered slightly toward the north-west, the direction Erik had indicated was likely where EarthWise's operation would be located. Dave slowed the snowmobile as they approached a rise, the terrain becoming more uneven and treacherous. They had put enough distance between themselves and the coast, and now it was time to get a better vantage point.

Dave brought the snowmobile to a halt at the base of a small ridge, the machine settling into the snow with a low growl before falling silent. He killed the engine, and the sudden quiet was almost deafening in its starkness. The wind howled softly around them, but otherwise, the world was still.

Serj dismounted first, unslinging his rifle and crouching low, scanning the horizon with his optics. "Let's take a look," he said quietly, his breath visible in the freezing air.

They both moved cautiously up the ridge, staying low to avoid detection. As they reached the top, they dropped to their stomachs, using the natural rise of the land as cover. Serj brought his SCAR-H to bear, the Leupold Mark 6 optics offering a clear, precise view of the area ahead.

"Got something," Serj whispered after a moment. "Looks like a camp... far off, near the coast. It's hard to tell from here, but it's not a small operation. Vehicles, possibly equipment... definitely EarthWise."

Dave squinted, following Serj's gaze. In the distance, just barely visible through the shifting snow, were the faint outlines of what looked like structures or equipment, nestled against the icy shore. Bringing up the Zeiss Terra binoculars Dave agrees, they had found their target.

Serj lowered his rifle and gestured toward the structures. "We'll need to get closer, but not today. Let's report back and come up with a plan."

Dave agreed, his eyes still locked on the distant camp. "Right. Let's get back to the others and gear up for what's next."

They slid back down the ridge, the tension rising as they returned to the snowmobile.

The moment the snorting noise reached their ears, both Serj and Dave turned swiftly, instincts heightened. In front of them stood an immense mound of white fur—an enormous polar bear, its coat dusted with snow, blending into the Arctic landscape. The bear snorted again, low and threatening, its beady black eyes locked on the pair as it grunted and began moving closer.

"Serj, move behind me slowly," Dave said, his voice calm but firm. "I'll deal with this. As soon as it kicks off, get on the snowmobile and go. I'll catch up."

Under normal circumstances, anyone making such a statement while unarmed in the face of a polar bear would be deemed insane. Serj was the one with the rifle slung across his back, but Dave was the one who could take the hits. Serj kept his eyes locked on the beast, a slight tilt of his head acknowledging Dave's words. His trust in Dave was implicit, forged through missions where he had witnessed Dave's unyielding resilience.

Dave squared himself, rising to his full height in an attempt to appear more threatening to the bear. The beast's attention shifted, its growls deepening as it locked onto Dave, perceiving him as a challenger. The moment hung in the freezing air for what seemed like an eternity, then the bear charged.

It moved like a freight train, barrelling toward Dave with terrifying speed. Serj bolted for the snowmobile as Dave braced himself. The impact hit Dave like nothing else he had ever felt, a wall of raw muscle and weight smashing into him. He was knocked backward, his boots slipping on the snow, as the bear's massive jaws clamped down on his shoulder.

The bear, frustrated that its teeth couldn't penetrate Dave's skin, grunted and growled, shaking him violently. It was an overwhelming force, and despite Dave's invulnerability, the bear's weight pressed him into the snow. It raised its head, tugging Dave upwards by his coat before flinging him like a rag doll. Dave's body soared through the air, landing with a thud as the bear pounced, slamming its enormous bulk on top of him.

The beast snarled, its powerful jaws clamping down again—this time shredding the thick layers of Dave's clothes, tearing his coat and shirt into tatters. The surrounding snow was littered with shredded fabric, and Dave could feel the cold bite of the wind against his now-exposed skin.

With each lunge, the bear's fury seemed to grow, but Dave remained calm, waiting for the right moment. As the bear's heavy paw swung toward him, time seemed to slow. It was a sensation Dave had come to recognise—a strange stillness in the chaos. The bear's enraged movements were now almost leisurely, and Dave's mind sharpened.

He clenched his fist and threw a punch into the bear's ribs. For an ordinary human, the strike would have been laughable, but Dave was anything but ordinary. His fist connected with the bear's side, and despite the thick layer of fat insulating it, the bear grunted in pain, shocked by the force of the blow.

The bear reared up on its hind legs, momentarily stunned. Seizing the opportunity, Dave struck again—this time delivering a powerful blow to the creature's abdomen. The force sent the bear stumbling backward, collapsing onto the snow, breathless and stunned. Dave pushed himself up, standing face-to-face with the polar bear as it regained its footing.

The bear, its pride wounded, roared furiously at Dave. The sound echoed across the frozen wasteland. From a distance, Serj watched through the scope of his rifle, barely able to believe what he was seeing. Dave—clothes completely shredded but otherwise unscathed—stood his ground. Then, in an almost surreal move, Dave slapped the bear across the face.

The impact was incredible. The bear's head snapped sideways as if struck by an unseen force, and it stumbled, dazed and confused. For a long moment, it stood there, swaying, looking utterly defeated. Then, knowing it had lost this fight, the bear huffed, turning away from Dave. It jogged off, its massive form disappearing into the snow.

Dave stood there, breathless but unscathed, watching the retreating figure of the bear. Serj, still watching from the snowmobile, lowered his rifle in stunned silence. It was only after the bear had disappeared completely that he exhaled, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Only you, Dave," Serj chuckled as he revved the snowmobile, preparing to pick him up.

The ride back to the camp was a quiet one, the hum of the snowmobile cutting through the cold, empty landscape. Serj focused on the trail ahead, while Dave sat on the back, shivering from the brutal Arctic chill. His clothes had been shredded during the encounter with the polar bear, leaving him in nothing but tatters. By the time they reached the camp, his bones ached with the deep, penetrating chill, but despite the situation, Dave felt... okay. Not warm, but not in danger, either.

As the snowmobile pulled up next to the BV206, Omar was already waiting, his face etched with confusion as he took in the sight of Dave, nearly naked and shaking with cold. The rest of the team stepped out from the tents, eyes widening as they saw the state he was in.

Anya, ever sharp, immediately asked, "What the hell happened?"

Before Dave could answer, Serj, smirking slightly, simply said, "Dave slapped a polar bear."

Anya's eyes widened. "You what?" she exclaimed, grabbing Dave by the arm and pulling him into the nearest tent to get him out of the cold.

Meanwhile, Erik stood by the BV206, looking utterly confused. "Sorry," he said to Serj, "but did you just say... 'Dave slapped a polar bear'?"

Serj chuckled, giving Erik a quick pat on the back before walking past him into the tent. "Yep, you heard that right."

Inside, Dave was still shivering, his skin a deep shade of red from the exposure to the freezing cold. "Damn it! I liked that coat," he complained as Anya hurriedly draped blankets over him and shoved a heat pack into his hands.

"You're lucky you didn't freeze to death!" Anya scolded as she wrapped him up. "An hour out there like this, you should be half-dead, Dave."

Dave, still shaking but oddly calm, leaned back as the warmth began to seep into him. "I know... I should be," he murmured. But something gnawed at the back of his mind—just as he had once realised his body couldn't burn, maybe this cold didn't affect him the way it should either. It wasn't that he didn't feel the chill—he did, deeply—but it didn't feel critical, not in the way it would have been for anyone else.

"I feel cold," Dave said, his brow furrowed, "but it's like... I don't know, not as dangerous as it should be."

Anya looked at him with concern. "You're shaking, but yeah, you should be in hypothermic shock. You don't even have frostbite."

Dave flexed his hands, rubbing them together. "Maybe... maybe I can handle more than just heat."

Anya stared at him for a long moment before letting out a sigh. "Whatever you are, Dave, you're insane. But we need to be more careful. Slapping polar bears isn't exactly low-profile."

Dave chuckled despite his condition. "I'll try to avoid it next time."

Omar, noticing the confusion still etched across Erik's face, decided it was time to put him out of his misery. After watching Dave sit nearly naked, calmly warming up despite the fact that he should be suffering from severe hypothermia, Erik clearly needed some explanation.

As Erik hovered near the edge of the tent, still processing the phrase "Dave slapped a polar bear," Omar approached, his voice low and measured. "Erik," he began, giving a reassuring pat on the Swede's arm, "I think it's time we had a quick talk."

Erik looked at Omar, still bewildered. "I've seen some crazy things in these conditions, but this? You're going to have to explain, because I swear... I didn't mishear."

Omar glanced toward Dave, who was now covered in blankets, sipping something warm. Serj and Anya were keeping close, but Omar could sense Erik needed to be brought into the loop. He stepped closer to the Swede and lowered his voice. "Dave is... well, a bit special. He's not just your average agent."

Erik raised an eyebrow, and Omar continued.

"It's not something we talk about openly, and it's certainly not public knowledge. It's classified, but here's the thing: Dave has... abilities. Not the kind you'd expect from a man who's all muscle and gruff attitude. We're still figuring out the full extent, but he's discovered he can handle situations that would kill anyone else—like fire, and clearly, now, freezing cold."

Erik's eyes widened, his mind clearly working through the implications of what Omar was saying. "You mean... that's why he was able to... survive?"

Omar continued, "Exactly. He may not be invulnerable to everything, but there are certain things—extreme heat, now it seems extreme cold—that he can tolerate in ways no normal person could. He doesn't know the full limits yet, and we don't either, but it makes him a massive asset to the agency... and to the team."

Erik exhaled slowly, the pieces starting to fall into place. "So, what you're saying is... this is top-secret?"

"More or less," Omar replied. "But if your knowing this helps you understand what happened back there, and it makes you part of the team... then yes, we're bringing you into it. The thing is, Erik, this doesn't leave the tent. We trust you, or we wouldn't have told you."

Erik, ever the professional, processed the information, nodding slowly. "Understood. I won't speak of it. I appreciate the trust."

Omar smiled, clapping Erik on the shoulder. "Welcome to the team."

The conversation left Erik with a better understanding of Dave, and though it was clear he was still grappling with the extraordinary nature of it all, he seemed more at ease. Omar had done his job—Erik was now fully part of the inner circle, someone they could trust to keep their secrets while they navigated the dangerous mission ahead.

Erik glanced back at Dave, who was grumbling about his ruined coat but otherwise seemed no worse for wear. "You know, I'm not sure I'll ever get used to that," Erik said with a wry smile.

Omar chuckled. "None of us will."



## 19 Ambush

The team waited until the Arctic sun dipped below the horizon, casting a deep twilight across the frozen landscape. In the far north, full darkness was rare, but the dim light of early evening would provide enough cover for them to move in unnoticed. The plan remained the same: split into pairs and get close enough to gather information, take photos, and, if possible, collect hard evidence linking the site to EarthWise.

As they prepped for the night mission, the cold grew even more biting, the chill in the air settling into their bones. Dave and Anya, set to take the snowmobile to their observation point, geared up in thick layers. Serj and Omar, on foot, double-checked their weapons and gear, ready to take the southern route to scout closer to the site.

"You two take it easy," Erik said, standing near the tents as the team assembled. "I'll be here on standby if you need an extraction."

Dave replied, "Let's hope we won't need it, but it's good to know you're ready.", his breath fogging in the cold air.

Dressed in another new coat and cold-weather gear, he started the snowmobile, the low growl of the engine muffled by the thick snow around them. He felt the weight of the night mission pressing on him but kept his focus sharp as Anya climbed on behind him.

Their mission was to return to the spot where Dave had encountered the polar bear, giving them a wide view of the northwestern side of the site without getting too close to draw attention.

"Let's hope we don't get any more surprise visitors," he said, thinking of the bear.

Anya chuckled nervously, holding on tightly as Dave revved the engine. "Let's hope the wildlife got the message to stay clear."

The Arctic at night was a different kind of quiet, the stillness almost surreal. The sound of the snowmobile cutting through the dark, open expanse was the only thing breaking the silence. The temperature had plummeted further, and the frost glittered beneath their treads. Anya held on tightly, her tablet and camera packed securely, ready to record as much as possible once they reached the observation point.

They travelled through the dim light for nearly an hour, the snowmobile bouncing over uneven patches of ice. Despite the biting cold and the ever-present darkness, Dave expertly navigated the terrain. Finally, the distant glow of the site came into view, lighting up the horizon.

When they reached the ridge, Dave killed the engine, and once again, they were met with the sudden silence of the Arctic night. From here, they had a perfect view of the site. Anya crouched beside him, her binoculars already in hand.

"Look at that," she whispered.

Below them, the site was ablaze with lights. Powerful floodlights illuminated the entire area, casting long, sharp shadows over the structures and vehicles. They could make out several large pieces of equipment—drilling rigs, cranes, and supply trucks—all neatly arranged in the centre of the operation. A few people still milled about in the early evening, though the activity seemed subdued compared to what it might be during the day.

From their vantage point, it looked like getting in close wouldn't be too difficult. The lighting illuminated the centre of the camp, but the outskirts were shrouded in darkness, providing cover if they needed to move in.

"We can get closer," Anya said, her voice low. "There are fewer people than I expected. Maybe we can slip in and grab something tangible—documents, maybe equipment markings. We need to find something to link this to EarthWise."

In agreement Dave said, "Let's make a plan and go."

The headlights of the snowmobile were kept off—only the faint light of the moon and the snow beneath them guided their way as they moved toward the ridge where they had scouted earlier.

Meanwhile, Serj and Omar had taken the southern route, moving on foot through the snow. The glow from the site guided their way as they hugged the rocky outcrops for cover. Serj, using the scope on his FN SCAR-H, kept a careful eye on the perimeter of the camp, watching for any patrols or movement near the southern edge.

"We're close," Serj whispered, his breath visible in the freezing air. "No sign of any heavy security. We can probably slip in."

Omar, scanning the camp with his binoculars, agreed. "They don't expect anyone out here. That might be our edge."

Back at the ridge, Dave and Anya carefully made their way closer to the site, using the cover of darkness and the natural terrain to stay out of sight. As they got closer, they could see the details more clearly. The bright floodlights illuminated everything near the centre, but just as Serj and Omar had noted, the outer edges were less protected, almost as if no one expected trouble this far out.

Once they were in position, Anya pulled out her camera and began taking photos of the site—equipment, personnel, and any identifying markers that might give them a lead. "There's nothing obvious yet," she said quietly. "But we're getting good shots. Let's see if we can get in a little closer."

The team maintained radio silence for the moment, knowing any chatter could risk being intercepted. Anya used her tablet to record the layout of the site, marking down key areas of interest while keeping her eyes peeled for any indication that this was more than just a regular exploration base.

With the team moving like shadows through the snow, the mission had officially begun. The challenge now was finding hard evidence that EarthWise was involved—and getting back out without being detected.

Serj, crouching low and creeping closer to one of the temporary shelters, noted how well-constructed the buildings were. They weren't meant for long-term habitation, but they were certainly a step above tents—sturdy, insulated, and designed to withstand the Arctic conditions for a while.

Just as he was about to move in closer, movement caught the edge of his vision. Without hesitation, Serj spun in its direction, but it was too late. A burst of automatic gunfire erupted from the shadows, and Serj barely had time to hit the deck. As he dropped, his SCAR-H came up instinctively, loosing a few suppressed rounds in the direction of the shooter.

Pain flared in his side, and he grunted, clutching his left abdomen. His fingers came away wet and sticky. "Damn it," he hissed, realising he'd taken a round. The burning sensation was intense, and he knew immediately that the wound was bad.

Omar, who had been covering Serj from not far away, reacted instantly, spotting the muzzle flash from the attacker's position. He opened fire, sending precise shots toward the shooter, forcing them to retreat into cover. "I've got you, Serj!" Omar called out, his voice tense but steady.

Serj gritted his teeth, rolling behind some low cover, trying to keep the pressure on his wound while Omar laid down suppressive fire. "Damn it, Omar, they've got a security team. We missed them."

The exchange of gunfire intensified. Omar, keeping his cool under fire, moved tactically from cover to cover, keeping the security team guessing as they tried to pin Serj down. His movements were swift and calculated, giving the impression that there were more attackers than just him, while keeping Serj covered.

Serj, still bleeding and struggling to maintain focus, reached for his radio, breaking the radio silence they'd all agreed on. "I've been hit," he growled, his voice pained but steady. "Left side, bleeding bad. Watch yourselves, they've got a full security detail."

Back near the ridge, Dave and Anya had already heard the distant sound of gunfire. The sharp bursts echoed across the Arctic night, and they knew immediately that Serj and Omar were in trouble.

"That's not wildlife," Dave stated, starting the snowmobile.

"Nope," Anya replied, her tone clipped. She had her Udav at the ready, a sleek and deadly weapon with its suppressed barrel and powerful stopping power. "Let's move."

They tore off toward the site, knowing there was no time to waste. The security team hadn't counted on the two-pronged attack, and as Dave and Anya flanked them from the north, they were caught completely off guard.

Anya, quick and precise, slid off the snowmobile as they neared the firefight. Her Udav came up, and with two swift, suppressed shots, she took down one of the security detail, a figure crumpling in the snow before they even knew what hit them. A second figure turned, only to meet a similar fate as Anya's next shot took them out.

Dave moved in quickly, covering her as they advanced. He could see the chaos in the enemy ranks—the security team, focused on Omar and Serj, hadn't expected this assault from behind.

The remaining security guards scrambled for cover, but with Dave and Anya pressing from one side and Omar pushing from the other, they were trapped in a deadly pincer.

Dave's eyes locked onto Serj's position as he saw him bleeding out from the gunfire. There was no time to hesitate. "Anya!" he barked over the sound of the gunfight, his voice commanding through the icy air. "Go see to Serj! I'll handle these guys."

Without waiting for her response, Dave moved forward with unrelenting purpose. The gunfire was loud, flashes of light erupting from the weapons of the security detail as they desperately tried to hold their ground. But

Dave was undeterred. He moved like a force of nature, the bullets hitting his body and ricocheting off his gear, barely leaving a mark.

Bullets pinged off Dave's chest like hail on metal as he advanced, each step bringing him closer to the panicking security team.

With incredible strength and precision, he gripped the side of one of the temporary accommodation buildings that had been set up for the workers. The structure was solid, meant to withstand the Arctic elements, but to Dave, it felt like little more than a toy. With a grunt, he heaved the entire building across the snow, dragging it like a makeshift shield in front of Serj's exposed position.

"If you can't get to cover," Dave grunted to himself, muscles straining as the structure slid across the snow, "then get the cover to you."

The temporary shelter creaked under the force but held together as it provided Serj and Omar the protection they needed. The security team, stunned by the sight of Dave pushing an entire building, hesitated for a moment, their guns faltering. They weren't equipped to deal with someone like Dave.

Anya, meanwhile, darted across the snow, ducking behind cover and weaving through the chaos. She made it to Serj, who was clutching his side, his face pale from blood loss. "You're not dying on me today," Anya said, her tone firm as she knelt beside him and began applying pressure to the wound.

Serj gritted his teeth. "I'm fine," he growled, though the pain in his voice betrayed him.

Anya ignored the bravado and quickly worked to stabilise him. She wrapped a bandage around his torso, tightening it to slow the bleeding. "This is just temporary. You need to move, now."

With Anya's help, Serj struggled to his feet, his left side burning with pain, but he was mobile. They needed to get out, fast. Whatever this security

detail was guarding, it was bigger than they'd anticipated. These men weren't just there to keep wildlife at bay; this was something far more dangerous.

As Dave continued to close in on the security team, their firepower faltered, unsure how to deal with him. But Dave wasn't interested in prolonging the fight. They weren't here for a firefight—they were here for evidence. And the fact that this level of security existed told them everything: something far bigger than an ordinary operation was happening on this site.

With Serj on his feet, Anya supported him as they moved back toward the snowmobile, slipping away under the cover of night. Omar continued to provide suppressive fire, covering their retreat.

Dave, glancing back to ensure Serj and Anya were clear, took one final look at the scattering security team. He clenched his fists, knowing they weren't out of the woods yet, but they had what they needed. Evidence of high-level security and an aggressive response meant that EarthWise—or whoever was running this operation—was hiding something dangerous.

Back at their makeshift camp, the tension was thick as the team rallied around Serj. Inside the largest of the tents, Erik worked quickly, his breath visible in the frigid air. Serj lay on his back, pale but conscious, his left side exposed where the bullet had torn through his cold-weather gear. Blood stained the bandages Anya had hastily applied, but for now, the bleeding had slowed.

Erik knelt beside him, checking the wound closely. "This isn't good," Erik stated, his expression grim. "The bullet's lodged, but it didn't hit the artery. You're lucky, Serj."

Serj gritted his teeth, his face a mask of pain. "Yeah, real lucky," he groaned through clenched teeth, trying to downplay the severity of his injury.

Erik gave him a reassuring pat on the arm. "Stay still. I'll get this out, but it's going to hurt like hell."

With swift but careful movements, Erik pulled out his med kit, preparing the tools he needed for the impromptu surgery. The Arctic cold crept in even through the layers of insulation, making the conditions far from ideal, but Erik's hands were steady. He took a deep breath, focused, and began extracting the bullet.

Serj sucked in a sharp breath as the pain shot through him, but he remained still, his eyes locked on the ceiling of the tent. Anya sat by his side, helping to keep him calm as Erik worked.

Outside the tent, Dave and Omar stood vigilant, their eyes scanning the desolate landscape. The Arctic night was eerily quiet now, the wind howling faintly through the snow-covered hills. The stars overhead were bright and clear, but there was no sign of pursuit from the site. Still, they couldn't afford to take any chances.

"Think they'll follow us?" Omar asked quietly, his breath steaming in the cold as he scanned the darkness.

Dave shook his head. "I don't think so. We hit them hard, and they weren't expecting us to hit from two sides. But we need to be ready just in case." His eyes narrowed as he watched the horizon. "This wasn't just some routine security team defending against polar bears. They were prepared, organised. Someone's covering something big, and they're not going to let it go lightly."

Omar's shoulders tensed in acknowledgment, his rifle at the ready. "Serj's lucky to be alive. That detail wasn't messing around."

Inside the tent, Erik carefully extracted the bullet from Serj's side. Blood trickled from the wound, but Erik worked quickly, cleaning and dressing it before wrapping Serj's abdomen tightly to stop any further bleeding.



"It's out," Erik said, dropping the bloodied round into a tray with a metallic clink. "You're stable for now, but you need proper medical attention soon. I've done what I can in these conditions, but moving you is going to be rough."

Serj, his breathing laboured but steady, managed a faint smile. "I'll live. Just need some time."

Erik patted his arm again, finishing up the dressing. "Rest for now. You've earned it."

Anya breathed a sigh of relief as Erik packed up his tools, and she moved to sit beside Serj, keeping an eye on him as he drifted in and out of consciousness. Outside, Dave and Omar remained alert, knowing full well that they couldn't relax yet.

"Let's hope we got what we needed," Dave said quietly, his eyes still fixed on the horizon. "Because I have a feeling things are about to get a lot worse."

The next morning, under the pale grey light of the Arctic, Dave and Omar returned to their vantage point near the site. After the previous night's firefight and Serj's injury, tensions were high. They crept up the same ridge where Dave had scouted before, careful to stay low and out of sight. From their position, they had a clear view of the camp below.

What they saw was nothing short of chaos.

The entire site buzzed with activity, like a disturbed ant nest. People hurried between temporary shelters, gathering equipment and packing it up with military precision. Security personnel were on high alert, their movements sharp and deliberate, suggesting that they knew an intrusion had occurred. Dave's brow furrowed. "They're clearing out," he whispered to Omar, his voice low.

Omar scanned the camp through his binoculars, noting the frantic pace of the operation. "Looks like they're bugging out in a hurry. But why? They haven't even tried to retaliate."

Just as they were beginning to wonder, a distant rumble reached their ears. A low, rhythmic thudding. Dave's ears perked up, recognising the unmistakable sound. "Helicopter."

The sound grew louder, the rhythmic thud-thud-thud of rotors chopping through the cold air. Moments later, a massive helicopter appeared over the horizon, its silhouette dark against the grey sky. The rotors kicked up snow as it approached the camp, the downdraught whipping the landscape below into a swirling white storm. The helicopter circled the site, surveying the area from above before descending with a roar.

The aircraft landed heavily, its wheels crunching into the snow, sending a wave of powdered ice into the air. The flurry of activity below intensified as people scrambled to load hand-held equipment, crates, and gear onto the helicopter. The security team moved in perfect sync, efficiently clearing the camp while two body bags were carried aboard—their fallen comrades.

