

Utiqtuq

Gayle

Kabloona

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ON THE SHORE OF A LITTLE LAKE ON THE WESTERN COAST OF Baffin Island, Aliisa stood with a handful of rocks. She dropped them one at a time through the thin ice forming along the edges of the lake. *Crunch-plop, crunch-plop*. She liked that sound, and besides, there was nothing else to do. Tonight was wet and kind of foggy. Aliisa looked west, over the lake, toward the sea on the horizon; it would freeze soon, too.

“Come on, sun, you can come out any time now.” She shivered. This night shift felt long. The nights had been getting darker recently. The days of twenty-four-hour sunlight were ending, and as summer waned, the air became crisper.

She couldn't tell how long exactly she had been up. They had stopped telling time with hours a long time ago.

It's actually been years, I guess, she thought to herself. It didn't really matter, though; they didn't need to be anywhere at any particular time. No school nights, no alarm clocks, no mealtimes; they ate when they were hungry, went to bed when they were tired,

moved camp with the seasons (or, more accurately, when Ittuq told them to pack up). Now that it was getting dark again at night, Aliisa took the overnight shift because her eyes were sharper in the dusky near-darkness.

Their year was defined by the seasons: times when they caught Arctic char in the rivers or lakes, times when berries covered the tundra, times when the sea ice froze and they could catch sunning seals. The dark, cold part of mid-winter and the glorious spring when the world seemed to open up. It had been three long, dark winters since they left town, left everyone behind. She'd be thirteen soon, her birthday coinciding with the horror that spurred their escape to the land.

They had camped near this lake by the coast for the summer, catching char with a boat Ittuq had fashioned out of some old, abandoned fuel drums. They caught fish, dried fish, and ate fish. All day, every day. Aliisa hadn't let on that she was pretty sick of eating fish. At least when she was on watch she could supplement her diet by stooping to pick berries or *qunguliit*, the tart little plant with a red tower of seeds they used to call "Inuk candy."

Aliisa adjusted the rifle on her back and started toward the little hill behind the tent where Ittuq and Anirniq were sleeping. If she didn't move around a little, she would definitely fall asleep, even if she was cold, and she didn't want to put them in danger like that.

There was a rock at the top of the hill the perfect height for resting on. She called it her leanin' rock. She had a pretty good vantage point from there. She scanned the area for anything moving, anything that could be eaten or that wanted to eat her or her little adoptive family. Nothing so far; only rocks, tufts of tussock grass, and little rivulets of water running toward the lake

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under a thin layer of ice. She listened to the water still gurgling under the ice over hidden stones. She could hear nothing else, not even a bird chirp or a bug buzz. The gloom cut into her field of vision, but there was still enough visibility for her to feel secure. Secure that if anything came out of the mist, she'd be ready for it.

Aliisa shuffled her rubber-booted feet and scooped against her leanin' rock. She found a comfortable place to rest and ran the fingertips of one hand against the rough lichen growing on the rock. She slipped into one of her many pastimes, absent-mindedly counting the rocks in front of her.

"*Atausiq, marruuk, pingasuuuuu!*"—yawn—"sitamat . . . talli . . . mat . . ." She began counting at one, but her mind drifted away as the numbers grew higher. Her eyes drooped closed. Her head fell forward.

She instinctively inhaled sharply as she started awake. *Ajai, whoa, Aliisa! Stay awake!!* She was blinking rapidly, wondering if she had nodded off for long, when she heard a distinct sound. Her breathing stopped as she listened, and she was suddenly alert. Footsteps. The rifle came off her back in one swift movement. Her ears trained on where the sound was coming from as it became more pronounced. Her suspicions confirmed, she hugged the rifle butt into the soft spot between her shoulder and chest. She moved the bolt up and back, bullet into the chamber, bolt forward and down.

