



# **THE HUNTERS**

**Part 1**

**By Jon Mallet**

**From:** Pre-Colonisation Exploration Probe 1X2TL9989

**To:** Universal Colonisation Agency

Trace amount of DNA Particles detected in Galactic Cluster  
L42M0L22H425.

DNA particles detected.

Deep Space Contagion Prevention Protocol engaged.

Threat Level Raised to Yellow.

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Trajectory Modified.

Circumventing Infected Zone.

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Scanning infection radius.

Active DNA detected

Active RNA detected

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Scanning completed.

Uploading spatial coordinates.

Over.

It's not like I ever killed anything, I mean I may be on my way to my first genocide but I'm not a killer that's for sure. You won't find an ounce of murderous blood in me, I promise. On the contrary, I'm more of a live and let live kind of guy. I get no joy out of watching a creature squeal in terror as it's about to die, as it fights for a few more seconds of reality before the lights get turned off.

Well that's not totally true, I may have stepped on a few bugs, and I may have clapped a few flies during the course of my life but those don't count. Their too small to even matter. I mean when Cassandra asks me to kill a spider that's hanging on the wall, I care for it, I put it in a glass and release it outside into the wild so it can go on living its life.

The only time I may have killed anything was years ago, when I was still a kid. On a sunny day of August, I accidentally ran over a young racoon with my bike. The poor animal didn't die instantly but I got to hear its tiny ribcage crack. As I got close to it, I witnessed death for the first time; the heavy breathing, the violent spasms, the last sparkle of life slowly departing away from the body. In hindsight, I should have stomped on its tiny head and put an end to its sufferings as soon as I could, but I was too petrified to act. Time stood still. I tried to gather up some courage to raise my leg but I could not bring myself to it, the idea of killing was too repulsive to me. I loomed over the agonizing racoon as its long furry tail kept on twitching in pain. In a state of panic, I was coming up with every possible excuse to attenuate the horrible act I had just committed. Maybe he was faking it so I would leave him alone. Maybe it was some kind of defensive ruse against predators. Maybe it would heal quickly and he would go back to its former life. I started imagining the kind of racoon he had been. Did he have a family? Had he been good to those around him? A feeling of guilt and cowardice ran through my guts as I knew I was lying to myself so I would not have to face cold hard facts. Even if I didn't want this, it was still my fault, I had to deal with it. I raised a heavy leg over its fragile head, I had nothing against the young racoon, but it was for its own good, to put an end to its agony and mine. At least, that's what I thought at the time, but who was I to make that call? Even if the little buddy got to live long enough to see another day, it would eventually die off in a horrible way. The longer I lingered there feeling sorry for myself, the more he suffered. I closed my eyes and took a last untainted breath. My mind was set, my whole body became stiff and I felt like I was going to be sick...

*Ding Ding Ding*

The warning lights over our heads flash to indicate that we are entering an area of turbulence. The pilot of the floatplane sitting next to me turns his baseball cap around, kisses the naked woman on the keychain dangling in front of the window and presses a few buttons. He looks at the sky with defiance.

“Good God it’s ugly out there, the wind keeps on pushing us away from the lake, this won’t be an easy landing I tell ya. Hold on tight and pray for some bit of luck.” I buckle my belt and take a look outside. Water droplets are trickling down the window of the floatplane as I try to make out the landscape through thick gray clouds. I had been told by the recruiter of the company that the way to Dease Lake was quite the scenic show. From the air, one could admire the snowy peaks of the gigantic mountains and the sapphire blue lakes hiding in vast alpine forests. He promised that you could truly get a sense of how immense nature was in this part of the country, thousands upon thousands of kilometers of pristine land lost in endless beauty. I’m starting to think the recruiter from the company was lying, since we left Prince Rupert this morning, the bad weather keeps on following us wherever we go, we have yet to see the shadow of a glacier. We have been floating in a dull gray mist for the last few hours and I have no idea of how far I truly am from civilisation. I think of Cassandra and I wonder how many kilometers come between us, I last saw her in her cute pajamas when I left the house this morning and I miss her already. Only 22 days to go.

Suddenly, the whole floatplane is violently shaken by a pocket of wind, the numbers on the altimeter keep going down at an alarming rate as we descend into the unknown. The wind gains in strength and whistles loudly throughout the floatplane, covering over the rumblings of the motor. As we freefall, my fingers are clasped to the armrest, holding onto something stable while my lower body starts leaving my seat. The strength of the wind forces the floatplane to dive forward, headfirst into the lake. My thoughts become dreamy; my head feels lighter, like I am about to pass out. As I accept the inevitable crash to come, images of my sweet Cassandra caressing her belly flash into my mind. A second before it’s too late, the pilot regains his composure and lowers the yoke on the dashboard.

“Woowee! Hail Mary!”

The nose of the floatplane raises slowly as we are about to plunge into the waves. The pilot, screaming his lungs out, keeps on pushing down on the yolk as hard as he can. As we regain some sort of stability, gravity slams me back on my seat. The numbers on the altimeter slow down but we are still losing altitude.