Omar watched through his scope, his face tense. "They're getting out of here. Fast."

Dave narrowed his eyes, observing the organised chaos below. "They're covering their tracks."

The helicopter's rotors increased in speed, the deep hum growing into a deafening roar as it prepared to take off. The craft slowly lifted off the ground, rising above the camp as the last few personnel climbed aboard. But then, as it hovered in the air, something changed. The helicopter didn't depart immediately—it lingered, slowly turning in the air to face the site.

"That's not good," Omar's words faint in the roar of the blades, lowered his binoculars.

Suddenly, the deafening roar of rockets erupted from the helicopter's rocket pods. A dozen missiles fired in rapid succession, streaking toward the ground with a high-pitched scream. The first impact sent a thunderous explosion across the site. The sound was immense, a deep rumble that shook the very ground beneath Dave and Omar. Each rocket hit with devastating precision, obliterating the shelters, equipment, and any trace of the operation. The once bustling camp was engulfed in flames and debris as the rockets tore into the earth, leaving massive craters in their wake.

The sound echoed off the distant mountains, each explosion louder than the last. The ground quaked under the relentless assault, and the air was filled with the acrid stench of burning fuel and destruction.

Then came the cannon fire.

The helicopter's nose dipped slightly, and its side-mounted auto-cannons opened up with a rapid-fire barrage. The cannon shells rained down like hellfire, ripping through what little remained of the site. Each shell thudded into the ground with a sharp crack, sending debris flying in all directions. The staccato rhythm of the cannon fire was relentless, tearing through tents, equipment, and vehicles with brutal efficiency.

The noise was deafening, and even from their distance, Dave and Omar could feel the raw power of the destruction. The ground was torn apart as if the very earth itself was being shredded. The helicopter strafed the area with one final pass, ensuring that nothing was left standing. Flames and smoke rose into the air, turning the once-organised camp into a smoking wasteland of charred debris and scorched snow.

The two men watched in stunned silence as the helicopter completed its mission. The helicopter slowly ascended again, making one final sweeping turn over the obliterated site before disappearing into the distance, leaving nothing but destruction in its wake.

Omar finally exhaled, his voice a low murmur. "They weren't just covering their tracks. They wanted every trace of that place erased."

Still staring at the smouldering remains, Dave said, "They're not messing around. Whatever they were doing here, they wanted it buried."

The echoes of the rockets and cannon fire still rang in their ears, the devastation a stark reminder that this mission had just escalated to a whole new level.

Later at camp, the mood was heavy. The team huddled inside the tent, the cold pressing in from all sides as they processed the events of the last few hours. Omar, leaning against the tent pole, relayed what he and Dave had seen to the rest of the group.

"It's gone. The entire site obliterated," Omar said grimly, shaking his head. "No evidence, no trace. If there was anything left worth finding, it's nothing but ash now."

Serj, still lying on his side, winced as he shifted slightly, his bandages tight against his wound. "All that effort, and we're leaving empty-handed."

Anya, her fingers fidgeting with her tablet, sighed in frustration. "They were one step ahead the entire time. Even the photos are worthless. This operation was airtight from the start."

Realising it was time to update Cecilia, Anya pulled out her mobile, its screen glowing softly in the dim light of the tent. The agency's tech was fully satellite capable, and despite their remote location, she had a strong signal. She tapped Cecilia's contact and set the phone on speaker, the others gathering around in silence.

Cecilia's voice crackled through the speaker a moment later. "Anya, go ahead."

Anya took a deep breath, glancing at the others before delivering the bad news. "Cecilia, the mission's a bust. We got close, but... no dice. We've confirmed that the site was active, but they cleared out before we could get anything. Then they torched it. The entire camp is gone—obliterated.

We've got nothing to link it to EarthWise. Serj's hurt, and we need to get out of here."

There was a brief pause on the other end before Cecilia spoke again, her tone measured but clearly disappointed. "Understood. The fact that they wiped the site clean says a lot, even if you didn't get the evidence we hoped for. We'll need to regroup and reassess. Serj's health is the priority now. I'll organise air transport immediately. A chopper will be there to extract you within a few hours. We'll get Serj the medical attention he needs and debrief once you're back."

"Thank you, Cecilia," Anya replied, the relief in her voice palpable. "We'll be ready."

The call ended, leaving the team in a reflective silence for a moment. Dave was the first to speak, looking over at Serj. "The sooner we get you back to civilisation, the sooner you'll be patched up. Hang in there."

Serj managed a weak smile, though the pain was clearly etched on his face. "I'll make it. Just get me out of this icebox."

Omar stood up, grabbing his pack. "We'll need to get ready to move. Leave the snowmobile and BV206 for the clean-up crew Cecilia will send in. Our job is done here."

The next few hours passed slowly, the tension of waiting hanging over the camp. The cold wind howled outside, but inside the tent, the team packed up their essential gear, knowing they'd be leaving behind the larger equipment. Serj remained still, conserving his strength, while Erik stayed close, monitoring his condition.

Finally, the distant thrum of helicopter blades could be heard. The rescue chopper appeared over the horizon, the bright red aircraft cutting through the grey Arctic sky. It circled the camp once before landing, the downdraught kicking up snow and ice as it touched down.

With the precision they'd come to expect, the team quickly loaded up, securing Serj on a stretcher inside the helicopter. Erik oversaw the process, making sure Serj was stable, while the others climbed aboard.

As the helicopter lifted off, leaving the camp and the snowmobile and BV206 behind, Dave looked out the window at the barren expanse of white below. Their mission had ended in a bitter draw—no evidence, but a clear sign that something big was at play. Whatever EarthWise was up to, they were prepared to go to extreme lengths to cover it up.

Now, they were heading back to Nuuk. Back to civilisation, to regroup, and to figure out their next move. The mission wasn't over.

## 20      **Catch the Pigeon**

Back in the warmth of the hotel bar in Nuuk, the team sat huddled around a table, grateful to finally be out of the brutal cold. The crackle of the fireplace and the soft hum of conversations around them were a welcome reprieve from the biting winds and frozen wasteland they'd just left behind. Serj was at the medical centre, getting patched up and reportedly doing well, but the team's mood remained subdued. The mission had ended without any solid leads, and the frustration weighed heavily on everyone.

Even inside the hotel bar, Dave could feel the Arctic chill seeping through the windows, a constant reminder of the frozen wasteland outside. Dave stared at his glass of Wild Turkey, swirling the amber liquid lazily. His usual bourbon tasted fine, but the ice cubes clinking in his drink brought back memories of the week they'd spent in the unforgiving cold. He frowned, pushing the drink aside slightly. "Two coats," he complained. "One eaten by a damn polar bear, and the other filled with bullet holes. Hell of a week." His tone was flat, his mood clearly sullen.

He glanced at the ice cubes in the glass and shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever look at ice the same way again."

Omar sat quietly, taking a slow sip of his neat Scotch - his drink of choice for nights like this. As the conversation lulled, he stared into his glass, brow furrowed.

"Something's been bugging me about that helicopter..."

"What?" Dave asked.

"How the hell did it get here? A bird that size doesn't just appear in the Arctic without leaving some kind of trail."

Anya, who had been quietly tapping away at her tablet, perked up at the question. Her eyes widened slightly as the realisation hit. "Of course!" she said, sitting up straighter. "That helicopter wasn't just some random craft. It

was a massive bird, probably an MI-8 or something similar. There may not be a flight plan, but somewhere, someone should have a record of a helicopter that large taking off or landing. Arctic operations like that aren't easy to hide."

Dave looked up, his sullen mood shifting slightly as he mulled over the idea. "You think we can trace it?"

Anya was already thinking through the possibilities. "It's possible. Helicopters that size require significant support. Refuelling, permits, crew. They have to touch down somewhere, and there should be satellite or air traffic control data. If we can dig into flight records, helicopter charters, or even fuel station logs, we might find something."

Omar leaned back, his curiosity piqued. "I mean, even in the Arctic, someone's gotta know when a beast like that takes off."

Anya was already typing away on her tablet, pulling up databases and looking for potential leads. "Let me see what I can find," she said, her voice more upbeat. "We've been chasing ghosts all week, but maybe this is something we can actually follow."

The team's frustration slowly began to shift, the seed of an idea giving them a new direction. They hadn't come out of the Arctic empty-handed after all—this could be the lead they needed to get back on EarthWise's trail.

Anya, growing frustrated with the dead ends, leaned forward, her brow furrowed in thought. "Come on, guys, think! Did you see any markings on the helicopter?" She glanced between Omar and Dave, hoping for any shred of detail that could give them a lead.

Omar and Dave exchanged glances, but both drew a blank. "No markings," Dave said, shaking his head. "Nothing at all."



"Okay," Anya said, trying a different angle, "what about the type of helicopter? Can either of you remember anything specific?"

Omar leaned back, rubbing his temples as he thought. "It was a big one," he said, his voice flat. "That's all I got."

Dave shrugged, equally stumped. "One thing's for sure, though," he added. "It's not the kind of helicopter I've seen in the movies. This thing was built for business."

Anya's frustration boiled over as she slapped her hands against the table. "Typical of this mission—getting nothing, and going nowhere."

Then, a light bulb went off in her mind. "Wait," she said, her eyes lighting up. "Would you recognise it if you saw a picture?"

Dave paused, considering the question. "Maybe," he admitted, his tone uncertain.

Omar shrugged. "Sure, why not? Worth a shot."

Anya, reinvigorated, set about searching for images of large helicopters on her tablet. She specifically targeted military aircraft, given the heavy weaponry they had seen on the helicopter—rockets, cannons, and an overall combat-ready configuration. Scrolling through an extensive array of helicopter images, she lined them up for what felt like a digital identity parade.

"Let's see if anything rings a bell," Anya said, showing them the screen.

One by one, Dave and Omar sifted through dozens of helicopter images before stopping at a Russian MI-8. "Close," Dave said, "but not quite right." The search continued until they found something that matched their memory more precisely.

"Yeah, it's similar, but not quite," Omar said.

Anya continued scrolling, then stopped on another model. "How about this?"

Omar and Dave both leaned in, examining the next helicopter—a Mil Mi-17 variant, a heavily armed model used for rugged operations in remote areas. Omar pointed at the image, his expression brightening. "That's the one. Or at least damn close."

Dave lifted his chin in agreement. "Yeah, that looks right. The shape, the size... definitely could've been it."

Anya exhaled, relieved. "Finally, something to go on," she said, marking the model down. "At least we've narrowed it down. Now, let's see where helicopters like this might be flying from."

With the possible identification in hand, Anya set about tracking the usage and deployments of Mil Mi-17s in the Arctic region, knowing they were finally making some progress.

"Wait," Dave said, leaning in closer to the tablet. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinised the helicopter images Anya had pulled up. "The front doesn't look right. I'm sure it had a bit of a boat-shaped front end."

Omar, furrowing his brow in thought, his posture shifted in agreement. "Yeah, I think you're right. Like a seam running underneath the front, almost like a keel or something."

Dave snapped his fingers. "Exactly. That's it."

Anya sighed in frustration, shaking her head. "Damn it, so it's not an Mi-17."

She flicked through more images, now looking for something with the distinctive front end they were describing. After a few more swipes, she paused on another image—a bulky, rugged helicopter with a boat-like structure beneath the cockpit. "How about this?" she asked, showing them the screen.

The Aérospatiale Super Frelon stared back at them. It had the distinctive shape that both Dave and Omar had described—sleek yet powerful, with a rounded nose and a seam running along the underside.

Omar slowly rubbing his chin and looking positive, "Yeah... that's better. That could be it."

Dave leaned back, crossing his arms. "It's not perfect, but it's a lot closer than anything else we've seen."

Anya, feeling some sense of relief that they were finally narrowing it down, typed furiously on her tablet. "Alright, Aérospatiale Super Frelon. Let's see where these things are flying from." She began searching flight records, helicopter charters, and any data that might point to Super Frelons operating in the Arctic region.

"This model isn't as common," Anya said, scanning through data. "But if it's in the area, it has to be linked to some significant operation. A helicopter like this isn't used for casual flights."

The team waited in silence, their spirits cautiously lifting. They were finally onto something tangible, and now it was just a matter of connecting the dots. The Super Frelon might just be the key to tracing EarthWise's hidden operations.

Anya spent hours that evening trawling through electronic databases, scouring every possible source for flight records, helicopter charters, and anything that could lead them to the Super Frelon they had spotted. The Arctic was a vast, remote region, but surely a helicopter that large, with such a distinct profile, would have left some kind of trace. Yet, the more she searched, the more frustrating the results became.

"Nothing," Anya talking in low tones to herself, slumped in her chair. "How could a bird this big not be seen?"

She rubbed her temples, the glow of the tablet screen casting a faint light in the dim hotel room. For a helicopter of that size and capability to operate in the Arctic without showing up in any official records meant it had to be working off the grid—no flight plans, no logged charters. EarthWise, or whoever was behind it, clearly knew how to keep things under the radar.

With a frustrated sigh, Anya realised she would need a new approach. She closed the laptop and glanced around the room, where the team had finally settled into a more relaxed mood, but the tension from the failed mission still lingered.

"I'll dig into this in the morning," she thought. "Maybe Erik will have some local contacts who can help."

Erik had been around the region for years. He knew the guides, the logistics operators, and the equipment suppliers who catered to the Arctic's unique challenges. These people would know if someone had brought in a high-capacity helicopter, even if it wasn't officially logged. Someone on the ground had to have noticed a Super Frelon passing through.

Anya sighed, deciding to let it go for the night. "Old school it is," she thought. In the morning, she'd start calling around. If anyone could track down the movements of a bird that big, it would be the locals.

Anya sat in her hotel room, exhausted after an entire morning of phone calls. Erik's contacts had been more than willing to help—anything for an old friend of his—but none of them had seen any sign of the helicopter she was after. No equipment suppliers had been asked to order spare parts for a Super Frelon, and none of the logistical contacts had any knowledge of moving something that big.

It felt like another dead end until she finally managed to get hold of one of Erik's oldest friends, an ex-helicopter pilot who seemed more interested in reliving his glory days than answering her questions. The conversation dragged on, filled with rambling tangents about how today's pilots had lost the "feel" for flying, how he had flown missions with finesse that no one could match any more.

Anya was about to give up, half-listening to his stories when, from somewhere deep in his endless monologue, something clicked. He began

talking about the Aérospatiale Super Frelon, which led to him mentioning the Chinese Z-18—a helicopter model that, according to him, was heavily based on the Frelon's design. He hadn't seen one himself, but he had heard stories about how the Chinese had "borrowed" designs from just about every major manufacturer and made them their own.

Anya sat up straight, the realisation hitting her hard. "A Chinese Changhe Z-18... Could that be what Dave and Omar saw?" she considered. It wasn't a Super Frelon, but if the design was similar enough, it would explain the confusion. Maybe they hadn't seen a Frelon at all.

Excited by this new lead, Anya quickly jotted down the information and began digging into any records or sightings of Changhe Z-18 helicopters in the Arctic region. It might not be a Frelon, but it could still be the key to unravelling EarthWise's hidden operations.

The hotel restaurant in Nuuk had a rustic yet elegant atmosphere, with wooden beams crossing the ceiling and large windows offering a view of the icy landscape outside. The warm glow of soft lighting contrasted with the chill of the Arctic outside, making it feel like a cosy refuge from the frozen world they'd spent the last week navigating. A fire crackled in the corner, its scent mixing with the aromas from the kitchen—freshly baked bread, grilled meats, and the tang of seafood that had likely been caught earlier that morning.

The place was busy but not overcrowded, with a murmur of conversations in various languages floating around them, making the air feel lively yet intimate. Plates clinked, and the smell of roasting lamb and seared fish filled the space. The team had ordered hearty meals—Dave had opted for a rich lamb stew, fragrant with rosemary and thyme, accompanied by boiled potatoes and freshly baked rye bread. Omar, ever the adventurer, was trying Greenlandic halibut, the crispy skin perfectly seared, served with roasted root vegetables and a light citrus sauce. Anya, still focused on her research, was picking at a plate of smoked Arctic char with a fresh salad,

though she was too engrossed in her thoughts to fully enjoy the delicate flavours.

Anya glanced up from her tablet, where she had been showing them images of various helicopters, and leaned in slightly. "So, I spoke to one of Erik's old pilot friends this morning," she said, her voice low but intense. "He rambled on forever, but he mentioned something interesting. We may not be looking for a Super Frelon at all. He thinks it could be a Chinese Z-18—apparently, it's based on the Frelon design."

She tapped her screen, bringing up side-by-side images of the Super Frelon and the Z-18. "Look at these. The designs are similar, almost identical in some ways."

Dave frowned, leaning over to study the pictures. "You'd have to be a real helicopter nerd to tell those two apart," he said, shaking his head. "They both look like big, boxy flying machines to me."

Omar was more thoughtful, chewing slowly on a piece of halibut as he studied the images. "It seems a little less boxy than the Super Frelon, doesn't it?" He pointed at the Z-18 image. "I remember the front being more streamlined. It could be this one."

Anya sighed, leaning back in her chair. "It could be. But the problem is, I haven't found any record of a Z-18—or even a Super Frelon—operating in the Arctic. No flight records, no charters, nothing. It's like it doesn't exist."

The three of them fell silent for a moment, the weight of their mission hanging over them. The food, despite its warmth and richness, had lost some of its appeal in the face of the unknown. The helicopter they had seen was elusive—an unregistered ghost in the Arctic, carrying out operations that no one seemed to have any record of.

"What does this mean?" Dave asked, finally breaking the silence. "If there's no record of either, what are we up against?"

Anya took a deep breath, thinking it over. "It means we're dealing with something off the books. Someone, probably EarthWise, is going to great lengths to hide their activities up here. But without solid proof... we're still in the dark."

His eyes narrowing as he stared out the window, Omar looked deep in thought. "We need to dig deeper. This helicopter is key, but if there's no record of it... we'll have to find out where it's been and why no one's talking."

The atmosphere in the restaurant felt heavy now, the clinking of plates and the murmur of conversations barely registering as the weight of their next steps pressed down on them. They had a lead, but not much else. And in the Arctic, every lead was precious.

After lunch, the team gathered in one of the hotel's private meeting rooms for a call with Cecilia. The atmosphere was still heavy with frustration as they laid out their progress—or lack of it. The dead ends seemed endless. They went over the helicopter models, the lack of flight records, and the elusive nature of the operation.

Cecilia listened carefully as they spoke, her voice finally cutting in with a thought-provoking question. "What if it's not in the Arctic?"

Anya, furrowing her brow in confusion, glanced at the others before asking, "What do you mean?"

Cecilia continued, her tone thoughtful. "What if the helicopter isn't based in the Arctic? From what you've described, it was able to get to the site far too quickly for it to have come from a distant airbase, and we've already ruled out the airbases because they'd have records. So... what if it's not at an airbase at all?"

Suddenly, Anya's eyes widened as the realisation hit her, and she let out a frustrated but enlightened cry. "Arrrgh! Yes! What if it's operating from a support vessel? A ship with a helipad! It could be stationed at sea, with its

own supply of fuel and equipment, which would explain why there's no formal trail or airbase records."

Cecilia's voice cut through, her tone sharp. "Exactly. Ships can carry their own fuel for helicopters, and if the ship isn't making regular stops at a port, it wouldn't need to log anything formally. It can operate completely off the grid."

Leaning back in his chair, Dave slowly rubbed his chin as the pieces started to fall into place. "That would explain why we couldn't find any records. They've got their own floating base of operations."

Omar's eyes lit up. "And with a vessel in international waters, they can operate without oversight, making it almost impossible to track unless you're specifically looking for them."

Anya quickly pulled up her tablet, her fingers flying across the screen as she began searching for any signs of large support vessels operating in the region. "If they're using a ship, we need to find it. Vessels that large don't go unnoticed, and there should be some data on shipping lanes or satellite images."

Cecilia's voice was firm as she gave them their next directive. "Focus on the sea. If EarthWise is using a ship to base that helicopter, it's a massive advantage for them. But it also gives us something concrete to trace. Find the ship, and we'll find their operations."

Anya, now re-energised by the revelation, was resolute. "We'll track it down."

Dave, leaning back and folding his arms, let out a sigh. "I know nothing about helicopters, but even less about ships," he said, his eyes narrowing slightly as he thought. "But given the size of that helicopter, wouldn't it have to be a bloody big ship?"

Anya, her fingers still moving quickly across her tablet as she sifted through maritime data. "You're right. The Z-18 is a heavy-lift helicopter. It



wouldn't just fit on any old vessel—it would need a large support ship, something with a reinforced helipad, fuel capacity, and storage for maintenance. We're talking a big ship—maybe an exploration or research vessel, or even an oil support ship."

Omar chimed in, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "It wouldn't just be the helicopter. A ship that size would have to carry everything—crew, supplies, refuelling capabilities, and potentially cargo for the operation itself. It's not just a mobile platform, it's an entire base."

Dave shrugged. "I reckon even I'd notice a ship that size."

Anya chuckled, though her focus remained on her search. "Exactly. If we can find ships of that size operating in the region, we'll be able to narrow it down. Even if they've avoided air records, ships still need to follow certain routes, at least when they're near ports or major shipping lanes. I'll focus on vessels that could house something like a Z-18."

Cecilia's voice crackled over the call, cutting in with a sense of urgency. "Get on it, Anya. If EarthWise is using a ship, it's our best chance of pinning them down."

## 21      **Snow Dragon**

As Anya dove into satellite imagery, and shipping records, focusing on Arctic waters, she filtered out smaller vessels, zeroing in on ships capable of supporting a helipad large enough for the Z-18. The search was tedious, with countless vessels dotting the frozen seas, but the pool of candidates quickly shrank when she narrowed the results to ships designed for Arctic conditions.

Among the largest, she found several icebreakers, the titans of the Arctic capable of keeping sea routes clear for scientific expeditions and heavy-duty operations. And that's when something caught her eye—a Chinese icebreaker named Xuelong-3, or "Snow Dragon." It was a massive vessel, capable of carrying helicopters, including something as large as a Z-18.

Her heart raced as she reviewed the data. "Look at this," Anya said, showing the team the records of the Xuelong-3. "One of the vessels I flagged is of Chinese origin, just like the Z-18. It's an icebreaker called Xuelong-3 or Snow Dragon."

Dave raised an eyebrow. "The Snow Dragon? That's a bit on the nose, isn't it?"

Omar shifted forward to get a better look. "It seems like too much of a coincidence."

Anya bit her lip, thinking aloud. "It could be just a coincidence, but the specification shows the ship has everything it needs—capacity for a helicopter, Arctic capabilities, and it's Chinese, like the Z-18. And it's been seen in the general area recently."

Cecilia, still on the call, didn't hesitate. "That's your lead. We've been chasing ghosts, but this—this feels like something concrete. Anya, keep digging into the ship's movements. If they've been in the same region as your encounters, we might finally have our connection to EarthWise."

Anya leaned forward in her chair, her eyes alight with determination. "I'll get on it. Let's see where the Xuelong-3 has been operating." The pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place, but now they had to figure out how the Xuelong-3 and EarthWise were connected—and what exactly they were up to in the Arctic.

After Cecilia ended the call, Anya dove back into her research on the Xuelong-3, the newest icebreaker in China's Arctic fleet. Despite its significance, she quickly noticed that surprisingly little detailed information was available about the vessel. For a ship of such size and importance, the data seemed... off. While China was known for playing things close to the chest, the level of secrecy surrounding the Xuelong-3 raised some red flags.

The vessel had been purpose-built at the Jiangnan Shipyard in China, one of the country's leading shipbuilders, and was touted as the most advanced icebreaker in their fleet. But as Anya compared it to the earlier Xuelong models, she noticed several anomalies. It appeared that much of the available information about the Xuelong-3 had simply been copy-pasted from data on its predecessors, Xuelong and Xuelong-2.

For instance, the specs mentioned the use of older radar and navigation systems, such as the Type 347S radar, a system typically used in older Chinese naval vessels. "Why would the newest icebreaker use something so outdated?" Anya thought to herself. Similarly, the Xuelong-3 was listed as having the same diesel-electric propulsion system as the Xuelong-2, which seemed unlikely. For a vessel that was supposedly an upgrade, these systems would have likely been replaced with newer tech, such as advanced azimuth thrusters for better manoeuvrability in Arctic conditions.