She still couldn't see anything through the fog, but she was pointing her body in the direction of the sound. Her left leg was perched up on her leanin' rock to steady her left arm that supported the rifle barrel. The crunching on stones grew louder, closer. Now she could see the outline of a dark shape lurching grotesquely toward her. It was coming fast, but she didn't fire yet. She slowed

her breathing, calming herself, willing her body to become still. Her forefinger depressed the trigger gently, but not enough to fire. Finally, she could make out the figure's outline—it was coming straight at her, fast. Her right eye placed the rifle sights on the silhouette's head and her aim swayed with its rapid movements, waiting for the perfect moment to fire. She waited until it was about thirty metres from her. She took a slow breath in and a slow breath out—*CRACK—fwiiiiip—thunk!*

The *ijiraujaq* flew backwards headfirst. Aliisa already had another bullet in the chamber but waited. The zombie lay on the ground convulsing, limbs flailing. But Aliisa knew it was a good shot. In a few more moments it would stop, its body convinced that the head was indeed dead. The last of the jerking slowed and stopped. She approached cautiously. She listened intently for more sounds and kept her finger on the trigger, just in case. She got closer, rifle ready, and kicked at the *ijiraujaq*'s feet. No movement. It was, in fact, dead . . . or deader . . . whatever you wanted to call it. She drew back the bolt of her rifle and carefully pushed the spare bullet back into the clip. *One bullet, one body.*

She walked up the *ijiraujaq*'s body to inspect the head. Her bullet had hit exactly where she'd wanted it to. There was an oozing cavern where its face used to be. Little bits of bone and black sludge were sprayed across the rocks behind the body. It wasn't like killing a game animal; this thing's blood wasn't blood anymore.

"Stupid dead bodies getting deader and deader." She glared down at it accusingly. "Quit running around trying to eat people, ugh." It looked like this one had gnawed off its own forearm and hadn't been picky about the jacket covering it. Aliisa was careful not to touch or step in any of the gunk strewn behind the body.

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She pulled her jacket sleeve over her hand, carefully grabbed the ijiraujaq's foot, and dragged its lower body so the head was facing away from their camp. It was a hunting tradition. If you pointed the carcass of an animal toward camp it would bring you better luck; more animals would come to you. Except with *ijiraujat*, with zombies, they pointed the bodies away from where they lived. Might as well try, right?

Ittuq, meanwhile, had been jolted out of his sleep by the gunshot and had emerged through the tent's flap.

"Aliisa, *qanuinnngilatit?*" he called. "You good?"

"*Ii, ijiraujaq qukiqtara.* Yeah, I shot an ijiraujaq. It got way out here. . . ." Aliisa started to reply.

Ittuq approached Aliisa and the mess on the ground. "This one must have been tracking us for a while," he explained, looking over the carcass. "We just need to clean up these stragglers and we should be okay," he went on. "The further north we go, the less we'll see. I know it doesn't seem like it now, but we will get somewhere safe eventually."

Ittuq saw the pained look on Aliisa's face. "Aliisa, you're doing great," he reminded her. "You're surviving. It's not your fault. You know you need to protect yourself."

Aliisa sighed. Ittuq was right, of course; it *had* gotten easier since the beginning. Although she still felt odd about *ijiraujat*. When she was holding her rifle, she knew it was her or them. But afterwards, well . . . looking down on them, she would start thinking of all the people she used to know. When the things were running and slobbering and scary her instincts kicked in, but she

was still human after all. She missed her old life, and these things reminded her of where she'd come from. Since narrowly escaping Iqaluit during the pandemic, she had slowly come to terms with this new life. She had quietly slipped away one night after helplessly watching her family turn into *ijiraujat*. She'd had nothing with her and wasn't going to make it far when Ittuq found her, cold and distraught, far up along *Niaqunnguup Kuunga*, Apex River.

Ittuq had also rescued Anirniq, a toddler at the time. Who knows where the little guy came from; he hadn't said a word to either of them, ever. Ittuq had taught Aliisa how to shoot and survive, but even if they were already dead, every *ijiraujaq* reminded her of her loved ones after they'd turned—with crazed eyes, clawing hands, and biting at each other—but also before, when they were alive and loving. Her mind sometimes got stuck in a feedback loop. It was hard not to feel bad for these people and what they once were, in theory. But when confronted with a terrifying, decomposing, sprinting monster, those feelings didn't matter anymore.

