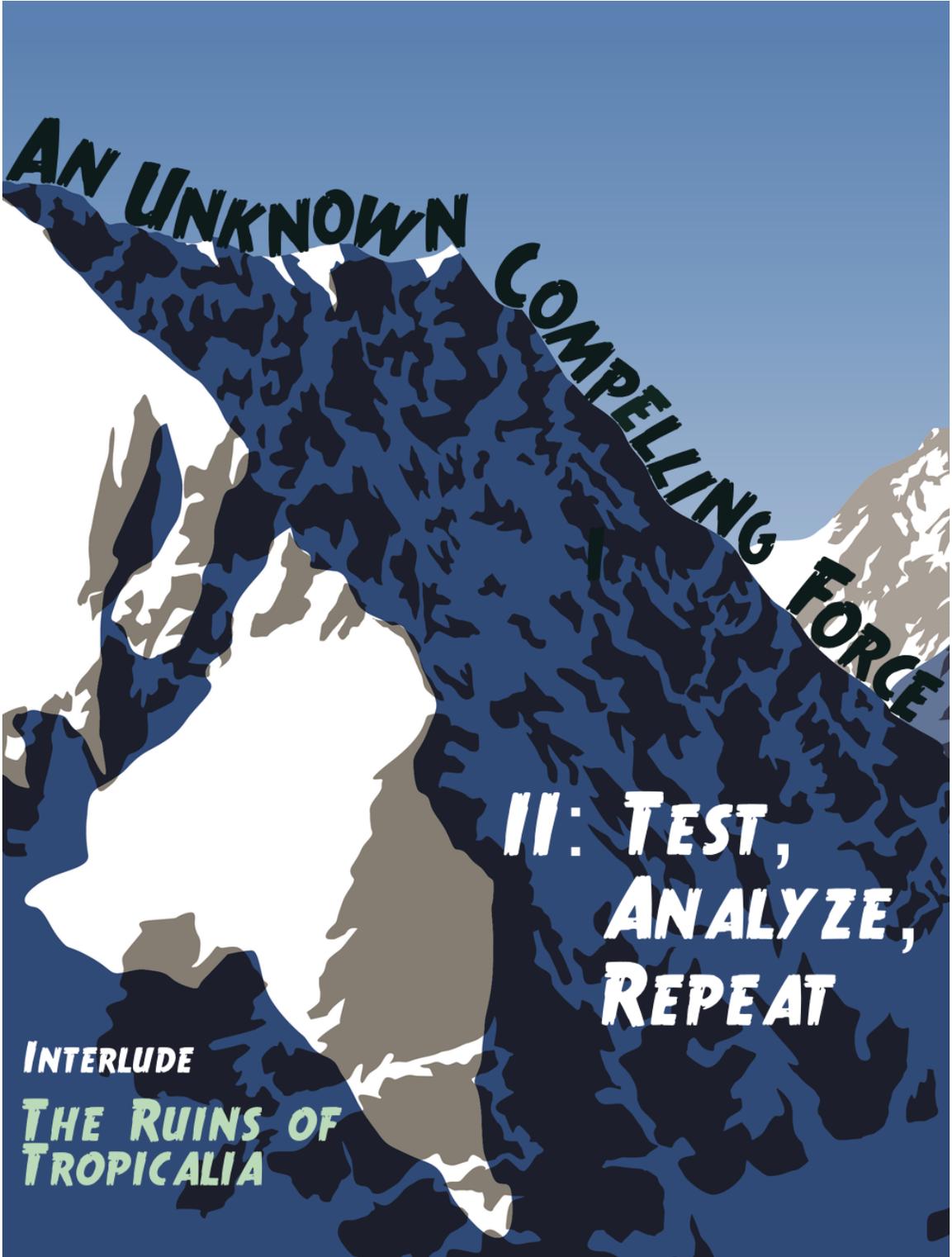


AN UNKNOWN COMPELLING FORCE

**II: TEST,
ANALYZE,
REPEAT**

**INTERLUDE
THE RUINS OF
TROPICALIA**



II: Test, Analyze, Repeat

New York

The Evening Before The Disappearance

The Irish pub remains nearly empty as the sun begins to set behind Sam's neighborhood. Later in the evening this pub will become one of the few jocky, fratty, hangouts in Brooklyn, but Sam knows that until eight or so, it's generally quiet. The only other person at the bar besides himself, Josi, and his friend Anton is a short, fat man drinking a Guinness at the far end.

