



«Is møter ild i ny, eksplosiv thriller.»

GUNNAR GRAN, STAVANGER AFTENBLAD

ISEN



«Isen er teknisk sett en nær fullkommen thriller, profesjonelt skrevet.»

SINDRE HOVDENAKK, VG

JOHN KÅRE RAAKE



GYLDENDAL

THRILLER

THE ICE

Thriller

John Kåre Raake

Isen
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“The North Pole and the regions surrounding it do not belong to any nation, but are a resource that belongs to the all people of the world. China has a population of over one billion inhabitants, one-fifth of the global total, and will use its strengths to participate actively in the development of the Arctic. The battle that certain countries are now conducting in order to gain sovereignty over the Arctic is tantamount to a violation of the interests of every nation on Earth. In light of this new reality, it is difficult to predict the future of ‘war for the Arctic’, but the voice of every country must be heard, including China’s.”

Rear Admiral Yin Zhuo in an interview with China News, Beijing, 5 March 2010

*You never really know your friends
from your enemies until the ice breaks*

Inuit proverb

THE NORTH POLE

November 2018

1.

All Saints' Day

89°35'7" N – 037°22'9" W

Each step brought the man from Xian closer to death. It was minus twenty, not so cold for the Pole, but the northerly wind had increased in strength in the last hour, sending the relative temperature plummeting to almost minus forty.

North Pole explorers have survived temperatures of minus fifty and colder wearing a double layer of wool underwear, windproof outer clothing, and pants and jackets stuffed with down.

Gai Zhanhai might as well have been naked.

Over his meagre upper body he was wearing only a checked lumberjack shirt, with thin long johns torn above the left knee and green Adidas sneakers. The only thing keeping his head and brain warm was his bearskin hat.

Zhanhai knew he was going to freeze to death if he kept running, but also that each step was distancing him from death's clutches.

From the man hunting him down.

Zhanhai had lost all feeling in his legs. In extreme cold, the torso has to come first, the warm blood being withdrawn from the limbs and skin in order to keep the heart pumping. His legs had developed their own intelligence to anticipate the obstacles in the terrain. They jumped over or skirted around the ice blocks forced up to the surface by the movement of the massive floes. They automatically regained their balance as Zhanhai stumbled on the blanket of fresh, grainy snow under his feet.

Green curtains of light billowed in the sky above Zhanhai. The aurora was powerful enough for him to be able to see the contours of the landscape ahead of him. Zhanhai had longed to see the day when the icy landscape would be bathed in sunlight, to experience the North Pole just as his instructors at China's Arctic and Antarctic Administration's training base had shown him in pictures.

More curtains cascaded from space, the northern lights becoming so strong that Zhanhai feared that it was only a matter of time before his predator spotted him on the flat landscape.

Inside the warm bearskin, his brain sent a pulse of neurons down towards his numb legs, asking them to change course further towards the west. The only plan Zhanhai had managed to come up with as he ran on autopilot through the polar night was to lure his

pursuer out onto the ice far enough, then use his superior speed to circle back around to where he had begun.

To the warmth.

To the weapons.

Zhanhai sensed the salty tang in his nose just in time.

He forced his hurried legs to stop before they carried him right out into the Arctic Ocean. From horizon to horizon, a ten-metre wide crack in the ice had cut a black channel so fresh that only a fine layer of slush had formed on its surface. Ice fog floated up from the pitch-black Arctic Ocean, smothering the northern lights in a damp mist.

In half an hour the fracture's frosty crust would be thick and rigid enough to be crossed on skis. Zhanhai had neither skis nor time.

Except for the clothes on his back, the only other thing that he had was the flare gun, which, to his amazement, he was still holding in his numbed fingers. He turned his back to the channel and raised an arm so that the gun aimed towards the tracks his Adidas shoes had made in the newly fallen snow. The tracks the hunter would follow to find him.

Before him, Zhanhai saw huge slabs of ice strewn like enormous, grey pieces of candy in the murky landscape. He could see no movement between them.

Zhanhai's arms had begun shivering so much that he barely managed to keep hold of the flare gun. From what his Arctic instructors had taught him, he knew his body would soon lose the tension pulling the veins together that kept the blood in the warmer parts of the body. When this happened, warm blood would run back down to his ice-cold arms and legs. The cold would cool the blood down to a viscous soup. When the chilled blood returned to the heart, its muscles would beat slower, leading to less blood reaching the brain. It would eventually cease to function. Hallucinations would follow. What was left of the blood circulating under his ice-cold skin would begin to feel far too warm. He would be consumed by an urge to start taking off his clothes.

Then he would die.

He decided to retrace his own footsteps in the hope that his pursuer had got lost in the darkness of the ice desert. In the same instant, Zhanhai heard the splash.

If Zhanhai had made that decision a couple of seconds earlier, perhaps the polar bear would not have been able to reach him.

Not that it would have altered the outcome.

An adult polar bear can run at a speed of over thirty kilometres an hour for short distances. Even faster if the polar bear is famished and lean. This young female, now bursting out of the water like a live missile, had not eaten for weeks.

Its powerful front claws swung out at one of Zhanhai's calves, flaying his ragged long johns and morsels of frozen skin and sending him spinning to the ground. Zhanhai felt neither the cold from the ice nor the jagged crystals cutting into his face-as he was thrust across the snow. His body had long since switched off such unnecessary, energy-sapping senses. The optic nerves in Zhanhai's pupils, however, registered the bear's maw as it gaped before him. Four long canine teeth. A row of small, sharp molars. A blood red tongue. His pupils barely had time to send these impressions to the brain before the polar bear locked its jaws around his head. Zhanhai's skull split, pieces of his brain spraying out over the ice.

In his death throes, his spinal cord sent billions of unsynchronised nerve signals out along the body's neural pathways. One of these reached through the frozen nerve endings all the way to the fingertip of the hand holding the flare gun.

Zhanhai was already dead when his finger twitched, pulling the trigger. The flare gun's hammer struck the primer of the cartridge loaded in the steel barrel. Its propellant chamber exploded, the pressure from the gases launching the flare skyward.

The flare burned a stripe deep into the bear's fur as it shot past. The carnivore dropped Zhanhai's crushed head and fled back to the channel, diving in and breaking a hole in the crust that had already begun to form on the surface of the sea. The waves beat the thick ice particles towards the edge, where they were immediately stiffened by the cold.

Held aloft by its parachute, the flare burned brightly high up in the sky, a red glow on the icy landscape where Zhanhai's battered body lay, soon mutating into a fleeting vision of hell.

2.

89°33' N – 037°43' W

“Fuck.”

Anna Aune sat up in bed. Her left arm was freezing. It had slipped out of the sleeping bag while she slept and had ended up lying against the outer wall of the hovercraft, *Sabvabaa*. The wall was always ice cold because of the draughts that entered through the poorly sealed window above her bed. She should have changed the seal, but the nearest parts dealer was thirteen hundred kilometres away and the only way to get hold of anything was by transport plane all the way from Norway to the North Pole, then having it thrown out attached to a parachute. So, it was just easier to try sleeping with both arms inside the sleeping bag.

Anna stuck her hand in under her thermal jersey. Under the cold tips of her fingers, her heart was beating. The daily medical check: Anna Aune was still alive. The hands of her watch glowed in the dark. 23:13. She had no idea what had woken her up, and no clue when she had fallen asleep. Without sunlight as a guide, all the days at the North Pole blended into one.

She yawned and glanced out through the frost crystals on the window, just catching a glimpse of the reflection of her rangy body, like a larva, inside the tight sleeping bag. A red star shone in the sky. Fucking huge, she thought. A supernova. Anna blinked and rubbed her eyes. The star was still shining. She pressed her nose against the cold glass to see better, holding her breath so that the damp air from her lungs wouldn't form even more ice on the window. Now Anna could see something above the red star. White smoke, and a parachute. Then she realised that what she was seeing out of the window wasn't a dying star.

It was a flare. The sight of it got her nervous system pumping adrenalin into her blood. She knew all too well what these things meant.

Danger.

Death.

Everything she was running from.

Anna sat completely still. She could hear the whistling of the wind in the antennae on the hovercraft's roof but clung to the hope that she was still sleeping, that she was in the middle of a hyper realistic dream and didn't even know it. The serenity of the North Pole and the absence of sights and sounds had got her dreaming again, or, at least, now she could remember what she dreamt.

Anna was far from keen to wake the man sleeping at the other end of the cabin, but after having studied the flare long enough to realise that it wasn't an illusion, instinct took over.

“Daniel, wake up!” she heard herself shout.

Professor Daniel Zakariassen, asleep on the other side of the curtain that divided the hovercraft's cabin at night, grunted softly. The bed creaked as he turned over. The old man was a heavy sleeper.

Anna stood up out of bed, pulled the curtain to one side and stepped past the work table where three laptops hummed quietly, crunching the data streaming up from instruments at the other end of kilometres-long cables beneath the surface.

"Daniel, I see a flare!"

She shook Zakariassen, who startled and sat up. A hint of rosemary hit her. He swore by camphor drops to keep colds at bay, even though on the ice there were no viruses other than those they had brought along with them.

"What is it?" he said, his voice thick with sleep.

"I can see a flare."

"Flare...now?"

His words sounded even more clear-cut than usual. Zakariassen was originally from Tromsø, but his diction had adapted to the dry language that prevails in science's ivory towers.

Anna walked up to the large windows at the front of the cabin. The red flare had dropped in the sky, but was still clearly visible.

"The position, have you been able to fix the position?" shouted Zakariassen.

"No."

Zakariassen tramped past her and wiped away the condensation on the instrument panel's large compass. He mumbled something that at first she didn't hear.

"Distance?" he repeated. "How far away is it?"

Anna tried to estimate the distance. The flare was hanging directly above the short pressure ridge of icy rubble that had been pushed up from the pack ice in crunching, rumbling birth pangs more than two weeks ago. There was a pair of rangefinder binoculars in a bag under her bed, but the flare would probably vanish by the time she pulled them out. Her quick fix was a simple Girl Scout trick.

She closed her right eye and stretched out her arm in front of her with her thumb trained on one of the peaks on the pack ice. When she switched eyes, her thumb shifted in her field of vision two peaks further to the left. She estimated the distance between the first and the second peaks to be around four hundred metres. The trick was to multiply this distance by ten. The frozen peaks were four kilometres away. The flare looked to be even further back.

"At least four, maybe five kilometres," she said.

Even though it was her own voice, Anna felt as if she was having an out-of-body experience. All she wanted was to go back to bed, pull the hood of her sleeping bag over her head, and dream on.

Zakariassen took out a little case. Inside there was something that looked like a clunky, old-fashioned video camera. "I'll see if I can see anyone in the thermal imaging camera." He turned it on, holding it out in front of him. On a little screen at the back, Anna saw the icy dark now depicted in blue shapes. The only thing that wasn't shaded blue was the flare, which glowed bright red on the screen too. The professor swept the camera back and forth, but out on the ice nothing else was radiating heat. He put the camera back in its case and sat down in front of a computer.

As he pushed up his glasses, the lenses magnified the deep wrinkles in his forehead. A map of the North Pole appeared on the screen as he woke the machine from

its slumber. The professor set his thin fingers on the keyboard, punching numbers onto the white landscape.

"Five kilometres, 89 degrees...35 minutes, 7 seconds North...22 minutes...9 seconds West. It doesn't make any damn sense, I have no record of anything at that position."

In her previous line of work, Anna's rigorous training had drilled into her the crucial importance of knowing the theatre of war. Understand the terrain. Always be ready to engage the enemy, but keep a backdoor open in case of the need to beat a hasty retreat. Zakariassen was right: Nobody was supposed to be at the position the flare was coming from. That meant that whoever had fired it must have come from the only other inhabited place for hundreds of kilometres in any direction.

She breathed in. It had to be the Chinese.

3.

"Ice Dragon," said Anna loudly. "The flare must have been fired near the Ice Dragon base. The bearing is right. The Chinese drift station is there, it must be seven or eight kilometres north of us."

She looked out of the window. The flare was about to drop down behind the ice mounds. The horizon was outlined brightly in red, as if streaked in blood. She had seen these signs before, burning above an unknown town. A plateau. A mountain beneath a distant sky. The warnings were always the same.

War comes in many guises.

This one began with an innocuous suggestion over an old seventies kitchen table with a view over Tromsø and the surrounding straits.

"There must be hundreds of students who would jump at the chance of an expedition to the North Pole, though?" was Anna's first objection when her father, Johannes Aune, suggested that she might be a suitable expedition member for Professor Daniel Zakariassen.

"Of course," her father hesitated a little. "People are interested and Daniel has spoken to many of them, but there's probably something not quite right with any of them. Daniel is...a little odd. It could be good for you too, Anna."

She hadn't bothered to ask her father what psychological insights convinced him that it would be a good idea for his thirty-six-year-old daughter to spend nine months drifting on an ice floe across the North Pole with a difficult, seventy-three-year-old widower she had barely seen or spoken to in the last fifteen years.