"Don't go back into that place, Aliisa," Ittuq said, accurately assuming her train of thought as always. "How many times have I told you? You can't help them. You have Anirniq and me; now, don't we count for anything?"

Aliisa absent-mindedly rubbed her shoulder, a bit sore from the rifle recoil. "Yeah, of course," she mumbled.

Their conversation was cut short by a strange sound, one they hadn't heard in years. This was a big sound, a deep sound reverberating across the land. Their faces turned up to the sky, the sound growing louder as it neared. A chopper appeared in the sky through the faint dusk and grew more distinct as it flew toward them. They both stared in awe. *What the! Who was flying it?? Where did they*

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find the fuel? Why were they here? This was huge. Aliisa felt like planes and helicopters were from a different life. Even timid Anirniq, who usually cowered at the slightest hint of danger, poked his little head out of the tent to look.

The helicopter, a red one, quickly grew closer. They saw two helmeted heads looking back at them from the cockpit. Having circled around them once, the chopper set down on a flat patch between the tent and where Aliisa and Ittuq were standing. Aliisa squinted and plugged her ears at the noise, and Ittuq watched distrustfully. The two heads inside were busily doing whatever tasks a helicopter required after landing. When the rotor blades stopped moving, one of the heads exited. He came over toward the two Inuit, hand outstretched in Ittuq's direction.

"Doctor Robert English, medical doctor at the Coleman Research Centre for Communicable Diseases at the University of Toronto!" he called.

Ittuq stood stock still, looked at the tall man, and didn't offer his hand in return. The doctor put his down awkwardly. Aliisa stared open-mouthed at this tall man. It had been years since she had seen a *qallunaaq*, a white person. Even before they had gone to the land, as the pandemic became serious, most of the *qallunaat*, the white people, had left the North to be with their families in the south. This man's red survival suit was so bright and new it almost hurt Aliisa's eyes. Not a stain on it. Brand new boots, unscratched glasses, and so many gadgets hanging off him. She suddenly felt incredibly grimy. Everything she had on was the same colour by now, covered in dirt and old bloodstains.

"Do you two speak English?" the red-suited doctor asked tentatively. He looked strange and slightly uncomfortable. His

immaculate little glasses perched on a huge, pointy nose. He had looked them both up and down and taken in the dead ijiraujaq to their left.

Ittuq nodded his head once. "Yeah," said Aliisa, meanwhile burning with a thousand questions she wanted to ask all at once. *I thought you were all dead.*

"Great!" the qallunaaq exclaimed. He looked relieved. "Well, I suppose I should explain what we are doing here. I'm with the ReNew Canada project distributing vaccines and treatment to survivors in the Canadian hinterland. A year ago, the CRCCD developed a vaccine for the virus that decimated 86% of the population. We began treating the infected, and the vaccine has been quite effective in preventing infection in healthy individuals. All survivors of the pandemic must be relocated to regional treatment centres set up around the country. It was communicated that some Inuit went back to the land to escape the infection. I, along with Greg here,"—he motioned toward the pilot approaching—"have been tasked with rounding up the remainder of you and bringing you to Igloolik, where triage will assess you. You'll then be transferred to Hamilton, Ontario, for quarantine or placement in the required remediation group. Now, can I get your names please?" A notepad had appeared out of one of his suit pockets, pen poised to officially record their existence.

Aliisa stared agape at this man and his pilot. Everything was okay now? They could go back to living in a house again? With TV? And a PHONE? Her mind started racing: couches, snacks, food other than seal and fish, showers! School! *Wait. Erw, school. . . .*

I wonder who else is in Igloolik and Hamilton. Had anyone she knew escaped?