Josi extracts herself from her stool, wobbling slightly. She touches Sam's shoulder to steady herself. She leans over Sam to address Anton.

"It was nice to meet you," she says. "I'd stay longer, but I promised my friend Kristen I'd get dinner with her."

Anton is taller than Sam with short brown hair, a thin beard, and broad shoulders. He wears a faded t-shirt and old—or designed to look that way—jeans. Tattoos peak out from under his sleeves.

He smiles.

"No worries. It was nice to meet you, too."

Josi fishes through her purse while she says to Sam, "Kristen and I are going out later after dinner, probably to Star Bar. That's usually where we end up. You guys would be more than welcome to join us if you're still out."

"I don't know..." Sam begins.

"What time do you think," Anton cuts in, a little too eagerly. "Like a couple hours?"

Josi lays a twenty-dollar bill on the bar. "Something like that. I can text Sam to let you know where we're at after dinner."

"Okay," Sam says.

"Hopefully we'll see you later," she says.

She slings her purse over her shoulder, turns, and walks out the front door. Anton leans back and admires her as she leaves. He turns to Sam.

"You're an idiot. That girl wants you."

Sam shrugs. "Liz was supposed to cook me dinner tonight, but she texted me a few minutes ago to ask for a rain check."

"Fuck," Anton says, rolling his eyes. "Liz is no good for you. She's hot, but I see that crazy in her

eyes. She treats you like shit. I saw her out last night. You need to cut it off with her before you get too intertwined and you can't get out."

The questions involuntarily tumble out of Sam, all smashed together.

"Where specifically did you see her last night? What time exactly? Who was she with? Did you know them?"

"I don't know exactly where it was," Anton sighs. "A few minutes before I texted you. I was out with a couple guys from the band on Halsted. I saw her across the street, maybe half a block away. There were a couple people near her. I can't say for sure if she was with them or not. They were all dressed kind of weird."

"Weird how?"

"Jesus, it doesn't matter. She told you she was going home, and then she didn't. That's all that's important."

Sam recalls the moment she left last night. He and Liz and four other people sat around a round table. Liz looked amazing in a short dress and heels. She leaned over and pinched the top of Sam's hand.

"I'm tired," she whispered. "I need to crash."

"I can take you home," Sam said.

She kissed him on the cheek. "You should stay out with your friends. I can take the train."

They're not his friends. Not really. They're just some people he met. He tends to avoid making friends. His time in each place he stays is necessarily limited. Why bother? Anton is the only one in this city he might be forced to call a friend, and that happened somewhat unavoidably as they're next-door neighbors.

"How did she look? Could you tell if she looked happy, scared, drunk? Was she still wearing her dress?"

"Actually, I think she was in a hoodie and jeans. But who gives a fuck..."

Sam ostensibly speaks to Anton, but his questions are more for himself.

"Why'd she go home and change first and then change back before this morning? Who could she have met up with? You really didn't see them?"

"Fucking hell," Anton growls.

Sam constructs another theory. He closes his eyes for a moment. He sees Liz meet up with a tall stranger outside a sports bar in Manhattan. She stands on her tiptoes to kiss him... Later, they burst out of the bar together, hand in hand... They dance at a club... She slips out of a bathroom stall, her nose ringed with blue powder... Her face shiny and radiant, her eyes dilated as she leans in for another kiss at the next bar... Sighing and clicking her tongue as she dismisses Sam's missed calls and texts while lying naked on the stranger's couch... Climbing into her car in front

of Sam's apartment this morning...

"The pieces have to fit," Sam says, opening his eyes again.

"No they don't," Anton says angrily. "And you need to get the fuck out before they do. You can't do this shit all the time."

"Do what shit?"

"Get obsessed. You can't ever let things go. Shit, I've known you for what, three months, four? And I can see it plain as day. You need to learn what's important and what doesn't matter. What's worth pursuing and what's a waste of time. She's trouble. Get out before it consumes you. You've got enough pointless shit running through that weird brain of yours already."