Johannes Aune had grown up in the same street as Daniel Zakariassen in Tromsø. Daniel was bright and gave private tuition to fellow pupils who were dropping behind in their grades. One of these was Anna's father, who sorely needed a pass in Norwegian to get on to the course in mechanics at the technical college. In Johannes, Daniel recognised a natural gift for engines and engineering that, over the years, brought the theoretician and the mechanic together as close friends. The scientist paid Johannes a visit whenever he needed to build a scientific instrument, and the mechanic came to Daniel with a shopping bag full of receipts when it was time to submit his tax returns. It was Johannes

who had proposed a North Pole expedition as the brilliant finale to an otherwise anonymous career.

"Daniel needs this," her father said, as his nicotine yellow fingertips fidgeted with the old pack of cards with which he would play solitaire before breakfast TV began. "After Solveig died, you know...he's got nothing."

"Dad, I'm not a therapist."

He stood up, taking two of the fragile cups that Anna's mother had inherited from her Russian babushka out of the cupboard above the sink, and picked up the jug from the worn-out coffee machine.

"There's not much time, you know. Daniel got the last sponsor on board yesterday. Almost three million kroner from a research institution in Switzerland. But they need him to leave for the ice *now*. Daniel's a theorist, a smart guy with numbers and that kind of thing, but he needs someone to look out for him. You've been out in a long, cold winter before," he argued as he poured the coffee.

"I'm not so keen on the cold these days," Anna said, taking a sip of the bitter coffee. The yellow pack from the Co-op was her father's favourite.

"Yes, but you've been through training in the armed forces...all the military exercises you've been on up here. You know how to survive in Arctic conditions."

For a second Anna thought about snapping back at him with a wisecrack that, above all else, she was best at making sure that others didn't make it home. But she bit her tongue. He was only trying to help. These last two years had been tough on him, too.

A call from the Armed Forces Special Command at its base in Rena had woken Johannes up in the middle of the night. "Your daughter has been seriously wounded in action in Syria," was the brief message. "We don't know whether she is going to survive or not." An hour later, Johannes was sitting in a black car with the Armed Forces insignia on its door. On the way to the airport in Tromsø, the car picked up Anna's half-sister, Kirsten, from the comfortable neighbourhood on a hill above the city, where she lived with her husband and their three children.

They were taken to the airport from where a jet usually reserved for the Chief of Defence, the Prime Minister and the King flew them straight to a military airbase in Germany. From there a helicopter from the Deutsche Luftwaffe delivered them to the American military hospital in Landstuhl. When her father and sister came in to see her, Anna was lying unconscious in a hospital bed with tubes feeding her oxygen and nutrition. She had been placed in an induced coma to give her body a chance to recover after suffering three heart stoppages over two operations. The doctors explained she had been hit by a powerful projectile that had travelled through her body, from the shoulder down to the hip.

After watching over Anna for a week without her regaining consciousness, Kirsten had to return home. She had a family and a business to take care of. Johannes Aune stayed on at the hospital in Landstuhl for two months. At home in Tromsø, three employees made sure that Aune Motorworks stayed afloat. Two weeks after she was admitted to military hospital, the doctors woke her up.

The first words she said to her father were "Yann's dead". Johannes had cried with joy that his daughter had survived. Anna cried in sorrow for the same reason.

A month later, Johannes pushed his daughter in a wheelchair into Reception at Sunnaas Rehabilitation Hospital at Nesodden, outside Oslo. After six months of painful treatment there, she was able to walk again. That same day, she took a taxi down to the

quay from where the ferry sailed towards Oslo. When the Nesodden ferry docked at Aker Brygge, she walked a few hundred metres to an anonymous office to meet Victoria Hammer, who, many years ago, had recruited her into E 14, a secret military unit whose existence was known only to a select few. Victoria tried convincing Anna not to quit her job. She failed.

Since then, Anna had been living in her old room at her father's house. In the end, and as an excuse not to make a decision, she agreed to join Daniel Zakariassen's expedition. An excuse to avoid the hassle and the many good suggestions about what she should do with her life. An excuse to postpone her return to the world and a fresh start in life. Zakariassen's hovercraft would drift on an ice floe towards the North Pole, even further away from civilisation.

Anna saw her reflection in the hovercraft's window. Her dark hair hung down over her forehead like a tired old mop. Her skin was pale, her eyes mere black hollows. Her cheekbones cast long shadows, like a vampire with a serious case of iron deficiency, she thought.

The loudspeaker on the radio transmitter crackled. "This is ice drift station Fram X calling ice drift station Ice Dragon...over!"

Zakariassen was leaning in towards the microphone, speaking slowly and clearly, following radio protocol. His English sounded like it had come straight out of a Thor Heyerdahl documentary. Sharp, clipped words, but utterly tone deaf.

"This is the hovercraft *Sabvabaa*, the Norwegian Fram X expedition calling Ice Dragon operating base, are you receiving us? Over."

Anna noticed a green light burning through the reflection of her face. Long, draping curtains of the northern lights glimmered in the cosmic wind blowing in from space. Unusually powerful solar storms had been interfering with their communications all week.

The University of Tromsø had warned them that several satellites were out of action due to the storms. The professor had soon slammed the palm of his hand irrationally hard against the computer's monitor when his weekly sponsors report bounced back from space. *Server not found*.

Anna had been more annoyed about the new episode of *The Big Bang Theory* that she was missing out on.

"Fram X expedition calling Ice Dragon, are you receiving us? Over."

Zakariassen listened to the scratching of the loudspeaker. "Fram X expedition calling Ice Dragon, are you receiving us? Over," he repeated.

"I'm calling Boris," Anna said.

4.

"We can't get through to Ice Dragon either," said Boris.

The Russian's deep baritone came and went with the flickering of the northern lights. In Anna's mind, the voice evoked a picture of a short, fat man trapped in an even more cramped space than she was.

"Is there a problem?" she asked.

"Not before you rang, Anna," he answered, laughing out-loud.

"They haven't issued a mayday..." Anna deliberately formed the words as a conclusion, hoping that Boris would say he would take care of it. That this was a matter for the Russian authorities.

Boris was a meteorologist stationed at the Taymyr Peninsula, at the northernmost tip of Siberia. He chatted with Anna daily as he sent out his weather and ice reports. Since she received satellite images and the reports by email, it was not really necessary, but Boris liked to chat.

The Russian became even more eager when he realised that Anna was interested in classical music, a legacy passed down from her mother, who loved film scores and was always playing the piano. She absolutely had to come to his home city of St Petersburg, Boris insisted. He would be her guide and take her to concerts, the opera and the ballet.

Sometimes she wondered how a middle-aged man from St Petersburg with a taste for the finer things in life had ended up on one of the most desolate places in Russia. Had the connoisseur been having an affair with the wife of a university director? Embezzling funds? Fooling around with young boys? She thought about all of this because she, too, had banished herself to a place found on no map; the ice never stood still long enough for one to be drawn.

Daniel reached out his hand, motioning for the satellite telephone receiver. Anna passed it to him.

"Have you spoken to CAAA?" he asked.

Boris didn't laugh.

The Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration was far from popular with the Russians. China didn't border the North Pole, but that hadn't prevented them from asserting their claim to the resources beneath the ice. To demonstrate this, they sent the icebreaker *Snow Dragon*, or *Xue Long* as it was called in Chinese, to the North Pole at regular intervals. The Russians took exception to the flame-red steel giant anchoring at the pole, directly above the Russian flag they had planted on the ocean floor.

"The Chinese are struggling with the solar storms too, but the Yellow River base on Svalbard was in contact with the commander of Ice Dragon a couple of hours ago. It was a fucking terrible connection. Give them some time."

Anna looked out. She was entrapped by pitch darkness. The flare had vanished forever.

"It might have been an accident. The Chinese might have mixed up the dates and thought it was New Year. Set off some fireworks. Shit happens," said Boris.

It was late and Boris's baritone was husky with vodka. His English sounded like a dissonant Mussorgsky symphony, touched by genius and drunken madness.

"What I saw was no firework. Can you send a helicopter?" Anna yelled, so loud that Boris would hear it through the interference created by the solar storms.

"Yes, when the winds have calmed down tomorrow – if the Chinese ask for help."

"How bad is the wind going to be?"

"Nooot good...up to seventy-five kilometres an hour. Gusting to storm force."

Zakariassen pressed the receiver against his ear to show that he was speaking now. "It's not blowing so much over here yet."

Boris's laughter crackled through. "Well, call me in two to three hours and tell me who's right."

"Sabvabaa will get to the Ice Dragon base in two hours, no problem," said Zakariassen firmly as Boris broke off the connection. "We're the only ones who can help the Chinese if they're in trouble."

"How do you know that we'll be able to ride out the storm?" asked Anna. The northern lights had vanished and outside, pitch darkness reigned. She switched on the searchlight on the roof of the hovercraft, turning the lamp so that the light hit the weather station standing out on the ice. The wind vane was already spinning at a clip.

"*Sabvabaa* has endured the winter before. Her hull can take it," replied Zakariassen.

"The Americans have a base on Thule. With their helicopters they'll get there quicker from Greenland than we can."

The professor had to admit that Anna had a good point, but when Zakariassen finally got through to the duty officer at 821 Air Base Group on Greenland's west coast, he was given the same message. If they thought there was an emergency situation at their base, the Chinese had to ask for help formally. And the conditions were too bad right now. Even if the American rescue helicopters could fly to the North Pole, they would not be able to land in the storm that was making its way in from the Russian tundra.

Before the final decision to cast off was taken, Zakariassen called *Sabvabaa's* owners, the Nansen Environmental and Remote Sensing Center in Bergen. The head of the institute shared Anna's concerns for the coming storm, but let the obligation to offer help win out. Zakariassen was given permission to go. Anna heard Zakariassen start the hovercraft's engine as she pulled on her clothes behind the curtain, a flowery tablecloth she had borrowed from her father's house. The hovercraft rattled and shook as the engine idled erratically.

As she swiped a stray tangle of hair away from her mouth, it revealed a narrow scar on the side of her face. It cut across the skin straight down towards a larger scar that was just visible over the neck of her thermal vest. Above the scar on her shoulder, the lobe was missing from her right ear. The visible traces of the bullet that had almost killed her in Syria.

She quickly pulled on her thermal underwear and, on top of that, another layer of clothing. As she yanked down the curtain, she saw the professor on his way out of the hatch.

"I'll start clearing things away outside, come when you're ready," he shouted, opening the hatch all the way. The wind blew straight in and the cabin temperature dropped quicker than a lead weight on its way into the seabed. Zakariassen switched on his headlamp and crawled out into the blizzard.

Anna's head nearly touched the ceiling of the cramped cabin. A single step brought her to her survival suit, which was hanging on a peg above a gas burner and a kettle. Next to the burner was a samovar, a large, beautifully decorated Russian tea kettle, much too big, really, for this little cabin, but a departing gift Anna had not been able to refuse. It had been given to her by Galina, the Russian woman Johannes had employed when he began renting out rooms to tourists in his large Swiss-style house, beautifully located next to the Tromsø straits.

“My father made tea for tourists with this samovar when he was a conductor on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Nothing like strong, sweet tea when it’s cold,” Galina said, before giving Anna a kiss on each cheek and waving goodbye at the airport.

After three weeks at the North Pole, Anna agreed. There really was nothing like steaming hot sweet tea to get the body moving. But now it would have to wait. She pulled on the fluorescent yellow survival suit with reflective stripes over the chest and knees and stepped into a pair of blue moon boots. The North Pole was no place for fashion junkies.

She got dressed in silence. Only the slight sound of her breath and the creaking of her shoes on the wooden floorboards could be heard above the engine’s hum. As she opened the hatch outwards, the Arctic wind bit in fury.

A warning of the storm that was yet to come.

5.

Anna saw Zakariassen standing some distance away on the ice. He was disconnecting the cables that lay in coils on the ice from their instruments, the very reason that they were at the North Pole. Or, to be more precise, the reason that Daniel Zakariassen was at the North Pole.

Most of the instruments were coupled to long cables hanging thousands of metres down into the ocean. Delicate sensors could capture the sound of seals in the water, or the echoing cries from a school of beluga whales looking for a breathing hole. Other instruments hung right in the middle of the ocean’s invisible highway, the currents beneath the surface. When the first measurements came in it didn’t take Zakariassen long to conclude that the ocean temperature had risen and the salt concentration was lower than the previous year.

He explained to Anna that the fresh water from the ice melt diluted the ocean’s salt content, weakening the currents sending cold water from the north down to the equator, where the seawater would evaporate, cooling down the atmosphere. When this declined, the temperature in the entire atmosphere increased and the air over the North Pole also became warmer – on one random November day in 2016, an incredible twenty degrees warmer than usual. Now the very backbone of the North Pole itself was beginning to melt – the ancient, hard blue ice that had always lasted from one year to the next.

“Your children are most likely going to be the first for three million years to grow up without ice at the North Pole,” sighed Zakariassen late one evening after having published the first expedition blog on Fram X’s website.