“Hey bud! Are you doing ok there? Hold on ta your breakfast, we might hit a few salmons before we make it to town. It ain’t over until it’s over!” He shouts without looking at me. I see faint lights from the village materialising through the dense mist. The floats under the plane ram into the wall of water as we grind our way through the lake like a heavy skipping stone, a loud torrent of water roaring around us as we absorb the full intensity of the crash. On impact, I am catapulted out of my chair but my seatbelt keeps me from flying away through the window. I struggle to catch my breath. A loud clank echoes from beneath the floor, a cog in the motor that just shattered, the floatplane decelerates as it shuts down, losing its momentum until it comes to a complete stop.

The surroundings become calm, we listen to the soothing drizzle of the rain on the cockpit, surprised to be alive. The swinging from the waves elevates and lowers the floatplane as we drift towards the shadowy village. The pilot brings the pinup to his lips, whispers a few inaudible words and kisses the keychain on the breasts before releasing it.

“Fucking hell that was a rough landing, the damn mountain wind is unpredictable out here. You still breathing there?”

“Yeah... Yeah... Didn’t think I’d make it in one piece but yeah, now I’m ok.” I rub my arms and my legs to make sure they are still intact and discover that they are shaking uncontrollably. The pilot smiles at me, proud of himself.

“Good heaven, I haven’t had to land like that in years, reminded me of the old days! I didn’t want to say it out loud so you didn’t panic but for a second there I thought we were gonna end up at the bottom of the lake. But hey what is done is done and here we are.” I try to smile back at him, but my lips refuse to answer my command, my courage is still hiding somewhere out there in the rain. The pilot notices my state of shock and pats me on the shoulder. “It’s all over bud, it’s all good, look at me, I’m doing just fine.” He points at the window. “Check it out. We can see the dock and the airport, we’re almost there. In fifteen minutes, we’ll be walking on solid soil, both feet on the ground.” He turns on the ignition key, the engine coughs a black smoke and makes a strange grinding noise, the plane sounds injured. “I think something’s broken inside, I hope it ain’t too bad. I’ll have to take a look at it once we get on land.”

As we make our way to the dock, I still can’t wrap my mind around what just happened. A few hours ago I was a normal city guy living a normal city life in a normal city house. I leave it all to make a few honest bucks when first thing I know, I have a

close brush with death. I knew when I accepted the job that it would be hard but I was ok with it, open to new experiences, ready for adventure. To tell you the truth, when I left the comfort of my bed this morning, I expected on coming back in one piece. I can't die now anyways; I have a pregnant woman to love and a kid on the way to feed. At least, now that I've made it without a scratch, that it's all in the past, it makes for a great story to tell my folks back home. The way I see it, I just escaped death, and whatever happens next will never get as crazy as a plane crash.

"Hey bud! Check this out, the rain is leaving, the hot spring winds are pushing it away, dear Lord, take a look at all those peaks." The clouds are swept away, unveiling hidden glaciers atop giant mountains. "I've been living up here most of my life and I ain't ever been able to predict the weather. The mountains are giants in their own land, they do as they please, we're too small for them to notice anyway." The alpine sun emanates on all and everything up in a clear blue sky, flashing its light on the icy mirror of the surrounding glaciers. "All you gotta do is move outta their way, avoid being trapped under their movements. But it's like this, one day or another whatever you do, you won't avoid death and that'll be it. Adios. The mountains won't care. You being gone from this planet'll be like a mosquito falling in a lake to them." The surroundings make me wonder if we have landed into a fairyland, all the colors seem more vivid than I'm used to. "I'm ranting on and you'll start thinking I'm a loony but all I'm saying is to be careful out there, this ain't the city no more, you're on your own and greater forces are up against you. The best you can do is to count on yourself and praise God for a long journey and a swift conclusion. Welcome to the North bud."

Maybe it's the change in altitude or maybe it's the adrenaline still pumping through my head but I find some caring sense in his warning and I thank him for that.

"No problem bud, I'm just telling it like it is. You look like a nice fella; I wouldn't want you to end up here forever just because you imagined you were safe."

The floatplane swerves to the right as it aligns itself with the dock and slows down until it comes to a full stop. The motor dies off in a growl and I get to take a first glimpse at the remote community that I will learn to call home this summer. What first strikes me are the imposing conifers ornamenting the lavish landscape, hundreds of massive trees swaying in harmony to the beat of the wind. Hiding under the frozen needles of their skirt is a mix of snow and mud and an old rusty shack. The airport is built out of grossly red painted metal sheets with unkempt wooden planks for a porch, the place looks abandoned. The only sign of human life is a black pickup truck with a sasquatch

of a man standing tall next to it. Immobile, as in some sort of meditation, he's puffing smoke from a wooden pipe, looking at us, awaiting our arrival.

The pilot brings out a flask from inside his coat, hoists several long strides without even grimacing and hands it to me.

"Dear lord, I needed that. Here, have a sip, it'll do you good after all a this."