A memory flashes in Sam's mind that reminds him why he can't shake her off as easily as Anton demands. He and Liz lie in bed together on a rainy Saturday morning. He is literally reading her body, studying the dozen prayers for strength, written in a dozen different languages, positioned in a dozen different angles, designed in a dozen different fonts, tattooed in a dozen different places on her body. She runs her nails through his hair and stares worriedly at the ceiling, submitting to his examination. She bites her lip.

"Like what?" Sam asks.

"Hmm," Anton says. "Well, this Dealtoff nonsense, or whatever you call it, for one thing."

"Dyatlov's not pointless."

"Spending every waking moment trying to figure out what happened to some missing hikers in communist Russia fifty years ago doesn't seem particularly productive to me."

"It's more than that to me. It's bigger than that." Sam's phone buzzes on the bar. It says *Liz*. He silences it.

"Christ, man," Anton says. "I'm guessing—hoping—you haven't had the chance to mention this Dealtoff crap to Josi yet in your intimate moments together between productivity meetings, data efficiency seminars, and whatever other creepy crap you goons do up in those skyscrapers."

Sam says nothing, but shakes his head.

"Please keep it that way," Anton says. "I get it, man. Sure, the pieces have to fit. This is the real world. Everything makes sense eventually. It has to. But you've taken one tiny piece of the puzzle you thought looked odd and out of place, and you've chopped it up into even tinier pieces. But that piece doesn't matter. The rest of the puzzle is already assembled, and waiting. It's a beautiful landscape or whatever."

He laughs and continues.

"The piece you're pulling apart and fretting over is supposed to be part of the background. Just a random section of the sky. It's not supposed to be noticed. So fucking let it go. Put it back where you found it, and everything will fit as well as it was ever meant to. Forget. It."

“You don’t know the story—” Sam starts.

“Fuck yes I do. You’ve made me read everything about it. You want me to solve it for you? Will that end it? Okay, here we go... Your timeframe’s all wrong. You’re focusing on the wrong parts, and that’s my whole point about all of this. That’s the problem. Whatever happened to them didn’t just start in the middle of the night. It happened in the afternoon at least. Something was threatening them...”

Sam’s phone buzzes again. Liz again.

“... They felt safer camping away from the trees out in the open on the slope so they could get a clear view of their surroundings. That’s why they didn’t write in their diaries that whole day. They were scared. They set up a watch. My best guess is the natives—the Mansi—I think they were called. One of the articles you sent me said that there was a local legend about nine people who died on the mountain while waiting for the Great Flood to subside. That’s where it got its name, The Mountain of the Dead...”

The phone buzzes a third time.

“... The Mansi believed it to be sacred, and they wanted to rid it of intruders who were violating their taboo...”

Sam holds up his phone. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I have to take this.”

Anton shakes his head without expression. Sam puts the phone to his ear and walks out to the street.

January 29th, 1959

Near The Mountain of the Dead, Russia

The ski team stands close together on the same slope where they will later set up camp, surveying the forest below them. It’s mid-afternoon. They murmur nervously. Dyatlov stands furthest downslope, binoculars pressed to his eyes.

Through the binoculars, he counts four Mansi tribesmen standing near the edge of the trees. Animal hides drape across each of their chests. Two of them have rifles slung over their shoulders. Dyatlov spots a large knife strapped to the waist of another. All four of them stare up at the ski team.

“How many are there?” Rustem asks.

Dyatlov lowers the binoculars.

“I see four for sure. Possibly two more a bit further back.”

Lyudmila asks, “What are they doing here?”

Dyatlov says, “Right now they appear to be watching us.”

Alexander K says, "We should go down there. Scare them off. Or figure out what they want."

Dyatlov shakes his head.

"That's not a good idea. They've got guns. They're probably just on a hunting trip, but we should be careful. This is still their territory."

"The fuck it is," Alexander K says. "This is our land. Everyone's. Russia."

Lyudmila scoffs.

She says, "Somehow I don't think your patriotic sentiments will produce the results you want."

"What should we do then?" Yuri asks.

Dyatlov turns around to scan the slope behind them.

"I think we should camp here tonight, just to be safe. There's a flatter area about 200 meters further up," he says.

"It's pretty exposed up here," Yuri says.

"But we can keep an eye on them," Dyatlov insists. "We have a good view of the whole valley. Alright, everyone?"