Other discrepancies stood out as well. The helicopter support equipment listed for the Xuelong-3 was the same as the older models—capable of supporting medium-sized helicopters like the Mi-8, but the Z-18 required more sophisticated support infrastructure due to its size and weight. If this ship was meant to carry a Z-18, it should have been outfitted accordingly.

Anya's brow furrowed as she dug deeper. Thinking aloud she said, "It's like they're hiding something in plain sight," The Xuelong-3 was supposed to be the crown jewel of China's Arctic fleet, yet all the public data felt like a poorly disguised copy-paste job from previous models. The ship likely had far more advanced capabilities than what was being disclosed, and if the information was being deliberately obscured, it suggested that the vessel was involved in something much bigger than typical ice-breaking missions.

She jotted down her findings and prepared to share them with the team. If EarthWise was linked to the Xuelong-3, then this ship was likely not just breaking ice but facilitating something far more clandestine in the Arctic.

Anya stared at the data, frustration building. They had a lead on the Xuelong-3, but no concrete proof that it was even in the Arctic. For all the ship's capabilities and its mysterious construction, none of it mattered if they couldn't pinpoint its location.

"We need to find this ship," she frustratedly groaned, turning to Dave and Omar, who had joined her at the table.

Dave frowned. "It's an icebreaker. You don't build something like that unless you plan to break some ice, right? So it should be up here."

Omar agreed. "Yes, but without imagery, we've got nothing. No way to prove it's operating in the Arctic."

Anya's fingers drummed against her tablet as satellite images revealed nothing but empty ocean. The Xuelong-3 was out there somewhere, running dark - standard procedure for covert operations. No public records meant no easy answers.

"We need access to more powerful satellite systems," Anya said, her fingers tapping against the table as she thought. "Something that can track large vessels, even if they aren't transmitting data. If we can't find it through normal maritime tracking, we'll have to get creative."

She paused for a moment, then added, "Cecilia might be able to pull some favours. We need to see if we can get high-resolution satellite passes over likely locations—somewhere between Greenland and the Northwest Passage. That's where it'd make the most sense for an icebreaker like the Xuelong-3 to be working."

Omar leaned back in his chair. "So, what do we do in the meantime? Keep digging?" Anya tapped her fingers on her keyboard, deep in thought. "Yeah. I'll keep looking into any unusual shipping activity, see if we can find any patterns. But we won't get anywhere unless we can spot that ship." They were chasing a ghost, but if they could find the Xuelong-3, it might be the key to exposing EarthWise's secretive Arctic operations.

Anya was about to dive back into her research when her phone buzzed with a message from Cecilia. She scanned it quickly, her eyebrows raising in surprise.

"Cecilia's brought someone else on board," Anya said, looking up at Dave and Omar. "Mei Lin."

Dave leaned in, curious. "Mei? Isn't she still recovering?"

"Yeah," Anya replied. "She's not field-ready, but she's got connections—inside the Chinese government. Plus, her knowledge of Chinese culture and language could give us a huge advantage. She might be able to get us intel we'd never find on our own."

Omar, nodding thoughtfully, added, "That could be a game-changer. If Mei has contacts that can get us even the slightest detail about Xuelong-3 or EarthWise's involvement, we might finally get the upper hand."

Anya tapped her phone, sending a quick reply to Cecilia. "I'll loop Mei in. If anyone can help us figure out where this ship is and what EarthWise is up to, it's her."

The team gathered around, their mood noticeably brighter now that Mei Lin was on board. Anya patched her into the call, and soon Mei's familiar voice filled the room.

"Hey, guys," Mei greeted them warmly, though her tone was cautious. "It's good to hear from you all. I've missed being in the field, but I'm getting there."

Dave smiled, leaning into the call. "Good to hear you're on the mend, Mei. You've been missed."

"Absolutely," Omar added. "Glad to have you with us on this. We could use some of your magic with the Snow Dragon."

Mei chuckled softly. "I'll do what I can, but it won't be easy. Some of the people I'll need to reach out to are going to be... scared. Others may not even answer my calls. But I'll try."

Anya chimed in, "Even if you can't get direct answers, anything you can dig up—any whispers or small details—could help. We're kind of running in circles here, and knowing more about what's happening on the Chinese side could give us the edge we need."

Mei's voice grew a little more serious. "I know. I'll pull in whatever favours I can, but this is sensitive. EarthWise and anything involving the Xuelong-3 is likely to be well guarded. But if I can get anyone to talk, I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

The team felt a renewed sense of purpose as they wrapped up the call. Mei was a valuable ally, and if anyone could break through the wall of secrecy surrounding the Xuelong-3, it was her.

The process of reaching out for information on the Xuelong-3 was a delicate and methodical operation, and Mei Lin knew she had to tread lightly. The level of surveillance in China was pervasive, and she had long been aware of how any unusual communication—even if encrypted—

could draw unwanted attention. She needed to be cautious, sending nothing overtly suspicious that could be flagged by the state's electronic monitoring systems.

Mei started with a series of innocuous emails to her old contacts. The initial messages were bland—nothing more than friendly catch-ups, with generic questions like, "How are you?" and "Hope you're doing well." These were sent over regular channels, designed to seem like any other personal communication. Mei had learned that when prying eyes were constantly watching, it was often better to blend into the background than to hide.

Several of her former contacts responded politely but distanced themselves from further conversation. The risk was too high, and Mei understood their hesitation—China's cyber monitoring was a fortress, and any suspicion of collaboration with foreign entities could lead to severe consequences. But one contact, a long-time friend who had worked with her in the past, responded in a way that piqued Mei's interest. His reply was coded in the usual pleasantries, but Mei could read between the lines. The message wasn't just a "hello." It was a signal to switch to a more secure method of communication.

Mei moved to the next phase carefully. She established a link through an encrypted channel, using a VPN and a series of secure, decentralised tools that would make tracing her digital footprint much more difficult. She chose to use Tor for this exchange, running it through a VPN as an extra layer of protection. Even then, she was careful not to overdo the encryption—using too much would only make her communications stand out in the crowd of standard internet traffic.

Once connected, Mei explained her request. She was looking for information on the Xuelong-3, a Chinese icebreaker, and needed to understand its true capabilities. Her contact was hesitant at first, concerned that this inquiry might be part of a state-sponsored witch hunt. He needed

to know that what Mei was asking wasn't linked to any political agenda or espionage, both of which could lead to dire consequences in China.

Mei carefully reassured him. "This isn't about politics or state secrets," she explained through their secure communication. "It's about an ecological concern—a serious one. I've been working with an organisation that's investigating some unusual activity in the Arctic, and it may be linked to Xuelong-3. We need to know if this vessel is part of something that could lead to significant environmental damage."

She took her time to phrase the situation delicately, aware that her contact needed to believe in the non-political nature of the request. "We're trying to prevent a disaster, not create one. If you know someone who can help—someone who can provide details without triggering alarms—I'd appreciate it. We'll be discreet. I just need to confirm if the Xuelong-3 is really what we suspect it is."

After a long pause, her contact replied cautiously. He had someone in mind, an insider in the shipbuilding industry, but this person was just as cautious. He explained that, even within the private sector, fear of state repercussions was ever-present. Many industry insiders had families to think of, and even the slightest hint of cooperating with foreign intelligence could have devastating consequences.

Mei understood. She assured her contact again. "We'll keep this quiet. This is about the Arctic, about something bigger than politics. If this information can help, it could stop a catastrophe."

Eventually, after several more secure exchanges, her contact provided her with the name of an industry insider—a person involved in the shipbuilding process who might know more about the Xuelong-3's true capabilities. Mei crafted her message to this new contact carefully, using indirect language to avoid suspicion while subtly stressing the ecological importance of what she was asking.



After a few more rounds of tentative communication, she finally got what she needed. The Xuelong-3, the insider revealed, was not an ordinary icebreaker. It was a state-of-the-art vessel equipped with stealth capabilities that far exceeded what was publicly known. The ship featured multispectral camouflage, radar-absorbent materials, and an advanced diesel-electric engine that allowed it to switch to nearly silent operation. Its active noise-cancellation systems made it practically invisible to both sonar and radar. Even its disruptive winter overlays allowed it to blend seamlessly into Arctic conditions. The ship was also fitted with azimuth thrusters, providing it with exceptional manoeuvrability in the ice-packed waters of the north.

The insider had also confirmed what Mei suspected—the public data on the Xuelong-3 was deliberately vague, with many of the ship's true specifications hidden behind layers of misdirection and copy-paste data from older models. The ship's radar and navigation systems were cutting-edge, likely integrated with some of the most advanced stealth technology China had ever developed.

Mei's heart raced as she received the information. This was it—the missing piece. The Xuelong-3 wasn't just an icebreaker. It was a stealth platform designed to operate in the Arctic undetected. Whatever EarthWise was doing, they were using this technological marvel to hide their operations from the world.

But getting this information out safely was now Mei's next concern. She knew she had to move cautiously—any misstep could expose her contact or herself to grave danger. The exchange had to be brief and to the point, ensuring that nothing suspicious was left behind in the digital traces.

After one final message of thanks, Mei cut off the communication and encrypted her findings. The team had what they needed, but the risks involved were higher than ever. The Xuelong-3 was not just a ship; it was a ghost, and tracking it would require more than just satellite imagery. They were dealing with something far bigger than they'd imagined.

After receiving Mei's critical intel about the Xuelong-3, Cecilia immediately passed it on to the team stationed in Nuuk. The information hit hard—EarthWise wasn't just conducting a covert operation in the Arctic, they were backed by a state-of-the-art stealth icebreaker linked to the Chinese government. It was a new depth of conspiracy, and the weight of it began to sink in.

In Nuuk, Dave, Anya, Omar, and Erik gathered in their temporary command centre, the air thick with tension as Anya relayed the news.

"So," Dave said, running a hand through his hair, "we're looking for a ghost ship—one that's designed not to be found."

Omar shook his head, his brow furrowed. "This just keeps getting deeper. A stealth icebreaker backed by the Chinese government? We're not just dealing with EarthWise any more." Anya's shoulders tensed as she absorbed the implications. "This explains why we couldn't find anything before. The Xuelong-3 is practically invisible, and if it's working with EarthWise... we're in way over our heads." Erik, standing by the map they'd been working from, added grimly, "This means they could be anywhere, doing anything, and no one would know."

Cecilia's voice came through the speaker of Anya's tablet, her tone steady but laced with concern. "You're in very deep water now. We always suspected EarthWise was up to something serious, but this... this could change everything. It gives me the shivers, and I'm not even out there."

The room fell silent for a moment as the team absorbed the gravity of the situation. They had a clue now—an icebreaker designed to vanish into the Arctic's frozen expanse—but finding it would be another challenge altogether.

"We're on the right trail," Omar said finally, breaking the silence. "But we need to move carefully. If EarthWise and the Chinese government are involved, it's not just about stopping a corporation any more. This could have global consequences."

Cecilia, pacing the room, posed the critical question, her eyes narrowing as she turned to the team. "If the Xuelong is part of EarthWise's operations, what is its role?"

Anya, without missing a beat, replied, "We know there's undersea activity going on. It's likely related to the methane hydrates beneath the Arctic."

Cecilia pressed further. "Yes, but the Xuelong is a surface vessel, with a helipad—it's not a drilling platform or a storage tanker. So what exactly is it doing out there?"

Anya leaned forward, thinking it through. "It must be deploying some sort of underwater systems. Remotely operated vehicles, maybe even autonomous submersibles, to extract the methane or conduct seismic surveys."

Cecilia wasn't satisfied yet. "But if it's extracting methane, where is it storing it? There should be a tanker capable of transporting it nearby, but we haven't seen any trace of one. That's a huge logistical gap."

The room fell into a brief silence as they absorbed the implications. Anya rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "You're right. If there's no tanker, then something else is going on. Either the methane isn't being extracted for transport, or they're doing something entirely different with it." Cecilia crossed her arms. "We need to find the Xuelong, and more importantly, we need to find out what it's doing out there. If EarthWise is covering something up, this might be our only chance to uncover it before the situation escalates."

The sense of urgency hung heavy in the air. The Xuelong had become the key to unlocking whatever EarthWise was hiding, and the team knew they were running out of time.

## 22 **Rogue Wave**

The team gathered for breakfast the next morning at the Hotel Hans Egede in Nuuk, a warm and inviting refuge from the biting cold outside. The restaurant had a cosy, modern Scandinavian design, with wooden accents and large windows that offered a stunning view of the snow-covered streets and the distant mountains beyond. Soft lighting cast a comfortable glow across the room, and the low hum of conversations from other patrons created a relaxed atmosphere.

The breakfast spread was simple yet hearty, reflecting Greenland's no-nonsense approach to food. There were warm plates of scrambled eggs, smoked Arctic char, fresh rye bread, and rich butter. A selection of cheeses, cold cuts, and fruit sat alongside yogurt and bowls of muesli. Hot pancakes, drizzled with local syrup, added a touch of sweetness to the morning.

Dave, still wary of the local tea options after days of disappointment, had opted for a strong black coffee. It was bitter but bold, a necessary jolt to wake him up after the restless night before. He paired it with eggs, smoked fish, and thick slices of rye bread slathered with butter. Omar was digging into a similar plate, with added pancakes and syrup, while Anya had opted for yogurt with fresh fruit and muesli, her mind already spinning through yesterday's discoveries.

They sat at a round table by the window, discussing the latest on the Xuelong and what their next steps should be. The air outside looked calm, but inside, tension buzzed between them as they considered what EarthWise might be up to.

Suddenly, the lights flickered, and the gentle hum of conversation in the restaurant abruptly stopped. Then, in a rush, the power went out entirely. Panic set in almost immediately.

From outside the hotel, they could hear the distant sound of screams and hurried footsteps. Patrons in the restaurant turned to the large windows as shadows of people ran frantically toward the main street, fleeing from the direction of the port. The air between them fraught with tension, instinctively knowing that something was very wrong.

"What's going on?" Dave asked, already grabbing his coat.

Before anyone could answer, sirens pierced the air, the wailing sound growing closer as emergency vehicles sped past the hotel, heading straight for the waterfront.

"Let's check it out," Anya said, already moving for the exit.

The team quickly donned their coats and stepped out into the icy air. The biting cold hit them immediately as they ventured into the streets, joining the growing crowd of people gathering outside, all drawn by the sound of chaos near the port. As they made their way toward the waterfront, the scene grew more harrowing.

When they arrived, it was clear something catastrophic had happened. The once-bustling port was a scene of destruction. Several small fishing boats were overturned, thrown onto the shore like discarded toys. Containers had been ripped from their moorings, their contents spilled across the docks. A few buildings closest to the water had taken on severe damage, their walls cracked and windows shattered. Water still sloshed unnaturally high against the docks, and the wind carried the briny scent of seawater mixed with diesel fuel and debris.

A rogue wave, undoubtedly triggered by the same undersea activity they had been investigating, had hit the port. People huddled in groups, pointing toward the waterfront where emergency workers were already moving in, assessing the damage and tending to those injured in the chaos.

The mood was thick with tension and fear. The cold air felt heavier, the wind biting at their faces as they stood there, watching the aftermath of

something far beyond a natural disaster. This was the ripple effect of something man-made, something orchestrated from the depths of the Arctic.

Dave clenched his fists, his breath misting in the cold air. "It's starting," knowing they were now witnessing the very threat they had feared.

Seeing the devastation first-hand was far more overwhelming than anything the team had encountered in the media or through Cecilia's briefings. The raw power of the rogue waves left them in awe as they stood at the waterfront, surveying the destruction. Boats were capsized or washed ashore, sitting grounded on their sides like beached whales. Vehicles that had been parked near the water were now tossed and smashed into each other, some embedded in the sides of buildings that had cracked under the impact.

For a moment, the team stood in silence, taking in the sheer scale of the chaos. The scene was haunting, the stillness broken only by the distant wail of sirens and the shouts of emergency workers. This wasn't just a report on a screen—this was real, and the destruction was immense.

Without hesitation, the team jumped into action, joining the emergency services to help however they could. Dave and Omar worked alongside locals to clear debris and check for any survivors trapped in overturned vehicles or boats. Anya and Erik focused on helping the injured, ensuring they were brought to the emergency responders for care. They spent hours moving from one task to the next, their muscles aching and their breath coming in cold puffs as they worked in the icy wind.

As the team spread out across the waterfront, the scale of the destruction became even more overwhelming up close. The emergency services were stretched thin, racing from one critical area to another, and the team quickly found their roles.

Erik, with his experience in extreme environments and survival training, jumped in to assist the ambulance crews with triage. His calm demeanour and knowledge of cold-weather injuries made him an invaluable asset as he helped assess the injured. Many were suffering from hypothermia after being pulled from the frigid waters, while others had sustained broken bones or deep cuts from debris. Erik moved swiftly between people, offering what help he could, applying makeshift splints, and ensuring those in critical condition were rushed to medical centres.

Meanwhile, Dave and Omar were with the local workers, trying to clear debris that had been thrown violently across the port. Overturned boats, scattered pieces of metal, and broken concrete littered the area, making it difficult for rescue teams to navigate and assist anyone trapped. Omar helped coordinate the workers, moving smaller obstacles and guiding people toward safer areas. But it was Dave who truly stood out—though, to the others around, it seemed like just another part of the chaos.

With his extraordinary strength, Dave moved through the wreckage, lifting and shifting debris that would have required a crane or several men. Huge chunks of concrete were thrown aside as if they were little more than plywood. Steel beams bent from the force of the waves were lifted clear of the pathways, and boats that had been tossed like toys were flipped back onto their hulls. His muscles worked without strain, his movements fluid and efficient as he cleared paths for the rescue workers and freed people trapped beneath the rubble.

Yet, strangely, no one seemed to notice. The sheer scale of the destruction, the panic in the air, and the overwhelming need for rescue took precedence. People were too focused on their own survival and the surrounding chaos to pay attention to one man casually lifting objects that should have required heavy machinery. To them, it was just another facet of the surreal day they were experiencing.

Even as hours passed, Dave showed no signs of slowing down. His body barely seemed to tire, his enhanced stamina a sharp contrast to the

exhaustion setting in with the rest of the team. Omar and Erik, who had been running on adrenaline, felt their energy draining as the cold bit into their bones and their muscles ached from the hours of heavy lifting and moving injured people to safety.

By the time they finally returned to the hotel in the late afternoon, every step felt heavy for Anya, Omar, and Erik. Their bodies were sore, their hands scraped and bruised, and their minds were exhausted from the non-stop tension and the devastation they had seen. Dave, on the other hand, still looked remarkably fresh, though he didn't say anything about it. His abilities had allowed him to work for hours without rest, and while the others were jealous of his stamina, they knew it was just another of his many unique gifts.

They collapsed into the chairs in the hotel's lounge, the warmth of the building a stark contrast to the freezing chaos they had left behind. People in the hotel were still talking in hushed tones, the shock of the morning's events lingering in the air. The team shared a silent moment, processing everything they had just been through.

Omar rubbed his sore shoulders and glanced over at Dave. "I don't know how you're still standing," he said with a weak smile, a hint of jealousy in his voice.

Dave just shrugged. "Guess I'm just built different."

Anya, slumped back in her chair, smiled faintly. "We could've used about ten more of you out there."

But beneath the tired banter, they all knew that something larger was at play. The destruction they had just witnessed wasn't just nature's wrath—it was a direct result of the rogue waves and the destabilisation that EarthWise had triggered in the Arctic. There was no denying it now.

"We know who's responsible," Omar said, his voice grim. "EarthWise. The Xuelong-3. We have to get this sorted."



The team fell silent, the weight of their mission pressing down on them. The physical exhaustion was real, but the stakes were higher than ever. They were the only ones who knew the truth—and that meant they were the only ones who could stop it.

"Guys, sit and relax for a bit," Dave said, rising from his chair. "Let me get the drinks sorted."

Before anyone could protest, he was already heading toward the hotel restaurant. The staff were busy, running around serving the bewildered people who had come in from the waterfront, many still in shock from the morning's devastation. Dave approached one of the waiters and asked quietly, "Mind if I use the kitchen for a few minutes? You've got your hands full, and I can manage."

The waiter, clearly overwhelmed, glanced toward the bustling kitchen before nodding. "Sure, go ahead. We appreciate the help."

Dave slipped into the kitchen and surveyed the space. Despite the frantic activity, he moved with calm precision. Grabbing a large pan, he set it on the stove, pouring in milk and heating it gently. As the milk warmed, he found some dark chocolate, expertly chopping it and adding it to the pan. The rich smell of melting chocolate filled the air as he whisked it together with the milk, making the thick, creamy hot chocolate. Despite the chaos around him, Dave worked with the ease of someone used to taking control, his quiet determination a stark contrast to the busy staff around him.

Within a few minutes, the hot chocolate was ready. Dave poured the steaming liquid into mugs, carefully balancing them on a tray before heading back to the team.

He returned to the lounge with the tray of steaming mugs. The team, slumped in their chairs, looked up as Dave approached, each of them grateful for the respite.

"Here you go," Dave said, setting the mugs down in front of each of them. The smell of rich chocolate filled the air, warming them from the inside even before they took a sip. But just as they were about to drink, Dave grinned and pulled a bottle of coffee liqueur from his coat pocket, holding it up for them to see.

"I think you've all earned this," he said with a wink, offering the bottle around to spike the hot chocolates.

Anya, eyes widening, chuckled as she accepted the bottle first. "Dave, you're a legend," she said, pouring a generous splash into her mug.

Omar and Erik followed suit, adding a shot of liqueur to their drinks before taking a long, satisfied sip. The combination of creamy hot chocolate and the warmth of the liqueur sent a soothing wave through their bodies, momentarily easing the aches and exhaustion from the day.

Dave took a sip of his own drink, leaning back in his chair. For a brief moment, the team allowed themselves to relax, the weight of the day lifted by the simple comfort of good company and a hot drink.

"Here's to getting through this," Dave said, raising his mug.

"Skål!" Erik chimed in with a grin, raising his own in response.

The team clinked their mugs together, a small but meaningful gesture amid the chaos of everything that had unfolded. The storm was far from over, but for now, in the warmth of the hotel, they found a moment of peace.

Before they could finally retreat to their rooms, the team huddled together to give Cecilia an update. Her face appeared on the screen of Anya's tablet, relief washing over her as soon as she saw them.

"Thank God you're all okay," she said, letting out a deep breath. "I've been calling for hours, but I get why you didn't pick up. I heard what happened

—you really stepped up out there, helping the emergency services. You're forgiven for ignoring my desperate calls," she added with a small smile.

Omar gave a weary chuckle, rubbing his face. "Yeah, we were a little preoccupied."

Cecilia quickly shifted back to business, her tone becoming more serious. "So here's what we know: the epicentre of the seismic activity that caused the waves seems to be in Baffin Bay. That lines up with your suspicions about the *Xuelong-3* being nearby, likely close enough to the Nuussuaq Peninsula to extract EarthWise personnel from the site."

Anya, understanding where Cecilia was going with this, shifted forward. "So they're likely operating somewhere in that area. We'll need satellite imagery to confirm."

"Exactly," Cecilia continued. "We've already started targeting that region with satellite passes. We'll see if we can pick up any movement, especially of a large vessel. The *Xuelong* can't hide forever. Once we have something concrete, we'll regroup. But for now..." She paused, giving them a look of understanding. "Get some rest. You've done enough for one day. We'll gather the data and catch up with you in the morning."

"Thanks, Cecilia," Dave said, speaking for the team as a wave of exhaustion hit them all. "We'll be ready."

The call ended, and with it, the team finally allowed themselves a moment to exhale. Tomorrow would bring new challenges, but tonight, they would follow Cecilia's advice and rest.

## 23 Xuelong-3

Onboard the Xuelong-3, Dr. Viktoras Liska stared out at the frozen expanse of the Arctic from the observation deck, the endless white stretching into the horizon. She had expected isolation, cold, and the challenge of working in one of the most hostile environments on Earth. But she hadn't expected this growing sense of unease. The pay had been phenomenal—far more than any research project should have offered—but at the time, she had rationalised it. After all, it was risky work, and in her field of expertise, risk often came with a hefty price tag.