“Lucky that I wasn’t planning on having kids, then,” was Anna’s terse reply.

She closed the hatch behind her, walking into the headwind across the hull of the hovercraft, and jumped down onto the ice. Zakariassen motioned for her to come over to him.

“I just have to fix something.” Her words drifted away with the wind, but Zakariassen had heard enough, and waved both arms to stop her.

“No, we have to get moving before the storm hits.”

Anna ignored his protests and walked quickly past the large propeller at the rear of *Sabvabaa* and deeper into the dark. She let the light from her headlamp lead her along the poles stuck at regular intervals into the ice. Between them tripwires were strung, almost invisible, that would trigger a flare at the top of each pole if an intruder walked through them. In this corner of the world, that intruder was usually a polar bear.

The light from her headlamp struck a rise in the ice. Anna walked over to it and dropped to her knees. She pulled off her gloves and blew warm air onto her frozen fingers, then brushed away the snow covering the block of ice that she had buried earlier in the day, it being the 1st of November. The Day of the Dead. All Saints' Day. Beneath the snow a photograph became visible, frozen in time inside the ice block.

It was a picture of a man.

The man was standing under a blue sky, his eyes prominent in his tanned face. Wrinkles streamed out from their corners, like exclamation marks above his white smile. In the curls of his black hair, some grey strands twisted over his ears, betraying that he was perhaps older than he looked. He was dressed in a light blue jacket, and an illegible ID card hung over his chest.

Anna pulled something out of the snow in front of the photograph. It was a grave lantern, its flame extinguished. She screwed off the lid and shone a light down into it. The wick was covered in snow that had found its way in through the ventilation holes in the top. She tipped it upside down, shaking the snow out, then lit the wick with a well-worn Zippo with an engraving of a winged dagger on its side. When Anna was completely sure that it was burning strongly, she dug a hole in the snow all the way down to the ice sheet and placed the burning lantern into the snow. Now it was sheltered from the wind.

She stayed on her knees looking at the picture. Illuminated by the lantern, a halo of light encircled the man's face, its flickering flame bringing his eyes to life. His name was Yann Renault. He and Anna had been together for almost a year when he was kidnapped by IS in Syria on an assignment for the aid organisation Médecins Sans Frontières. It was supposed to have been their final mission. Anna would move to the village of Seillanse in the mountains of Provence, where his parents ran a little hotel. The plan was that they would take over the hotel when Yann's parents retired. But if you want to make God laugh, tell him about your plans.

Yann Renault was buried at the cemetery in Seillanse while Anna was lying in a coma at the hospital in Germany. To the world, Yann was a hero who had sacrificed his life to spare his fellow hostages. Only a handful of people knew that it was Anna Aune who had saved them. Even fewer still knew what had really happened when Yann was killed.

She pulled the stiff sleeve of her survival suit to reveal her watch. The hands were ticking over, breaking free from midnight. All Saints' Day was over. The dead had been remembered. The machinery of the world ground on.

When Anna climbed back into *Sabvabaa's* cabin, Zakariassen was sitting in the driver's seat with his hand resting on the wheel. He had an irritated look on his face, but refrained from commenting on the delay. She turned around and glanced out of the hatch at the metal equipment cases on the ice. Forty cases with everything they needed to survive for almost a year. A year without having to think about anything other than work, eat, sleep. Now more than ever, that seemed like the greatest of earthly pleasures.

"The ice floe may break apart while we are away," she said.

Zakariassen looked at her.

"If that happens, you'll lose all your equipment," she continued. "Your expedition will end in complete failure."

The old man looked at her for a few moments before his eyes flitted away, fixing themselves on a point on the wall in front of the worktable. Several moments passed before he shook his head firmly, and placed his hand on the throttle.

"We have a duty to help people in need," said Professor Emeritus Zakariassen in a firm voice, shoving the throttle forward.

6.

In the Inuit language, *sabvabaa* means “flows swiftly over it”. As Anna was sitting in the seat next to Zakariassen, it felt more appropriate to describe the hovercraft’s passage as “bumps slowly over it”.

The wind had increased in strength and, in order not to lose control, Zakariassen was driving well under the normal cruising speed of twenty-five knots.

Sabvabaa hovered over the ice on a cushion of air trapped under the hull by its heavy rubber skirting. Although the air cushion meant fewer obstacles, and *Sabvabaa* floated easily over blocks of ice and open fractures, the lack of friction beneath her was also a problem when the wind hit her from the side. Zakariassen constantly had to adjust his course with the steering wheel controlling the rudders on the large propeller driving the hovercraft forward. *Sabvabaa* was lurching forward like an inebriated wino, and every time Zakariassen increased or decreased the power, Anna sensed a slight nausea rising in her throat.

She took a deep breath and tried to look straight ahead. Snowflakes whirled into the lights like white moths on a warm summer night. An image as far away from reality as it was possible to be. Her fingers were still ice cold, and a thermometer on the instrument panel told her that the temperature had dropped to minus thirty in the short time since she had seen the flare. She felt the seat shake, heard the rattling of objects in the cabin hitting each other. A faint stench of diesel. Outside, the North Pole was pelting the windshield with ever more snow. She was trying to focus, trying to imagine what had happened at the Chinese base, and what they would find when they got there, but the monotonous rumbling of the engine kept skewing her concentration.

Back to the picture of Yann still lying on the ice.

Anna remembered precisely where the photograph was taken.

In Syria, at a refugee camp on the outskirts of Ain Issa, two years, six months and twenty-two days ago. Yann had invited her to see how everything was going with the boy who had brought them together. Little Sadi had laughed when Anna leaned over the cot he was lying in. Tiny bubbles of gurgling delight slipped out of the corners of his mouth, seemingly unconcerned that he had lost a foot below one knee. A brutal reminder that the Syrian civil war turned a blind eye to whether its victims were soldiers or children.

“Sadi’s going to be fine. Kids get used to prostheses much quicker than adults,” said Yann as they ate lunch in an air-conditioned tent afterwards. This first meal together was what Yann would later insist was their first date. Anna always denied it with equal fervour.

“I know I’m not the most romantic person on the planet, but driving two hours across a scorching desert to a miserable refugee camp, eating *something* you called lunch from a plastic plate – all while your colleagues argue in French and stick their elbows in my food – is no date, not in Norway. Not even in Tromsø.”

Yann always laughed, kissing her. “You don’t know what romance is, Anna. You must be pretty glad you met me otherwise you would never have melted, my Scandinavian ice queen.”

Now Yann was dead and she was, seemingly, queen of the ice again. Anna knew that she would never meet anyone who could match up to the self-assured, romantic man from the mountains of Provence again. This knowledge had rushed in, filling every cell of

her body the moment she woke from the coma at the hospital in Germany. No matter what her father said, no matter how her colleagues consoled her, or what a succession of psychologists tried to get her to do to move on, she saw no meaning in life anymore. The only reason she was still alive was that she couldn't bear the thought of her father finding her dead. Anna had agreed to go to the North Pole, but not to coming back.

"Are we on the correct heading?"

She was dragged away from her thoughts as a gust of wind blew *Sabvabaa* hard into a sideways lurch. She scarcely managed to grab hold of the computer she had on her lap before it slid onto the floor. The clock on the screen showed it had been almost thirty minutes since they had set out for the Chinese base. The laptop display was a satellite image with three moving dots. She knew that the red one was Ice Dragon's position. The blue one was *Sabvabaa*, and the green one was the GPS transmitter on the equipment they had left behind on the ice. *Sabvabaa* was midway between the red and the green dots. On the satellite image Anna saw dark veins in the ice. The fractures that lay ahead of them.

"Yes, we should see the base soon."

Zakariassen throttled up.

The kitchen cabinets rattled from within as the vessel lurched onwards. Slush sprayed up, splattering the windows as they passed over a broad channel.

"Fuck!"

Zakariassen flung *Sabvabaa* sideways as a huge pressure ridge appeared in the searchlight's beam. The hovercraft began to slide and Anna watched the shards of the towering wall of ice approaching at high speed. White floes. Black shadows. Razor sharp contours.

Red lights flashed on the instrument panel and an engine warning screeched hysterically as Zakariassen applied full power. *Sabvabaa* pulled forward, parallel to the wall. He wrenched the wheel steering the propeller, barely managing to force the boat away from the icy barricade.

"Jesus, Anna, stay focussed!" he barked furiously.

Her heart thudded in her chest and she could hear her pulse pounding in her ears as she saw the edge of the ice wall drift past the windows like the spikes of an enormous hedgehog. Her eyes scanned the instrument panel. Something was wrong.

"It might help if you turned on the radar," she said, pushing the switch that Zakariassen had forgotten in his eagerness to leave.

The professor mumbled something under his breath as he leaned forward to get a better view through the window. *Sabvabaa* was gliding smoothly forwards now. The tall wall of ice sheltered it from the northerly wind.

Anna swallowed her growing nausea and saw that the blue dot on the satellite map had moved up next to the red.

The position was 89 degrees, 37 point 3 minutes North, 37 degrees, 13 minutes.10 seconds East. Not far from the pole itself.

"We should be there by now."

She tried peering through the sleet that was settling on the windows faster than the wipers could clear it. In the glare of the powerful searchlight on the roof, the massive pressure ridge cast long shadows across the ice field. After a while, she caught sight of something blinking in the darkness.

"Stop!" she yelled. Zakariassen yanked back the throttle. The hovercraft stopped dead. He peered out.

"I can't see anything."

Her hand groped for the switch to the searchlights, shutting them off. It was a trick her father had taught her when she got her first car, an old Volvo that the mechanic had repaired and repainted. "Shut off the headlights for a second before each corner, then you'll see if there are any cars coming in the other direction," he said, before waving her a worried goodbye as she headed to a concert along the pitch black, rain-sodden back roads of the Troms valley.

Once her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she spotted them. Sparkling lights on the other side of the pressure ridge wall. They had to be the lights from the Chinese base.

Zakariassen saw them at the same time, and re-engaged the power. The lights from Ice Dragon streamed in through the snowed-up windshield. They were powerful and floated high above ground, like UFOs. On Anna's display, the green and red dots merged.

An alarm sounded.

The anti-collision warning flashed on the radar screen. The teeth of a beast appeared right ahead of them. Zakariassen swerved abruptly to the left. The hovercraft lunged wildly, avoiding the nearest monster tooth. In the bright light, she saw that they were oil barrels lying in the snow.

Behind the barrels a barracks came into view, painted blue.

Zakariassen steered past the barracks and set the propeller in reverse so that they came to a stop under the UFO lights. Anna didn't notice that she had been holding her breath until black dots began fizzing at the edge of her field of vision.

Her eyes stung as she looked up the glare above them. Compared to the dark polar night they had just driven through, this was like arriving a neon heaven.

It only goes to show that the devil pays his electricity bills, too.

7.

When the engine stopped, *Sabvabaa* became strangely still. Outside, Anna saw the snow swirling in tight swarms through the bright floodlights illuminating the Chinese base. Even though the engine was stopped, the windows still rattled. One of the instruments indicated that the storm that Boris had warned about was on its way. She was looking for an excuse to do nothing, just to sit there in her warm seat, close her eyes, and fade into oblivion. "It's blowing almost fifty kilometres an hour already," she said. "A near gale."

"Yes, yes, you think I don't know that already?" Zakariassen looked at her irritably. "We're not on a goddamn girl scout's outing." He increased the speed of the wipers to get a better look. Their rubber strips, frozen stiff, screeched offensively at her as they wheeled over the film of ice that had formed on the windshield.

The deluge of light they were trapped under was pouring down from the top of a tower that thrust up behind a large, yellow barracks. The building was at least seven metres tall and around fifty metres wide. More like an industrial warehouse.

Surrounding the yellow building were smaller red polar cabins in a horseshoe formation. Light came from most windows, but there was no movement and no curious faces to be seen inside. Zakariassen blew onto his glasses, wiping and pushing them back into place on his narrow nose, then looked at the instrument panel. His fingers fumbled for a switch.

Anna jumped at the siren blare from the hovercraft's roof.

The wind and the snow swallowed the blast.

Zakariassen sounded a longer burst. Both stared towards the floodlit base. In the red cabins, no doors opened. Nobody came running out of the dark. Apart from the wailing of the wind, the only sound that Anna could hear was a remote, rhythmic pounding. A steady beating.

Zakariassen also noticed the noise. He exhaled slowly through his nose. A worried expression. Anna realised it had just dawned on him that there was no guarantee that this particular rescue mission would end with a quick and easy heroic act.

"We should let the institute know," he said finally.

The fabric of his survival suit creaked as his picked up the satellite phone receiver that he kept in a holder on the instrument panel.

"Yes, we are at the Chinese base." He spoke loudly when the head of the institute in Bergen replied. "No, we haven't seen anyone yet...what was that? Please repeat...I can't hear...yes, yes, I'll let you know. We'll take a look. Of course we'll be careful."