Everyone eventually assents. They move up the slope and set up camp. While Nicolas cooks dinner, Dyatlov stands at the edge of camp, looking through the binoculars again. Yuri and Rustem approach him.

"What are they up to?" Yuri asks.

Dyatlov hands Yuri the binoculars.

He says, "You can see the fire they've got going. I haven't seen them cook anything. They're mostly watching us."

"I don't like this," Rustem says, stating the obvious.

"I don't either," Dyatlov says. "I think we should keep watch tonight. Sleep in shifts. Two or three at the watch at a time."

"You think that's necessary?"

"I don't know. I don't like the way they're acting. But I don't know much about these Mansi. I don't know if they usually act like this. This area is sacred to them. They're probably just making sure we don't do anything to offend the spirits. But better safe than sorry."

"Rustem, Alex, and I can take the first shift," Yuri says.

Some time later, most of the team is asleep in the tent. Nicolas, Dyatlov, and Alexander Z stand

around a small fire. Nicolas has his chin to his chest, his eyes closed, almost asleep on his feet. There's a soft click and a faint crunch. Dyatlov cocks his head. Nicolas snaps awake. Dyatlov takes a couple steps back and peers into the darkness behind the tent. His eyes have trouble adjusting to the lack of light. The fire was needed, but foolish.

His eyes don't need to adjust for long. There's a burst of movement, and four Mansi men round the side of the tent. Two of them level rifles at the watchers. One of the men begins shouting in a language they can't understand.

Dyatlov calls gruffly toward the tent, "Everyone wake up!"

One of the Mansi lunges forward and swings a small club. It smacks into Dyatlov's shoulder. He grunts in pain.

Two of the men cross to the side of the tent facing the fire. The smaller of the two kneels down and pulls a knife from his waistband. The other man stands above, covering him.

Dyatlov says, "There's no need-"

The other man with the rifle tenses his gun against his shoulder and shouts at Dyatlov, who stops talking and raises his hands, palms outward. The man with the knife slices into the tent fabric. He steps aside and the man with the gun points it through the opening.

"Out! Now!" he barks in Russian.

The Mansi march the whole team down the hill. They corral them into a tight patch of bare snow near the remnants of their extinguished fire. The team, shivering in various stages of dress, make frantic, confused eye contact. The Mansi chatter in their native language. Two more, who had been waiting down here in the woods, have joined them. At times, their voices rise to the level of argument.

"We should run," Lyudmila whispers to no one, everyone.

"No," Dyatlov says, barely opening his mouth.

"It's our only chance," Alexander Z says.

"No," Dyatlov repeats. "Wait. This isn't how it's supposed to go."

Lyudmila's eyes grow wider. She stops shivering. She's made her decision. She takes off. The Alexanders and Nicolas follow after them. The rest of the group remain where they are, their arms raised and outstretched.

The Mansi shout and point at the fleeing skiers. The man who directed them out of the tent raises his rifle. He fires two shots after them. Three of the Mansi plunge into the woods after them.

"But they would see the other footprints," Dyatlov protests, his face twisted more in confusion than fear.

The four running team members crash through branches, stumbling down and through deep pockets of snow. Alexander Z falls completely. Nicolas hauls him to his feet. The sounds of

pursuit grow closer.

Lyudmila, still in the lead, comes to a sudden stop. “Wait!” she shouts. “Stop!”

She peers over the edge of the ravine. Nicolas and the Alexanders rush up behind her, panting. They see the drop-off, too. The Mansi burst from the woods. They slow down when they see that the skiers are cornered. Lyudmila turns to face them.

“Get out of here, you savages!” she screams. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

They step closer.

“You motherfuckers! You pussies! You need your guns? Who do you think you are?”

“Shut up!” Nicolas says harshly.

She continues unabated.

“Come here then! Why don’t you try it? Are you scared?”

The lead Mansi approaches her. He’s broader and taller than the others, bigger than any of the skiers. He swings his right arm and punches her hard in the face. She crumples to the ground. He kneels on her chest.

The other three skiers cry out. Nicolas starts to rush toward her, but the man with the gun points it directly at his chest.

Lyudmila’s left arm is trapped behind her back. He shifts his weight, and a bone in her arm cracks. One knee still on her chest, he pins her other arm with his foot. He pulls out his knife. She struggles, spits blood.