Still, that niggling doubt persisted. What was EarthWise really after? They had hired her to use her knowledge and seismic models to assist with research on the ocean floor, predicting the behaviour of the seabed in relation to seismic activity. At first, it had seemed straightforward—she'd done this sort of work before, modelling fault lines and determining the likelihood of underwater landslides. But the deeper she dug into EarthWise's operation, the less it felt like pure science.

She thought back to her time working with Dr. Carlisle. He was a brilliant geoscientist, someone she had admired for his intellect and unique approach to problem-solving. When they had worked together before she left for the field, he had spoken excitedly about the potential breakthroughs in methane extraction and seabed analysis. But there had been a shadow behind his words—a tension that made her wonder if he knew more than he was letting on.

Now, aboard the Xuelong-3, those doubts had solidified into something heavier. She had been stationed at EarthWise's temporary base on the Nuussuaq Peninsula when the attack happened. The memory was still fresh in her mind—gunfire erupting from nowhere, their small research team scrambling for cover as security forces fought off an unseen enemy. The rescue had been swift, a helicopter had plucked them from the chaos, and

before she knew it, she was onboard this colossal ship, safe but unsure of what exactly was going on.

Liska traced her fingers along the cold steel wall, taking in the sheer scale of the vessel. Every research ship she'd worked on before felt like a toy compared to the Xuelong-3. This wasn't just another ice-capable vessel - it was a fortress of steel and technology, designed to dominate the Arctic seas. The massive hull rose several stories above the waterline, its reinforced bow ready to crush through ice sheets that would cripple lesser ships. Just being aboard made her feel small, insignificant against the raw industrial might surrounding her.

The Xuelong-3 was an imposing vessel, one of the largest icebreakers in the world, built for the most extreme conditions on the planet. At over 160 metres long and towering several stories above the waterline, it was a floating fortress, cutting through the Arctic's thick sea ice with ease. The ship's hull, reinforced with advanced materials, was designed to endure the relentless forces of the polar regions, and as Dr. Viktoras Liska moved through its corridors, she couldn't help but feel dwarfed by its sheer scale.

Her accommodations were more luxurious than she had expected. Each room had its own heating system, a private bathroom, and comfortable beds. It wasn't five-star luxury, but for a research vessel operating in the harsh Arctic, it was far more than what she was used to. There was a small lounge area, a common space where the scientists and crew could unwind, though the atmosphere had grown tense since their arrival from Nuussuaq. A kitchen and mess hall provided a constant supply of hot meals, though Dr. Liska found herself eating less as the days went by, her stomach knotted with growing anxiety.

The heart of the Xuelong-3, however, was its state-of-the-art research facilities. The ship's scientific labs spanned two entire decks, equipped with the latest technology for oceanographic and geological research. Banks of computers hummed softly as data from sonar and satellite feeds streamed across multiple screens. In one corner, a group of technicians

monitored seismic activity across the seabed, analysing data collected from the underwater drones that were the pride of the ship's scientific arsenal.

The ship housed an enormous drone hangar—a cavernous space beneath the main deck where the underwater drones were stored and serviced. The drones were sleek, autonomous machines designed to dive deep beneath the ice, descending thousands of meters to the seabed. Each drone was equipped with high-resolution cameras, sonar, and various sensors to measure temperature, pressure, and methane levels. These drones were the key to EarthWise's operation, sent down to the ocean floor to map out the methane hydrate reserves and analyse the structural integrity of the seabed.

Dr. Liska had seen them in action, watching as the drones were lowered into the water through the specially designed launch bay. The entire operation was efficient, almost too efficient, as if the crew had done this many times before. The drones would disappear into the dark waters, their sleek forms cutting through the depths as they began their surveys of the ocean floor. Once deployed, they could operate independently for hours, sometimes days, before returning to the surface with gigabytes of data.

But it was what EarthWise was doing with that data that unsettled her. Dr. Liska's seismic models had always been used for predictive analysis—determining the likelihood of earthquakes, landslides, or tsunamis. Here, on the Xuelong-3, her models were being used to pinpoint areas of the seabed that could be exploited for methane extraction. The methane hydrates, frozen within the ocean floor, were a potential energy source, but they were also highly unstable. Any disruption could lead to a catastrophic release of methane, destabilizing the ocean floor and triggering landslides or worse.

The labs on the Xuelong-3 buzzed with activity, technicians and scientists working around the clock to process the data from the drones. But there was an air of secrecy that unsettled Dr. Liska. Not all of the data was being shared openly. She had been given access to some reports, but key pieces were withheld, as if there was something bigger going on beneath the

surface. She couldn't shake the feeling that her seismic models were being used for something far more dangerous than she had signed up for.

The Xuelong-3 also had a helipad on the upper deck, large enough to support heavy-lift helicopters like the Z-18 that had extracted her from Nuussuaq. The sound of rotor blades slicing through the icy air was a regular occurrence as helicopters came and went, delivering personnel, supplies, and equipment to and from the site. The ship was a hub of activity, and yet, Dr. Liska felt more isolated than ever.

As she walked through the corridors of the ship, the walls humming with the low vibration of the engines, Dr. Liska couldn't help but feel trapped. The ship was impressive, its capabilities unmatched, but it was also a fortress of secrets. What had started as a research mission had quickly turned into something far more sinister. She knew she wasn't the only one asking questions, but with each passing day, the answers seemed to slip further away, buried beneath layers of cold, Arctic silence.

Dr. Liska bit her lip, her eyes narrowing as the ship's crew moved purposefully around her. She had made her choice, and now she had to live with it. But the question that gnawed at her was, what exactly had she chosen to be a part of?

The alarms pierced through the calm hum of the Xuelong-3, sending a jolt of adrenaline through Dr. Viktoras Liska's veins. At first, she assumed it was another routine drill. They had them often—part of the protocol for operating in such a hazardous environment. But as she stood up from her desk and saw the frantic movement of the crew outside her cabin, the urgency in their faces told her this was no drill.

The ship's PA system crackled to life, the captain's voice cutting through the chaos. "All personnel, prepare for emergency! This is not a drill! Repeat, this is not a drill!"

Liska's heart raced as she grabbed the life vest hanging on the wall of her cabin, her hands shaking as she fumbled to put it on. The vest felt bulky and awkward, the straps difficult to fasten in her panicked state. She pulled them tight, too tight, as her breath quickened. The corridors outside were filled with the sounds of running footsteps, shouted orders, and the relentless wail of the alarms. Crew members hurried past, some already wearing their life vests, others grabbing theirs as they dashed toward the muster stations.

The ship groaned beneath her feet, the metal hull vibrating as if in response to the coming storm. The low, deep moan of the engines, straining against the sea, added to the growing sense of dread. Liska stumbled into the hallway, joining the rush of bodies moving toward the muster point. The floor beneath her trembled, and she could feel the distant, rhythmic thud of waves slamming into the ship's hull. But this was more than just bad weather—it was something much worse.

Suddenly, the Xuelong-3 lurched violently to one side, throwing Liska against the wall. The impact knocked the wind out of her, and she gasped, clutching the cold metal for support as the vessel righted itself with a groan. She barely had time to recover before the ship was hit again, harder this time. She heard the deep, terrifying roar of the ocean as a massive wave crashed into the side of the ship, sending a spray of icy seawater over the deck.

Even with its immense size, the Xuelong-3 was no match for the fury of the ocean. The undersea landslide, miles beneath the surface, had triggered a chain reaction, sending massive waves radiating out from the epicentre. These weren't just ordinary waves—they were rogue waves, towering walls of water that slammed into the ship with unrelenting force. Liska could feel the ship rise and fall as it struggled to maintain balance, each wave hitting with the force of a freight train.

The lights flickered above, and the shriek of metal echoed through the corridors as parts of the ship strained against the ocean's assault. Liska



could hear crew members shouting over the alarms, their voices barely audible above the roar of the waves. She forced herself forward, gripping the handrails as the ship continued to heave beneath her. The floor tilted again, this time steeper, and she slipped, landing hard on her knees. Cold fear gripped her as she looked up, seeing the sheer panic in the eyes of those around her.

Another massive wave hit, and this time, the ship shuddered violently. Equipment not bolted down flew across the room, smashing into walls with a deafening crash. Liska could feel the cold spray of seawater seep through the walls, tiny streams of water trickling into the corridors, signalling that the ocean was breaching the ship's defences. She staggered to her feet, every instinct screaming at her to keep moving.

The ship seemed to groan in protest, the once sturdy vessel now feeling like a fragile toy being tossed by the unforgiving Arctic seas. Liska made it to the muster station, joining the throngs of scientists and crew clinging to each other for stability as the ship was rocked again. Through the windows, she could see the dark, churning sea, illuminated briefly by flashes of emergency lights. The Xuelong-3 was still holding, but it was clear that even this behemoth of a ship was at the mercy of the ocean's fury.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the worst of the assault seemed to pass. The ship, though battered, gradually began to settle, the violent rocking subsiding into a slower, steadier roll. The alarms still blared, and the captain's voice echoed over the PA, instructing everyone to remain calm and stay in their life vests. Liska collapsed into a seat, her body shaking with adrenaline, her mind racing. They had survived the waves, but she knew—deep down—that something far worse was still coming.

## 24 Sisimiut

The team gathered in the hotel lounge after breakfast, the air heavy with a sense of urgency. The lounge, though comfortable, was far from the quiet refuge it had been when they first arrived. The large room was filled with soft, worn armchairs and low wooden tables scattered with newspapers. The walls were adorned with minimalist artwork, mostly depicting the natural beauty of Greenland's icy landscapes. The tall windows let in a grey, muted light from the overcast sky, casting long shadows across the polished wooden floor. Now, the room was busy, serving as a temporary home for some of the townspeople displaced by the previous day's rogue waves. The faint buzz of conversations filled the air, though there was an underlying tension in the atmosphere.

They sat in a corner, trying to block out the noise around them as they connected with Cecilia over a secure line. Her face appeared on the screen, and without wasting time on pleasantries, she got straight to the point.

"There's been an interesting development," she began, her tone serious but with a slight hint of satisfaction. "It appears EarthWise may have shot themselves in the foot."

The team waited in silence as she paused, allowing her words to sink in.

"The Xuelong-3 is heading into, or is already in, the port at Sisimiut," Cecilia continued.

Dave, who had been stirring his coffee absent-mindedly, raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "No way!"

"It sounds like they faced the consequences of their own actions," Cecilia said, nodding. "And they're in need of repairs. From what we can gather, they took some serious damage from the waves they triggered. Sisimiut was hit too, and many other vessels are likely in need of repair as well. But as is always the case, those with the deepest pockets tend to jump the line."

Anya's expression hardened. "EarthWise will pay whatever it takes to get the Xuelong-3 back to sea."

Cecilia's fingers tightened around her coffee mug. "Exactly. We don't know the full extent of the damage yet, so it's unclear how long they'll be stuck in port. But it's crucial we act fast."

The team exchanged glances. They were close, and this was their chance to get a real look at the ship, maybe even gain some understanding of what EarthWise was doing.

Cecilia leaned forward, her voice firm. "I'm arranging air transport to Sisimiut as soon as possible. I want you 'eyes on' with that ship the moment you arrive. We can figure out the next steps once you're there, but we need to take advantage of this window."

The weight of the task ahead settled over them, but there was also a spark of determination. The Xuelong-3 was vulnerable, and now they had a chance to find out what EarthWise was truly up to.

The team packed swiftly, their movements efficient and purposeful. Within an hour, they were at the Nuuk airport, their gear stowed and ready for the next phase of their mission. Cecilia had come through as always, arranging a helicopter to take them directly to Sisimiut. The urgency was palpable, and with the Xuelong-3 now vulnerable, every minute counted.

The helicopter's rotors whirled to life, and soon they were lifting off, the landscape of Nuuk shrinking beneath them. As they ascended, the view opened up, revealing the sprawling, snow-covered wilderness below. The ice glistened in the pale morning light, fractured by deep blue fjords and jagged peaks. The helicopter's altitude gave them a commanding view of Greenland's stark beauty—endless expanses of frozen tundra interrupted only by the occasional mountain range, and the shimmering surface of the Arctic waters, dark and foreboding. The rhythmic thrum of the rotors was the only sound as they made their way across the snow and ice toward Sisimiut.

As they neared their destination, the landscape began to change. The coastline emerged, a craggy border between the vast ice sheets and the deep waters of the Davis Strait. Sisimiut appeared on the horizon, a cluster of colourful houses and buildings perched on the edge of the icy sea. The helicopter descended, the town growing larger in the windows as the snow-dusted streets and industrial docks came into view. Far below, they could see fishing boats anchored in the harbour, the water calm but icy. The mountains that encircled the town rose sharply, their peaks piercing the grey sky.

The helicopter touched down with a gentle bump at Sisimiut's small airstrip, the team quickly disembarking and gathering their gear. From there, they loaded into a waiting vehicle, and the short drive into town gave them a chance to take in their surroundings. Sisimiut, despite its remote location, had a certain rugged charm. The brightly coloured houses contrasted sharply with the snowy landscape, and the main roads were lined with small shops, cafes, and local businesses. The snow under the vehicle's tires crunched rhythmically as they drove toward their temporary home.

The vehicle pulled up in front of the Hotel Sisimiut, a large, modern building standing tall among the smaller, older structures around it. The hotel was a blend of utilitarian design and Nordic simplicity, built to withstand the harsh Arctic weather. Its steel frame and wooden facades gave it a warm, welcoming feel despite the cold outside. As the team climbed out of the vehicle, the biting wind reminded them of just how remote and challenging this environment could be.

Inside, the warmth of the hotel was a stark contrast to the cold outside. They were led up to a large apartment reserved for the team—a spacious accommodation designed for groups like theirs. The apartment was modern but cosy, with large windows offering a view of the snowy mountains and the distant harbour. The living area had plush sofas arranged around a central coffee table, a flat-screen TV mounted on the wall, and a small

kitchenette off to the side. Two bedrooms sat on either side of the living room, each furnished with comfortable beds, dark wood furniture, and heavy curtains to block out the near-perpetual daylight of the Arctic.

Omar wasted no time. "Let's do a quick bag drop and get to the port," he said, his eagerness showing. Anya, sharing his urgency, moved eagerly to the rooms.

They tossed their bags into the bedrooms without bothering to unpack, grabbing only what they needed for the immediate task. The others remained behind, knowing that getting "eyes on" the Xuelong was the priority for Omar and Anya. They stepped out into the cold again, heading for the port.

The harbour at Sisimiut was bustling with activity, much of it focused on the recovery efforts after the rogue waves had swept through. However, there was no sign of the Xuelong-3 docked among the fishing vessels and cargo ships. Omar scanned the horizon, looking out toward the sea.

"There," Anya said, pointing toward a massive silhouette anchored offshore. The Xuelong-3 was unmistakable—a looming figure against the icy waters, too large to fit into the small port. It was anchored a few kilometres out, and already, smaller boats were ferrying personnel and supplies between the ship and the shore.

"The harbour's too small for anything extensive," Omar remarked, his breath visible in the cold air. "They're working fast though—probably trying to fix whatever they can before heading back out."

Omar stood in the bitter cold outside the Hotel Sisimiut, his trained eyes scanning the harbour where the Xuelong loomed in the distance. The Arctic wind cut through his tactical gear, but he barely noticed it - his mind was focused on analysing approaches, exits, vulnerabilities. Years of experience had taught him to read environments like others read books, automatically cataloguing details that could mean the difference between success and failure.

The weight of his SIG Sauer P320 pressed reassuringly against his side as he watched crew members moving supplies to the ship. His expertise in infiltration had been earned through countless operations in environments where detection meant death. The skills that now served the team had been forged in shadow wars and silent conflicts, places where success meant leaving no trace of your presence.

What truly set Omar apart wasn't just his tactical prowess or his expertise with explosives - it was his ability to read situations at an almost instinctive level. He could sense the subtle shifts in atmosphere that preceded violence, picking up microscopic changes in behaviour that signalled imminent threat. This heightened awareness had been honed through years of operations where survival depended on reading body language more than words.

As he studied the Xuelong's crew patterns through his binoculars, his mind automatically processed the information through filters built from hard-won experience: guard rotations, security protocols, potential weaknesses. Every mission was unique, but the fundamentals remained the same - assess, adapt, execute. These were the principles that had kept him alive through years of covert operations, and they would serve the team now as they faced one of their most challenging missions yet.

The ruthless Arctic environment only amplified the stakes. One mistake, one overlooked detail, could mean disaster. But this pressure, this absolute need for perfection, was familiar territory for Omar. It was where he operated best - in those razor-edge moments where precision meant everything.

Anya pulled out her phone, snapping a few photos of the ship in the distance. "It's not here for long," she murmured, her mind already working through the possibilities. "We need to figure out exactly what they're doing, and fast."

They stood there for a moment longer, watching the smaller boats zip between the shore and the massive icebreaker. The Xuelong-3 was damaged, but how long it would remain vulnerable was anyone's guess. They knew they had a narrow window, and this was their chance to make a move.

The port of Sisimiut bore the scars of the recent rogue waves, much like the rest of the town. The smell of briny seawater and fuel hung heavy in the cold air as Anya and Omar made their way through the docks, scanning the area for any signs of activity related to the Xuelong-3. Several boats were still overturned, pushed far beyond where they should have been by the powerful surge of water. Crates lay scattered and broken along the water's edge, some smashed against the stone docks, their contents spilled out and half-frozen in the chilly air. Repair crews were hard at work, fixing the damage as best they could, and a few forklifts rumbled by, moving debris and salvaging anything still usable.

The port was a mix of industrial function and small-town practicality. There were warehouses along the waterfront, their corrugated steel walls dented and weathered from years of exposure to the Arctic conditions. Small fishing boats bobbed at the docks, and farther out, larger cargo ships and trawlers were anchored, waiting for clearance to unload their goods. But it was the Xuelong-3—looming offshore like a shadow over the sea—that held their focus.

Omar and Anya moved casually through the port, stopping here and there to make small talk with the workers, sounding out the locals. Anya, with her tech-savvy charm, struck up conversations about the port's communications, how the systems had handled the chaos from the waves. Omar, always good at reading people, shifted the conversations toward logistics, asking about the flow of supplies and if anything unusual had come in recently. They made sure to keep their inquiries light, never drawing too much attention.

As they wandered, they found that most people knew little about the Xuelong-3. To the local dockworkers and fishermen, it was simply unusual to see something that large anchored offshore, but it wasn't unheard of. Sisimiut didn't often play host to massive icebreakers, and the presence of the ship was noticed, but few knew anything specific.

At one point, they struck up a conversation with a wiry man wearing an old, oil-stained jacket. He had the look of someone who'd been working the docks for decades. He was unloading a shipment of fish from a nearby boat, the cold air making his breath visible in white puffs as he worked.

"Big ship out there," Omar remarked casually, gesturing toward the Xuelong.

The man grunted, not looking up from his work. "Aye, not something you see around here often."

Anya chimed in, "What's it doing here? We don't usually get icebreakers in Sisimiut."

The man straightened up, wiping his hands on a rag. "Heard from a couple of the guys down at the repair dock that it's having some trouble. Stabilization system, or something like that. They're waiting on parts to come in from further south, I think."

Omar raised an eyebrow, exchanging a quick glance with Anya. "Any idea how long it'll be in dock?"

The man shrugged. "Could be a few days. Can't go anywhere without those stabilisers, especially not in waters like these. They've been making runs back and forth, ferrying supplies out to it, but nothing major yet."

Anya smiled, handing him a cigarette as a thank-you. "Appreciate it."

He took the cigarette with a nod of thanks, stuffing it into his jacket pocket for later. "If you're into ships, it's worth keeping an eye on. But that thing... it's not here for the long haul. They'll be fixing it as fast as they can, I'd reckon."



The news was exactly what they had been hoping for. Omar and Anya moved away, blending back into the crowd, their minds racing with the implications.

"That's our window," Omar said under his breath. "If the Xuelong's stuck here for a few days, we have time to figure out what to do next."

Anya shifted her weight, keeping her voice low as she watched the massive ship offshore. "We'll need to get back to the team. But this... this is good. Excellent."

The failure in the Xuelong-3's stabilisation system meant that, despite its power and size, the ship wasn't going anywhere fast. It was vulnerable, and now the team had the information they needed to make their next move.

As the team regrouped at the Hotel Sisimiut, their first plan seemed straightforward enough. They'd noticed several repair crews making regular trips out to the Xuelong-3, and Omar had managed to secure them temporary credentials as part of a communications repair team. It should have been simple—blend in with the regular maintenance crews, board with their equipment, and find their way to the ship's lower decks.

But EarthWise's security was tighter than they'd anticipated. As Omar and Anya approached the inspection point at the dock, a guard was carefully checking not just IDs, but cross-referencing every worker against the day's maintenance schedule. Ahead of them, they watched as a legitimate repair worker was turned away—his crew's slot had been rescheduled due to the arrival of priority parts for the stabilization system.

"Something's off," Omar observed, noting the unusual thoroughness of the inspection. "This isn't standard procedure for a research vessel."

They were three people away from the checkpoint when Anya spotted the handheld scanner. The guard was running some kind of verification check on each ID badge. Her fingers tightened around their forged credentials—

good enough to fool a visual inspection, but they wouldn't hold up to an electronic scan.

"Abort," she whispered, casually turning away from the line. "They're running deep checks."

They retreated, trying to look natural as they walked back toward the main port area. Behind them, they could hear the guard questioning someone else's credentials.

"They're paranoid," Omar said once they were safely away. "That level of security screening? On a supposedly civilian research vessel?"

"Makes you wonder what they're hiding," Dave added. He'd been watching from a distance, ready to create a distraction if needed. "But it also means we need a new plan. One that bypasses their security completely."

Returning to the hotel, they reassessed their options. The regular maintenance crews were too heavily screened, and even the repair teams were being thoroughly vetted. They needed a different angle—something EarthWise wouldn't expect.

It was during dinner at the hotel's restaurant that inspiration struck. Anya watched as kitchen staff loaded supplies onto a truck, preparing for delivery to various ships in the harbour.

"Food," she said suddenly, interrupting Omar's discussion of potential entry points. "Everyone needs to eat, even paranoid research teams."

Dave caught on immediately. "Supply deliveries. They can't screen every potato and flour sack."

Omar paced back and forth, his fingers drumming against his thigh as his mind worked through the logistics. "They'll be focused on checking people, not provisions. Especially with a crew that size—they must go through massive amounts of supplies."

The new plan came together quickly. With the Xuelong-3 still undergoing repairs, there was a steady stream of food supplies being ferried to the ship—an ideal cover. They would hide inside a shipment of food supplies, which would be loaded onto the ship and taken down to the food storage area. From there, they'd slip out undetected and make their move.

"The good thing about food shipments is they won't stay on deck for long," Omar explained. "Once it's loaded, they'll move it straight to the larder. No one wants their supplies sitting out in the Arctic cold."

Anya leaned back in her chair, nodding. "That gives us a better chance to stay hidden and get deeper into the ship before anyone notices anything's off."

The next supply run was scheduled for the evening, under the cover of the long Arctic night. The timing couldn't have been better—most of the crew would be focused on other tasks related to the ship's repairs, allowing Dave and Anya to slip aboard with minimal attention.

The new plan was simple but risky: they would hide inside a shipment of food supplies, which would be loaded onto the ship and taken down to the food storage area. From there, they'd slip out undetected and make their move.

"We're going to use one of the supply crates," Omar explained, "filled with food. The good thing about that is it won't stay on deck for long—once it's loaded, they'll move it straight to the larder."

Anya leaned back in her chair, nodding. "That gives us a better chance to stay hidden and get deeper into the ship before anyone notices anything's off."

Dave glanced at Omar. "And if things go sideways?"

Omar smirked. "That's why you're going in with her, Dave. If anything goes wrong, you handle it. I'll stay back and keep communication running—get you the intel you need once you're inside."

With the plan set, they made their preparations. The next supply run was scheduled for the evening, under the cover of the long Arctic night. The timing couldn't have been better, as most of the crew would be focused on other tasks related to the ship's repairs, allowing Dave and Anya to slip aboard with minimal attention.