I thank him and fake a swig of the strong liquor, probably bourbon by the smell of it, it's too early for me to drink anyways and I want to stay sober for the day to come. I give it back; he opens up the side door and jumps out onto the dock. The pilot runs at the back to catch the rope at the tail-end and drags it towards him as the floatplane closes in on the side of the pier. The cabin lightly trembles when we bump on the rubber tires used as buffers. The pilot runs up to the front, secures the nose and raises his thumb to tell me that all is safe, I can come out now. I unbuckle my seat belt and slide out through the pilot's door.

As soon as I set a foot outside, I feel a deep echo originating from the mountains, a permanent hum reminding me of my insignificance in this land. Pure cold air passes through my lungs, and although the sun is out, I still breathe out frosty condensation. The pilot takes out a few packages and hands me my backpack, my sole possession for this journey. After a close inspection of the floatplane, the pilot walks with me as we make our way towards the shore.

"You know, I was expecting a bigger beating on her, she's a good machine, hard headed that's for sure." He shivers. "Don't you find it a bit nippy out here? It never really gets hot, but you're body'll get used to it, just make sure to eat enough meat to keep your furnace going."

At a distance from us, the tall man exhales out a cloud of dark smoke.

I am surprised by how much he fascinates me, a sense of awe that I can't quite explain. Although he has the looks and garments of a typical lumberjack from the old day, a giant one at that, his presence inspires respect. I try to distinguish the features of his face in the tobacco haze around his enormous head but can only make out a broad and furry beard going down to his belly. The pilot calls him out while he walks up to him in a familiar tone. "Hey Sask! Big man! How've you been? Long time no see! How was the winter in the backcountry?" Sask remains still and silent, in no hurry to answer. "You should've seen us out there man! We just survived one hell of a landing, ask your friend right here, the damn wind almost got us killed, we almost went swimming." The pilot,

a man of respectable height, is dwarfed when standing next to Sask who is at least two heads higher than him. "By the way, this is Konrad, the new recruit. I was tasked with bringing him safe and sound to Dease Lake and now that he's standing here, alive, my mission is done, you can have him, he's all yours."

As his gaze falls upon me, a few drops of sweat trickle down my back, a crow somewhere out there caws his lungs out. His beastly dark eyes penetrate straight into my soul, making up his mind on what kind of man I am and if I'm worth his time.

This whole introduction makes me uneasy; I just want to make a good first impression on my new boss so I extend my hand to greet him.

"You... you must be Mr. Samuel Macpherson? The recruiter from the company told me you'd be waiting for me once I got here. I'm Konrad, it's a pleasure to meet you sir." He remains still, keeping his hands to himself. More smoke comes out of his mouth, veiling his enormous body. After what seems like an eternity of him scrutinizing down on me, he grunts and nods, he's made up his mind and grabs my hand with overwhelming strength. The texture of his callous palms reminds me of wooden bark, like those of a man who worked in the rough his whole life.

"I'm Sask." For the first time, I hear the man talk, the deep tone of his voice catches me by surprise, I never thought a human capable of such low frequencies, like a roaring lion that can talk. The pilot also looks astonished.

"Samuel Macpherson? Samuel Macpherson? You mean you actually have a real name?"

Before answering, Sask inhales another long puff of smoke that he releases as he talks.

"I do but I haven't heard it in a long time."

As the aura of smoke around him dissipates, I get a clearer view of him. His hair is long and ungroomed as is his beard, by the length of them he probably forgot what he used to look like a long time ago. His skin is tanned and dirty from a life in the outdoors, this man belongs in the mountains, he is a part of the mountains. His stature reminds me of the sasquatch, the withdrawn mythical creature roaming these forests.

"Is it Sask as in the sasquatch?" As the words escape my mouth, I feel dumb for asking the question, there goes my chance to make a good first impression. Sask is transfixed by my question, he gazes at me and I come to the realisation that the man lags in conversations. A life of solitude in the woods has atrophied his social skills, he is not used to small talk.



"No. I'm from Saskatoon, they used to call me Saskatoon Sam but now it's just Sask." In a hurry, the pilot picks up my backpack and throws it in the box of the pickup truck along with his packages.

"Saskatoon Sam hey? Must've been a hell of a long time ago, I've known you for years and I'd never heard about your secret name before. Never even asked myself what your real name was in the first place. Hey, mind if I bum a ride with ya? I've got a few packages for Maury back at the store and I need a brewski to help me calm down my nerves." Without waiting for an answer, the pilot hops in the passenger seat of the pickup and takes his flask out. Sask grunts and opens up the driver's door. I don't want to be abandoned out here all alone in the wild and get into the back. Before I can sit down, I'm welcomed by the sight of a large hunting rifle laying on the backseat, aiming its deadly muzzle at me. It's scratched metallic barrel, its rusty iron sight, its chipped camo butt; its multiple scars tell of a bloody and eventful existence. This black hole spitting a bullet between your two eyes is the last image you marvel at when you get gunned down, the last glimpse of reality before the lights go out. I never held a gun in my hands before and I dread the idea of a machine designed to kill. I freeze in the face of perceived danger, I don't know how to react. The pilot at the front of the truck turns in my direction to see what is taking me so long. At the sight of the rifle he whistles in admiration and exclaims.