He switched the telephone off, stood up and walked over to the worktable, pulling open a drawer and picking up a black object. He turned around, holding it out towards her. Anna saw the holster holding the large Smith & Wesson Magnum revolver that Zakariassen had bought in Longyearbyen.

"I don't use firearms."

Zakariassen had looked at Anna in astonishment when he heard the words. She uttered them in the lobby of the Radisson hotel they were staying at while they were waiting for *Polarstern* to dock in Longyearbyen to collect them, *Sabvabaa* and the rest of the equipment. The hotel was full of Japanese and Americans wandering around in thick socks and oversized down jackets. A sign at the entrance made it clear that boots were not to be worn inside the hotel. Another directed that firearms – revolvers, pistols and rifles – were to be placed in the hotel's weapons safe and that the key could be collected from reception.

Zakariassen had been out to buy the Smith & Wesson revolver from a mineworker who was returning home. On Svalbard, all inhabitants are instructed to carry a firearm when venturing outside urban areas. The day before, Anna had seen a mother on a snowmobile dropping her children at a kindergarten right in the city centre, a revolver hanging from her belt.

"You surely don't mean that you don't shoot? You're a soldier, aren't you?" said Zakariassen.

"I was a soldier."

"But why?"

"That's my business. I don't use firearms."

"No, no, there's no discussion...we can't be in the North Pole without weapons."

"I have a weapon."

Zakariassen laughed out-loud when Anna showed him the Japanese sports bow she had bought in Tokyo years ago.

"You're going to shoot a polar bear with a bow and arrow?"

"I'd rather not. I think I'll manage to scare them off by growling and waving my arms."

In the end, Zakariassen had reluctantly accepted that Anna would neither use his old Mauser rifle nor the revolver – especially after he had seen her use the bow. The targets were empty tin cans she had placed on top of a large block of ice next to *Sabvabaa*. Quickly and effectively, and at a distance of twenty metres, she dispatched every single one of them. As the bowstring launched its arrow, an echo bounced back from the surrounding ice like a sharp whip-crack. When the professor picked up one of the targets, the arrow had penetrated straight through the tin that had contained the Trondheim brown stew they had eaten for dinner the day before.

Zakariassen pressed the leather holster holding the revolver into Anna's hand and pointed to the snow whirling past in the bright light outside. "We cannot walk out into a full storm in zero visibility without protecting ourselves against polar bears...you won't be able to shoot a bow and arrow now...you of all damn people understand that, surely."

Anna sensed her own physical disgust as the revolver's metal brushed her hand. She tightened her fist.

"No, I can't."

"You can't shoot a bow in these conditions," he protested.

She got up out of her seat and walked to her bed at the back of the cabin, pulling out the ragged North Face bag that was stored underneath it. She unzipped it and hunted her way through underwear, socks, t-shirts, long johns and books she had never got round to starting. Under an unopened bottle of Lagavulin Single Malt whiskey, she finally found a leather sheath. She opened it up and pulled out the knife it was shielding, a long, matt black blade terminating in a solid leather handle. A hunting knife she had won in an arm-wrestling contest against an American marine in Bosnia. The soldier hadn't realised that he was facing a three-time Scandinavian youth arm-wrestling champion. Her technique beat his strength with ease; it took two seconds for the loudmouth to cave in once she forced his arm down.

"I *am* armed, see?" Anna opened the side pocket of her survival suit, slipping the knife into it as Zakariassen looked on in frustration. He grunted something and picked up the cartridge clip he always placed on the windowsill after being out on the ice with his old Mauser rifle. It clicked damply as he pushed it in. He ran the moisture out of his hair with his hand and looked back at Anna firmly.

"Now we had better get out there and find out what the Chinese are playing at."

8.

As she clambered down from *Sabvabaa*, Anna felt the gale ice-cold thrusting needles into the exposed skin around her eyes. Even though she had a ski mask over her face, the wind was whipping snowflakes at her eyelashes, where her body heat thawed them before they froze into a hard, icy camouflage.

Anna turned away from the wind and saw Zakariassen climbing down after her with his rifle slung over his shoulder. She pulled her ski goggles over her face and thrust her hand into her pocket to check that her mobile was there. It was connected to *Sabvabaa's* wifi and if the northern lights and the solar storms relented soon, there was a slight chance that she could call or send an SMS. Zakariassen trudged past her in the snow, his silhouette stretching out behind him like a black yeti as he moved towards the floodlights. Reluctantly, she followed. It was hard work walking in the snow. The wind ripped and tore at her body, trying all the time to force her back. From inside her constricted hood and behind the huge skiing goggles now covering her face, Anna's line of sight was limited. As she walked, she constantly turned her head to get a better perspective. The flickering snowflakes dragged the light from Ice Dragon into the dark like fireflies. Anna realised that she ought to be feeling safer here, on this massive base that could almost be a small town, but her senses screamed otherwise. The darkness and the ice fields beyond the reach of the floodlights definitely felt safer.

She turned her head to the left, her narrow field of vision sweeping past the yellow warehouse to a smaller, grey cabin with a flat roof. A heavy snowdrift had blown up against its wall.

As she was looking the other way, the first two polar cabins in the horseshoe formation came into view. Both of them had wide doors to their fronts, but no windows. Two chimneys stuck up from the roof of the one furthest away. The drifting flakes performed an extra pirouette as they struck the invisible smoke the chimneys exhaled.

She walked behind Zakariassen, sheltered from the wind along the edge of the large building. The thumping noise grew louder the closer they got to its front. Zakariassen walked around the corner and vanished. For each step that Anna took towards the corner, her legs grew heavier. She had been here before. Old memories sparked into life again. In her brain, these memories became electrical impulses rushing along her nerves to her senses. The snowflakes became dandelion seeds.

The seeds tumbled from the sky and, backlit by the low evening sun, looked like paratroopers in a vast invading army. The atmosphere was relaxed. The soldiers in her troop were talking trash about the previous night's karaoke at the officer's mess at Film City.

Anna was second in line. She was on her first overseas mission with the multinational NATO force in Kosovo. An American soldier walked ahead of her. Sebastian had a good voice. At the karaoke, his version of 'My Way' was one of the better ones. He turned to her just before the corner of a bombed-out shopping centre in downtown Priština.

"You good?" he asked, walking around the corner.

She nodded and looked behind to check on the others.

A boom.

The corner sheltered her from the explosion. Karaoke Sebastian, from a little town in Minnesota, lost his life to shrapnel from a NATO cluster bomb. Blue on blue. Killed by one of his own.

Anna stopped just before the corner. In the middle of the space between the large building and the polar cabins, she saw three small heaps of snow several metres apart. Snow was blowing up and over them like a thousand tiny ski jumpers.

Instinct told her that at the very moment she turned the corner, there was no turning back. She would be a soldier again. And just as the magnetic force below the ice pointed every compass in the world in the same direction, Anna Aune clearly attracted misery no matter how far she tried to remove herself from it.

She stepped forward and rounded the corner.

9.

The storm wind from the Russian tundra smashed into Anna like an invisible freight train.

Zakariassen was standing a few metres further ahead, in front of a door banging in the wind.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

He was staring at something in the doorway, then turned slowly towards her. She saw the floodlights above him reflected double in the large ski goggles covering his face and glasses. His pupils were hidden beneath his deep eye sockets and bushy eyebrows.

"Is something wrong?" she yelled.

Her question vanished in the wind. It was freezing cold. Snowflakes carved into the bare skin between her ski mask and mouth.

The open door was flapping in the wind.

Boom.

Boom.

Boom.

Anna forced herself to put one foot in front of the other, struggling through the deep snow towards Zakariassen. Now she saw what he had seen. In the doorway there was a man crouching on all fours. His head was bowed, looking straight down at the floor, as though he was searching for something.

As the door closed towards the man again, she thought he would move to avoid trapping his fingers. But when the door blew open again, the man was in exactly the same place.

Boom.

Boom.

The doorframe tore a gash in her glove as she grabbed it, although she didn't know why she did. It was probably a reaction to Zakariassen just standing there, staring.

"Hi, what's wrong?"

"I think...he's dead." Zakariassen yelled the words in her face, his spittle freezing on her goggles.

Anna held the door open against the wind with her back while she bent down towards the man. Now she saw that he was covered in white frost. The hair on his head was covered with ice crystals. An icicle hung from his nose.

She touched him on the shoulder. She was wearing heavy gloves, but the sensation sent a chilly shiver up through her arm, a feeling that the motionless body was leeching a cold evil. When she tried to pull the man towards her, he wouldn't move an inch. His

hands were rooted to a layer of ice on the floor. He was like one of the dead mountaineers on Mount Everest, those who succumbed so high up that even the helicopters couldn't reach them, only to remain on the mountain for time eternal.

The ice-people.

"You're right," she said, turning towards Zakariassen. "The only place this guy is going now is six feet under."

"What?"

"He's stone dead!" she yelled, making sure that the old professor heard her.

Zakariassen's eyes blinked madly. "Did he freeze to death?"

"No, but he *was* frozen to death."

Zakariassen gazed at the ice-man. "What's the difference?"

"He's crouched on all fours. If he had died naturally, he would be lying on the floor, or leaning against the wall. Or he might be the world's most patient suicide victim, but I have my doubts about that."

Anna pointed towards the white hands planted in the ice.

"Even at twenty below, with that amount of water on the floor it would still take at least two hours before it froze solid. Nobody's going to be able to stay still for that long. Something must have happened to put this guy in the deep-freeze so quickly."

"An accident?"

"I sure hope so," she said, turning towards the wind. The circle of red polar cabins around the large building suddenly looked completely different. They might have been a safe harbour from the coming storm. Now they could be harbouring something else entirely.

She felt her neck hairs bristle.

Zakariassen peered into the darkened space, and her eyes followed his. She couldn't see anything in there, but suddenly understood that the man in the doorway wasn't the end of this. There was somebody else inside the building.

She let go of the door and backed up two steps.

"Now we have to be really fucking careful," she said.

Anna backed away from the ice-man quickly. From Ice Dragon. From this Hades on ice.

Zakariassen's looked at her with his doubled eyes and said something that disappeared with the wind.

"...more..."

He shouted as he pointed into the dark space.

The wind stole her words before they reached him. "No, we need..." She looked down along the wall. There were no other doors in sight. She decided to walk around the building's perimeter to investigate what was on the other side. When she looked back, Zakariassen had vanished. She scanned around before realising where he must be.

"Daniel!" she yelled. "Come back, it's not safe in there!"

But he either didn't hear her, or didn't want to.

"Goddamn. Fuck."

After fumbling to open the pocket where she kept the large Maglite, she walked up to the door, shoving it against the wall and kicking snow under it until it stayed there.

Anna inhaled slowly, focussing on steadying her pulse, then lifted a foot and stepped past the frozen man. Her boots crunched.

A flashlight pulsed in her mind.

An image of a man with three eyes.

She crushed the memory and, holding the torch with an outstretched arm, tried focussing on here and now. The gloom closing around her felt physical, a spectre of shadows groping and tearing at her. She was trained to be rational, but each signal in every nerve cell was screaming that this was a fucking terrible idea. The torch beam carved through the darkness and struck something solid. There was a figure ahead of her, and it was not Zakariassen.

10.

Without thinking Anna raised the Maglite, gripping it hard, ready to strike the man standing right in front of her. In one reflexive movement she hunched her tall body together into a smaller target, but the floor was as slick as an ice rink.

Anna slipped.

The Maglite was knocked from her hand as she broke her fall. The torch rolled away over the icy floor, its beam streaking around like a lighthouse on speed. The light was hitting walls, girders, walls, girders...walls...a foot. A face. Another face. The torch stopped and, in its ray, she saw something moving.

"Anna!"

It was Zakariassen crawling towards her on all fours. The reflective strips of his survival suit dazzled vividly.

"Oh my God, you cannot go off like that Daniel! You scared the living shit out of me!"

Vapour clouds gushed from his mouth, his eyes wide-open in shock.

"They're all dead!"

Cracks were beginning to appear in his cut-glass accent.

"They're dead Anna, there are dead bodies everywhere!"

She grappled forward along the ice, picking up the torch. The man she thought was going to attack her was still standing in the same spot. He was covered in a white skin of frost. Tiny icicles hung from his arms. He had been flash frozen to the floor at the moment of escape, just like the man in the doorway. Beneath the frost, Anna saw that his eyes slanted slightly. He was without a doubt Chinese, or Asian at least. He was dressed in a thin down jacket, and from what could be seen of his shoes, he seemed to be wearing slippers. The man had not dressed for the deep cold.

Behind him she saw two more figures. Two ice-men, frozen stiff at a table, upon which were some frosted shapes that Anna presumed were laptops.

One person was lying next to the table, sunken down into the ice that covered the entire floor. One foot had broken off and lay alone. Anna sensed the nausea rising in her throat as she looked at the breakage. It was cut as sharply as the salami Galina shaved in the kitchen with the electric slicer for her father's guests. There was not a drop of blood to

be seen. The man had been frozen solid before he fell. The foot must have broken off when he hit the floor, like an icicle falling from the roof gutters.