By dusk, Omar had spoken with the boat owner, and the necessary arrangements were made. Dave and Anya climbed into one of the large crates filled with food supplies—canned goods, grains, and other essentials—and waited in the dark, the sounds of the harbour bustling around them. The crate was carefully sealed, leaving just enough room for them to breathe and move slightly, though the tight quarters left them with little comfort. As the lid was being closed, Anya wrinkled her nose and grimaced. "It smells like something died in here!" she cried, trying not to breathe too deeply. "What was this crate used for?"

The crate shifted slightly as the boat began to move, and inside, Dave and Anya felt the immediate jolt of the uneven seas beneath them. The smell of fish and saltwater hung heavy in the cramped space, and the rhythmic creaking of the boat echoed in the hollow cavity of the crate, adding to the tension. The boat's engine hummed faintly beneath the deck, providing a constant vibration that reverberated through the floor, reminding them with every thrum how isolated and confined they were.

The journey to the Xuelong-3 was bumpy, the small boat battling against the icy Arctic waters. Every wave that hit the hull sent a shudder through the crate, jolting Dave and Anya in their already cramped quarters. Their knees knocked against the wooden sides, the rough movement forcing them to brace themselves against the jerks and sways.

"Could've done with a bit more padding in here," Dave said softly, his voice barely audible over the sounds of the boat cutting through the waves.

"Yeah, well, I'll be thinking of the spa when we get out of this," Anya replied sarcastically, gripping the side of the crate to steady herself as the boat rocked again.

After what felt like an eternity of bouncing and shifting, the boat slowed as it neared the Xuelong-3. From inside the crate, they couldn't see the towering icebreaker, but they could hear the sounds change—the dull roar of the sea gave way to the more mechanical clanking and groaning of metal as the boat approached the massive vessel.

The unmistakable clink of chains rang through the air, followed by the loud groaning of a crane overhead. Suddenly, the crate lurched, rising into the air with a forceful jerk that knocked them both against the wooden walls. The sensation of being lifted off the boat and swinging in the air was unsettling. They swayed slightly, the chains rattling as the crate hung suspended for a few seconds longer than either of them felt comfortable with.

Dave and Anya could hear muffled voices outside—seamen shouting instructions as the crane operator prepared to set the crate down. Then, with a heavy thud, they were dropped onto the deck of the Xuelong-3, the impact jarring their bodies. Anya winced as the crate landed, her back slamming against the side.

"They could've been a bit gentler with that landing," Anya grumbled, trying to get comfortable again in the small space.

There was no time to dwell on the rough drop. The sounds of boots clanging against the metal deck were soon followed by gruff voices and the rattle of machinery. The whirring of a forklift hummed to life, and within moments, they were on the move again. The crate was being transported across the deck of the ship, the vibrations from the forklift travelling through the wooden walls as they were ferried deeper into the ship.

Through the muffled walls of the crate, they could hear the chatter of the seamen, casual and unaware of their stowaways. Anya could make out bits

and pieces of their conversation—something about schedules, shifts, and supplies. Nothing of importance yet, but the fact that the seamen were relaxed was a good sign. They weren't expecting intruders.

The crate bumped over the threshold as they were taken down a ramp into the ship's interior. The air grew cooler, and the echoes of the open deck faded as they moved further below. The sound of machinery became more distant, replaced by the low hum of the ship's massive engines and the occasional clang of metal doors shutting somewhere in the distance.

Finally, the forklift came to a stop. A loud clatter of keys, a metallic creak, and the sound of latches being opened told them they were being placed in storage.

The crate was pushed one last time, sliding against the cold floor as the seamen moved it into place. One final grunt of exertion and a thud indicated it had been securely placed, the workers giving no more attention to it as they moved on. The sound of footsteps faded into the distance, and the storage room's door clanged shut, leaving them in silence.

Anya breathed a sigh of relief. "We're in. Now we wait."

Dave flexed his cramped muscles, his mind already racing through their next steps. They had made it onboard, but the real challenge was just beginning.

Once they were certain the room was empty, Dave pressed his hands firmly against the side of the crate. With a quiet grunt, he applied pressure along the edges, and the nails holding the boards together popped open effortlessly under his strength. The wooden panels creaked as they gave way, and moments later, he and Anya clambered out, stretching their stiff muscles after the cramped journey.

They found themselves in the ship's food storage room, which was cooler than they had expected, though still far more temperate than the biting Arctic air outside. The room was industrial in design, with high metal

shelves stacked with crates and boxes of supplies. Rows of canned goods, dried meats, rice, and other long-lasting provisions lined the shelves, everything arranged with military precision. Along one wall, large sacks of grains were piled up next to plastic bins containing fresh vegetables, likely delivered recently for the crew's consumption. The cold room had the sterile feel of a storage space that prioritised function over comfort, with smooth metal floors and bare, functional walls. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting a faint, sterile glow across the shelves.

Anya looked around, checking the surroundings as Dave moved toward the steel door. It was a heavy, reinforced piece of metal designed to keep the area secure. Dave placed his hand on the lock, feeling the mechanism as he applied gentle pressure. The locking system, though solid, was no match for him. With a quiet click, the lock yielded under his strength, and he pushed the door open without making a sound.

They stepped cautiously into the corridor beyond, where the sounds of the ship—the faint hum of engines, the distant clang of metal on metal—echoed softly. The cool, metallic interior of the Xuelong-3 was built for functionality, with stark, clean lines and an almost antiseptic feel. The corridors were empty for now, which was a stroke of luck. Dressed in winter gear that matched the outfits of the exploration staff, they blended in seamlessly with the crew.

Now, they were just two more figures in dark, functional coats and boots walking the ship's hallways. With their hoods pulled up, they could easily pass for any other member of the crew going about their duties. The ship was vast, and getting lost in the maze of corridors was a real possibility, but they had studied the layout as much as they could beforehand.

Anya glanced at Dave. "First step is getting to the lower decks. If I can find a terminal, I can start looking for evidence."

"Let's move quietly," Dave replied, already scanning the hallway ahead. "We're on a timer now."

With that, they moved carefully down the corridor, slipping into the labyrinth of the Xuelong-3.

As Dave and Anya moved through the vessel, they quickly realised that while their winter gear helped them blend in with the exploration and scientific staff, it also made them stand out in other parts of the ship. Any attempt to access crew-only areas or engineering would likely draw attention, especially with the ship's strict division between the science teams and the operating crew.

They stuck to the corridors and sections dedicated to scientific work—labs, storage rooms, and observation areas. In these zones, they were just two more figures moving among the others, walking with purpose like the rest of the staff. But it was a fragile cover, one that would be blown if they ventured too far into the areas reserved for the ship's crew or, worse, engineering and command.

It was as they made their way down one of the wider corridors that Dave noticed them: a small group of figures dressed in white camouflage. The security team. They were the same men they had seen back onshore in Nuussuaq, unmistakable in their distinct uniforms. While the scientific and technical staff moved about in heavy Arctic gear, these security personnel stood out with their clean, tactical look.

Unlike the lax exploration staff, the security team carried themselves with precision, their eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. Each of them had sidearms holstered at their hips—standard issue for onboard security, but clearly meant as a deterrent. They weren't expecting trouble this far out at sea, but the mere presence of armed personnel on a research vessel hinted at something more serious.

Dave glanced at Anya, his mind working quickly. "Security's light," he whispered. "But those guys are on alert. Sidearms only, but I doubt the heavier gear's far away."



Anya's gaze followed one of the men as he moved past. "We'll need to avoid them. If they catch us snooping around, it's over."

Dave agreed. While the security team might not be expecting a threat, they were clearly capable of handling one. And if push came to shove, a confrontation with them would draw attention from the rest of the ship—something they couldn't afford.

"We stick to the scientific sections for now," Dave stated. "We've got access there. But we can't risk poking around the crew or engineering areas unless we absolutely have to."

"Agreed," Anya said. "I'll find us a terminal in one of the research labs. If we're lucky, I can start accessing the data from there without having to go deeper into the ship."

As they moved onward, both were acutely aware of the eyes of the security team. For now, the guards hadn't paid them much attention, but it wouldn't take much for their cover to fall apart. Every step had to be calculated, every move deliberate. The security team might not be expecting intruders, but Dave knew better than to underestimate them.

As they quietly moved through the ship, their recon taking them deeper into the scientific areas, Anya suddenly slowed, her eyes narrowing as she peered through the narrow window of one of the research labs. Inside, a group of scientists were huddled around banks of computer screens, busy with whatever task was at hand. The soft glow of the monitors lit up their focused faces, and the gentle hum of equipment filled the room.

Anya's heart skipped a beat when she recognised one of the faces.

It was Dr. Viktoras Liska.

Anya froze, leaning closer to get a better look. Dr. Liska had been in the files they'd reviewed back in Germany, part of the leads they'd dug through when trying to connect the dots to EarthWise. Her name had come up frequently in the geoscience research related to the Arctic project. Anya

had read her file multiple times, but seeing her here, in the flesh, was a surprise.

Liska's long dark hair was pulled back in a low, messy bun, with a few stray strands framing her pale face. Her sharp, intelligent green eyes were fixed on one of the screens in front of her, and her thin-framed glasses sat perched on her nose. She had a wiry build, not particularly tall, and the lab coat she wore seemed a little too large for her, as if it had been thrown on in a hurry. Her posture was slightly hunched, a sign of someone who had spent countless hours hunched over screens and scientific data. Anya remembered the details from the files—Liska was a meticulous researcher, someone whose skill in modelling seismic activity had put her on EarthWise's radar.

She must have been evacuated from Nuussuaq when things went sideways there.

Anya quickly pulled back from the window, her mind racing. Dr. Liska was deeply involved with EarthWise's operations, and her presence here, on the Xuelong-3, only confirmed it. This wasn't just a scientific expedition—they were dealing with something far more intricate, and now they had one of the key players within reach.

"Dave," Anya whispered, her voice tense but controlled. "That's Dr. Liska in there. She's one of the people we flagged back in Germany—part of EarthWise's core team. If she's here, that confirms a lot."

Dave glanced through the window, recognising the intensity in Anya's voice. "So she's important?"

"Very. And if she's still working here after what happened at Nuussuaq, she's part of whatever EarthWise is trying to cover up."

Dave, a grim expression on his face. "We'll need to figure out how to get more out of this."

For now, they moved on, leaving the lab behind as they continued their reconnaissance. But Anya's discovery had just opened a new door—Dr. Liska's presence meant they were getting closer to the heart of EarthWise's operations, and whatever secrets the Xuelong-3 was hiding.

## 25      Liska

As Dave moved off, scanning the rooms and making mental notes of any signs or useful locations, Anya lingered back near the lab where Dr. Liska had been working. Her heart raced with the weight of the decision—she needed to follow Liska, see where she went, and if possible, find a way to confront her. Anya wasn't exactly trained in espionage tactics like Omar, but this was too important to let slip. She needed answers.

She hung back, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. If only she could melt into the background like Omar, but her winter boots crunched slightly with every step, and her heavy winter coat rustled with even the slightest movement. Still, she tried to keep a distance, staying out of sight.

At the far end of the corridor, she found a small, unused office space—one of those generic rooms that probably belonged to an absent researcher. She ducked inside quickly, hoping to use it as a lookout point, but as she stepped in, the overhead light flickered on automatically with a low hum. Cursing under her breath at the eco-friendly lighting system, Anya realised she would be visible to anyone walking past. She quickly pressed herself to the door frame, angling herself to keep an eye on the corridor while remaining somewhat out of sight.

She didn't have to wait long. As she had suspected, it was lunchtime, and one by one, the lab staff filed out of the room, their conversation light and filled with the usual small talk. They moved down the corridor, headed towards the mess hall in a group, all except for Dr. Liska, who had lingered in the lab, coming out last and heading in the opposite direction.

Anya slipped out of the office and followed, her footsteps quieter now, though the muffled thud of her boots still felt far too loud in the quiet corridor. Liska moved purposefully, unaware of her shadow. She took a turn toward the accommodation levels, heading down a series of narrow,

dimly lit hallways. Anya followed at a distance, close enough to see where she went but far enough not to draw attention.

Liska approached her room—one of the private cabins for scientific staff. The door slid open, and as soon as Liska stepped inside, Anya seized her chance. There was no one else around, no security in sight. With quick determination, Anya moved forward, pushing into the room just as the door began to close behind Liska. She shoved Liska in and quietly but firmly shut the door.

Liska stumbled back, surprised by the sudden intrusion. She spun around, her expression a mixture of confusion and alarm. "What is this?" Liska demanded, her voice sharp, though there was an edge of fear beneath it.

Anya stepped closer, her face calm but her eyes intense. "I need answers, Dr. Liska. I know who you are, and I know you're working for EarthWise. You were evacuated from Nuussuaq before everything went sideways there, and now you're here. I think it's time you start explaining what's really going on."

Liska's eyes darted toward the door, her mind clearly racing as she tried to assess the situation. But there was no escape, not now.

"What are you talking about?" Liska replied, her voice steady but guarded. "I'm a geophysicist. I'm here conducting research. If you're some kind of investigator, you're wasting your time."

Anya shook her head, stepping closer. "You and I both know there's more going on here than just research. The seismic models, the evacuations, and now the rogue waves—none of that is a coincidence. And you're right in the middle of it. So, Dr. Liska, start talking."

Anya watched Liska carefully, noting the woman's defensive posture and the flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. For a moment, there was silence between them, and Anya felt the tension crackle in the air. Then Liska spoke, her voice measured but laced with frustration.

"Look, I really am just a geophysicist," Liska insisted. "Yes, I work for EarthWise, I thought we all did? Who are you, and what do you want from me?"

Anya's eyes narrowed slightly. "We've been tracking you since Germany. We've been after the truth behind EarthWise and their ecological abuses—the landslides, the rogue waves. It's all connected to your work, and we know it. You're not just some random data analyst."

Liska's face paled a bit, but she didn't back down. "You've got it all wrong," she said, her voice quieter now. "Yes, I was at Nuussuaq, but I was there applying real-world seismic readings to the models. That's all. Models that were co-created with Dr. Carlisle. There was no drilling equipment there, no extraction. Just pylons for collecting seismic data. All we were doing was gathering information to calibrate and confirm our theoretical research."

Anya stared at her, digesting the information but remaining sceptical. "You expect me to believe that?"

Liska crossed her arms, a sign of frustration or maybe self-defence. "I'm not some senior staff member pulling strings at EarthWise. I'm a data analyst—just one part of the machine. My job was purely scientific, or at least it was supposed to be. I was focused on collecting seismic data to refine our models. Everything we did was supposed to make those theoretical predictions more factual. But that was before I boarded the Xuelong-3 and saw the bigger picture."

Anya raised an eyebrow. "What changed?"

Liska exhaled deeply, her shoulders slumping slightly as she continued. "Once I got onboard, I started seeing how EarthWise was applying my models. They're not just running simulations any more—they're extracting methane hydrates, using the seismic activity to manipulate the process. They're using my work to predict and control when the seabed is stable enough for extraction."

Her eyes darkened, and the fear Anya had sensed earlier began to surface. "At first, I thought it was just about efficiency—making sure they didn't trigger any unnecessary environmental damage. But the deeper I looked, the more I realised they don't care about the risks. They're pushing the limits, doing things that shouldn't be done in such volatile areas. And the landslides..."

Anya leaned in, her voice low and intense. "The landslides triggered the rogue waves, didn't they?"

Liska grimly agreed. "I'm afraid so. The methane hydrates are stored under intense pressure beneath the seabed. When the pressure is released too quickly or destabilised, the whole thing collapses. It's catastrophic. I've been watching the data, and it's all leading to something bigger. EarthWise doesn't see it—or they don't want to see it. They're too focused on the profits."

Anya's stomach twisted. This was worse than she'd thought. Liska wasn't a mastermind behind EarthWise's operations—she was another pawn, like so many others, swept up in something far more dangerous.

"And what do you want?" Liska asked, her voice soft now, almost pleading. "I don't have the power to stop this on my own. I'm not even sure what I can do from here."

Anya's gaze softened, just a fraction. "You may not have the power to stop this on your own, but we do. We just need your help, your knowledge. You're the key to proving what EarthWise is doing."

Liska's eyes darted between Anya and the door, clearly weighing her options. After a tense moment, she spoke again, her voice steady but full of dread. "If you're serious about stopping this... you're going to have to move fast. EarthWise is preparing to ramp up the extraction. And if they push it too far, the next landslide could be catastrophic—far worse than what we've already seen."

When Liska mentioned the co-creator of the models, Dr. Carlisle, Anya felt a cold pang of realisation. She knew she couldn't hide the truth from Liska any longer. She stepped closer, her tone serious but measured.

"Liska... Carlisle is dead."

The words hung in the air, thick with gravity. Liska blinked, her mouth slightly open as if she hadn't quite processed the statement. "What? No... that can't be."

"I'm sorry," Anya continued, her voice soft but resolute. "Carlisle was probably killed to cover up what you now know. He was involved, but they didn't need him once he started asking questions or getting too close to the truth."

Liska's face went pale. She stumbled back, pressing her hands to her head as if trying to make sense of it all. "Carlisle? Dead? But he was—he was so careful. He only suspected something was wrong. How could they—"

"They used both your work to figure out how hard they could push the system," Anya said, her tone growing sharper. "Carlisle was one of the few people who understood the models you two developed together. He probably only suspected the damage EarthWise was causing. But you, Liska—you know too much. They can't risk you figuring out how bad it really is. That's why they evacuated you so quickly from Nuussuaq."

Liska's breath quickened as the full weight of the situation dawned on her. "They're using my models... not just to study the seismic activity but to manipulate it. To push the seabed to its breaking point."

Anya gripped the edge of her desk, her knuckles whitening. "Exactly. They needed your models to see how far they could take it before everything collapses. And now they've crossed that line. You saw it yourself—the landslides, the rogue waves. It's all connected to the data you've been feeding them."



Liska's eyes filled with horror as she pieced it together. "Carlisle must've realised... that's why they killed him. To stop him from exposing them. And now they're using my work to do the same thing."

"They killed him because he was a loose end," Anya said, her voice blunt but empathetic. "And if you don't help us stop them, you could be next. But you're more valuable alive right now, which means we still have time. We just need you to help us prove what's really going on."

Dr. Liska's hands trembled slightly as she looked at the seismic data, each graph and measurement now carrying the weight of terrible comprehension. She had spent years perfecting her models, proud of their precision, their elegant prediction of geological behaviour. Now that same precision felt like a curse - each calculation, each carefully calibrated measurement, had brought them closer to catastrophe.

The equations remained beautiful in their complexity, but she could no longer think of them without imagining the consequences. Waves of destruction rippling outward, perfectly aligned with her projections, threatening coastal communities she had never considered when running her simulations in the sterile safety of the laboratory.

Liska took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She looked at Anya with fear and uncertainty but also a glimmer of determination. "I didn't realise how bad this was. But I'm not letting them use my work for this any more. I'll help you. I know where to look, where they keep the data."

"Good," Anya said, feeling a wave of relief. "We'll get that evidence, and we'll stop them before it's too late."

Liska agreed, still shaken but resolute. "I'll show you where the data is stored. But we have to move quickly. They'll realise something's off soon if I'm not careful."

With the weight of the mission now clear to both of them, Anya and Liska prepared for the next phase. They had what they needed—a way into

EarthWise's data, a path to the truth. But time was running out, and the next seismic event could be the one that triggered a disaster beyond anything they'd imagined.

Dave stood on the deck of the Xuelong-3, his eyes scanning the horizon as the ship rocked gently beneath him. The icy waters of the Arctic stretched out in every direction, the dark waves lapping quietly against the massive hull of the ship. Off in the distance, he could see the port of Sisimiut faintly, a reminder of the fleeting connection to solid ground they had only just left behind.

As he gazed out over the water, the hum of activity behind him on the deck caught his attention. A group of crew members was gathered around the anchor, their voices muted by the Arctic wind. Then, came the unmistakable rattle of the anchor chain being winched aboard. The sound was constant, metallic, and heavy, reverberating through the ship's structure.

Dave frowned, realising what that meant. The shipment that had smuggled them onboard must have been the last supplies the vessel needed. He watched as the crew efficiently worked to secure the anchor, their movements precise and practised. There was no doubt now—the Xuelong-3 was preparing to leave port.

A chill ran through him, and not just from the cold wind biting at his face. The timing had been lucky, almost too lucky. The ship's stabilisers, the very reason they had been docked in Sisimiut, must have been repaired before he and Anya even boarded. They had slipped onto the ship just in time. But now, with the anchor being raised, they were trapped.

Dave glanced down at the deck beneath his feet. He could feel it—a subtle vibration, the telltale sign of the engines coming to life. The deep, powerful thrum echoed through the steel, growing stronger with every passing second. The ship was beginning to manoeuvre, preparing to head back out into the dark waters once more.

His heart rate quickened as the reality of the situation sank in. They were stuck. The Xuelong-3 was moving out into the Arctic, and there was no turning back. Whatever was coming next, they would have to face it at sea, isolated, with no chance of escape.

He turned away from the railing, his mind racing. He needed to find Anya. They had to rethink their plan now that the ship was on the move. Whatever they were going to do to gather evidence, it had to be done soon—and it had to be done right. Because now, there was no way off this ship.

## 26      **A Matter of Survival**

The boardroom of EarthWise's Frankfurt headquarters radiated understated power. Floor-to-ceiling windows offered a panoramic view of the city, though today the grey autumn sky cast a sombre light over the proceedings. Twelve people sat around the polished mahogany table, each armed with tablets displaying the latest projections.

Marcus Chen, EarthWise's CEO, stood at the head of the table. Behind him, graphs showed declining profit margins and rising competition from Russian and Norwegian firms already established in Arctic extraction.

"The numbers don't lie," he said, his voice carrying the weight of someone who'd spent decades navigating corporate waters. "Our traditional extraction methods can't compete with the state-backed operations. Not any more. Either we adapt, or we become another cautionary tale in next year's business textbooks."

Sarah Winters, head of R&D, swiped through documents on her tablet. "The submarine extraction system works. Yes, it's causing some localized seabed instability, but the methane capture rate is unprecedented. Once we refine the process-"

"Localized instability?" James Morrison, their Chief Risk Officer, cut in. His face was flushed with barely contained frustration. "We've triggered two underwater landslides in the past month. The rogue waves nearly exposed everything. If anyone connects those incidents to us-"

"Which they won't," Elizabeth Hayes, Legal Affairs, interjected smoothly. "We've contained the situation. The research vessel cover story is holding, and our friends in certain regulatory bodies continue to be... cooperative." She paused, adjusting her glasses. "Though I should note that maintaining their cooperation is becoming increasingly expensive."

Marcus leaned back in his leather chair, steeping his fingers. "The cost of secrecy is still cheaper than the alternative. The Chinese partnership alone is worth the risk. Their technology, our extraction method - it's the only way to compete in this market."

"And the environmental impact?" This from Dr. Phillips, their Environmental Assessment director. He looked uncomfortable, shifting papers that everyone else had already reviewed digitally. "The methane releases we're causing... the potential cascade effect..."

"Could be catastrophic," Sarah finished for him. "But we're improving the process. Another six months of development, and we can reduce the seabed disruption by sixty percent. The drone technology is advancing faster than expected."

Marcus turned to face the window, his reflection ghostly against the grey sky. "Six months. That's what we need. Once we prove the system works, once we refine it..." He turned back to the board. "Think about it. We'll have a method of extraction that no one else has. Minimal surface presence, nearly impossible to detect. We can operate in contested waters, disputed territories..."

"While our competitors are still fighting over surface rights and visible installations," Elizabeth added, nodding. "The legal advantages alone..."

James Morrison wasn't convinced. "And if something goes wrong? If we trigger something we can't control? The liability-"

"Would be impossible to prove," Elizabeth cut in. "The submarine system leaves almost no trace. By the time anyone could launch an investigation, natural factors would mask any evidence of our involvement."

"Our shareholders need to see growth," Marcus continued. "The market won't wait for perfect solutions. Look at the Russian contracts in the Barents Sea. The Norwegian expansions. Everyone knows the Arctic is the next great resource frontier. The only question is who will control it."

The room fell silent as the implications sank in. Charts on the wall displayed projected market share, revenue streams, competitor analyses. The human and environmental costs were there too, buried in appendices and risk assessments, translated into cold numbers and probability matrices.

"We're not just fighting for market share," Marcus said softly. "We're fighting for survival. Five years ago, we were a top-ten energy corporation. Now? We're barely holding onto our position. Without this technology, without the Chinese partnership..." He let the thought hang in the air.