"Whoo whee, hail Mary! That's a monster of a Ruger you have there Sask. You could go to hell and back with that thing no problem. Hey bud, I ain't your mother or anything but you should move out the way. First rule of survival out here, never remain at the mouth of a gun, that fucking thing is so powerful it'd blow you to pieces, we'd have to scoop you up with a spoon to send you back home." I snap out of it and do as ordered; I move out of harm's way. Sask turns around and picks up the gun.

"Sorry bout that, forgot I had it in the back, I ain't used to having so much company riding along with me." He slides up the fire chamber to show us it's empty. "I never keep it loaded anyways, wouldn't want it to fire by accident. If you ever need any bullets Konrad, they're in the glove box, don't think we'll ever need'em but they're there just in case." He puts the rifle between him and the pilot as I take my seat and slam the door shut.

We leave the airport and make our way along a rough gravel road into the wood. I lower my window to acclimate to my new surroundings, to get used to its sounds and smells. The sun and sky disappear as we enter the belly of the forest. Hidden under the shadows of the trees, a cold piney odour tingles my nose, a mix of fresh wood and

melting ice, a sign that spring is making a slow comeback. I wish Cassandra was with me right now so we could discover these majestic lands together, I wish we went hiking along those trails with the wind in her hair. We'd laugh and eat and make love in the tent. The front tire hits a pothole, everyone in the car is shaken upwards at the same time as the truck keeps on going its way.

"Jesus Christ Sask!" Yells the pilot at the front. "Where'd you learn to drive man? I almost flew out the window, I could've been hurt." I'm tempted to remind him that he had almost gotten us killed in a plane crash earlier but I keep my mouth shut. "Given how reckless you are on the road, I'm surprised you've made it back from the backcountry intact. I'm guessing the roads are all muddied up and full of rocks this time of year. You been up to the camp already?"

"Yeah been up there with Scoop to open up the place yesterday, power up the generators. Left him up there too so he can scout around before we start tomorrow." As we turn a corner, the road becomes paved, it's worn down but at least it's solid.

"Oh Scoop! My man! Good old Scooper the Detector! How's he? Haven't heard of him in a long time. Ever since... you know, ever since..." The pilot waits for Sask to acknowledge that he understands what he dares not say but the giant ignores him. "You know what I mean... ever since he came back from you know where."

"He looks like he's doing fine, I mean, that's what he's been telling me. He's promised me he's got it all under control now. But you know how it goes with him, whatever he'll do, the sadness'll always come back to haunt him, it's like a curse he's born with. Since he came back from the city last fall, he's been laying real quiet, taking care of his Ma, keeping up with the house, haven't even seen him at the Lounge for a beer."

"Well it's good to hear he's doing better. Speaking of the Lounge, you heard anything about Ayleen? That poor Ayleen's been through a rough patch lately. Steven told me she put an end to her fling with his buddy Nate. She caught'em red handed inside Lynda, going at it right there on the bathroom floor. It went as well as you might expect, Nate and Lynda both ended up with a black eye and a bloody nose. Ayleen's banned them from ever entering the Wolverine Lounge again, it's her place after all, she's the boss. She promised she'd shoot'em both in the stomach if they ever came near her place. If I were'em I'd stay far from the Lounge, she's been hunting her whole life you know. Last year Nate told me he saw her shoot a 16 pointer with one bullet, straight through the heart. Don't get me wrong, I love Ayleen she's a great gal with a lot of appeal if you know what I mean but I know I couldn't handle her, she's more manly than I am for

Christ's sake. She could crush my bits with her two fingers if she wanted to, have you seen the pair of hands on her? All this to say that she's back in the game, free as a dove, ready to find some love, and that's where you come in my friend. I mean you know how she is, you know her temper, if someone ever has a chance of handling her, it's you. It's about time you get it on with a girl Sask, believe me, you gotta get your pecker going, get it soaked a bit before it dries off forever, I've never seen you with anybody. Maybe Saskatoon Sam made all the girls fall for him but the old Sask I know's been on a dry spell of many years. A chance like that won't come by often, especially not up here in Dease Lake. The more I think about it, the more it makes perfect sense to me, you know what I mean? You understand right? Right?" As sole answer, Sask keeps his eyes on the road. The pilot shakes his head in disapprobation. "Come on man! Worst case she says no, best case scenario you get some, I mean, hello? How is this even a choice? Hey Konrad buddy, back me up on this one will ya? Answer this, could you ever say no to some easy tenderness out here in this wilderness?" Out of nowhere I get sucked into the discussion, having to take side.

"Gee I really don't know man, I already got my girl back home, I don't wanna think about that. Besides, I already get my fare share of titty in the city."

The pilot claps his hands.

"Ah! You heard that Sask? The man's a poet! Listen bud, even if you have your "girl back home" as you say, you're still entitled to an opinion. Don't really have to think too long to know which way your dick would swing in this particular scenario now, would you?"