From the ceiling above the frozen men hung a deluge of water, halted in free-fall. Where the flood hit the floor there was another body part sticking out. An arm. At the bottom of the frigid fall lay a head, split in two, the brain a pale grey pulp. One half of the skull was cracked into two more pieces, the eye socket ruptured, a little snowball hanging from it by a thin thread. Anna's torchlight flickered in the dark pupil that she glimpsed under the glassy surface.

"You see, they're all dead!"

Zakariassen's voice screeched. Anna could see his breath floating before his face like a ghostly airship. The lenses of his Oakley goggles were already covered with a thick layer of frost. Now Anna suddenly felt how cold the building was. There was a profound chill emanating from below the ice, dense, unstoppable. It felt as though only the flames of hell could warm this place up. As she tried to lift her foot, the ice stuck to pieces of her boot's rubber sole.

Zakariassen mumbled something. He was struggling to open his mouth. Drops of blood burst from his lips as they tore each other apart in the cold. His words overflowed thickly, filling the space.

"What in hell has happened to them all?"

"I don't know."

Anna walked over to the two ice-men sitting at the snow-covered table. Now she saw that both their heads were bowed and their hands covered their faces. They had tried to defend themselves against whatever had killed them. Their laptops were wrapped in snow and ice. She pressed one of the keys on the nearest keyboard. Snow crunched under her fingers. The computer was as dead as its operator. A couple of sheets of paper had blown up against the screen. She tore one of them loose. The paper was stiff and covered with handwritten Chinese characters, nothing that might tell her what they had been working on. She turned around, moving the beam of light slowly around the room. The ice-men cast long shadows against the walls, but nothing in the room appeared dangerous. Just a few cabinets containing tools, coils of cable, an ordinary coffee machine. The jug was split and covered in frost, the coffee frozen like a black reptile as it crawled out of the cracked glass.

She pointed the torch upwards.

The light beam hit the frozen waterfall hanging down from the roof. The streams of water had frozen on their journey towards the floor, sprawling into the air like a sculptural still frame of a skyrocket at the point of explosion. It was impossible to see where the liquid was coming from, but there was no doubt that the icy waterfall had to have something to do with whatever had killed the men below. Anna stuck a finger under her facemask, stretching it out a little so that there was more space to breathe. When she did, she couldn't smell anything. The air she was inhaling felt almost viscous.

"Do you know what it might be?" she asked.

Trying to avoid looking at the dead, Zakariassen shone his own torch towards the ice waterfall

"It might simply be water."

"These people were not killed by water. They froze to death in seconds."

The professor looked at the waterfall in the roof, thinking.

A sharp crack-boom cut him short.

A shot.

From outside.

11.

Fucking idiot!

Silent accusations raged inside her mind as the shot rang out. *How can you be so completely stupid, Anna?!*

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. As she had followed Zakariassen in, she had ignored her instincts, howling in chorus, warning her not to go into the warehouse. The victims of such gruesome deaths could have been murdered. If so, the murderer would not be far away.

One of the first rules she learned in the army was never to run towards a wounded comrade without securing the area first, no matter how much he was screaming for help. Forget this basic rule and you risked an enemy sniper seeing to it that you'd be the next one lying there, begging for rescue in no man's land while life slowly bled out of you.

She managed to think of all of this before the shot's echo died out in a metallic snarl that rang in the ears. Its direction of travel told her that whoever had fired was standing by the doorway.

"Down!" she yelled to Zakariassen. With one hand she thrust herself around on the ice. Now she saw a clear movement in the dark. Something white.

Another crack-boom.

She rolled over in case the shooter had seen her in the gloom. Another boom. Again something white moved.

Harshly metallic, it boomed one more time, Anna finally realised what she was looking at.

"There's no... Jesus fucking Christ...it was just the door."

Her nerves had called her bluff. The cold gripped her head like a vice. She couldn't think straight. Without letting go of the torch, she got up on her legs and walked slowly towards the door, trying to keep her balance on the ice. As she was walking past the ice-man in the doorway, Anna realised that one of his hands had broken off. Three fingers held tight to the door handle. The rest of the hand lay crushed behind the doorframe. She noticed her own footprint in the palm of the broken hand. She must have stepped on it on her way in.

"Follow the book now Anna, get an overview of the area first," she said aloud to herself. The pit of her stomach told her that a hidden danger was lurking, but now the

threat was coming from outside. She nudged the door open with her shoulder. There was nobody in direct sight.

The storm had increased in strength in the few minutes they had been inside. The snow strafed across the yard, making it impossible to see the cabins on the other side. For the weather alone, going outside felt like a suicide mission.

"What the hell has happened here, Anna?" Zakariassen was standing right behind her. Feeling the Mauser's rifle barrel press against her thigh, she pushed him back.

"Stay here. Don't go out before I say so." she said, and squeezed out of the door into the snowstorm.

She ran crouched along the wall and around the corner of the warehouse. Once on the other side she was protected from the wind, her back pressed hard against the panelling. There were no cabins here that a killer could hide out in. The blue barracks they passed on the way in was so far away that only a sniper rifle would have a chance, but the snow would have made it impossible to see her.

The cold tore at her lungs as she inhaled calm breaths, trying to clear her head. Trying to analyse the situation.

Scenario 1: The men in the building had died in an accident. If that was the case, where was the person who had fired the flare?

Scenario 2: The men were murdered, one had managed to escape and sent up the flare, but the murderer was in pursuit and killed him too. Her entire paranoid mind-set clung to the second explanation because the next move was so goddamn simple.

They had to leave.

With the torch held high, ready to strike, she walked around the corner and back into the storm wind again. The chill immediately brought tears to her eyes and, as she was blinking them away, she saw a movement in the snow.

Someone was standing in front of the building.

Her body shrank into a tight coil. She threw herself to the ground, feeling a sharp pain as the fall pressed the knife in the side pocket into her hip. A blast of wind carved a passage through the snowdrift. The figure became clear.

It was Zakariassen. He was staring at something above the roof.

"What are you doing?!" She had to yell to be heard over the wind. "I told you not to come out before I said so. I was about to stick my knife in your back"

The professor met the anger in her voice with a helpless waving of the arms.

"I couldn't stay in there, not with those...ice-men...I was freezing to death," he stammered. Her eyes darted around. The brief glimpses she caught of the windows in the barracks surrounding them betrayed no sign of movement. There was nobody to be seen, but they were standing in the most exposed position possible. A few metres ahead of them lay three snowdrifts. The floodlights twinkled on something metallic under the surface of one of them.

"That's a tank, up in the tower."

Anna granted herself a brief glimpse upwards. An amateur with more will than talent had painted a large, bright blue dragon on a tarp fastened to the tower's cross bracing. Green flames hissed from the monster's gaping jaws. Next to it, two Chinese characters painted in red: ice, dragon.

The tank Zakariassen was talking about was barely visible behind the tarpaulin. On top, thick layers of ice glittered. "I think whatever killed everyone came out of that," he said. "It must have sprung a leak."

Anna looked towards the yellow building. If his theory was right, there was still a vital piece of the puzzle missing.

"Come on!" she shouted, seizing Zakariassen's hand and dragging him with her away from the surrounding cabins.

Three steps and they were back to the ice-man in the doorway. The torchlight found his remaining hand. What she was looking for wasn't there. It wasn't lying next to him on the ground either. The man in the doorway was the only one who might have shot up the flare. But where was the gun? Again she felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She had a strong sense that someone was watching her. Anna rotated on her heels, allowing her eyes to sweep over the yard.

A silver glimmer caught her eye. The wind had now blown free whatever was lying under the nearest pile of snow. Something was fluttering. Something she wanted nothing to do with.

Zakariassen followed her gaze. "What is that...that in the snow?"

The fact that he had seen the same as her gave her no choice. If the snow was hiding what she feared it was, it was going to be impossible to leave the Chinese base.

"Get your rifle ready."

He looked at her uncomprehendingly from behind his goggles. Zakariassen still hadn't realised what the rescue mission had led them into.

"Walk with me, but keep your eyes on the barracks and if you see anything...anything at all...let me know." A flash of awakening dawned in his eyes and, crouching down, he loaded the rifle, looking around nervously.

They ran side by side towards the fluttering object. Anna hit the ground just next to it without once taking her eyes off the cabins' windows.

"Watch the windows. Shout out if you see something."

She pushed the snow off the silvery material. She saw now that it was the hood of a down jacket, buried in the snow. A tangle of black hair stuck out from beneath it. Pale skin was visible underneath. The head of a man. At first she saw something she thought was an eye, but the position was wrong. Then Anna got final proof that what had happened at Ice Dragon was no accident.

In the middle of the dead Chinese man's forehead was a thick welt of blood, hardened around a bullet wound. Anna felt the nausea climbing towards her throat. Her field of vision narrowed. The world was swallowed by an explosion of white fireworks.

12.

On the ice, the driving snow was settling on the contents of Anna's guts. She barely managed to turn away from the wind and pull up her ski mask before retching. She scraped off the slime that was already freezing around her mouth. The cold stung her face. She stayed doubled over and gasping until she was sure she wasn't going to throw up again. Then she pulled the mask back down over her face and turned around. The professor was staring awkwardly at her. His eyes blinked quickly. He held the rifle up to his chest.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"What happened...it was like you disappeared, I couldn't get through to you."

Anna looked over to the warehouse where the ice-men were. Her eyes traced the bright floodlight beam up past the fluttering dragon. The glare blinded her eyes.

She turned away from the stark light, and saw that she was lying in a white room, under a white sheet. All around her were people dressed in white. She was trying to speak, but something in her mouth was gagging the words. One of the figures in white came over to her. A man. His hair was hidden inside a white hood, but trickles of red blood were running from the seams and down over his forehead. He removed the mask. It was Yann.

"How's it going, Anna?"

She tried to reply, but the object in her throat stopped her. Her hand fumbled towards her mouth, grabbing an air tube and yanking it out. She could speak at last.

"How can you be alive? Someone must take care of you. Have I died?"

"I'm doing well, but it's too early for you, Anna, there's much more for you to do yet." Yann kissed her on the forehead. His lips felt cold against her skin. He peeled back the white hood, and black blood ran from a hole in his forehead.

Anna blinked, forcing her eyes away from the floodlights, and met Zakariassen's stare. "I...I just fucking lost it for a moment...everything's okay now, don't worry."

She felt her heart kicking. The professor looked down at the dead man. His face was already covered by a thin layer of snow. The bullet hole had turned grey.

"He was killed...?" It barely merited a response.

Anna looked around. She still couldn't see any movement in the windows of the red cabins. She spat in the snow in an attempt to get rid of the taste of puke and breathed deeply.

"You have to listen to me now Daniel...do *not* panic..."

"What?!"

Mistake. Those were not the right words. Breathe deeply. Take one thing at a time. Anna gestured towards his old Mauser.

"You have to cover me."

Zakariassen held the rifle away from his body as if it had suddenly become a venomous snake. She grabbed hold of him, turning him so that he had full sight of the red cabins.

"If you see anything now, don't yell, just shoot!" she growled into the wind. "I need to search him."

Her numb fingers ran over his lifeless corpse and the snow around him while she avoided looking at his head. There was no weapon.

She walked over to the next snowdrift and kicked off some of the snow. A figure appeared. This dead man was lying face down, and the only thing to hint that he had been shot in the back was a slight tear in his down jacket.

Before walking over to the last drift, she cast a glance at Zakariassen. The old man was leaning forwards into the wind, his rifle pointed straight ahead. An easy target if anyone armed was hiding in one of the cabins, but she couldn't do anything about it right now.

When she had managed to dig away some of the snow covering the last victim, Anna saw that he was lying on his back, staring straight up. His eyes sat glazed in the pale face. She removed a glove and placed a finger on his exposed throat. There was no sign of a pulse, and when she went to lift her finger, it snagged a little against the skin.

No doubt about it, the man was dead.

His down jacket was ruptured where the shot had hit him in the centre of his chest. His arms were splayed out to the side like an angel in the snow. He had thin jogging pants on under the jacket, fur slippers on his feet. He had no weapons of any kind. Anna had hoped that one of the three was the killer – it was not unusual for a mentally disturbed individual to end a mass shooting by killing himself. But nothing in the way the Chinese men had been killed suggested suicide. And the murder weapon was gone. There was only one conclusion to draw from what she had seen: Ice Dragon's crew had been killed.

She turned and saw her long shadow stretching to the nearest red cabins. There was still nothing to see in the windows, but now every part of her trembled. Blood pounded in her ears. She ran back through the snow to Zakariassen.

"Everyone's dead and somebody has killed them, Daniel," she shouted point-blank to be heard above the wind. "We need to get the fuck away from here right now!" She grabbed his hand, leading him back through the snow to *Sabvabaa* like a child.

13.

The moments it took until the diesel engine warmed up enough to start *Sabvabaa* felt like an eternity. The windshield wipers were working at full power, but in the snowstorm it was impossible to see far. If the killer was hiding in one of the cabins he must have seen them coming. He. Anna didn't know much, but she knew that this was the work of a man. Perhaps more than one. They were holed up there with their weapons. As soon as she turned the key, the race was on.