“Fuck you! Fuck you, you pussy!” she spits. “Fuck you!”

He reaches into her mouth with his thick fingers, yanks open her jaw, and slides the knife inside. Her curses fade into a gurgle.

Nicolas ignores the gun and begins to sprint toward his fallen comrade. But the Mansi quickly turns his rifle around, swings it hard, and strikes him in the back of his head with its butt. His skull is crushed.

Alexander Z also makes a move. The man with the gun focuses on him and swings again, this time connecting with Alexander’s ribs. He cartwheels backwards and falls over the ravine’s edge. Alexander K reaches out to try to catch him, loses his balance, and tumbles over the edge after him.

The Mansi exchange a few words. Then they shove the unconscious Lyudmila and Nicolas over the edge. They turn and head back toward the fire. The others will pay for this. They will watch them freeze.

The muffled sound of hurried footsteps thump down the hall outside the apartment. Keys jangle. The lock turns, and the door flies open. Liz bursts inside.

She slams the door behind her, turns the deadbolt, and fumbles with shaking hands to fasten the chain lock. She heaves herself against the door, breathing heavily. She puts her ear to the wood, listening for sounds of pursuit.

After twenty seconds, momentarily satisfied that she hears nothing beyond her own labored breaths, she backs away from it. She wears the same business suit that she wore at breakfast this morning with Sam. But it's rumpled, and there's a tear on her right sleeve, and a run running almost the entire length of her left leg.

Liz crosses the room—a modest studio slightly bigger than Sam's. The apartment was furnished when she moved in. She doesn't have time for that kind of thing. She hasn't even been inside her apartment for weeks. She goes to the window and draws the curtains.

The street three stories below is deserted—unsettlingly so for New York—save for a solitary figure on the other side of the street. The man stares up at her. His face is hidden in shadows, so she can't read his expression, but she doesn't have to. He wears a long white coat. After making sure she's seen him, he turns and walks down the adjoining street.

She closes the curtains. Her iPod rests in a dock on a shelf above her TV, hooked up to small speakers. She switches it on, and cycles through several songs to find the one that will calm her down. She settles on a track from a band she hasn't listened to since high school.

She grabs her phone from her purse, throws the purse on the bed, and heads into the bathroom. She glances very briefly up at her reflection in the large mirror above the counter. She quickly looks away. She knew she wouldn't like what she saw.

More blue residue rings her nostrils. She grabs a tissue. She first wipes away the mascara-stained tears, and then the dross.

She selects Sam's name from her list of contacts and sends him a text. Her phone buzzes. It's a text from a blocked number:

Tonight. Utnapishtim.

She texts back: *Not tonight. I need time. Two more days.*

She blows her nose. More blue comes out.

The phone buzzes again. This text says: *Tonight. Don't make us come to you. That won't be pleasant for anyone. We'll be waiting. Utnapishtim.*

She snuffles, and then can't hold it back any longer. She starts sobbing. With trembling fingers, she dials Sam's number and puts it to her ear, for her third attempt of the evening. This time, he picks up.

"I'm so sorry," she says, trying her best to hide the sound of her sobs. "I know that's not enough, not nearly enough. But I need you to do something for me."

Sam, standing outside the pub, says flatly, “What.”

“Tell me the scariest thing you can think of. I need to know there’s something more terrifying than... tell me about Dyatlov. What’s the scariest possibility? If they really waited at that forest and stood watch, then there was something back at the tent that terrified them so much that they chose to freeze to death instead of going back. What was at the tent? What was it?”

Sam says, “Why don’t you come out? I’m still at the pub with Anton. We can meet at the Tin & Thistle if you want.”

“Okay, but just tell me first...”

The team is asleep. Something rustles outside. Georgyi, nearest the tent entrance, sits up. He pulls back the tent opening.

A four foot tall creature stands motionless outside the tent, staring at him with large, black, almond-shaped eyes. Its skin is gray, its head shaped like an upside-down teardrop. It is naked. It has no ears, no nose, and no genitalia. A mucous-rimmed slit serves as a mouth. Absolutely fucking terrifying.

It steps forward.

Georgyi screams.

Orange lights flash in the sky above.