"I know what I think but I can't say it out loud, I refuse to say it. As we say back home, some things are better said unsaid." That should put an end to it. The pilot is stubborn, he won't take no for an answer and turns around to taunt me but I look outside to dodge his glance.

"Come on say it. Say it."

"I told you I ain't saying nothing."

"Say it, say it, say it, say it, say it."

"Say what? Uh? Say what? What do you want me to say?"

Sask sighs in a roar, he's had enough, he's fed up with all our bickering.

"Shut it you two! You stop tormenting my new recruit, leave him alone."

“Whatever! You guys know I’m right anyways, you just don’t have the guts to admit it. When you’ll be going down on her Sask, your beard deep in her cleavage, think about me, think about my nice smile and my beautiful face and think about how much I was right.” For some childish reason the pilot insists on being right, he must be one mean drunk. He looks back at Sask expecting a riposte but Sask keeps his eyes on the road, silent. “Anyways, in other news, I was talking to Dave at the lounge last week and he told me...” Unable to keep his mouth shut, the pilot changes the subject and keeps rambling on about whatever gossip is being told in town.

The fresh breeze outside feels soothing on my forehead, my mind phases out into the dense hilly forest. We come across a driveway with a small cabin further away down at the end of a rough trail, all by itself, in total isolation, no one to bother them. Two huge hounds appear from the backyard and bark at the truck to let us know that we are not welcome on their land. Up here everyone fends off for themselves if they want to survive. Up here, there is no unified community, no blocks of houses, no neighbours around to keep you company. It’s just yourself against the mountains, yourself against the cold, yourself against the wildlife. If you decide to exile in solitude, so far away from civilisation, it’s because you would rather endure all those dangers than to be stuck amongst your fellow men, whatever your reason is, one thing is for sure, you want to be left alone.

The truck keeps going on for a few kilometers until it swerves on a corner and we make it to what could only be described as Dease Lake’s downtown: two rudimentary houses facing each other, on their side of the road. The left one looks straight out of the Klondike days with its planks turned gray from old age and its orange round nails like freckles. On a rectangular sign over the door, the words General Store have been painted and left to decrepitude many years ago. The second building, a spacious log cabin made into a bar, is of more recent design and a lot more welcoming. A red neon sign flashes the words Wolverine Lounge in cursive letters over a small patio. I distinguish two women sitting together at one of the tables, sipping their beers, getting a tan. The truck parks at the bar and we all come out. The pilot runs to the back and picks up his packages.

“Well that was a fun ride! I’ll come around by the Lounge for a beer right after this, if you guys are still there I’d be up for a pitcher or two.” And he leaves us and I won’t miss him. Deep inside I hope we will be far away before he comes back and starts drinking. I would rather listen to the echoes from the mountains than have to endure the pilot’s claptrap, I’ve had enough of him for today.

The two women out on the patio hail Sask from afar. He raises his arm to salute them back and signals me to follow him. As we approach their table, they stand up to greet us, I recognize one of them by the description I was given of her. She's tall, much taller than me and displays a pair of giant feminine hands, Ayleen could probably kill me with one punch if she ever felt like it. All giggly and cute, with her long dark hair like the night and her welcoming smile, she opens up her arms and pounces on Sask to hug him. Two titans colliding into each other, I can almost feel the earth tremble from the shock.

"Well well, look whose here, my favourite bear has arrived. Boy am I glad to get a hold of you before you leave." She encircles him in her arms for a hug but Sask remains still, not reciprocating her gesture. She lets go of him and he backs off by one step. Is it because he's too shy? Is it because he has no feelings for her? I'm incapable of reading Sask, the man's a mystery to me. Any facial clue I could use to understand him better is hidden under his beard. With his deep cavernous voice, he answers in a friendly manner.

"Hey Ayleen! Nice to see you too." His discourse ends there, he is a man of few words. His eyes get lost in the background, everyone is standing there confused, waiting on him to continue on with the presentations. Ayleen is the first to break the ice, she leans towards me to get on my level and extends her giant hand.

"You must be Konrad the new guy, welcome to Dease Lake, I hope you had a nice flight coming up to here, the view is beautiful from the air." I raise my head to meet her eyes for the first time and am surprised by the warmth and kindness she emanates.

"That's me, I'm Konrad, nice to meet you too. Just came in about a half an hour ago, can't say we saw too much on the way in except for wind and rain. But now that I'm here, I'm glad to have made it." As I talk, the second woman appears from behind Ayleen, hesitant to join in on the conversation. "I mean I didn't know what to expect but I didn't think I'd be so amazed by it. It's my first time so far away from the city, and I've never seen so many peaks..." I glance at the new girl standing there, smiling at me, fumbling on a golden lock of hair, waiting to be presented. Ayleen moves aside to make space for her.