From that instant she only had the time it would take to run from one of the possible hiding places. In those few moments she had to turn the hovercraft around and get herself and Zakariassen away from the Chinese base, back to the safety of the ice.

She grabbed the satellite telephone without looking down, raising the receiver to eye level and scrolling down to Boris's number, looking from the window to the telephone and back again. The speaker emitted a pulsating tone as she dialled. There was no contact with the satellites. The solar storm was blocking the connection.

"The telephone's fucked, you'll have to try the radio," she yelled to Zakariassen, but got no response. The professor was sitting slumped forward in the seat next to her. After they had fled back to the hovercraft she had tried to get him to sit in the driver's seat, but the professor seemed panic-stricken. Daniel just sat down, clutching his old Mauser and murmuring something about how this wasn't how it was supposed to turn out...this wasn't the plan.

"Forget about your plans, Daniel, all we need to do now is see about getting the fuck out of here," she yelled in an attempt to break through his inertia. But Zakariassen just stared, his eyes glued to the floor. During their short time at Ice Dragon they had both suffered a kind of mental collapse. Anna knew where her post-traumatic stress came from, but had no idea what was troubling him. It was probably a completely natural reaction to all the dead bodies he had seen. A nightmare no-one could be prepared for.

At last the diesel light blinked on and she turned the key. The engine rumbled into life on the first attempt. She placed both hands on the little wheel without taking her eyes off the window. If someone was coming at them now, the snow flurries would prevent her from seeing them until they were almost there. She would see the killers sooner with the lights on, but that would also reveal their position.

Zakariassen had shown her how to manoeuvre the hovercraft in Longyearbyen and during the first few days after the German icebreaker had dropped them off, but he still preferred to be at the wheel. It was fine by Anna. She had never shown an interest in any vehicles but motorbikes anyway.

The din from the engine was brutally loud. *Sabvabaa* shook as powerful fans sucked the polar air down below the hull and the compressed air lifted the hovercraft up off the ice. The wind began pushing *Sabvabaa* sideways as soon as she was floating on a cushion of air. Anna manoeuvred her so that she was travelling into the wind, just as Zakariassen had taught her. The propeller bit into the wind and the rudder forced the airstream to the side. The little hovercraft began to rotate.

The building containing the ice-men slipped into view through the windshield.

She held on frantically to the wheel as *Sabvabaa* continued rotating away from Ice Dragon. Steering a hovercraft was completely different to driving a car. The craft leapt

into the darkness. The floodlights vanished to the rear, swallowed by the night. Her hand fumbled across the instrument panel until she found the headlight switch. When the lights came on she saw the blue barracks straight ahead.

Anna jerked the wheel to the right but the storm wind forced *Sabvabaa* sideways towards the barracks.

"Daniel, I can't control the boat."

Zakariassen blinked and looked up. It took a few moments for him to realise what had happened. He awoke from his trance.

"Let go of the wheel!"

His hand shot forward.

"Throttle! More throttle!"

She pushed the throttle down as far as it would go.

The blue barracks became two, then three, as the juddering from the engine rattled the windows. Something in the cabin tumbled off a shelf, sounding like marbles smashing into one another. She didn't look back. Everything now was a matter of getting clear of the barracks. From the driver's seat Anna could see the blue panelling just beyond the side windows. The hovercraft would be clear in just a few seconds.

A forceful wrench, the screeching of aluminium sheeting shredding as it was ripped free from its rivets. *Sabvabaa* jumped, trembling and pivoting around the edge of the barracks. One of panels struck the side of the boat. There was a loud bang from the back.

"Stop! You need to stop! The propeller has been hit!"

Zakariassen jerked the throttle back to idle.

Another crash. Glass shattered at the back of the cabin.

The wind pummelled Anna in the neck. She turned around, seeing snow sweeping in through the window above her bed. A bright light flickered outside the broken window. Flames.

An alarm wailing.

"We're on fire!" screamed Zakariassen. "God, get out!" His spit struck her ear.

"No, stay here, I'll fix this."

She shoved the panicked man out of the way and fumbled under the seat. Her fingers found a plastic handle and pulled a fire extinguisher free.

It took her three strides to reach the hatch. Snowflakes frozen into ice whirled into her face as she pushed it open. Outside, a huge hole gaped in the barracks wall where the collision had torn off the panelling. In the glow of the flames she saw barrels through the gash in the wall. Oil barrels.

Fantastic.

Sabvabaa was ablaze right next to the Chinese fuel depot.

The flames were coming from somewhere under the housing surrounding the propeller. She ran across the hull towards the flames, which the wind was blowing outwards at an angle. The stench of diesel struck her. Black smoke was spiralling out of the flames. The wind sucked the smoke up towards the northern lights, corrupting them.

Anna yanked out the fire extinguisher's pull pin and sprayed foam towards the base of the fire beneath the propeller. The blaze hissed and wheezed at her, brandishing its burning claws and refusing to die.

14.

Anna had to put the fire out before it reached the insulation in the cabin walls. If that happened, *Sabvabaa* would be ablaze in seconds. Finally the chemical powder managed to drive away enough oxygen to smother the flames. They flickered feistily up into the air before dying out in cinders, doused by the dark.

As she was entering *Sabvabaa* again, she felt a stinging pain under one of her elbows. Twisting her arm, she saw an ember deep inside a hole in her survival suit. With a knife, she picked out the fire's final attempt to burn her to death.

"Is the engine damaged?" Zakariassen was still sitting in the driver's seat, mercifully out of his funk.

"No idea, I can't see a goddamn thing out there. Try starting it."

He twisted the key and a loud, painful, whining sound filled the cabin.

"The start motor's working anyway...but it sounds like the engine's not getting any fuel."

The professor turned off the ignition. Quiet. Anna looked outside. The barracks they had collided with was blocking the view towards the Chinese base. She leaned forward, turning off the lights. Darkness consumed the cabin. Behind the barracks she caught the glare from Ice Dragon's floodlights.

"Daniel, I need you to do something for me now...go out and keep a lookout."

Sabvabaa was equipped with three Iridium satellite telephones, a VHF transmitter for air comms, a VHF receiver for talking to ships, and a 100-watt radio transmitter. Anna tried them all while Zakariassen kept watch outside.

She only took her eyes away from the window for brief moments as she tried to get through once again on the satellite telephone. She couldn't see anything moving in the bright light around the red cabins. The wind was whipping the snow sideways across the floodlights, which drew an almost perfect circle around the base. At a distance, Ice Dragon looked like one of those plastic snow globes with miniature cities inside them that parents buy their kids for Christmas. The ones you shake to make it snow.

If Anna Aune could shake Ice Dragon now, blood would rain down.

The crash from the collision must have let the killer or killers know that the rescue crew in the hovercraft were in trouble. Now they had regained the upper hand. Maybe men were walking out into the murk now, preparing to surround them at any moment? Zakariassen could only watch one side of the hovercraft as Anna tried to sound the alarm.

At last she managed to engage the emergency beacon.

The Argos transmitter was a black plastic waterproof box that looked a bit like a coffee canister. It would automatically broadcast an SOS signal with *Sabvabaa's* exact location up to satellites orbiting above the North Pole – that is, as long as the battery held out.

When that was done, Anna climbed out of the hatch and hunched into the storm. She stood in the shelter of the propeller's fire-damaged housing while Zakariassen had his head inside the engine. The wind clawed at her and she had to fight hard to keep her balance. When he was finished, the skin on her face felt like a rigid, ice-cold mask.

The professor climbed into the cabin with a charred hose in his hand. His survival suit was iced up and filthy, and he stank of diesel. He tossed the burnt plastic remains towards Anna. "The problem is the fuel line. It was torn off in the collision, diesel sprayed right out onto the engine block...it's hot as hell when the engine's running, that's why it caught fire," he said with barely concealed irritation.

"Ok, how much time do you need to install a new hose?" Anna didn't take her eyes off the red cabins. Her neck muscles ached with stiffness.

"One...maybe two hours, but we can't drive through this blasted storm." Zakariassen laid the hose on the worktable. He suddenly looked tiny and shrivelled inside his oversized survival suit.

"I've tried the radios but everything is dead. Either it's the weather or something must have happened during the collision," she said. "Is there anything you can do about that?"

"Yes, in the worst case they're broken, but it's probably just a cable. It's easy to change them all at the same time..." - his voice died out, his gaze losing focus - "but all the reserve parts are still at base. Shit." He looked at her, frustrated. "I'm sorry, I had no idea we were walking into this hell. Have you really tried all the satellite phones?"

"Of course I have! Try yourself if you don't believe me!" She had to breathe in deeply to keep a lid on her anger. "The satellites are being blocked either by the atmospheric conditions or the storm. I've activated the emergency beacon, the rescue centre must know that we are in trouble."

The professor looked at the black Argos box anxiously, and the green light that was blinking. "What if it doesn't work?"

"Why wouldn't it? Emergency beacons are built to go down with sinking ships. It'll work from here without any problem, but it's just going to take time in this weather. The Russians don't have any bases on the ice this year. The nearest helicopter is probably in Greenland, Svalbard...or maybe Novaja Semlja." As she spoke, her eyes never lost sight of the base outside for more than a few moments at a time.

"This storm can't last for ever." Zakariassen stared down at the floor. Through his grey hair she could see the shiny crown of his head, the liver spots drawing a map of an unfamiliar continent.

"But we cannot wait, you and me can't stay here any longer, Daniel," she said. "I have no idea what has happened at the base. Maybe there was an accident in the building, but the Chinese we found in the snow were shot and killed, beyond any shadow of a doubt. That means that there are one or more killers at the base."

"Were," corrected Zakariassen. "Don't murderers usually flee?"

"Where to though? We're at the fucking North Pole. There's nowhere to run to. If you're alone on the ice in this weather, you'll freeze to death." Anna looked out at the snowstorm. Ice Dragon's lights trembled behind the snowflakes as though the electricity was being pumped out of a beating heart. "Maybe he's committed suicide," she thought. A simple solution to every problem. Then the realist in her took over. The alternative scenarios. How the pawns in this bloody game of chess might be played.

"The thing now is...if whoever has done this is still here, then we are their only rescue. *Sabvabaa* is their only route out of here," she said. No matter which step she tried, she kept returning to the same strategy. A move she in no way, shape or form wanted to make. But there were so few pawns left in this game of chess, and she was the one with power to save them.

The queen.

"If we are going to survive this, we need to get out again. It's we who need to attack, Daniel. We have to catch the killer."

15.

"Calling anybody on this frequency! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!" Zakariassen intoned in a flat voice, like a demotivated priest in an empty church. He was sitting at the radio and turning the frequency shifter. "In the name of God, there must be someone we can get hold of."

Nothing but white noise came back from the loudspeaker. Anna did what she always did when she wasn't sure what to do. She walked over to her bed, pulled out the bag from underneath it, yanked open the zipper to the little pocket at the front and took out a box of snuff. Sitting on the bed, she stuffed a wad of it up under her upper lip. The first of the day. Still for a moment, she felt the nicotine quivering around her nose as a sense of relaxation spread throughout her body.

She looked out.

Except for the snow drifting by, there was no movement to be seen beyond the hovercraft. For a moment she thought, why bother? Wasn't this the opportunity she had been waiting for? Couldn't she just sit here waiting for whatever fate would bring? Let the chips fall where they may? But the old man's tense look as he sat at the radio brought her to her senses. The headstrong soldier took over. She couldn't desert Daniel Zakariassen now.

"Daniel, how much ammo do you have?"

The professor jumped a little.

"Um, a full magazine in the rifle and six rounds in the revolver, but I have a lot more ammunition besides." He stood up, happy to have a simple task with a clear objective: Find the boxes of ammunition. Count them. Zakariassen walked over to the little kitchen cabinet hanging on the wall next to her bed, opening the door and shoving tin cans, and packs of crackers and spaghetti to one side.

"I left the boxes here somewhere." She heard his heavy breathing. The sleeve of his survival suit creaked as he stretched his arm into the cabinet. He pulled out rice and potatoes from the bottom shelf.

"Strange...they must have fallen down..." He reached in deep under the shelf. A couple of sharp snorts, then he pulled out one red box and a larger grey one. Both lids were open.

"How has that happened? I closed them really well..." The professor was looking down at them, exasperated. Anna leaned in. It was no mistake. There were just a handful of cartridges left in each box.

"It's a mystery...the bullets must be here somewhere... I don't understand."
His indignation was overtaken by confusion. Anna pushed the professor aside, shining her torch into the cupboard. She spotted a narrow crack at the back, against the wall, stuck her finger into it and felt the cold wall against her skin, but there were no cartridges.

"You're completely sure that they were in the boxes?"

His eyes blinked fearfully at her. She almost regretted asking. Who could be completely sure of anything anymore?

"Yes. Yes. Completely sure. Why would I put them anywhere else?"