Some time later, Lyudmila lies on a shiny, metal operating table. Her wrists and ankles are bound to the corners of the table by a pink, fleshy substance. Her mouth is held open by a metal, spidery spacer. Machinery descends. Her tongue is burned out of her mouth by a thin laser.

Liz walks briskly down the street, still on the phone with Sam. Her eyes dart around, on the lookout for men in white coats.

“What about the note they say they found near the camp? A page torn from one of their diaries... Didn’t it say, ‘From now on, we know there are snowmen?’”

The team is asleep. Something growls outside, followed by fierce, ragged breathing. Georgyi, nearest the entrance to the tent, sits up. He smells something acrid. He pulls back the tent opening.

Two massive legs covered in white fur fill his field of vision. Then, the creature bends down. Its simian face hovers inches from Georgyi. Its lips curl back. It roars. Georgyi screams.

Some time later, the creature catches up with the group at the ravine. It picks up Alexander Z and hurls him over the edge. Its furry, muscular arm thrusts toward Lyudmila’s face, reaches in, and

pulls out her bloodied tongue. It roars again, swings its whole body around, and knocks Alexander out into empty space.

Liz's heels click across the pavement. She's almost there. Almost to Sam.

"What else?" she asks, desperately, breathlessly. "What could be worse?"

The team is asleep. A soft glow illuminates the tent. Georgyi, nearest the entrance to the tent, sits up. He pulls back the tent opening.

An eight-year-old girl stands outside the tent. She wears only a Sunday dress and black shoes. She is not shivering. She smiles at him, and holds out her hand. Still half-asleep, he smiles back. He remembers his younger sister back in Yekaterinburg. He reaches out to her.

He hesitates. His expression switches to confusion, as he notices that he can see right through her, and her feet are not touching the ground.

Her smile widens, opens, and reveals a mouth full of hundreds of sharp, jagged teeth. Her jaw unhinges. No time later, she charges.

The jangling guitars and handclaps of the opening strains of Afghan Whigs' "[Debonair](#)" fill the Tin & Whistle. To call it a hipster bar in the Lower East would be redundant. All seven of the bar's ceiling-mounted TVs are turned off. A piece of paper is taped to the largest Samsung above the bar that reads: *No negativity. No downward spiral. No doom and gloom. No noise. Smile!* The sentiment is punctuated by a forced little red Sharpie smile.

About thirty people are spread throughout the bar—some in booths, some at the bar itself, a few shuffling around the dance floor.

Sam, Liz, Anton, and Anton's girlfriend Amy sit in a booth in the corner furthest from the door. There's an empty pitcher of beer on the table between them. Anton, drunk and happier than earlier in the evening, waves his arms around excitedly.

"My plan," he says, "the Pernelli Plan, is simple. I'd pass a law that says anyone who makes over \$500 million—we take all of it. Well, no. I guess we'd let them keep a hundred grand and a car. Wouldn't that fix it?"

Amy hits his shoulder with the back of her hand. "Anton! You can't just do that."

He curls his lip at her. "Fine. How about this then? How about we just draw up a bill that applies to one person. Call it The Gates Bill. Or whoever it is now who's richest. A tax for the .00000001 highest income. A 99.95% tax. Take all that, put it back in the market."

Amy shakes her head. Liz, who had been texting, looks up from her phone. She drains her beer.

She says, “Or maybe we could just round up every single one of those motherfuckers who caused this. Every trader, every exec, every one of the bastards. Throw them into labor camps for twenty years. They fucked us over, so fuck them. They can pay us back with their sweat. Make them build our roads, fix our bridges, all that.”

“Jesus,” Sam says.

Anton, on the other hand, brightens. “Nice!” he says.

He points at Liz.

“I think I’m starting to like you.”

They high-five across the table. Her smile turns into a smirk that morphs into a shrug.

Who is she talking to on that phone? What’s she saying? He fights twin impulses—to peek over her shoulder to find out, or to never question anything she does, to live in blissful ignorance. The third feeling that washes over him is simple weariness.

She reads my latest text.

I’m so sorry. I’ve lost control of the situation. They’re acting without my approval. This isn’t what we agreed to. Please don’t go with them. You can stop. You’re strong. I’ve waited a long time. I can wait a bit longer.

“I’ve got to run to the bathroom,” she says. She slides out of the booth, sweeping up her buzzing phone with her.