"Come on Mary-Lou don't be shy. Konrad, this is Mary-Lou, Mary-Lou, Konrad. You two will be partners for the season. She's just like you she's also from the city and it's her first time up here." We shake hands and for some reason, on first contact, I feel a deep radiance in her eyes, I know she is a woman I can trust. It might have to do with

the fact that we are both strangers in this great unknown or maybe it's a sympathetic solidarity between rookies that unites us but I find her presence in this adventure reassuring, like I'm not alone on my own anymore.

"Hi Konrad, it's a pleasure to meet you. I totally understand how you feel, I flew in last night and I'm still amazed by what I see, don't think I'll ever get used to it, it's like the colours are nicer."

"That's funny, I felt the same way when I landed, I've seen lots of pictures of Dease Lake online but nothing compares to the real thing, the vibrance is in everything, it's crazy, you can't prepare your mind for something like that." Before I can continue on, Ayleen hops in.

"Let's go back to the table to continue; it'll be more comfortable to discuss sitting down. You guys want a pint? Come on, it's on me." Everyone looks up to Sask for an answer. He glances at the general store where we see the pilot and the clerk discussing through the window.

"Sorry Ayleen but we need to be on our way pretty soon. The road's still pretty rough and I wanna make it up to the camp before sundown. You know how it is." Ayleen looks disappointed and insists.

"Come on Sask, just a quick beer to celebrate everyone's arrival then you can be on your way. Three weeks out there is a long time without your company."

"Yeah, it's a long time but we'll be back. Anyways we still need to get Mary-Lou's stuff back at the motel."

"Oh, it's not a problem Sask, I walked from the motel with my bags, figured we might save some time." Visibly upset, Ayleen slaps her hands and exclaims.

"What? Dave let you walk outside the motel, along the road, all the way to here without telling you anything? I'll have to have a word with him when he comes in tonight, what's his problem? He knows you're new here, he knows you don't know." Mary-Lou's ears turn to red.

"I'm sorry Ayleen, I didn't know, I didn't know, don't get mad at Dave because of me, I didn't tell him I was leaving. I just left my room thinking it was a nice day for a walk in the rain."

"It's ok dear, no harm done this time, it's ok, you couldn't know, you're not from up here but listen carefully to what I'm about to say. Hey Konrad buddy, that goes for you

too, open up your ears. Out here is like a zoo with no fences and a million beasts lurking around, waiting for some easy meat to pass by, you ain't on top of the food chain no more. We got grizzlies, black bears, cougars, wolves, coyotes and that's just the beginning. They all run faster, swim faster and climb trees faster than you ever will. Never, and I repeat, never walk around town or anywhere on your own like this, one bad encounter and we won't ever see you again. Gone with the wind as they say. You go somewhere, you use a truck, you go somewhere, you bring a gun with y'a, am I making myself clear?" Sask confirms the veracity of her warning with a grunt. I'm all ears and take note of her instructions, this job is not the easy picnic down the lake vacation I thought they would be. If I ever want to hold Cassandra in my arms ever again, I need to raise my game, learn to adapt as fast as I can or else the mountains will get me. I remember the dying racoon's tail twitching, I hear him squeal, I can't afford to let my guard down if I ever want to hold my kid.

Sask's attention is still on the other side of the road, he's keeping an eye out on the pilot, who's shaking hands with the clerk.

"We still need to be on our way Ayleen, we still got a few hours to go before we get there. You guys got everything you need before we leave?" Orders the boss before making his way to the pickup truck. Despair flashes in Ayleen's face. She snatches him by the shoulder and forces him to face her.

"Can I get a hug before you go?" Her tone is imploring. "Just a small hug so I don't forget how y'a feel." Without letting him a chance to answer, she throws her whole body on him and squeezes him for what seems like a very long time. Sask does not react but does not push her back either. Mary-Lou looks up to me and rolls her eyes, I point to my watch and nod, she laughs a silent laugh. Ayleen releases her grip, and her eyes are watery. "Don't forget me ok? I know for damn sure I won't. You two take care of him, ok? From now on you gotta take care of each other so we can all celebrate your return in three weeks." Inside the store, on the other side of the street, I see the pilot making his way to the door, there's no escaping him now, but just as he is about to exit, the clerk calls him up and he walks back to the counter. "Before you go for real, I got something for y'all, wait right here, it'll only take a sec." Ayleen runs up inside the bar as Mary-Lou gives her backpack and handbag to Sask who drops them in the box of the pickup truck. With a case of beer in one hand and a bottle of bourbon in the other, Ayleen comes back and hands me the presents. "Here, it's for you guys so you don't get too bored up there, a little welcome gift, just make sure Scoop doesn't drink it all to himself. Welcome to the North! And this..." She takes out a paper letter from her bra

and hands it to Sask. "... this is for you. Promise me you won't read it until you're at the camp ok?" He acknowledges, takes it and hides it in his vest. We are running out of time, the goddamn pilot will be back any second now. I speed up the goodbyes.