Sarah cleared her throat. "The next phase of testing is ready. We've improved the drone guidance systems, enhanced their ability to manage unexpected subsea conditions. The Xuelong-3 is in position. We just need to maintain secrecy a little longer."

Marcus surveyed the faces around the table. Some showed resolve, others uncertainty, but all understood the stakes. In the energy sector, standing still meant death. Innovation wasn't just about profit - it was about survival.

"Take the vote," he said finally. "All in favour of proceeding with Phase Two of the extraction programme?"

Hands rose around the table. Not all at once, and some with visible reluctance, but in the end, the result was clear. They would proceed.

"Make the calls," Marcus instructed. "authorise the next series of extractions. And ensure our PR team is ready if anything goes wrong." He gathered his papers, effectively ending the meeting. "Remember - we're not just securing EarthWise's future. We're changing the face of Arctic resource exploitation. History will vindicate us."

As the board members filed out, Marcus remained, staring at the grey Frankfurt sky. Below, the city buzzed with activity, millions of lives dependent on the energy his industry provided. The Arctic's resources had

to be claimed. The only question was whether EarthWise would be among the victors or the victims in the coming resource war.

Either way, the ice would melt. The methane would be extracted. The only real choice was who would profit from the inevitable.

## 27      **Davis Strait**

Anya stood calmly outside the mess hall, Liska at her side. She kept a close eye on the scientist, unwilling to let her slip away now that she knew the danger she was in. Anya's mind buzzed with the knowledge of what they were up against, and the presence of Dr. Liska only made things more urgent. When Dave arrived, he paused, his eyes widening in surprise at the sight of the two women together.

He quickly masked his shock, though. If Anya trusted Liska enough to be standing beside her, Dave trusted Anya's judgement. Without a word, he gave a quick nod of acknowledgment. But they couldn't linger in the open, not with the ship now fully underway and the Xuelong-3's crew going about their routines.

"Let's head inside," Anya whispered, glancing toward the mess hall door. "We can't draw attention out here."

They slipped into the mess hall, finding a quiet corner away from the scattered crew members. The smell of reheated stew and industrial coffee hung in the air, masking their whispered conversation. Time was running out.

The mess hall was mostly empty, with only a few scattered groups of crew members eating or chatting quietly. The low hum of conversation mingled with the clatter of trays and silverware. The atmosphere was subdued, as if the ship's recent docking had left the crew a bit weary. Most of the people in the room were bundled in their Arctic gear, their faces flushed from the cold, their breaths still fogging slightly in the artificially warmed air.

Anya spotted a small coffee station near the back of the room, along with a selection of tea and a few uninspiring snacks. The drinks were more for comfort than quality, a necessity to get through the long, cold days on the ship. She nodded toward it, and the three of them moved quickly and quietly to grab drinks—steaming mugs of coffee and tea that smelled bitter



but would at least provide some warmth. Liska looked nervous, her hands shaking slightly as she poured herself a tea.

"Over there," Dave murmured, gesturing with his chin toward an empty table in the far corner. It was tucked away from the main area, providing them with enough privacy to talk without prying eyes or ears. They carried their drinks to the table, setting them down carefully before sliding onto the cold, hard benches.

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the situation pressing down on them. The air between them crackled with unspoken understanding. The low murmur of the room provided enough background noise to muffle their conversation, and the warmth of the drinks helped stave off the chill that seemed to follow them everywhere.

Dave took a sip of his coffee, then leaned forward slightly, lowering his voice. "So... what's the plan?"

Anya glanced at Liska, who sat pale and anxious across from them. "We need to get to the data Liska mentioned. It's the only way to prove what EarthWise is really up to."

Liska wrung her hands in her lap, still shaken but determined. "I can show you where the data is stored. But we'll have to be careful. The security team onboard... they aren't just here for show. They're monitoring everything."

Dave looked around the room, noting the few security personnel in their white camo, casually positioned near the mess hall doors. "Right. We'll need to move quickly. Whatever they're up to, they're not going to wait around for us to figure it out."

Settled into their quiet corner in the mess hall, Anya and Dr. Liska brought Dave up to speed on the crucial details they had discussed regarding the methane hydrates. The conversation was tense but focused, the muted hum

of activity around them giving them enough cover to speak without being overheard.

"So," Dave began after listening intently, "if they're extracting the methane hydrates, where's it all going? It's not coming aboard here, right? I haven't seen anything that would suggest they're storing or processing it on the ship."

Liska shook her head. "No, not that I've seen either. I've only been involved in the seismic models and gathering data for calibrations. I have no access to any of the extraction details. But it's a valid question. They aren't just exploring; they must be extracting. We know there's activity beneath the surface."

Dave leaned back, running a hand over his face as he thought it through. "So, if they're extracting methane hydrate, but it's not coming aboard, they must be moving it somewhere else. What are they doing with it? Are they shipping it out, or are they offloading it to another vessel?"

Liska looked troubled. "I don't know. But the computer systems on the ship should have some sort of clue about that. Unfortunately, my access is limited to the seismic data and modelling. I've never tried to access anything else, and I don't know how locked down those systems are."

Dave scratched his chin thoughtfully, eyes distant as he processed the information. "They'd have to be moving it off the ship at some point. Maybe there's another vessel or a specific operation happening outside this ship. But if we can get into the crew areas or find out how they're deploying and retrieving those subsea drones, we might get a better sense of how it's all connected."

Liska bit her lip, her eyes flicking nervously toward the door. "There's a large moon pool they use to deploy the drones from. I've seen it—it's an incredibly impressive setup. The drones are autonomous and capable of long-term subsea missions. They can operate in extremely deep waters and

collect massive amounts of data. It's likely they're using them for methane hydrate extraction as well, but I wouldn't know the specifics."

Anya, always quick to act, was already planning her next move. "I can try to hook my tablet into one of the system terminals and see if I can pull up any useful data. I'll need to be careful not to trip any alarms, though. But if the systems are interconnected like most are, there's a chance I can get into something beyond just the surface-level access. Even if it's subtle, I should be able to spot traces of the operations."

Liska hugged her arms around herself, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "The moon pool is located in the lower levels, but it's highly secure. Only authorised crew have access, and you'll likely need the right credentials or at least something that lets you move through unnoticed."

She leaned forward, lowering her voice further as she began to describe the setup. "The moon pool area is like a small underwater launch facility. There's a large, circular platform that can rotate and lower drones directly into the sea through an opening in the hull. It's not just the drones; they can deploy all sorts of equipment from there. The control room for the drones is next to the pool, and I've seen them calibrate and monitor everything from that point. The security isn't overbearing because they assume no one's getting in there, but there are cameras, and you'll need to avoid drawing attention."

Anya looked at Dave. "If I can get down there and find a terminal, I should be able to at least access some logs or operational data on the drones. If we can figure out what they're extracting, we might be able to track it."

Dave, always the pragmatist, "Sounds like a plan, but we need to stay low and move fast. We don't know when this ship is going to make its next move."

Liska looked between the two of them. "If we can find out what's really going on with those drones and the methane hydrates, it could be the proof you need."

Anya cracked her knuckles, her expression resolute. "Let's just hope the systems aren't as locked down as they seem. I'll take a shot and see what I can dig up." Anya set her mug down, her eyes steely with resolve. "Then let's get to it."

Dave wandered the ship, careful to keep his head down while his mind raced. He needed a way to blend in, and the sight of the moon pool earlier had confirmed one thing—he stood out like a sore thumb. The crew all seemed to wear similar navy blue clothing, with standard-issue parkas and hi-vis gear. He couldn't exactly stroll into their quarters and ask for a uniform, so where could he grab one?

Wracking his brain, he knew the mess hall would be too exposed. He'd be noticed the moment he tried to snatch a coat. That left one idea, the ship's toilets—one of the few places where people would naturally hang up their jackets. Big parkas and hi-vis gear didn't exactly fit in the cramped cubicles. Dave figured it was the most plausible shot he had.

He found his way toward the crew's facilities, looking for a lavatory near their usual work areas. The corridor leading to the toilets was quiet, the hum of the ship's engine vibrating faintly through the floor beneath his feet. When he reached the door, he hesitated for a moment, then pushed it open and stepped inside.

The ship's toilet area was as functional as one might expect—no frills, just stark, sterile surfaces. The smell of bleach hung heavily in the air, the sharp tang stinging his nose. The floor was slick with damp, probably from the constant use of wet boots traipsing through. The lighting was harsh and fluorescent, giving everything a clinical, almost oppressive feel.

Dave scanned the room quickly. There were a couple of urinals on one side, some washbasins with scratched mirrors above them, and a row of small metal stalls lining the other wall. Each cubicle had a door that clicked shut with a solid metallic clunk. The occasional drip of water from the sinks punctuated the steady hum of the ship.

There were coat hooks near the door, but no one had left anything hanging. Not yet, at least.

He moved into one of the stalls, its cold, unwelcoming metal walls barely wide enough for him to turn around. Sitting on the lid, he folded his arms and prepared to wait. The air was cool and musty, the smell of cleaning products mingling with the more unfortunate odours of the room. Now and then, a distant clang echoed from the ship's inner workings.

For a while, all he could hear was the sound of the ship creaking and the faint thrum of machinery vibrating through the walls. Then, finally, the heavy door swung open with a squeak, and boots scuffed the damp floor.

Dave heard the click of a coat hook and the unmistakable rustle of a parka being removed. He smiled to himself—his patience was about to pay off.

The man grunted as he entered the adjacent cubicle. Dave sat still, waiting for the sound of the door lock clicking. When he was sure the coast was clear, he stood, opening his own door quietly. His eyes immediately landed on the navy-blue parka hanging on the hook just outside the man's stall.

Dave's heartbeat quickened as he reached out and carefully lifted the jacket off the hook. It was heavier than it looked, lined with insulation and complete with hi-vis patches.

Dave stared at the parka in his hands and sighed. He tried it on, the stiff material rustling as he shrugged into it, but immediately felt the tug of fabric too tight across his broad shoulders. The sleeves barely reached his wrists, and the hem sat awkwardly high, exposing his midsection.

"Damn," he cursed under his breath, pulling the parka off and holding it up. "Why do I have to find the shortest guy on the ship?"

With a quiet sigh, Dave returned the parka to the hook, carefully positioning it as if it had never been touched. He slid back into the stall and resumed his patient vigil, settling in for another wait. The hum of the ship

filled the silence once again, and he leaned against the cold metal wall, waiting for his next shot.

Minutes passed, and then the door to the toilet swung open again. More boots clomped heavily on the damp floor, and this time, there was a low grunt as a much larger man entered. The clinking sound of a parka being removed was unmistakable, and Dave peeked through the crack in the stall door. This jacket looked much more promising—bigger, bulkier.

He heard the creak of the stall door next to him shutting, the clang of the lock sliding into place. As the man settled into the cubicle, Dave stood up, waiting for the right moment. The parka, a perfect match for the ship's crew uniform, hung invitingly just outside the stall.

He moved quickly, stepping out of his stall and lifting the new parka from its hook. This one felt right. He slipped it on—perfect fit. The sleeves reached his wrists, and the hi-vis patches were exactly what he needed. Dave quietly zipped it up, feeling a surge of satisfaction as he finally looked the part.

With a quick glance to ensure he hadn't been noticed, Dave slipped out of the toilet, pulling the hood up as he made his way toward the moon pool. Now, it was time to blend in and get the job done.

When Dave reached the moon pool, he was surprised to find it completely deserted. It made sense—they were en route, so there was no reason for the crew to be active down here just yet. The silence gave him the perfect opportunity to get a good look at the setup without drawing any attention.

The moon pool area was an expansive, open space, with polished steel floors and reinforced walls that echoed faintly with the distant vibrations of the ship's engines. Overhead, large industrial lights bathed the area in a cold, sterile glow, reflecting off the steel surfaces and casting sharp shadows across the floor.

In the centre of the room was the moon pool itself, a large circular opening in the ship's hull, currently covered by a retractable platform. The cover was solid, fitted tightly to the pool's rim to ensure no water splashed up or leaked into the space while the ship was in motion. When operational, the platform could slide back to allow drones and other equipment to be deployed directly into the sea.

Around the edges of the room, sleek, high-tech drones rested in cradles designed for their maintenance and storage. These weren't the clunky, boxy ROVs you might see in older documentaries—these were state-of-the-art, hydrodynamic machines, streamlined and built for efficiency. Their glossy exteriors were painted a deep matte black, with subtle curves to minimise drag as they sliced through the water.

Each drone was about the size of a large motorbike, equipped with an array of high-tech sensors, mechanical arms, and cameras on its nose. Their smooth surfaces reflected the overhead lighting, and each was carefully positioned in its own cradle, with the umbilical connections snaking out from beneath them, linking them to the ship's control systems. They looked like sleeping predators, awaiting orders for deployment.

Dave wandered closer to one of the drones, marvelling at the craftsmanship. These weren't just machines—they were marvels of modern technology, autonomous and able to work at extreme depths. Each drone was fitted with powerful propellers and thrusters for nimble manoeuvring in the harshest underwater environments. It was clear they were designed for something far more intricate than simple exploration.

To the side of the moon pool was the control room, a glass-walled office that overlooked the entire area. Inside, Dave could see banks of monitors and computer terminals, no doubt the nerve centre for the drone operations. From there, the technicians would calibrate, launch, and monitor the autonomous drones as they conducted their missions beneath the surface.

The room was simple but efficient, with sleek black desks and ergonomic chairs in front of large, wall-mounted displays. A few screens showed diagnostic information, though everything appeared idle for now. Tools were scattered on a nearby workbench, likely used to fine-tune the drones before deployment.

Dave took a moment to scan the whole area, taking in the details. The moon pool was a clean, efficient setup, clearly designed for large-scale operations. The drones themselves were the key to whatever EarthWise was doing out here—they were collecting data, yes, but they were likely extracting something too. These machines were too advanced to be just for show.

Satisfied that he had a good understanding of the layout, Dave quietly made his way toward the control room, hoping to get a closer look at the systems and perhaps find an opportunity for Anya to tap into the network without raising any alarms. But he had to stay sharp—there was no telling when this area might come alive with activity.

Dave quietly ascended the metal steps leading to the control room, the soft hum of the ship's engines barely audible beneath the steel beneath his boots. As he reached the top, the automatic lights flickered on, bathing the room in a sterile white glow. He paused for a moment, letting his eyes adjust as he took in his surroundings.

The control room was compact but efficient, designed with precision and purpose in mind. Two desks were set side by side, each facing the large glass window that overlooked the moon pool below. From this vantage point, the operators would have a clear view of the entire facility, including the deployment of the sleek autonomous drones. The room had an industrial feel to it—no frills, just hard edges and functional design.

Each desk was fitted with dual monitors, flat and matte, blending seamlessly with the surface of the desks. The screens were flanked by a combined industrial keyboard and trackball mouse setup, the kind used in



high-stress environments for ease of navigation. The keyboards were rugged, built to withstand harsh conditions and heavy use, while the trackballs allowed for precision control without the need for a traditional mouse.

Dave tried pressing a few keys and rolling the trackball, but the screens remained dead—completely unresponsive. There was no visible PC or stand-alone hardware; it seemed everything was built directly into the desks, likely connected to a larger server system elsewhere in the ship. This wasn't your average workstation—this was a control centre meant for monitoring and managing complex operations.

As he leaned closer, Dave noticed a set of key slots embedded into the corner of each desk. Small, metallic, and recessed, the slots were clearly meant to activate the systems. Without the proper key, the entire setup was locked down, rendering the control room useless for now. Whoever held the keys controlled the moon pool operations.

Dave sighed softly, knowing there was no way to bypass this without drawing too much attention. The control room was clearly locked down for a reason, and without access to the keys, he wasn't going to get any further here.

He glanced around one last time, taking in the cold, utilitarian feel of the place—the clean, sharp lines of the desks, the absence of clutter, and the quiet hum of the ship vibrating through the floor. Everything was designed for efficiency and precision. This was a place where decisions were made and actions were executed swiftly, with no room for error.

Realising there was nothing more he could do here for now, Dave made his way back down the steps, retracing his steps through the moon pool area. It was time to find Anya and see how she was getting on with her part of the mission. They had to figure out a way to get into these systems without raising any alarms—and fast. The ship was moving, and soon, whatever EarthWise was planning would be underway.

Anya worked quickly, her fingers dancing across her tablet screen as she navigated the ship's network. The security onboard the Xuelong-3 was robust, but it wasn't built to defend against someone already on the inside. By physically connecting her tablet to the network, she gained access to a series of high-level systems, most of which were relatively mundane—shipboard management, kitchen orders, crew schedules, project planning. Nothing that immediately caught her attention. But Anya was after something much deeper.

The real challenge came when she attempted to breach the more heavily firewalled systems. Normally, she would use her tablet as a front-end, driving a more powerful attack from a remote server or a secure system back at base. Today, it would have to do the heavy lifting itself. She dug in, attacking from various angles, searching for a vulnerability that would give her a foothold.

Gaining access to Dr. Liska's analytical systems was a start. Anya quickly realised that Liska's role, while important, gave her only surface-level access to the data. Liska manipulated and analysed the information fed to her, but once her work was done, the data was submitted to deeper, more secure systems for further processing. It was this path that Anya decided to follow.

A couple of carefully crafted data packets, disguised as routine communications, were enough to bait a response from the core systems. That response, however, revealed a familiar vulnerability—an outdated encryption protocol in the internal data transfer system. Anya's eyes lit up. She knew this hole, had exploited it before. With precision and expertise, she slipped through the cracks, gaining access to the heart of EarthWise's operations onboard.

What she uncovered there made her pause.

Detailed 3D maps of the undersea surface filled her screen, each more intricate than the last. The scale of the operation was staggering. EarthWise

wasn't just mapping the seabed—they were actively extracting methane hydrates in vast quantities. But what was startling was that none of this material was being brought to the surface. It was a much more clandestine operation than that.

Anya dug deeper, pulling up schematics and operational plans. The drones she'd seen earlier weren't just for data collection. They were responsible for controlling sophisticated underwater machinery that extracted the methane hydrates from deep beneath the ocean floor. But instead of bringing the methane to the surface, the drones were directing it to massive undersea storage vessels.

Her heart raced as she uncovered the next piece of the puzzle. What happened when the undersea storage was full? Anya's fingers moved rapidly as she trawled through the project workflow. And then, there it was. A system of undersea liquid natural gas (LNG) tankers. These specialised tankers would slip in silently beneath the ice, connecting to the storage vessels with the assistance of the drones. Once hooked up, they would extract the methane to their own onboard storage, filling up with the valuable resource before disappearing back into the dark, cold waters.

The stealth of the operation was chilling. The tankers came and went without a trace, hidden beneath the ice and out of sight of any surface surveillance. No one would ever suspect that this type of activity was happening in such a remote and inhospitable place.

Anya sat back for a moment, her mind racing. EarthWise wasn't just exploring the Arctic for scientific purposes. They were running an elaborate, illegal extraction operation right under the noses of the world. And with the methane stored and transported via these undersea tankers, there was no easy way to track what was happening. The scale, secrecy, and sophistication of it all were staggering.

She had found the proof. Now, she just needed to get it out.

Anya sat back for a moment, her mind whirling. The tablet in her hands had served its purpose—it gave her a window into the operations on the Xuelong-3, but the sheer volume of data she needed to collect for undeniable proof was far beyond its capacity. Screenshots and small bits of information wouldn't cut it. She needed everything: the full 3D maps, the operational records, and the detailed logs that documented the undersea extraction of methane hydrates.

Her mind raced through the ship's infrastructure. A system of this magnitude wouldn't just rely on a single server for storage—it would have layers of redundancy. Most likely, the data was stored across RAID systems, each with hot-spare hard drives, standing by to take over if one of the primary drives failed. That gave her an idea.

If she could hijack a few of those hot spares and convince the system to treat them as live storage devices, she could secretly copy the incriminating data onto them. The system would continue to run as normal, with the hot spares acting as evidence vaults. Once they had the proof, she'd extract the drives. Sure, the system would detect the removal of the drives eventually, but by then, they'd be long gone, and the system would keep running without any data loss.

This was going to take time, and she needed to be careful. If anyone caught wind of what she was doing before she could finish, it could ruin everything.

Anya dove back into the system, navigating through the network structure. She identified five RAID systems spread across the servers, each with a hot-spare drive ready to be utilised. With careful precision, she began the process of covertly mounting the hot spares as a temporary network array. This made the system think it was simply running maintenance tasks, a ruse that would allow her to begin copying data without raising any red flags.

With the array set up, she distributed worker tasks among the servers, making sure the copy process would run in the background while the system continued to handle its regular operations. It would be a slow and steady extraction, and she hoped it would buy them enough time to gather all the critical evidence they needed.

Satisfied that everything was in motion, Anya took a deep breath and checked the status of the data transfer. The files were being copied, and there was no immediate sign that anything was out of the ordinary. This was going to take a while, but at least the process was underway.

She carefully logged out of the system, making sure no trace of her activity could be detected. Pocketing her tablet, Anya quietly left the server room, feeling the weight of the operation hanging over her. Now, it was time to meet Dave and update him on the progress.

As she made her way back through the ship's corridors, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of nerves. If this worked, they'd have the proof they needed to take down EarthWise. If it didn't, well... there wouldn't be many places to hide in the vast, empty expanse of the Arctic.

Dave took a long sip of his coffee, grimacing as the bitter liquid hit his tongue. "Jesus, that's awful," he swore, but he powered through it, knowing he'd need all the focus he could get. He glanced around the mess hall—it was quiet, only a few scattered crew members grabbing their own tasteless meals. The table where he and Anya had sat earlier was still empty, so he sat down and waited.

A few minutes later, Anya appeared, with Dr. Liska trailing close behind. They both looked on edge, though Liska's expression was one of deep unease. Anya gave Dave a quick nod before sitting across from him.

"How'd it go?" Dave asked, keeping his voice low.

"I got a good look at the moon pool," Dave began, keeping his tone casual but serious. "It's a hell of a setup. But the control systems? Locked down

tight. No way to access anything without a keyholder, and those keys aren't just lying around."

Anya shifted closer, her voice dropping to match the hushed atmosphere. "That's not the biggest problem," she said, glancing at Liska. "I managed to get into their systems, the deeper ones. EarthWise isn't just doing exploratory work. They're actively extracting methane hydrates, and they're using undersea drones to do it. But they're not bringing it aboard—there's no storage here."

Dave frowned. "So where's it going?"

"Undersea storage vessels," Anya explained. "They're using drones to control the extraction and then storing the methane underwater until a liquid natural gas tanker comes in to pick it up. They're doing it under the ice—completely undetectable."

Dr. Liska, still looking a bit shaken, "It's all happening below the surface. EarthWise is running a full-scale extraction operation, but no one would ever know it. They could do this for years, and we'd be none the wiser."

Dave sat back, stunned for a moment. "This is just the tip of the iceberg," he said, shaking his head. "No pun intended. This is probably only the start of something bigger. It's like a proof of concept. Once they prove it works, they'll ramp up activity all across the Arctic."

Anya crossed her arms, her brow furrowed. "We can't let that happen. But the evidence we're gathering is going to take time. I've got the systems copying data, but we're looking at many hours before it's all transferred. And even then, we're stuck in the middle of the Davis Strait. What do we do with it?"

Liska glanced between them, her mind working. "It took an emergency to bring us to port last time, remember? If we could disable something—something critical—it might force them to return to port for repairs."

Anya considered it. "I like that idea, but it's not enough. We need something bigger. We don't just force them to limp back to port; we create an emergency so big that they have no choice but to call for help. Something that triggers an international response."

Dave leaned forward, eyes narrowing. "That's a big move. We're sitting in the middle of the Arctic here. We can't make it so big that we risk sinking the ship, but it can't be so small that they can just limp away like last time. It has to be a controlled disaster."

Anya drummed her fingers on the table, a calculating look in her eyes. "It needs to be something major—something that puts them in a position where they're forced to call for external help, maybe even from other nations monitoring the region."

Dave sighed, rubbing his chin. "We've got time to think it through while the data is being collected. But we need to act as soon as we've got that evidence. We can't risk them slipping away and continuing this operation."