On her way to the bathroom, I try one more time:

Please don’t go to them. They’re not who they used to be. This can be reversed. Please.

“We’re in post-*Fight Club*-land already,” Anton proclaims. “The apocalypse has begun and no one even realizes it. No one needed to blow up the buildings. They collapsed on their own.”

“The dark is rising,” Sam says. “Something’s coming up from the depths. Chanting in languages that aren’t languages. Screaming in voices that aren’t voices. Rising…”

Anton scoffs. “Ha. You wish. It’s not that exciting. If society has to crumble, why does it have to be this goddamn boring? Why can’t it be aliens or an asteroid or pestilence or tidal waves? Fucking economic meltdown.”

He shakes his head.

“Booooooring.”

Sam hasn’t yet seen the things he will see, so he has no counter-argument.

Liz returns, but doesn’t sit down. “Will you dance with me?” she asks Sam.

“Yes.”

He stands up and takes her hand. She leads him to the dance floor. The only other people there are a couple awkwardly making out. The Rapture has replaced Afghan Whigs.

She moves much more smoothly than him. Her thin body whirls and twirls and spins in circles around him. He pushes upward on her hand, and she lifts lightly off the ground, does two complete rotations in mid-air, and touches back to the floor. He thinks nothing of this impossibility. She puts her hands on his shoulder. They kiss.

“I wish I’d cooked you dinner tonight. I was going to clear some things up,” she says.

“Like what?”

Liz purses her lips. “I have to go turn into a pumpkin now.”

He grips her wrist a little too tightly and says, “I want to go with you. I want to try that blue powder. I want to feel what you feel. I want to see what you see.”

She shakes her head. “No,” she says. “I have to do this on my own.”

She kisses him hard, with her tongue. Then she pulls free of his grip.

“Tell Amy and Anton I said goodbye. I’m sorry. I promise you’ll trust me soon.”

She heads toward the front door. Anton wobbles over to Sam.

“I don’t suppose I have to tell you what I think,” he says.

“No, you really don’t.”

Anton takes a drink. Sam watches Liz push open the front door. Anton frowns, and then his expression flattens. He grips Sam’s shoulder, forces Sam to face him.

His voice slurry, he says, “Where did you come from? Who are you? How did you get here? What are you trying to do?”

Sam stares at him, trying to decide if he should and how he could answer. Then he brushes Anton’s hand aside. He jogs across the bar and out the front door after Liz.

January 29th, 1959
Near The Mountain of the Dead, Russia

Some time later, the team is asleep, except for Dyatlov. He stares at the ceiling. Lyudmila is nestled into the crook of his arm.

“This isn’t right,” he says in a monotone. “This isn’t me.”

Lyudmila stirs.

Without opening her eyes, she asks, “What’s wrong?”

He repeats his mantra.

“This isn’t right, this isn’t me. This isn’t right, this isn’t me.”

Her eyes flutter open. She kisses his cheek. He jerks away.

“You’re scaring me, Igor. You’re fine. We’re fine. We’re all here…”

“It’s not right,” Dyatlov says. “I’m not me. And you…”

He pushes her off his arm, and rotates his body to look at her. Within the space of three seconds, his expressions cycle through confusion, sadness, and anger.

“... You’re not right either. You... you bitch,” he snarls. “I saw you with him today. I saw you two today. Talking and laughing and joking. Do you think I’m a fool?”

Now she jerks further away from him. She pushes herself up on one hand. “Who? What the hell are you talking about?”

His eyes are wide, his pupils dilate. His face twitches with rage. Some of the other skiers begin waking.

“Talking,” Dyatlov says, “I saw you talking and talking. That tongue of yours getting you into trouble again. What else are you planning to do with it? When you run out of words to say to him, what will you do with it to him then?”

Yuri grumbles groggily, “What’s going on?”

She sits up completely and scoots back from him.

“Do you think I’m a fool?” he growls, his voice deep and guttural.

He grabs her arm, and then reaches for her throat. She yanks away and scrambles backwards over the other skiers.

“What’s come over you?” she shrieks. “What’s wrong with you?”

She pleads to the others, “Something’s happened to him!”