The cold from the smashed window found a way in down her neck. Her skin quivered. How long had they been outside while Zakariassen was busy with the engine? Ten minutes? Fifteen? She had been standing sheltered from the wind behind the engine housing and now tried to remember the view from that position. She couldn't see much in the snowstorm, being most concerned with trying to spot anyone coming out of the base. Could somebody have gone round the other side? Climbed up onto the hull, crept over to the smashed window and got in to *Sabvabaa* that way?

She turned towards the window above her bed. The remains of the shattered glass were still stuck in the seal, which had partly dislodged from the hull. "Well, I guess I can finally change the fucking thing," she thought. She ran a gloved hand over the shards, but it was impossible to figure out if anybody had climbed through.

"What are you doing?" asked the professor. He was still standing at the cabinet, holding the almost empty box of cartridges.

"I just had a crazy idea that the ammunition could have been thrown out of the window when we crashed," she lied. She saw the scepticism in his eyes. "It's worth checking every angle, isn't it?"

"I've counted. We have fourteen cartridges in total," he said. "Three more in the Mauser and one in the revolver."

She saw that he was looking for an answer that she couldn't provide. Would fourteen cartridges be enough to keep them alive until they were rescued?

"Fram X expedition, this is a distress call, mayday, mayday, mayday," Zakariassen intoned monotonously. There was no response. "Mayday, mayday, mayday."

"Daniel, we really have to get out of here now." Anna placed a hand on Zakariassen's narrow shoulders. He sent a final distress call before switching off the radio. When the lights showing the signal strength and the frequency faded, it was as if the rest of the world ceased to exist. Now it was only the two of them, *Sabvabaa*, and whatever awaited in the cabins on the ice.

Anna made him check that his Mauser rifle was actually working. She watched Zakariassen assume the loading stance, making sure the cartridge ejected from the chamber as it should, and then got him to take out the magazine and push the cartridge back in. She instructed him to stuff the extras into his breast pocket, within easy reach.

"What about you?" Zakariassen held out the revolver in his hand. If she accepted, Anna felt as if its weight would shatter the floor beneath her. She would fall through the ice below *Sabvabaa* and drown.

"I'll manage with my knife. After you."

16.

When she heard the hovercraft's hatch bang shut behind her, Anna suddenly wanted nothing more than to turn back, creep into the snug cabin, turn the heaters on full blast and bury herself deep down into her sleeping bag. Fire up the samovar and make some strong tea. Not give a shit about anything, close her eyes and hope for the best, be it rescue or ruin. But her body wouldn't listen. Her bones and muscles ignored her brain's protests, swiftly separating her from the fragile bubble of civilisation.

She ran towards the closest cabin, not daring to breathe until she was in its shadow at the rear. Zakariassen, who was walking backwards with the Mauser pointed towards whatever might be coming out of the dark, was left far behind, snorting like a beached whale when he finally got there.

Behind the professor's slender frame, Anna could just glimpse *Sabvabaa* propped up against the fuel depot. Their little home looked a picture of misery. The stern was scorched black, the cabin lights were off, and huge drifts of snow were already settling in front of its windows. Strange how fond one can become of a twelve-by-six-metre aluminium can.

When the professor had caught his breath again, they crept between the cabin and the one next to it. The storm was gusting stronger in the narrow passageway, and wading through this wind tunnel was like walking underwater. The low thrumming of an engine could be heard from the cabin to the right. Straight ahead of her in the middle of the yard the dead Chinese man's hood flapped in the wind. Anna didn't believe in life after death, but right here and now she would have given anything for the dead Chinese man to make contact from the hereafter and tell her where his killers were.

As she stopped at the corner, Zakariassen's rifle barrel prodded at her.

"Watch it, Daniel, I don't want a bullet in the back." She nudged him away as her eyes scanned for movement behind the windows in the other barracks. The door to the cabin on the left was less than a metre away.

"Stay here and keep a lookout," she instructed him. "Count to fifteen, then turn around and check that nobody's coming from behind. Zakariassen turned immediately. Anna wrenched his head abruptly towards her. "Look back for five seconds and then ahead to the yard for fifteen. Fifteen...five...fifteen...five. Got it?"

He nodded and nuzzled the Mauser into his shoulder, pushing himself against the wall and aiming towards the cabins ahead. She stuck her hand in her side pocket and pulled out the hunting knife.

One, two, three...

Anna Aune charged forwards with the knife in her hand. She grabbed the handle and tore the door open, diving into the warmth with the blade poised.

The door slammed shut behind Anna and she huddled her body into a ball. The glare of a powerful ceiling lamp stung her eyes. As she tried to get a perspective, she caught the smell of foul grease. A row of shelves had been placed along the wall, blocking her view. It would be easy to hide behind one of them.

“Don’t be scared, we’re here to help you!” she shouted, listening, but hearing only the sound of the wind outside and water drip-dripping on the floor. The snow on her survival suit was melting in cabin’s warmth, trickling off her.

The cabin was a workshop.

Yellow toolboxes with DeWalt printed in large, black lettering were stacked neatly on the shelves. Screwdrivers and spanners hung next to axes, nail guns and long ice drills, mounted in designated positions on the walls.

Anna walked inwards, past the shelving, and saw engine parts and hoses piled up against the back wall next to a large workbench. There was a net on the wall containing something that looked like a parachute. A big wooden crate plastered with red and yellow labels sat padlocked on the floor. A sled with a harness lay on the floor next to an enormous tyre. One side of the tyres was split and had come loose from the rim.

Someone had honoured the classic garage tradition of hanging up a *Playboy* poster on a cabinet – a Chinese woman posing on some stairs. She was dressed in a tiny purple costume that pushed her breasts up towards her face, and had purple rabbit ears on her head. ‘China Lee’ was printed in extravagant lettering at the poster’s corner.

There was nobody in the cabin. Anna turned around and saw a steel cabinet next to the door. A large padlock and a hacksaw lay on the floor in front of it. The lock had been sawn off.

She opened it up and saw empty racks and cleaning rags revealing that this was a Chinese version of a weapons cabinet. But where were the weapons? She counted ten rifle racks, and the shelves at the base of the cabinet were spacious enough to hold a large amount of ammunition.

Seeing a single 9-millimetre cartridge lying under the bottom shelf, she realised that the cabinet had also contained revolvers or pistols in addition to the rifles. Having made this less than reassuring discovery, she shoved the hacksaw in her pocket in case the killer had other secrets locked away. She grabbed a handful of cable ties and a roll of gaffer tape from a table used for bending pipes. In war, you’ll always find a use for cable ties and gaffer tape.

When she came outside, the front of Zakariassen’s suit was covered in a layer of snow, frozen stiff. The storm was growing steadily stronger, the temperature plummeting. If they weren’t able to find a safe bolthole soon, the North Pole would kill them.

“What was in the cabin?”

Anna slipped into the passageway and ran to the other end to check that there was nothing else to see beyond it.

“It’s just a workshop.”

She decided there was no point in alarming Zakariassen even more by telling him that the killers were now armed with enough weapons and ammo to start a small war. The next cabin caused no such concerns. When she flung open the door, all she saw was three large generators.

To get to the cabins on the north side of the yard they had to walk back through the floodlights, utterly exposed. For a second Anna thought about asking Zakariassen to shoot them out, but she didn’t want to risk wasting the scarce ammunition.

She was trying to run, but it was impossible. The storm that Boris had forecast was attacking them with all its might. It was blowing so hard that it was barely possible to breathe without turning away from the wind.

Two metres from the cabin, she saw something.

This time it was real. A movement in the shadows. She saw two eyes glinting in the floodlights, the light glimmering in two irises.

"There's something there."

At the corner of her eye, Zakariassen was turning around in slow motion.

"Take cover!" she yelled into the wind.

The professor raised his rifle. Whatever had been hiding in the shadows was gone. She saw a grey figure scuttling past the cabin beyond them.

A blast cut through the howl of the storm, and another as the Mauser discharged. Zakariassen fired one, two, three times.

"Stop!" yelled Anna, but it was too late.

17.

Zakariassen kept shooting until the magazine was empty. Each time he squeezed the trigger, the rifle barrel recoiled and his slender body shuddered. When the shots subsided, Anna hauled herself up and ran over to him.

"You don't need to shoot! It was just a fox!"

Zakariassen looked at her, confused.

"Sorry, my fault, I got it wrong. I thought I saw someone between the cabins," Anna said.

Behind his goggles his bushy eyebrows drew taut in dissent. "But there aren't any foxes at the North Pole in midwinter."

"I guarantee you I saw an animal, it had a tail and ran behind the other barracks."

"Mountain foxes only come as far as the North Pole in summer," the academic continued defiantly. "I..."

"Alright, okay, but we can't stay here. The only people who don't know we're coming now are already dead," Anna interrupted, dragging the professor in behind the wall he had just shot a hole in. "Reload."

"It's so damn cold..." His skinny fingers trembled as he took the extra cartridges out of his breast pocket and tried to jam them down into the magazine. One cartridge dropped to the ground. Anna looked down, scooping it up in a handful of snow. She positioned herself against the wind, blocking it out as Zakariassen blew off the ice. He reloaded and pushed the magazine back into the rifle.

The snowfall was so intense that Anna was only able to see the first of the cabins in the row they were standing in. Her fingers and toes were dull, numb. If they were going to spend as much time searching the rest of the base, they would freeze to death long before anyone had the chance to kill them.

In the military, Anna's strategy in this situation would be to find a position that she could defend until reinforcements came to their assistance. But whoever was hopefully coming to their aid now would be sending emergency rescue teams and medics, not

soldiers. The attackers would kill everyone except the pilots they needed to fly back to the mainland.

A gust of wind blew into the hood of Anna's survival suit, filling it with snow.

"I...I'm fucking freezing." Zakariassen's teeth chattered and as he spoke, Anna saw the panic in his eyes. Her own paranoia was crushing her chest with the strength of a sumo wrestler. They couldn't stay out in the storm any longer.

"Let's take the whole row at the same time," she yelled, a false confidence in her voice. "I'll open the door while you cover me." Then she ran around the corner before Zakariassen could protest. Anna ripped open the nearest door and registered two empty sofas and a massive TV, before running on. In the next cabin, two abandoned bowls of rice on a pair of tables told her this was the crew's mess.

When she burst open the door to the last cabin in the row, she recognised the dry stench of scorched dust.

Electronics.

Several radio transmitters stood stacked on top of each other on a shelf. She walked in slowly with the knife poised and ready, high above of her. Shadows from the radio cabinets slipped across her face. The outline of something appeared behind the edge of the shelves.

A figure, dressed in orange.

She backed up. There was a flickering in her eyes. Her vision was failing her. Like an amoeba, the figure split into five people in orange jumpsuits against a scorched black wall. Yann was among them.

"Shit shit shit! Fuck fuck fuck!"

Anna shouted the words, shaking her head, drawing in deep for breath. A psychologist had told her that this could happen. Post-traumatic stress triggered by sounds, smells or sensations. Her mind flooded with flashbacks and stopped taking in information from the outside. The reminders were more real than reality itself. The psychologist called it 'super memory'. Yann was coming closer and closer. She saw his windblown hair; time ticked by slowly. A gate in the wall opened behind him. A gigantic black-clad figure entered, a man-mountain. He was holding something in his hands. Hellfire.

Anna squeezed her eyes shut so hard it hurt. She sucked air deep into her lungs, letting it circulate as if it was a brand new sensation to be savoured and assessed. She reopened her eyes. Saw her blue moon boots standing in a puddle of water. The flickering faded. Her vision returned.

She took a step backwards. Something jabbed her in the back. She whipped around and saw that it was one of the posts holding the cabin up. When she looked back into the cabin, the orange figure was still in the same place.

"I am armed!" she yelled, but the figure didn't move.

She walked forwards with the knife stretched out before her, seeing an axe in the corner of her eye, lying on the floor behind the shelf holding the transmitters. The orange figure sat slumped, his head resting on the desk in front of three large computer screens upon which colourful images of the northern lights rotated.

With her fingers clasped so hard around the knife handle that it was physically painful, Anna walked slowly forwards.

It was a man.

Something that looked like a black ski helmet hung on a stand next to him. Her angle of approach made it look as though the helmet was in fact his head, removed from his body.

The motionless man was wearing an orange down jacket. On the back there were Chinese symbols cleanly embroidered around an illustration of the same dragon that hung from the tower. The man had black hair with a hint of grey, like dirty snow in a coalmine.

When Anna got all the way there, she saw that his head was resting on a keyboard. His eyes were closed, as if he was sleeping. A wispy beard covered his chin. She took off a glove and pressed her index finger against his throat. The skin was cold and clammy against her fingers.

Flecks of blood covered the floor under the chair the dead man was sitting on. The drops were dark red at their centre, brown, almost black at their edge. The Chinese man had been dead for several hours. She noticed that there were no bullet holes to be seen in his jacket, then turned and looked back. She now discovered what the axe on the floor had been used for. There were deep gashes in the backs the radios. Inside the warped metal, pieces of hacked cable hung across smashed circuit boards like battered guts. The man's killer had made the effort to destroy any means of communication with the world beyond.