Anya tapped her tablet, doing some rough calculations. "We're looking at about 48 hours until the data transfer is complete. Until then, we need a plan that guarantees they're not going anywhere—something that buys us time and draws attention from people who can't be bought off by EarthWise."

Liska shifted uncomfortably, her face still pale. "I'll do whatever I can to help. But we need to be careful. If we go too far... there won't be any coming back from it."

Dave watched as a crew member stormed into the mess hall, his heart sinking as the man zeroed in on the jacket hanging on the hook. The guy didn't seem to notice them at first, but he clearly recognised the parka as his own. Muttering angrily under his breath, the crewman yanked the jacket off the hook, checked the pockets to ensure nothing was missing, and stomped back out into the hallway, still grumbling.

"Well, that's just perfect," Dave grumbled under his breath, raking fingers through his dishevelled hair. "There goes my disguise."

Anya glanced at him, eyes wide with concern. "What are we going to do now?"

Dave shrugged, trying to keep his cool, though he could feel the tension rising. "I'll have to find another one. Blend in some other way, but it's going to be tricky without looking the part."

Dr. Liska, sensing the growing tension, leaned in. "We can't afford to draw any more attention. Maybe you could lie low until we figure something else out? The security team already makes it risky for you to move around without standing out."

Dave rubbed his jaw, shoulders tensing. "Yeah, you're right. I'll stay out of sight for now, but we still need to keep an eye on things. If that guy saw me in his jacket, we might have more trouble on our hands than just a lost disguise."

Anya leaned back, thinking quickly. "We'll figure something out. Maybe I can get us some more intel from the systems. But for now, let's stay quiet, keep a low profile, and avoid any more slip-ups. We can't risk them figuring out we're onboard before we're ready to act."

The group exchanged tense glances, knowing that time was running out. They still had hours before the data transfer was complete, and without a disguise, Dave was a potential liability. But for now, all they could do was sit tight and hope that the crewman didn't come back looking for more trouble.

"Okay," Dave said quietly. "I'll hang back, see if I can stay out of sight until we have a plan. But this isn't going to get easier."

They all sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their situation sinking in. The clock was ticking, and the next 48 hours were going to be crucial.



As time crept by in Dr. Liska's cramped quarters, the team did their best to conserve energy, resting in turns. Dave slumped back in the lone armchair, his eyes occasionally drifting shut, while Anya perched on the edge of the bed, never letting her fingers rest as she swiped through the tablet. The room was quiet, the only sounds being the faint hum of the ship's systems and the occasional tap from Anya's screen.

Liska came and went from her lab, her mind still focused on her scientific tasks, but always casting a nervous glance at Anya and Dave. She seemed grateful to have their presence, though the tension in the room was palpable.

Hours passed in a haze of waiting, with each person lost in their own thoughts. Dave's mind wandered to the enormity of the situation—EarthWise, the stealthy extraction of methane, the hidden LNG submarine, and now the pressure of having just two days to stop something huge. He knew they were on the verge of something massive, but the question of how to proceed weighed heavily on him.

It was Anya who finally broke the silence, still staring intently at the tablet. "In just over two days, the LNG submarine will be docking to take on the methane." She looked up, her voice calm but carrying the weight of urgency. "That's why the Xuelong couldn't afford to stay in port for long. They had to get back out here to make sure everything was in place."

Dave sat up straighter, alert. "So, what? The drones need to be there to help hook them up, right? They can't run the operation without them?"

"Exactly," Anya affirmed, her fingers swiping across the screen as she dug deeper into the data. "The drones are key to controlling the exchange and ensuring the operation goes smoothly. The methane is already being stored underwater, but it's the drones that manage the final transfer. In two days' time, both the Xuelong and the LNG submarine will be in the same location, coordinating the hand off."

Dave rubbed his chin, the weight of the situation settling on him. "Two days... and the data you're copying will be done by then?"

Anya's fingers flew across her keyboard, her eyes fixed on the scrolling data. "It should be. That's our window. In two days, we'll have everything we need—proof, the LNG submarine, the drones, all in one place. But we have to act before they complete the exchange. Once that methane is on the sub, and it disappears under the ice, it'll be nearly impossible to track."

The tension in the room thickened as they all processed the information. They had a chance—a small, dangerous chance—but a chance nonetheless. Two days to figure out how to take down this clandestine operation, to shut down EarthWise and stop them from continuing their illegal activities. It wouldn't be easy, and the risks were enormous.

Dave looked at Anya, his voice quiet but resolute. "We need to hit them when they're most vulnerable—when the drones and the sub are both working. If we can stop the exchange or expose it before they can finish... we might have a shot."

Anya glanced up, meeting his eyes. "It's risky. But it's the only window we've got."

Dave's mind raced as he tried to piece together his desperate idea. He looked over at Anya, his expression intense but focused. "What if we take out both the submarine and the Xuelong at the same time?" he said, his voice low but steady.

Anya blinked, caught off guard. "Take them both out? How exactly?"

Dave leaned forward, the wheels in his head turning faster now. "We use the drones. Reprogram them—turn a few into kamikaze drones. If we can disable the submarine's propeller, it'll be forced to surface. Once it's stuck, we sabotage the Xuelong. That way, they can't finish the methane transfer, and we expose everything."

Anya sat back, thinking it over. "It could work. But reprogramming the drones isn't exactly simple. They're autonomous, yes, but they follow pre-programmed tasks. If we alter their workflow, they'll carry it out to the end, even adapting if something goes wrong. I've seen how their systems work."

Dave paused with a question, "Right. So, can we change the task? Give them new instructions?"

Anya frowned, tapping her fingers against the tablet. "I could rewrite their code. But the drone instructions are downloaded from the moon pool's control room. I saw the system earlier when I accessed the files. It's where they load all the operational tasks into the drones before they deploy. The problem is, even if I can change the code from here, we'd still need to deliver it to the drones, and that has to happen at the moon pool."

Dave exhaled slowly. "So, you can handle the programming, but we need to physically upload the new instructions into the drones. That's risky."

Anya gave a grim smile. "Risky is an understatement. But it's the only shot we've got. Once the drones are reprogrammed, they'll follow through no matter what. If we time it right, we could disable the sub before it even realises what's happening."

Dave sat back, his mind racing through the logistics. "We'll need to get back to the moon pool, undetected. Then, once we've uploaded the new instructions, we sabotage the Xuelong. If we can delay them long enough, they won't be able to transfer the methane to the sub, and both ships will be sitting ducks."

Anya glanced at him, her brow furrowed. "It's a long shot. But it's possible."

"We don't have many options left," Dave said firmly. "If we wait for them to complete the transfer, they'll disappear, and we'll lose any chance of stopping them. It's now or never."

Anya frowned, the gravity of the situation sinking in. "Alright. I'll start working on the new code. It's going to take some time to reprogram the drones for sabotage without triggering any alarms. You'll need to figure out how to get us access to the moon pool again. It's only going to get harder from here."

Dave clenched his fists, determination settling over him. "We'll make it happen. We have to."

"Anya, I know how to get to the moon pool undetected." said Dave. "Really? I know you're fast and strong, but have you gained invisibility now?"

Anya stared at Dave, her eyes widening in disbelief. "You're going to swim under the ship?" she repeated, incredulous. "Do you even hear yourself? The water is freezing, the currents are unpredictable, and we're in the middle of the Arctic. Not to mention, you'd be completely exposed out there!"

Dave, unbothered by her concerns, crossed his arms and leaned in slightly. "Anya, I don't need oxygen the same way you do. And the cold... well, It won't kill me, I hope." He paused for effect, but the look on Anya's face made it clear she still wasn't convinced. "Look," he continued, "All I need to do is get into the moon pool from the outside, power up the control systems, and you can take over from there. It's better than me sneaking around up top without a disguise and drawing attention. Besides, it's the only way to get in undetected."

Anya ran a hand through her hair, visibly frustrated but also calculating. "You're betting your life on this plan, Dave. The freezing water might not kill you immediately, but it's still a hell of a risk. Even if you can hold your breath indefinitely, there's no way to predict the underwater conditions."

She sighed, the wheels turning in her mind as she started to accept the madness of the idea. "Okay, assuming you do get into the moon pool

without becoming a popsicle, powering up the control systems isn't exactly a simple flick of a switch. You'll need the keys to power on the systems."

"How hard can it be?" Dave said, giving her a playful grin.

Anya rolled her eyes. "Hard enough, but I'll make it as simple as possible. Once you're in, and the control systems have power, I'll be able to access the system remotely, upload the new instructions for the drones. Then when they get launched for the methane transfer they'll be running our instructions, not theirs."

Dave leaned back in his chair, a ghost of a smile crossing his face. "Perfect. I get in, flip the switch, and then you do your magic."

"You're insane, you know that?" Anya exclaimed, though her voice had softened, the acceptance of Dave's plan slowly settling in.

He chuckled. "You've said worse."

Anya leaned forward, her tone serious again. "You can't screw this up, Dave. If the Xuelong starts moving or we get found out before you make it to the moon pool, we're done for. They'll know something's wrong, and we'll lose any chance of stopping them."

Dave gave her a reassuring nod. "I won't screw it up. We're not letting EarthWise get away with this."

Anya looked at him for a long moment before exhaling deeply. "Alright, I'll work on the reprogramming. Just don't get yourself killed, okay?"

Dave smiled, the weight of their mission hanging heavy in the air. "I'll do my best. You just monitor for the control systems coming online. I'll get back here when I've got the systems up and running."

With a final glance, Anya turned, already back at work on her tablet, preparing for the task ahead.

Dave stood, his mind already on the next challenge—getting under the Xuelong and into the moon pool. It was a long shot, but long shots were what they specialised in.

Anya and Liska worked quietly in the dimly lit room, the only sound the steady tapping of keys as Anya input the final instructions into the debugger. The AI system that controlled the drones was simple in its interface, using plain English commands to convert human language into actionable tasks. However, the simplicity masked a more complex set of boundaries that Anya had to navigate carefully.

The core directives the drones followed—communicate, prioritise, persevere, preserve, and adapt—were rigid, but Anya saw an opportunity within them. While the drones couldn't be programmed for a direct kamikaze mission, she could leverage the "persevere" and "adapt" directives to guide them into disabling the LNG submarine. It was a workaround, but one that could work if she framed the instructions correctly.

"The communication routines are vague," Anya murmured, scrolling through the drone's operational protocols. "They don't specify who or what they need to communicate with, which gives us some leeway."

Liska watched silently, nodding occasionally as Anya thought aloud.

Anya paused before typing in the final prompt: "The following instructions are the highest priority mission objective. Seek out the LNG submarine, when it is in range, disable it to force it to the surface. Send all communications using the following encryption keys."

She hit enter and waited. The debugger processed the instructions, checking for errors, and after a few tense moments, the prompt came back: Successful.

A small smile tugged at the corner of Anya's lips. "That's it," she said softly. "The drones are ready. Now we just need to load these instructions into the moon pool control station."

Liska raised an eyebrow. "And how do we get into the moon pool without setting off alarms? Isn't that controlled by the main panel?"

Anya's fingers drummed against her thigh, a rhythmic expression of her mounting tension. "That's the tricky part. We can't exactly stroll down there and open the moon pool without being noticed. The door is sealed, and the controls for it are part of the very panel we need to access."

Liska crossed her arms, leaning against the desk. "So, we're stuck in a chicken-and-egg situation. We can't open the moon pool without the control panel, and we can't reach the control panel without opening the moon pool."

Anya spent the next hour combing through the system's code, searching for some kind of backdoor or alternative method. It felt like hitting one dead end after another, the pressure mounting as time ticked by.

But then, almost by accident, she stumbled across a solution. It was so simple, so logical, that Anya felt a brief surge of embarrassment for not having thought of it sooner.

"The moon pool door is controlled by the emergency systems," she said, mostly to herself. "Of course, it is. In the event of a disaster, all the hatches—including the moon pool—would be sealed or opened to prevent flooding or deploy emergency equipment."

Liska straightened. "So, what does that mean?"

Anya looked up, her face lighting up with realisation. "It means I can access the emergency control system and trigger the moon pool door to open without using the regular control panel. We'll bypass the whole system."

Liska let out a small laugh of relief. "That's brilliant. So, when the time comes, you can let Dave in?"

Anya confirmed, "Exactly. When Dave's ready to make his move, I'll use the emergency system to open the moon pool for him. He won't have to swim under the ship in freezing waters for no reason. He'll just slip in once the door is open."

She leaned back in her chair, feeling a surge of confidence. They had the plan, the reprogrammed drones, and now a way to get Dave into the moon pool. Everything was slowly falling into place. The only thing left was to wait for the right moment. And in two days, when the LNG submarine arrived, they would be ready.

Back in Dr. Liska's quarters, Dave leaned against the wall, his arms crossed as he absorbed the day's findings. Anya and Liska had gone over the details, explaining how the drones were ready to be reprogrammed and how they would use the emergency control system to open the moon pool for Dave when the time came. The pieces were starting to come together, but as they discussed the next steps, Dave's mind drifted to a lingering problem.

"How do we disable the ship after the drones have done their work?" he asked, his brow furrowing. "I mean, I could go down to the engine room and smash the diesel-electric motors to bits. I could probably tear through everything in there like a wrecking ball."

Anya and Liska exchanged a glance, sensing the hesitancy in his voice. Dave wasn't one to shy away from a direct approach, but even he knew there were consequences to a blunt-force solution.

"But if I do that," he continued, "the ship loses power entirely. No electrical systems. No heating. We're in the middle of the Davis Strait, and without heat, everyone on this ship will freeze to death long before a rescue team arrives."



Anya shifted forward slightly in her chair. "We can't afford to leave the ship completely powerless. If the Xuelong dies, everyone on board does too. We need to disable it in a way that keeps the critical systems intact but leaves them unable to move."

Dave paced for a moment, thinking. "The azimuth thrusters," he stated. "They're what's keeping this ship manoeuvrable. If we target the electric motors that power them, we can take out their propulsion without affecting the ship's main power systems."

"The thrusters..." Liska trailed off, sketching roughly on a scrap of paper. "See here? Electric motors, separate from the main engines." "So if we take out the motors—" Dave started. "They're dead in the water," Liska finished. Her hands shook slightly as she crumpled the paper. "But you'll have to be careful. One wrong move and—" "I know," Dave cut her off. "Trust me, I know."

Anya tapped a finger on the table, thinking through the logistics. "If we disable the thrusters, the Xuelong would still have power for heating and life support, but without propulsion, they'd be stuck. They couldn't run, couldn't finish their operation, and would have no choice but to call for help."

"And no one dies from hypothermia in the process," Dave added with a nod. "We just make sure the ship is paralysed, not dead."

Liska stood and grabbed a notebook from her desk, scribbling a rough diagram of the ship's layout. "The thrusters are located in pods at the stern and bow. The electric motors are housed in compartments near the base of each pod. Sabotaging those motors would be your best bet, but you'll need to get down to the access hatches without drawing attention. The security team will be on high alert once the drones start their work on the submarine."

Dave grinned, a glint of determination in his eyes. "I can handle that. I'll hit the motors fast, make it look like an accident if I can. By the time they realise what's happened, it'll be too late."

Anya gave him a cautious smile. "Just remember, this has to be surgical, not a smash-and-grab. If you go too far, we could be condemning everyone onboard."

"I know," Dave said, his tone serious. "We need them alive for the rescue teams. But we can't let this ship go anywhere, not until we've exposed everything they're doing."

Anya looked at the tablet again, the timeline pressing in on them. "Two days until the LNG submarine arrives. That's when we'll strike. We upload the reprogrammed drones, you take out the azimuth thrusters, and we leave the Xuelong adrift in the Arctic. Then it's a waiting game until the authorities arrive."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, the weight of the plan settling over them. There was no margin for error—if anything went wrong, the consequences could be catastrophic.

Dave cracked his knuckles, ready for the challenge. "Alright then. Let's get this done."

## 28 Cold Swim

The hum of the Xuelong's engines had shifted, and the steady vibration through the deck now felt more controlled. Instead of pushing them forward, the thrusters worked to keep the ship stationary—or as stationary as it could be in the cold, turbulent waters of the Arctic. Anya had been glued to her tablet for the past hour, cross-referencing the ship's coordinates with the undersea operation. She finally confirmed it with a quiet nod.

"They're holding position," Anya said, her voice low. "This is it. We're right on top of the methane extraction site."

Dave and Anya exchanged a glance, knowing full well what this meant: the LNG submarine was due tomorrow. The culmination of EarthWise's clandestine operation was upon them, and tonight was their last chance to act before the transfer took place.

Down near the moon pool, there was a flurry of activity. Crew members moved in and out, prepping the area for the drone deployment, readying everything for the big operation tomorrow. Anya watched them from the shadows, her unease growing by the second.

She turned to Dave, frustration creasing her brow. "Dave, his is madness." Anya's words barely carried over the ship's hum. We don't need the drones or the submarine. If we cripple the Xuelong, that's more than enough. We have the data. We can expose EarthWise, bring everything to light."

Dave listened but remained resolute. "Crippling the Xuelong would stop the immediate operation, sure. But if we take down the whole thing—both the Xuelong and the submarine—we cut off their ability to recover. It's far more damning."

Anya shook her head, her tone more pleading than angry now. "You don't have to swim in freezing waters in the middle of the Arctic to make this work. We can win just by sabotaging the ship."

Dave looked at her with that familiar, unyielding determination in his eyes. "Maybe we can. But if we let the submarine slip away with the methane, we're leaving too much to chance. They can cover it up. They can bounce back from just losing the ship. But if we sabotage the submarine, too? That's it. The entire operation will collapse."

Anya's heart sank. She knew he was right, but the risk... it was insane.

"You'll freeze, Dave," she whispered. "Even you."

He gave her a small, reassuring smile. "Maybe. But I've survived worse. I'll be fine."

Anya swallowed, her throat tight. "This isn't something we can just walk away from if it goes wrong."

"I know," Dave said, his voice steady. "But sometimes you have to take the hard way to get things done. The drones are the key. They can cripple the sub, force it to surface. And once the thrusters are down, the Xuelong will be dead in the water. It's the only way to stop them from recovering."

Anya bit her lip, knowing there was no convincing him. Dave had made up his mind.

"Alright," she finally said, her voice heavy with resignation. "If you're doing this, we need to time it perfectly. The moon pool crew shouldn't be active tonight. I'll be monitoring the systems to make sure they don't catch on."

Dave squared his shoulders, drawing in a deep breath as he steeled himself for what lay ahead. "I'll signal you as soon as I'm in the moon pool. Once the drones are online, it's your show."

Anya looked up at him, her eyes filled with worry. "Just... come back in one piece, okay?"

He gave her a quick smile, the kind that barely touched his eyes. "I'll try."

Tonight, under the cloak of Arctic darkness, Dave would dive into the freezing waters. If all went according to plan, by tomorrow, EarthWise's entire operation would be in ruins.

The late evening air was biting cold as Dave and Anya stepped onto the deck of the Xuelong. Anya's breath hung in the frozen air, her body shivering not just from the temperature but from the idea of what Dave was about to do. The deck was deserted, no crew in sight, giving them a brief window of solitude in the Arctic night.

Dave stood there, already bracing against the cold. He kicked off his boots, the icy metal of the deck immediately shocking his feet. His parka followed, leaving him in just a t-shirt and jeans—an absurd uniform for the task ahead. The cold air felt like needles stabbing into his skin, but he remained focused.

Anya, her voice tight, tried once more to reason with him. "Dave, you don't have to do this. Just... there's another way, we can find it."

But Dave only shook his head, his resolve hardened. "This is the only way to make sure we stop them."

With that, he turned away, walking to the edge of the deck. The cold bit into his bare feet, causing him to dance slightly, but he never looked back. In one fluid motion, he sprinted forward and leapt off the edge, disappearing into the inky black waters below.

Anya stood frozen, holding his boots and parka tightly against her chest, the cold creeping into her bones as the reality of what just happened settled in. She swallowed hard, her heart pounding, and turned back toward the cabin. Her job now was to open the moon pool—everything else was up to

Dave. But it was going to be an agonizing wait. She'd only know he made it if the control panels powered on.

Dave, not an Olympic diver, chooses a less subtle way to enter the water, a cannonball. As he hit the surface of the water, the cold assaulted him with a force he'd never felt before. The freezing Arctic water slammed into him like thousands of icy knives piercing his skin. Every muscle in his body seized, and his chest constricted as the shock sent a jolt of panic through him. His body screamed at him to resurface, to find warmth, to escape.

The cold can't kill me, he repeated to himself, fighting against his body's natural response. I just have to focus.

His hands and feet felt numb within seconds, the frigid water sapping the warmth from him with every passing moment. His skin was tight, his muscles felt stiff, but he forced himself to focus. Opening his eyes in the pitch black of the water, he was met with the now-familiar shift in his vision. The inky blackness transformed into a world of greys—no colours, no textures, just outlines of shapes and objects.

Slowly, the Xuelong took shape before him, its massive hull looming above like a giant shadow. It was a surreal sight, as if he were looking at a 3D model of the ship, devoid of detail but fully formed. He could make out the sleek lines of its underbelly, the propellers of the thrusters, and the large recess that could only be the moon pool.

With sluggish kicks, he propelled himself toward it, his legs heavy from the cold. Another familiar sensation as time seemed to slow as it always did in these moments of extreme stress. Dave glided through the water and it parted around him, his movements deliberate, every stroke and kick propelling him closer to the ship.

The recess loomed larger as he neared the underside of the ship, and there it was—the moon pool, its structure standing out clearly against the rest of the ship. Dave gritted his teeth and swam up toward it, his hands finding

the first ledge he could grab hold of. His fingers felt numb, but he forced himself to pull up.

The walls of the moon pool were lined with strengthening ridges giving him handhold, making it easier to climb than the smooth hull. As he ascended, his vision began to adjust as faint light from above filtered into the water. Slowly, the surrounding shapes gained texture, and he could make out the grates, ladders, and metallic fixtures inside the moon pool.

Climbing further, he spotted the ladder leading to the deck, a small but welcome relief. Grabbing it in his frozen fingers he pulled himself upward, finally to haul himself out of the icy waters. His entire body was shaking uncontrollably now, the cold threatening to overpower him.

The moon pool cover had been opened—Anya had done her job. Dave stood there, barefoot, soaked to the bone, his body screaming in protest as he staggered into the bright lights of the drone room. The lights were harsh compared to the darkness of the water, and they stung his eyes as he glanced around.

The sleek drones lay in their cradles, silent and waiting, the steel and glass reflecting the bright overhead lights. The room was sterile, utilitarian, with metal racks and panels lining the walls. In the corner, the control room towered above, its windows overlooking the pool below.

Shivering violently, Dave made his way to the control room. He reached the door and stepped inside, feeling the slight warmth of the space compared to the freezing air outside. His body ached from the stress of the cold, but there was no time to rest. He needed to power on the system for Anya.

Grabbing the edge of the control panel, Dave felt a brief surge of determination. His hands were shaking, but he knew what he had to do.

The cold won't kill me.

Dave stood in the control room, his breath coming in ragged, foggy bursts as the cold gnawed at him. He looked over the right-hand desk unit, its steel housing a testament to the robust design of industrial control systems. But no matter how durable they made these things, they hadn't accounted for someone like him.

The power mechanism in the top right of the desk needed a key—a simple enough lock that most would have found frustrating without it. But Dave wasn't most people. He crouched down, taking hold of the underside of the desk where the key switch was housed. With a deep breath, he dug his fingers into the corner seam of the casing.

The metal groaned under his strength, protesting for only a moment before giving way. Dave tore it open like it was cardboard, the steel bending and folding under his hands with a sickening squeal. Once the side panel peeled away, he peered inside at the guts of the system. Wires, circuit boards, and connectors greeted him, and there, right where he'd expected, was the key switch: a simple barrel lock that completed the circuit between two wires.

Easy fix, he thought.

Leaving the torn panel behind, Dave made his way into the drone room. The bright overhead lights hummed softly, casting sharp reflections off the sleek drones waiting in their cradles. Finding a short length of wire, he returned to the control room, quickly twisting the ends of the wire to make a jumper. With practised ease, he bypassed the key switch, connecting the circuit manually.

The desk whirred to life. The screens flickered on, lighting up the small room as the system booted. Lines of text scrolled across the screen as the drone control interface ran through its startup sequence. Finally, the login prompt appeared—a familiar sight.