"Gee, thanks a lot Ayleen, that's very generous of you. We'll take care of him as much as we can but we're counting on him to come through, he knows more about survival out here than we do." I open the back door and slide inside with the booze. Sask and Mary-Lou hop into the front and we go our way. Through the rear mirror, I catch a last shrinking glance at civilisation, Ayleen in front of the neon sign and the pilot running out of the store with his hand in the air, hailing for us to stop, but we leave it all behind.

We drive on for a few kilometers of nothing but trees and melting snow until we reach the entrance of an old private road. On the side, a fence with the company's logo blocks the way. I go out, open up the gate and we enter even deeper into the heart of the forest. As we make our way to the camp, we are sent back into a prehistoric world that has existed undisturbed for hundreds of thousands of years. For the next few hours, we advance in what could at best be called a trail, we traverse a dense forest, we go up a mountain, take a break at a glacial blue lake, follow a windy alpine pass next to treacherous ravines, make our way down steep cliffs, go through another dense forest that smells of early blooms, we enter a wetland with bridges made of wooden pallets and almost get stuck in the mud a few times. Under the thick covering of branches, there is not a trace of human life to be seen, no other vehicle track than ours.

When I first came into Dease Lake, I thought I had finally made it to the world's end but as we penetrate further into the wilderness, I come to understand how wrong I was and how vast the planet is. Behind the shadow of every tree, there is another one, behind the peak of every mountain there is another mountain waiting. And that's when it hit me, that's when I realised we could go on forever, pass this valley, pass the mountain range, pass the taiga, pass the solar system for that matter and we would still be as far as we could ever be. Once you're out of reach from the arms of your fellow men, there is no farther way to go, you're on your own in a state of true isolation. Nobody to blame your weaknesses on except yourself. If you die, it's your fault, if you make it, you've earned it. It's not a question of when you come back from the bush but a question of if you will emerge from it still alive. Dease Lake is far far away but at least it has a name, it exists, riding in this pickup truck out in the middle of nowhere, we are but an unfindable spot moving somewhere on a map, impossible to pinpoint.

Mary-Lou has remained silent since our departure, hypnotized by the grandeur of the scenery. She sighs.



"I can't believe how beautiful it is up here. I sure hope no one breaks a leg or gets a heart attack, we're so far away from everything." Sask grunts.

"I hope so too."

In the distance I see the head of giant pylons looming over the treetops, a row of metallic skeletons meandering through the hills as far as the eyes can see.

"Hey guys! Check it out. We've almost made it! We're almost there." Sask grunts.

"I wouldn't get my hopes up yet, the powerline's pretty long, we still have some way to go."

Mary-Lou sighs once again, the idea of total isolation slowly sinking in.

"I mean if something really bad was to happen and we needed urgent help, there's always a way out of here right? Right?" Sask's eyes are on the road, I don't know if he heard the question or if he's refusing to answer. "Konrad back me up on this one. Please put my mind at ease here. I'm not panicking but you know..." Mary-Lou's not panicking yet but she's close to it. For some reason I don't want her to feel bad I want her to feel reassured.

"I'm sure it'll all be ok, in the end it'll all work out. I mean they wouldn't send us all the way out here if they knew it was too dangerous, there are laws against those kinds of enterprises. It's too late to back up now anyway, let's hope for the best." I can't even convince myself. "So that being said, not to change the subject but what brings you up here? From what I understand, you're new blood like me, you out on your first hunt?"

"Yeah, it's my first time up here. To tell you the truth, it's my first time in the woods, ever. I never even went camping before..." And she laughs in a sweet syrupy giggle that washes away all the tension that had built up to this point. We engage in conversation and we become friends. Mary-Lou tells me how she just completed a degree in psychology and that she came up here to pay up her debts, get married and move out on her own. She tells me that after four years with her nose up in her books, she wanted a change of scenery, live a little adventure before settling in for good.

As we keep on talking, Sask keeps on trucking. We go up another mountain, cross a bridge over strong rapids, go down a narrow ledge riddled with rivulets, ride into a clearing lush with moss, go through a shallow river piled with dead trunks until we enter a swampy wetland. The path under our wheels becomes soft, we might get stuck if we ever stop. To get my mind off this new probability I keep on chatting with Mary-Lou.

“Can you imagine how many of them are hidden out there? Millions? Billions? From what I read, whatever we do they’ll never go extinct anyway. We can’t look up every water hole and every tree and every puddle of mud in the world, it’d be impossible, we’d forget a spot and they’d always end up coming back. You know they...” As we swerve around a giant fallen log, I detect an unusual movement in the corner of my eye, a disturbance in the natural pattern. Sask slams on the breaks, the suspension on the truck squeaks as if they were about to burst and we are all projected forward. I throw my hands in front of me to protect my head from slamming on the dashboard but I get confused and light headed.

“Fuck!” Roars Sask.

My shaky vision settles back to normal as I feel the truck sinking in, absorbed by the mud. I raise my head to understand the reason of all this turmoil.

Standing tall in the middle of the trail, a few meters away from us, massive and unmoveable, like a freight train made of fur and muscle, an enormous bull moose. Chomping on some bark he turns his head around in a slow and heavy motion. Who dares disturb his lunch? As he pivots, his antlers are revealed, two mature trees made of bone standing tall on his head. A moose of this size could easily roll over the pickup truck or trample us six feet under.