The killer had not troubled himself with two rows of tall glass cabinets standing against the wall. They were filled with black boxes with blue lights blinking on the front. The low humming of fans could be heard from within. Two black and grey cables hung out of an empty shelf in one of the cabinets.

She walked out, letting the dead man sleep on.

18.

Zakariassen was on his knees in the passageway behind the next cabin when Anna came out. The Mauser was resting on his thigh and he was aiming towards the three dead Chinese men out in the yard, as if he was scared that they would come back to life again and attack.

"There was one more in there," she shouted over the howling wind. Zakariassen nodded stiffly in a way that betrayed his lack of interest in the details.

There were now five cabins left. She breathed deeply and ran on.

Each time she entered a cabin, Anna felt the tension rising. Opening a door was like squeezing the trigger in a game of Russian roulette; sooner or later, there would be a bullet in the chamber.

The first cabin were a sick bay with medicines, bandages and a washing machine. Then there was a cabin with eight neatly made beds standing empty. In the third were satellite images of the ice hanging above a large meeting table, and a bed hidden behind a screen on which there was a painting of steep mountains climbing out of the sea.

No more dead, none living.

Two cabins left. The furthest away was a garage with two wide doors. One of them stood open and an oil barrel with a pump on top could be seen inside. Anna signalled to Zakariassen to go there first. To maintain her stealth, she ran hunched past the nearest

cabin, then through the open door. There was a small green tractor behind the other door. Anna caught the reek of diesel from the pump in the oil drum. Somebody had been refuelling not too long ago. It creaked as she walked. Wooden planks covered the floor.

"Come on, there's nobody here," she said, waving the professor, who was standing against the outer wall, into the shelter of the closed door. He walked in, but stopped abruptly. "There's been a vehicle here." The professor pointed at a small puddle of oil with the imprint of tyres soaking into the garage's wooden floor. Outside, the snow had long since covered any further trace of it. Anna looked at the tracks on the garage floor. She hadn't imagined that it was possible to drive to the North Pole. A car or tractor could drive over the ice as long as a fracture or pressure ridge wasn't stand in its way. It was one way of surviving the storm.

"Where can it have gone to?" asked Zakariassen.

She stuck her head out of the door and looked around the corner of the garage, hoping to see *Sabvabaa's* lights, but got just a face full of snow blown out of the black night. She pulled her head in again and wiped her face dry.

"In this fucking shitty weather Godzilla could be standing ten metres away and we wouldn't even know it."

Zakariassen stared down at the oil stain on the floor.

"Do you think he...fled?" he said, hopefully.

"Or they. Killing that many people is a lot of work."

"We need to check the last cabin, too," she said. They both looked over to it, its paint glowing red in the dark. The last room. Russian roulette's final chamber. The only place a killer might now be.

"Why can't we just...stay here?" Zakariassen's voice was trembling. "We'll just pull the door down. It's warm." He pointed at an oil heater shoved under a bench covered in mechanic's tools. Outside the open garage door the red paint of the final cabin glimmered under the bright floodlights. The windows were dark, the lights were off. Exactly what Anna would have done if she wanted to make sure she could see without being seen.

"No. We have to check the last cabin too."

"Please, I can't take it any more." Daniel began sobbing. "I'm so afraid." He was crying loudly that for a moment she was paralysed. Then Anna put her arms around him, pulling him close to her. "It's alright, I'm scared too," she said, looking him in the eye. "But it's good for us, only idiots feel no fear. Fear keeps you sharp." It was true. As a soldier, suppressed fear and controlled paranoia had kept Anna Aune alive through three civil wars on two continents.

When she had managed to calm Zakariassen down, they went back out into the snowstorm again.

They walked along the wall, sheltered from the wind, towards the front of the cabin.

"Wait here." Anna bent down and crawled on her knees around the corner.

She could see some grey stains in front of the door, partly hidden by the snow. Creeping over to a position directly under the window, she reached her arm up and pounded the knife butt hard against the glass. She jumped up immediately. Saw a pale face. Two black hollows for eyes. Her own reflection in the glass. A miserable person in a godforsaken place. In the darkness, nothing moved.

"Come here!" she shouted to Zakariassen. He crept around the corner to her. "Hold the door as I go in. If I get shot, shoot back, but try not to hit me." Zakariassen gripped the Mauser hard in his hands and nodded.

She got up next to the door and waited until the professor took hold of the door handle. One nod and he thrust the door open.

Crouched low, the knife in one hand and the torch in the other, Anna penetrated the darkness. As soon as she was inside she sensed a sweet smell, like freshly carved flesh.

19.

First Anna made sure that nobody was behind the door or on the opposite side before swinging the torch beam back and forth across unmade beds. There were people in two of them.

"I AM ARMED!" she shouted as loud as she could. "STAY DOWN!"

No reply.

She held the knife by the blade towards the figures in the beds, ready to launch. It felt as though the room's darkness was seeping out of the motionless shapes.

The torch beam found a head in the nearest bed. In its light, she saw a large stain on the floor, and recognised the cloying smell of coagulated blood.

The second individual was staring straight up at the ceiling with eyes wide open. She walked towards him. It was a young man with long hair. He lay in a dark blue sleeping bag and Anna could see white duck feathers in his black hair. There were two small holes in the sleeping bag, directly over his chest.

"What are you doing?"

Zakariassen was standing in the doorway. The floodlights outside drew him like a black silhouette against the snow storm. His shadow cut through the open door and lay across the second dead man like a dark curtain.

"There are two more. Both shot."

"Oh God...oh God." His voice was harrowed and lost. "Will this never end?"

Anna stuck the knife back in its sheath. "It's over now, we've been everywhere on the base. There are no survivors."

Zakariassen turned and looked towards the garage. The wind had changed direction and was blowing snow in through the open garage door.

"The murderers must have fled," he said.

"Where to though? There's nowhere to hide out there."

"The North Pole is twelve million square kilometres," said the professor.

"Disappearing is not so difficult."

"Yeah. Let's hope that the motherfucker who did this just disappears."

Anna looked at the two dead men. She rewound through her memory, trying to add up the dead. There had been five or six ice-men in the big warehouse. Three lying shot outside. The man with the orange jacket in the cabin with the radio equipment, and then these two poor bastards, killed in their own beds. Probably while they slept.

Eleven dead.

"I just don't understand, why would anyone want to kill peaceful scientists?" stammered Zakariassen.

"For the same reason that peaceful men kill women. There are a thousand reasons, an argument, jealousy, problems with money."

"Yes, one person I understand, but this...madness..."

"Right," said Anna, heading for the door. "This is the work of a maniac. But... the dark season and the isolation has chewed a hole in the head of many a strong man. It wouldn't be the first time."

Zakariassen slammed the rifle butt against the toe of his boot so hard that Anna feared he was going to fire a shot by mistake.

She got scared for a brief moment that *this* old man would suddenly run amok, or do something crazy. Professor Zakariassen had spent five years preparing his expedition. Everything was laid out in the finest detail. He had brought had so many spare parts for *Sabvabaa* to the North Pole that he could build a second hovercraft. The gear was checked, double-checked and triple-checked before they left, but there was one thing Zakariassen couldn't pack, no matter how much he tried. The professor didn't have the magic ingredient that distinguished successful people from the rest.

Luck.

Even a genius of a scientist with his pockets full of Nobel Prizes could not have foreseen that the world's next mass killing would take place at the North Pole.

"What are we going to do?" asked Zakariassen.

The snow was blowing across the ceiling, sprinkling down on his head, his ragged hair buckling like birch saplings in a wintry forest. He hadn't wanted to enter the dead men's room. His eyes avoided looking at them both.

"There's nothing more we can do here, we just have to get back to *Sabvabaa* and set up the trip flares around the boat so no-one can sneak up on us. And then you'll have to fix the radio antennas. The solar storm or whatever the fuck it is stopping us from getting any radio contact is going to die down. We'll just fire up the heaters and hold out until help comes."

Suddenly Zakariassen smiled. A boy's hope that everything would come good in the end. "Yes, good idea Anna. That's a good plan." He lifted the Mauser onto his back, ready to walk back to the hovercraft, when Anna suddenly heard a noise.

A word.

She turned around and saw a dead man getting up out of bed.

20.

The dead man climbed out of Zakariassen's shadow, his face rising into view in the glare of the floodlights that streamed into the cabin. He raised a hand as if to shield his eyes against the light and said something incomprehensible in Chinese, before collapsing on the bed again. Anna walked away from Zakariassen towards him.

For a moment Anna thought that this undead person was a woman. The face was pale. The slanted eyes had fulsome lashes, and long black hair swept over a large, smooth forehead. The nose was narrow, the lips broad and shapely.

"Can you hear me?" Anna asked.

The figure stirred, the sleeping bag slipping halfway off the body. He had a red fleece over his torso and something that looked like a t-shirt was wrapped around his ribcage. It was difficult to see because of all the blood that the fabric had absorbed.

"What happened?" It was a man's voice, surprisingly deep. His English was clear and pronounced.

"You've been shot. Can you remember who did it?"

"No..." He pushed his thin arms in under himself, trying to get up again.

"Don't move, stay still so we can look at your wound." Anna placed a hand on his chest and pushed him down gently. Dark blood stuck to her fingers once he was down again.

"Is he...has he also been shot?"

Zakariassen was still standing in the doorway. The floodlights illuminated a halo around his dishevelled hair, making him look like a figurine of Jesus.

"Yes. Get inside and close the door."

Zakariassen didn't move. "What if the killers come back?"

"In that case I would move away from the door. You make a brilliant target standing right there." He took a slow, hesitant step inwards.

"No, as a matter of fact I need bandages. Run back to the sick quarters we saw on the way here." She leaned over the Chinese man and placed two fingers on his carotid artery. "Just grab whatever you can find. Painkillers would be really fucking useful."

"There's no way in hell I'm doing that. We have to get out of here now."

Zakariassen's voice cracked in fear. "Please Anna, can't we just leave before the murderer comes back?" Patience in battle had never been Anna's thing. As she turned towards Zakariassen, he backtracked away from her. The look in her eyes must have been terrifying.

"Why the fuck do you think I'm trying to keep this poor bastard alive, Daniel? If there is anyone at all who might help us find out who's behind this massacre, it's probably him. But right now he's about to die from blood loss and shock."

She scrutinised the wounded man again, continuing to speak to Zakariassen as she turned her back to him. "Now do exactly as I say. Go outside, get your arse around the back, run as fast as you can to that cabin. Find four of the biggest compresses and loads of bandages. Four rolls, minimum. And morphine would be amazing." It fell quiet. She could hear him breathing through his nose. A step. The slamming of a door. Zakariassen was obeying orders.

The Chinese man's unusually large eyes stared in fright at Anna.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Anna Aune. We're the crew from the Norwegian Fram X expedition. Our base is eight kilometres further south. I saw your emergency flare. We're here to help you."

He kept staring. She had no idea if he was taking in what she was saying or whether he was in shock. She spoke slowly and clearly. "Can you help me...do you know what happened here?"

The only response she got was a couple of rapid blinks.

"Was it you who set off the flare?"

"No, I've just been here." He coughed and writhed in the bed. Anna laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You need to lie still. We're going to find something to help you." Her frostbitten lips formed something hopefully resembling a reassuring smile. "Is there anything you remember...about what happened to you?"

"No... I was sleeping...a noise woke me up...someone was standing in the doorway, then there was a boom. When I woke up again my chest was burning terribly, when I touched it my hand was covered in blood. I was scared for my life and screamed and screamed for help...but...no-one came." The man twisted his head towards the man lying in the bed next to him and stared blindly up at the ceiling.

"Then I saw Guan was...dead." He started to cry. Tears streamed down over his soft cheeks.

"Don't be scared, everything is going to be okay. We're here with you, and you are safe now," Anna lied, forcing out another stiff smile. "But it would help if you could tell me everything you can remember."

The Chinese man barely nodded.

"The man you saw at the door, did you see who he was?"

He blinked quickly. Tears crept into the corners of his eyes. "No, it was dark and I was sleeping, and everything happened so quickly. I think he said something to me, then he raised his arm as if he was pointing at something, then that noise and...I must have blacked out. When I woke up, nobody was here. Just Guan. That's all I know." He began crying again.

"It doesn't matter, just relax and we'll figure it out. We're here to help you."

Anna put her arm around him and lifted him up a little. With her other hand she felt along the bed under his back. If he was concealing a weapon, it would be somewhere close.

"What's your name?"

"Shen Li...Jackie."

"Okay, Jackie, just lie still and my partner will be here soon with a medical kit. We'll see to your wound. Help is on the way. It'll be fine, Jackie." Being a nurse was not so different to being a soldier. The objective justified every lie as long as it kept the spirits up, even when all hope was gone.

Jackie was wheezing heavily as he breathed. He looked across to the dead man in the neighbouring bed. "The others...? What happened to them...?"

Anna tried to keep a blank face, but her eyes betrayed her. Jackie looked back at her in sheer terror.