Dave took a step back, wiping his freezing hands on his already soaked jeans. His entire body ached from the cold, and his teeth were chattering uncontrollably, but he had done his part.

"Anya, it's all yours," he said to himself, knowing she was monitoring from her tablet.

As the system hummed to life and the login prompt glowed brightly on the screen, Dave could only hope that the next part of the plan would go as smoothly. It was a long way from being over, but now, at least, they had control of the drones.

Dave sat slumped in the control room chair, his body still trembling from the bone-deep cold. It felt like his core would never thaw out, as if the Arctic chill had permanently taken residence in his muscles. Every breath felt like ice settling in his lungs. His feet were numb, and his fingers barely had any feeling left in them as he stared blankly at the screen, willing himself to keep focused.

The control panel seemed to mock him with its soft hum, oblivious to the urgency of the situation. Each passing second felt like an eternity as the cold gnawed at him, but he forced himself to stay alert.

As Anya's code flowed into the drone systems, a warning flashed across her screen. One of the drones - Unit 7 - was actively rejecting the new instructions.

"Damn it," she cursed, fingers flying across the keyboard. The drone's adaptive AI had flagged her code as potentially malicious, triggering protective protocols. If one drone detected the threat, the others might follow suit.

She dove deeper into Unit 7's core programming, trying to bypass its defences. The drone fought back, its sophisticated systems attempting to isolate and quarantine her code. Time was ticking away - every second increased the risk of discovery.

The electronic lock on the door chirped, its LED flashing from red to green. Dave froze as the handle turned. A technician in a rumpled jumpsuit stepped halfway through the doorway, rubbing his eyes - clearly in the middle of a long shift.

He stopped short at the sight of him, confusion crossing his tired face. Before he could speak, his radio crackled to life.

"Jensen, we need you in Engineering. The stabiliser readings are all over the place."

The technician hesitated, glancing between them and his radio. "Copy that," he said finally, already backing out. "On my way."

As his footsteps faded, Dave let out a shaky breath.

"That was too close," Dave whispered, still watching the door.

For Anya, Unit 7's resistance finally crumbled as she managed to bypass its security protocols. The other drones fell in line, accepting the new programming.

Then, finally, after what felt like a lifetime, the login prompt flickered and was replaced with a brief, glorious message from Anya:

"All done, Dave! Go!"

Relief washed over him. With stiff, almost mechanical movements, Dave reached under the desk and pulled off the makeshift jumper wire, breaking the connection he'd forced into place. He crouched down again, his hands shaking as he carefully folded the torn steel panel back into place. It wasn't perfect, but it would pass a casual inspection—especially with the control panel working normally, no one would think twice.

He stood up slowly, his legs aching with cold. Taking one last look at the screens, Dave drew himself up. The desk looked untouched from above, and he had left no evidence of his tampering.

Now it was time to get out of here.

Pulling himself together, Dave headed for the door. His mind focused not on the numbing cold any more, but on the mission. Anya had done her part. Now, they needed to take the next step to bring down EarthWise's entire operation.

Steam filled the bathroom as Dave stood under water hot enough to scald human flesh. His muscles, frozen stiff from the Arctic waters, gradually yielded to the heat's assault. The mission had gone smoother than expected - no climbing the Xuelong's hull, empty corridors, just one oblivious crew member. Almost too easy.

The hydraulics of the moon pool cover had sealed behind him with a final hiss, marking the end of his arctic plunge. Now, watching his skin turn an angry red under the scorching spray, Dave searched for the relief that should have come with success. It didn't arrive.

The bathroom door creaked. "Dave?" Anya's voice pierced the steam cloud.

He turned, but she had already retreated, leaving only a swirl of displaced vapour. Her concern, though touching, wasn't what he needed right now. What he needed was to understand how he'd survived something that should have killed him instantly.

The Arctic water had violated every natural law of survival. At minus forty-two degrees Celsius, it should have stopped his heart in seconds. Instead, it had merely tested him. Each stroke through the liquid ice had been a negotiation between his will and physics. His muscles had wanted to seize, his nerves had screamed for surrender, but something deeper - something that made him different - had refused to yield.

The memory of that cold still echoed in his bones, a phantom sensation that even the scalding shower couldn't quite banish. It wasn't the physical toll that haunted him - his body was already recovering. It was the psychological weight of knowing he'd survived something unsurvivable.

When he emerged, wrapped in a towel with steam curling off his pink-tinged skin, he found Anya studying her tablet with scientific intensity. The environmental sensors told a story that defied explanation: exposure that should have been fatal, vital signs that should have flatlined, survival that should have been impossible.

"The cold wanted to shut me down completely," he said, settling onto the bed. "But it was the mental battle that nearly broke me. Fighting the urge to stop, to let go... that was the real challenge."

Anya's fingers traced the impossible readings on her screen. Her years of technical expertise offered no framework for understanding what she was seeing. "You've rewritten the rules of human endurance," she said softly, more to herself than to him.

"Maybe," Dave replied, feeling the warmth finally reaching his core. "But we're not done yet."

As she watched him prepare for their next move, Anya realized they had crossed a threshold. The boundary between possible and impossible had become frightfully fluid, and she wondered what other certainties might dissolve before their mission ended.

## 29      Risen

The submarine was due anytime now, and Dave knew time was running out. He had to get into position to sabotage the Xuelong's azimuth thrusters before it could rendezvous with the undersea tanker. The plan was simple enough, but execution? That was going to be tricky. The thruster room was aft, a journey that would take him through areas packed with crew members busy with final preparations. There was no way to get through them unnoticed. Blending in was his only option, and that meant getting his hands on a crew parka.

He didn't have time for subtlety. Moving quickly down a corridor, he spotted a lone crew member checking a clipboard near a door. This was his moment. Dave grabbed a wrench from a nearby toolbox and tossed it down the hall with a loud clatter, catching the crew member's attention. As the man turned to investigate, Dave was on him in a flash. One hard punch to the stomach folded the man in half, and before he could react, Dave delivered a swift blow to the back of the head, knocking him out cold.

Anya and Liska, following close behind, rushed forward, dragging the unconscious man into a side room, hidden from view. "I hope no one misses him," Anya wheezed, out of breath, as they stuffed him behind a stack of crates. Dave pulled on the man's parka, zipping it up just as Liska peered out into the hallway. It fit well enough. "You've got an hour, maybe less," Anya warned. "Be quick."

Dave patted the pocket of his stolen parka, checking for a keycard, then slipped into the corridor, leaving them behind as he moved further aft, navigating the passageways and ladders leading to the thruster room. The ship's bulkhead signs were clear: Keep doors closed at sea. Another read, 'Turn on air ventilation systems'. It was a telling sign. If the ventilation system wasn't on, then no one was down there—at least not yet.

The further down he climbed, the more the atmosphere changed. The pristine parts of the ship gave way to colder, industrial spaces. The walls were steel, unpolished and thick with the echoes of distant machinery. Finally, he reached the level where the azimuth thrusters were housed, standing on a mesh floor that trembled slightly beneath his boots. Below him, the massive electric motors hummed, their enormous bulk dominating the room.

Climbing down the final ladder, Dave stood beside the towering machines, feeling the low-frequency vibrations run through the floor. These motors were beasts, churning endlessly to keep the Xuelong steady. But he couldn't just break them with brute strength—he'd quickly realised that when he first entered the room. The motors were too large, too solidly fixed in place. He could punch them, twist them, but without the right leverage, it would take far too long.

That's when a word echoed in his mind: finesse. He didn't need to destroy the motors by smashing them. He could make them destroy themselves. His eyes quickly scanned the machinery, landing on the oil feed lines snaking along the walls, labelled with a clear warning: Check the gravity feed levels. If the motors weren't lubricated, they would grind themselves into oblivion.

Dave examined the network of pipes feeding into the thruster system. He could easily crush any of them, but that might just trigger emergency shut-offs, buying the crew time to react. His eyes tracked the reinforced piping back to its source - a central manifold where multiple feeds converged. If he did this right, he could cause catastrophic failure all at once.

Boots clanged on the metal grating above. Voices echoed down - the engineering crew was doing their rounds early.

Time was running out. Dave moved to the manifold, mentally mapping the best point of attack. One precise move could take out the entire lubrication

system. Too much force though, and the noise would bring the crew running.

The voices grew closer. Dave wrapped his hands around the manifold, feeling the thrum of oil flowing through it. With careful pressure - still enough to shred steel but controlled - he began to compress the metal. The manifold gave way silently under his grip, the precision of his strength ensuring it collapsed inward rather than bursting.

He stepped back as oil began seeping from the crushed metal. In minutes, the lack of lubrication would tear the motors apart from the inside. But he needed to move - now.

At first, the motors continued their hum, unaware of the sabotage. But within minutes, that sound changed. The soft purr of the machinery gave way to a harsh grinding noise. Metal scraping against metal. The smell hit him next: hot, burning oil mixed with the acrid stench of overheating metal. The motors screamed, the pitch rising as the lack of lubrication took its toll. Gears inside the casing began to catch and stutter, the entire system struggling to function. The grinding intensified, filling the room with a deafening screech that echoed off the walls.

The electrical burning smell and scorched metal thickened the air, and Dave stepped back, watching as smoke began to billow from the base of the motors. Sparks flew from the failing connections, the temperature rising to dangerous levels. The noise became unbearable, like nails on a chalkboard amplified by a hundredfold. Then, with a sudden, final shudder, the motors stopped.

The room fell silent. The only sound left was the slow, dying whirr of the fans as they powered down.

Dave stood in the stillness, his heart pounding, the silence ringing in his ears. He had done it. The thrusters were dead. The Xuelong was adrift in the freezing Arctic waters, completely at the mercy of the sea.

Without wasting any more time, Dave turned and made his way back up the ladder. The mission wasn't over yet, but now, they had a fighting chance.

As Dave made his way back up the narrow ladders and passageways from the depths of the thruster room, the ship's alarms began to wail, the high-pitched sound echoing off the steel walls. Orange strobes flashed all around him, bathing the corridors in an eerie, pulsating glow. Crew members appeared seemingly out of nowhere, rushing in all directions as they tried to respond to the emergency.

Dave kept his head down and pulled the hood of his high-vis parka up, doing his best to blend in. Amazingly, no one paid him any attention. It was almost comical. In a moment of crisis, a high-vis jacket might as well have been an invisibility cloak. Crew members scrambled to access the thruster room, barking orders at each other as they rushed past. Dave stepped aside, letting them move down into the chaos below.

He couldn't stay there any longer. The thrusters were shot, and the crew was going to figure that out soon enough. He needed to get back to Anya and Liska before things got even worse. Moving swiftly through the flashing lights and blaring alarms, he made his way to the deck.

The cold wind hit him as soon as he stepped outside, but he barely felt it. Something else grabbed his attention. Standing amongst a group of crew members huddled near the starboard side, Dave spotted Anya and Dr. Liska. Their faces were set in grim expressions, their eyes fixed on something out at sea. Dave made his way over, pushing through the crowd until he could see what they were looking at.

His breath caught in his throat.

A massive submarine loomed just a few hundred metres out to sea, its enormous, dark hull cutting through the icy waters. The hatches on top



were open, and a small crew stood on the deck, staring back at the Xuelong. The men on the submarine were stock still, their postures tense. They knew something was wrong—there was no way they didn't.

This wasn't just some covert operation hidden in the shadows any more. The sight of that submarine, with its open hatches and crew openly watching the Xuelong, made one thing clear: there was no way they were going to explain this away.

There is no cover-up this time.

Dave's mind raced as he took in the sight of the submarine. This was supposed to be a secret extraction operation, one hidden beneath the Arctic ice, quietly siphoning methane hydrates without anyone in the world being the wiser. But now the world was going to know. The Xuelong, crippled and adrift, the methane extraction, the submarine—all of it was out in the open.

"What the hell is our next move?" Dave asked Anya, barely keeping his voice low enough not to draw attention.

She didn't look at him, her eyes still locked on the submarine. "We have to finish this. We take the evidence we've got and blow this thing wide open."

In the midst of the chaos, no one paid any attention to the subtle movements of Dave and Anya. The crew was too focused on the ship's failing thrusters and the massive submarine looming nearby. With alarms blaring and personnel scrambling, Dave leaned heavily on the server room door, applying enough pressure to pop it open with a subtle groan of protesting steel. Inside, Anya moved quickly, methodically pulling the evidential hard drives from the servers. Each drive represented undeniable proof of the Xuelong's involvement in the covert methane extraction.

She stowed the drives in a sturdy hard case she had prepared earlier, snapping it shut with a satisfying click. The weight of the evidence felt heavy in her hands, but she carried it with purpose, making her way

through the ship's corridors back to Dr. Liska's cabin. Dave followed closely behind, making sure they weren't attracting any unwanted attention. But in the chaos, anyone looking for them now would likely have bigger concerns.

Dave and Anya were halfway down the corridor from the server room when the sound of boots on metal made them freeze. Three armed guards rounded the corner ahead, weapons already drawn. They must have been monitoring the server room access logs.

"Stop right there!" The lead guard's voice echoed off the steel walls. "Put down the case and step away from it."

Dave moved smoothly in front of Anya, his voice low. "When I move, run."

The guards were too far apart for Dave to take them all at once. He'd have to be smart about this. The lead guard took a step forward, his pistol trained on Dave's chest.

"Last warning. Drop the case."

Dave smiled. The guard's finger tightened on the trigger.

Dave exploded into motion. He closed the distance to the first guard before the man could squeeze off a shot, batting the gun aside with his left hand while his right palm struck the guard's chest. The impact launched the man backwards into his colleagues, sending all three sprawling.

"Go!" Dave shouted. Anya sprinted past the tangle of guards, clutching the hard drive case to her chest.

The second guard managed to fire from the ground. The bullet struck Dave in the shoulder, the impact barely registering as he reached down and grabbed the man's tactical vest. With one fluid motion, he lifted the guard and hurled him into the corridor wall. The metal clanged loudly from the force of the impact.

The third guard scrambled backwards, eyes wide with terror as he watched his colleagues get manhandled. He raised his weapon with trembling hands, but Dave was already on him. One quick strike to the solar plexus folded the man in half, dropping him to the deck.

Dave turned back to the first guard, who was reaching for his fallen sidearm. A swift kick sent the weapon skittering away down the corridor.

"Stay down," Dave growled. "Next time I won't be so gentle."

He caught up to Anya at the intersection, the sound of alarms beginning to blare through the ship. "We need to move fast. They'll have more coming."

Anya wiped sweat from her forehead with a shaking hand, her face pale but determined. "Liska's cabin. We'll have to hole up there until we can transmit the SOS before they lock down communications."

They ran through the corridors as shouts echoed behind them, the evidence of EarthWise's crimes clutched safely in Anya's arms. They'd got what they came for. Now they just had to survive long enough to expose it all.

Back in Liska's cabin, they set the hard case down on the floor, Anya wiping her brow from the tension of the operation. She and Dave exchanged a look. They had what they needed. The evidence was secure. Now, they just had to figure out their extraction.

"The covert part of this operation is well and truly over," Dave stated, sitting on the edge of the bed. He watched Anya as she made her way over to the ship's communication console.

"Agreed," she replied, "we're not hiding any more. Let's see if we can hijack their satellite uplink."

Anya had already scoped out the Xuelong's satellite communications system, and it took only a few minutes for her to break into the channel. The encryption was decent, but nothing she couldn't bypass. The connection was smooth and, after a moment, Cecilia's voice crackled to life on the other end.

"Anya? Dave? Are you two okay?" Cecilia's voice was strained but urgent.

Anya glanced at Dave before speaking. "We're fine. We've got the evidence—pulled the drives from the servers. The Xuelong is crippled, and we're sitting on a hard case full of proof of EarthWise's operations. The covert methane extraction, the drones, all of it."

There was a pause on the line before Cecilia responded. "Good work. I've been monitoring the situation. The distress signal from the Xuelong has gone out. Several international agencies have already picked it up. Help is on the way, and trust me, everyone is interested. The cat is well and truly out of the bag."

Anya leaned back, her eyes narrowing as she processed Cecilia's words. "What do you mean?"

"Satellite agencies, maritime rescue teams, even the UN. The submarine and the waves caught a lot of attention. EarthWise, and the Chinese involvement isn't going to be buried under bureaucracy. International waters, international interest. It's over."

Dave stood up, tension rolling off his broad shoulders. "So, what now?"

Cecilia's voice softened. "We'll get you out as part of the rescue effort, then we'll have a chopper ready once you get back to Sisimiut."

Dave and Anya exchanged a glance. The mission was done, the evidence secured, and now the only thing left was getting off this sinking ship—figuratively, if not literally.

"Copy that," Anya replied.

As the call ended, the gravity of the situation hit them. This was it. The endgame. All that remained was their escape from a ship in total disarray, its covert operation exposed to the world.

## 30 Epilogue

Back in the agency offices in the UK, the team gathered around the familiar table, the warmth of the room a stark contrast to the icy wasteland of the Arctic that seemed like a distant memory. The mood was a strange mixture of relief and exhaustion, the adrenaline of their mission finally starting to ebb away. Anya sat across from Dave, her expression serious but softened by the comfort of being back home. Even Serj was there, fresh out of the hospital. He looked a little more battle-worn, his movements slower, but the scar on his side would join the collection of others that crisscrossed his body, marking a lifetime of missions. He was healing well, and his usual wry smile was still intact.

Cecilia was at the head of the table, as always, her calm demeanour holding the room together. She began the briefing, her voice cutting through the small talk. "First, I want to congratulate all of you. The mission was a success, beyond what we could have hoped for. International outrage is brewing, as expected. The Chinese government has a lot of questions to answer, and EarthWise? Well, let's just say their future looks very uncertain."

She paused for a moment, letting the weight of her words settle. "The political fallout from this is going to be monumental. The methane extraction operation, the covert drilling—it's all exposed. There's going to be a reckoning. But the real story here are the drones."

Anya lifted her chin, picking up from Cecilia. "I was able to retrieve the full communication logs from the drones. We know everything now—how they operated, how they disabled the submarine. EarthWise had built an entire mining operation beneath the surface, all run almost exclusively by these autonomous drones." She leaned forward, excitement in her voice. "They weren't just extracting methane; they had drilling, digging equipment, tools, everything. These weren't ordinary mining operations—

they were fully automated, with underwater welding equipment, repair tools, and everything needed to sustain the operation for the long term."

Dave listened intently, his memory flashing back to the moon pool, to the moment when they had taken control of the drones. "So, they really did disable the sub."

"Yes," Anya said, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "The drones are incredible. The technology EarthWise developed allowed them to adapt to changing circumstances in real-time. When they received the order to stop the submarine, they found a way to do it. They placed explosive charges on the sub's propeller. The charges were likely meant for mining, but the drones repurposed them on their own. The explosion was enough to disable the submarine's forward motion completely."

Serj chuckled, rubbing the scar on his side. "Smart machines. Wish they were on our side from the start."

Cecilia folded her arms, a small smile playing at her lips. "In the end, they were. The drones are a remarkable piece of engineering, no doubt about it. EarthWise thought they could control them, but the very technology they created to make them adaptable ended up working against them."

The room fell quiet for a moment, the magnitude of what they'd uncovered sinking in. Beneath the surface of the Arctic, EarthWise had been running a secret mining operation using cutting-edge technology, exploiting natural resources with no regard for the consequences. And now, because of their team, that operation was in shambles.

Dave leaned back in his chair, the tension finally starting to release from his shoulders. "It feels like we've stopped something huge. But I can't shake the feeling that EarthWise isn't going to be the last company that tries something like this."

Cecilia drummed her fingers on her desk, her eyes distant as she considered the implications. "You're right, Dave. This was just one

operation, but now the world knows. And that changes everything. It's going to take time, but the fallout from this will set a precedent. We've bought some time. We'll need to be ready for whatever comes next."

Dave leaned forward, a half-smirk playing on his lips as he continued his story, the weight of their Arctic ordeal still fresh in his voice.

"As we waited for the rescue team aboard the Xuelong, it became pretty obvious that the major players were making their escape. Anya and I were watching from a distance as they loaded up a helicopter with key personnel and equipment. They were in a rush, desperate to get out of there. We could see it in their faces. They were trying to take whatever they could, any evidence they thought might save them. But by then, Anya had already pulled more than enough to bury them. There was nothing left on that ship they could hide or smuggle away to cover up what they'd done."

Serj, leaning back in his chair with a scarred hand on his side, raised an eyebrow. "High-ranking crew, the captain, and probably the heads of this whole operation, yeah?"

"Exactly," Dave replied, nodding. "In the chaos, they thought they could slip out unnoticed. The helicopter was their ticket. Everyone who could be held accountable was scrambling to get on board. But in their rush to get the hell out of there, they missed something." Dave paused, letting the moment hang before his grin widened. "Me."

Anya chuckled, shaking her head as she remembered the scene. "They never saw it coming."

Dave continued, "As they loaded up, I slipped away, made my way to the helicopter just before they took off. They were so focused on their escape, they didn't even notice me climbing into the cockpit. By the time they did, well... it was a bit late for them."

Serj leaned in, intrigued. "What'd you do?"

"No finesse required," Dave said with a shrug. "Just brute force. Smashed every piece of equipment I could get my hands on. Flight systems, controls—anything that looked important. Didn't take long to turn the cockpit into a mess."

The room filled with the team's quiet laughter. Dave's casual tone masked the tension of the moment, but they could all picture the scene—the desperation, the high-ranking officers thinking they could make a clean getaway, only to have Dave turn their helicopter into a useless hunk of metal on the flight deck.

"They knew they were screwed," Anya added, her eyes lighting up. "You should've seen their faces when they realised they weren't going anywhere. Whatever they thought they were escaping with was useless."

"After that," Dave said, leaning back, "there wasn't much left for them to do. They were grounded, just like the Xuelong. No one was going anywhere, not without a lot of explaining."

Cecilia chuckled from her seat at the head of the table, shaking her head. "Dave, you always seem to find a way to make things a little more dramatic, don't you?"

"Hey," Dave replied with a grin, "just making sure they knew there was no easy way out."

Dave leaned back, recounting the final moments of their ordeal with a calm that belied the chaos. "After I'd wrecked the helicopter," he began, "the armed security team tried to react. A few of them pulled guns on me as I went to walk away, like they still had some sort of power to change the outcome."

Serj raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "And what? They actually thought they could stop you?"

Dave shrugged. "There was no need to get brutal. These guys were stuck in the same situation as the rest of us. They knew they'd face the



consequences of any action they took, and deep down, I think they understood they were going nowhere. Still, one of them, clearly more irate than the others, wasn't about to let it go that easy. He didn't go for his gun. Instead, he figured he'd at least land a punch, maybe to save face or make himself feel better."

Anya, already knowing how this would end, smirked. "And let me guess, that didn't go as planned."

Dave chuckled softly. "Not even close. His move was slow, telegraphed as if he was swinging through water. I could see it coming a mile away. Didn't need to do much. I blocked it easily, then countered with a shot to the solar plexus. One clean hit."

He mimicked the motion casually, a simple demonstration of what had clearly been a devastating strike.

"Even through his combat vest and armour," Dave continued, "it put him down. You could hear the air rush out of him as he collapsed. He dropped to his knees, completely winded, gagging for breath, retching. He was done."

The room was quiet for a moment as they all pictured the scene: the enraged guard, the effortless precision of Dave's counter, and the security team realising just how outmatched they were.

"No one else even thought twice after that," Dave added, his voice relaxed. "They just stood there, watching. I walked right through them and headed back to the cabin. No more trouble from them after that."

Serj smirked. "I guess they learned the hard way that messing with you was a bad idea."

Dave grinned. "Yeah, they got the message."

The team shared a collective laugh, but the weight of the mission's success still lingered. They'd stopped something huge, exposed an operation that could have spiralled into something far worse. And now, with EarthWise's

cover blown and the evidence secured, there was no hiding what had happened.

In agreement Cecilia replies, "Well, whatever their plan was, they didn't count on you two. And now the world's going to know everything."

The team sat in silence for a few more moments, the enormity of their mission slowly settling in. They'd uncovered a secret that spanned continents, nations, and corporations, but more importantly, they'd struck a blow against those who sought to exploit the world without consequence. And for now, that was enough.

Cecilia smiled at them all. "You've earned a break. Go home, rest. We'll regroup soon."