She has backed up to near the entrance of the tent. She starts throwing on clothes—a mishmash of other people’s clothes, whatever she can find, anything to keep her warm. She just needs to get out of here. She needs to breathe. It’s like he’s possessed. She’s never seen him like this, except for maybe that one time back at University when he found her studying with Boris in the library and he made that terrible scene...

“Where do you think you’re going?” Dyatlov says. “If you like to talk so much to him, why don’t you talk to me? Am I not good enough?”

He tries to pursue her. He climbs over and pushes past a couple of the skiers until Rustem and Alexander K, woozily beginning to become aware of what's going on, block his progress.

"What are you doing?" Rustem asks, through clenched teeth.

They struggle to gain control of Dyatlov's flailing arms.

"Calm down, Igor," Nicolas says, from the far corner of the tent.

Dyatlov spins his neck toward Nicolas.

"You shut your mouth," he says.

He hacks a glob of spit in his direction. It lands on his sleeping bag.

"I'll deal with *you* later."

While Lyudmila laces up a second boot—one of the men's—Zinaida scoots over to her. She touches her shoulder.

"You can't go outside," she says gently. "It's still dark. Freezing."

"I need to get away from him. I need distance. I need a breath."

Lyudmila opens the tent flap and slips outside. Nicolas and Yuri join the others in their attempts to restrain Dyatlov. He punches Alexander K in the face, and slips out of Rustem's grip. He grabs his knife from his rucksack, slices open the tent, and heaves himself through the opening.

Dyatlov spots Lyudmila by the front of the tent.

"You bitch!" he shouts. "Get back here! Talk!"

Lyudmila screams and starts running. Dyatlov chases after her, knife in hand. The others begin streaming out of the tent, in various stages of dress. They race down the slope after Dyatlov.

At the edge of the woods, the pursuers are tired, breathless, and disoriented. Initial surges of adrenaline carried Yuri and Georgyi this far in only their underclothes, but now they are shivering. They make a quick decision to split up. Nicolas and the two Alexanders continue through the woods, trying to follow Lyudmila and Dyatlov's tracks in the darkness.

Rustem and Zinaida stay with their two under-dressed comrades. They argue about what to do next. Zinaida thinks Georgyi and Yuri should head back to the tent. Despite the cold, Georgyi insists on staying here for a while to make sure Dyatlov doesn't double back. The cold is already beginning to affect his thinking. Yuri simply doesn't want to brave the exposed, windy frigidness of the open slope yet. Rustem goes about making a fire.

Lyudmila falls to her knees in exhaustion and despair at the edge of the ravine. Dyatlov falls upon her, screaming.

"Talk and talk and talk and talk and talk..."

He digs the knife into her mouth.

The pursuers catch up. Nicolas dives at Dyatlov and throws him off Lyudmila. They fight, wrestling on the snow for control of the knife.

The Alexanders go to help Lyudmila. Blood pours from her mouth. Her severed tongue lies on the snow, haloed by crimson. There's a loud crack and the ledge the three of them stand on—really just compacted ice and snow—breaks off. They tumble into the ravine.

Dyatlov manages to toss Nicolas from him. They both struggle to their feet. Dyatlov stands first. He charges at Nicolas, and rams him off the edge of the ravine with his shoulder.

Back at the forest camp, Rustem tries to coax Yuri back to the fire. Yuri refuses. He sits on the snow, his arms and legs wrapped around the big cedar tree.

“The fire is shit,” he says dreamily. “The tree gives me warmth.”

Dyatlov emerges from the woods. He no longer has his knife, having lost it in the snow at some point during the struggle.

“Stay calm, Igor,” Rustem says.

Dyatlov tears a small branch from a pine tree. He makes eye contact with Zinaida. His face softens, yet his voice remains filled with crazed, murderous rage. He points the branch at her.

“It's you!” he says. “I knew it. It wasn't right. It never was. I knew it. It's you. It's supposed to be you.”

He steps toward her. She blinks slowly, bites her lip, and cocks her head. Her face begins to soften as well—as if she's about to understand, or remember something she couldn't possibly. But then it fades, and her expression twists back into terror. She runs up the slope, toward the tent. Dyatlov gives chase.

“It's you!” Dyatlov shouts after her. “It's okay, I remember now. Stop! Wait! I'm tired!”

Rustem, the only other skier with enough strength left to give chase one last time, staggers after them.