Keeping his eyes on the bull moose, Sask stays cool as he gives us instructions in a calm and controlled voice.

“The second I have his attention, you two open the door and run at the back of the truck. If he ever charges in your direction, move out the way.” He picks up the hunting rifle, gets some ammo in the glove box, loads it and jumps outside to face the beast. Sask is a titan amongst man, but as he stands in the shadow of the bull moose, I am reminded of his mortality. The bull moose bellows in our direction, his heavy dewlap shaking with rage, he is not happy to see us.

“Hey moose! Over here!” Sask makes as much noise as he can to taunt the animal in his direction. “Hey! Oh! Come at me! Oh! Come here!” The moose lowers his head to intimidate his adversary, his large antlers bending and breaking the smaller pines around him as he moves. “Run me down! Come on! Run me down! Oh! He’s on me! Oh! Now’s your chance! Run for it!” On his signal, we jump out of the truck and spring to the back for protection. I peek on the corner of the tailgate to follow the confrontation but Mary-Lou crawls up in a ball and closes her eyes, her face is livid with terror. “Hey! Oh! It’s your last warning moose.” Using both of his arms, Sask raises the rifle up in the

air but the moose grunts at him in defiance. The gun blasts, he shoots at the sun to scare the animal away. The detonation echoes faraway in the mountains like thunder escaping, my ears are ringing, my heart skipped a beat. Time stops, everything is at a standstill. For an instant I believe Sask scared him away but the moose exhales steam from of his nostrils and pounds on the ground with his front hoof, ready to charge. I try not to think about what would happen if Sask gets killed out here? What if the truck is shred to pieces? What about Cassandra? Panic is settling in. Sask and the bull moose are immobile, waiting on the other to make the first move. My legs begin to shake, I'm gasping for air, I'm about to sit down and pass out when Sask pounces on the beast. I never thought a man of his size could be so swift. The bull moose is too slow to react. Sask, using all his weight in one deadly jab, punches him straight in the snout, a deep cracking sound tells us he's done some damage. The animal exhales with pain, his dewlap shakes from catching his breath. He keeps his head low and bellows, this time his cry is less convincing, losing in strength. Sask advances towards his staggering foe. "Why didn't you go out when you had a chance? Uh moose? Is that all you got? Is that all you got?" For the first time the bull moose backs off, panting. Sask seizes his advantage and keeps on pushing but the animal is evasive, conceding victory. A second detonation breaks the sky, the bull moose has had enough. He turns around to make his escape, stumbles ungracefully on some icy rocks and disappears, leaving a trail of deep erratic tracks in the mud behind him.

I remain hidden until the tapping of his steps can be heard no more. The sound of flowing water and chirping birds comes back to the swamp. My body loosens up, I touch my fingers to make sure that this is all real. Sitting down next to me, Mary-Lou holds her face in her hands.

"Hey Mary-Lou." I approach her. "It's all good Mary-Lou, you can come back now, that damn moose is out of the way. Are you ok?" Still unsure, she raises her head towards me, but her eyes are scanning all around for danger.

"Is he really gone?"

"Yeah he's gone, you should a seen it run away after Sask scared him."

The news of our survival takes some time to sink in. She lowers her guard, she smiles.

"For a second there I thought, that's it, that's how it ends. Can you imagine?" Her nerves finally break down, she starts to laugh and cry at the same time. I laugh with her.

“Did I miss out on something funny?” Sask’s deep voice snaps us out of our hilarity. “You all good down there?” He joins us at the back of the pickup, looks at us and grunts. “Good thing he were young or I’d’ve had to put him down, them damn mooses get pretty stubborn when they get older.” He goes back in the truck and shouts. “Clear the way, I’ll see if I can get out of the mud.” Mary-Lou raises an eyebrow in disbelief. I’m getting used to Sask’s nonchalance, I shrug it off and get out the way. The engine gets turned on and roars as the wheels roll without advancing, spraying a tail of wet mud at its back. The pickup remains still in place. “I’ll need you to come’n help me push it out.” We get into position and for the next fifteen minutes, we give it all we got to impress our new boss. Under the spray of dark and dirty water splashing all over our bodies, we push as hard as we can, synchronising our efforts to get the damn machine moving. After some cursing, the pickup goes forward, and we are out and free to go our way.

Mary-Lou and I high-five, proud of ourselves and of having just completed our first task in this new life as hunters.

With the back of my hand I remove the mud in my eyes and get into the truck covered with dirt. As I open the door, a ghost of smoke escapes from the vehicle, revealing our protector enjoying his pipe. He remains silent, lost in thoughts, his gaze upon the road ahead. He exhales tobacco from his nostrils, the strong smell calms my mind. I come to understand that from now on, my life is in his hands, but I accept the danger, I feel safe knowing he looks out for me. This is his domain; he knows how to tame the fury of these mountains.

“You guys did good out there. Welcome to the North.”

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