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"No," Ittuq said, startling Aliisa out of her daydream.

The doctor raised his eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"I said 'no.' We are not going with you," Ittuq said, this time louder. He had adopted a stony-faced look, one Aliisa had never seen before.

"I . . . uh . . . I'm afraid you are required to," the doctor replied. "The entire Canadian population must be treated and vaccinated to prevent another outbreak."

"I'm not leaving this land!" Ittuq almost yelled, pointing to the ground at his feet. "We barely escaped town with our lives and now you want us—no, you ORDER us to go with you?! Every time the government has interjected into our lives, it gets worse! Just let us be! It's too dangerous to go back, and I won't!"

At this outburst, it was the qallunaaq's turn to stare wordlessly. Aliisa looked back and forth between Ittuq and the doctor's shocked face.

The doctor quickly pulled himself together and looked to Aliisa, deciding Ittuq was the definition of crazy and that she was in charge now. He was all business again, ignoring Ittuq completely.

"Um . . . maybe I should explain a little more. Let me get my equipment." He forged ahead with his captive audience, Aliisa, while Ittuq stood in the background, scowling. The doctor went back to the helicopter and retrieved a laptop bag and a small cooler. He set them down by the tent.

The doctor was trying to set up his laptop on a rock, but it wasn't working so well. He was trying to even out the surface to keep the laptop's screen level. First, he put his notebook under one side, a few Kleenexes, then a flashlight . . . which rolled out from under it, and the laptop almost fell off the rock. "Oh, for God's sake," she heard

him mutter. He didn't look like he was used to being outside in the wilderness.

Aliisa suggested he put it on the cooler, but that made the doctor more frazzled.

"No, no, no, I'm going to need that. This is fine, it's fine." In the end, he settled on perching the laptop on the rock, slightly askew. He clicked around a bit on the trackpad and brought up a PowerPoint presentation. Greg had joined, standing silently behind him. The doctor launched into listing a litany of medical facts, percentages, and population numbers while exhibiting colourful graphs and tables. Aliisa was only half listening. She was looking at the weird charts and equations on the PowerPoint, but not a lot of it made sense to her. Heck, she hadn't even talked to anyone but Ittuq and Anirniq for years, and Ani didn't even say anything back! Aliisa was just amazed that there were others still alive. She didn't care about this guy's facts and figures. *I can have my old life back.* Her thoughts started running away from her. She imagined everything being perfect, untouched, like nothing bad had ever happened. Some of her family and friends must have made it out alive like her. She'd be reunited with them straight away after the helicopter ride, they would jump back into normalcy, and they'd be happy again.

"... so first the research team came up with a vaccine to prevent the infection in healthy individuals..."

She was making her own lists in her head, things she wanted to do when she got back to town. *I wonder if there are warm showers in Igloolik? What kind of food do they have at these centres we'll be in? I hope Doritos are still a thing...*

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rendering the virus dormant. With continued treatment, we hope to completely eliminate the exposed cells from the body.”

Wait, what? Aliisa started paying attention all of a sudden. Treating the infected? How could you turn a moving, rotten corpse back into a person?

“Greg himself,” the doctor said, motioning to the helicopter pilot, “is in remission. He was exposed to the virus in northern Quebec. After we immobilized him, we successfully injected the treatment. So, he is able to perform normal duties, and he is once again a functioning member of society. Which is good for us at the centre because we are sorely in need of professionals like him. Normally he’d be in a quarantine centre, but exceptions have been made to those with in-demand skill sets. His treatment is injected twice daily. Actually, it’s time for his morning dose. This will be good for you to see. It’s quite simple really, nothing to worry about at all.”

Aliisa looked at the pilot. *This guy is an ijiraujaq?* She cringed and wanted to reach for her rifle. But Greg just stood there as before, albeit a little sheepishly now that his status had been revealed. He did look pretty harmless. He wasn’t attacking them, at least, or trying to bite her. He was wearing one of those blue work onesies qallunaat were so fond of. He was pretty nondescript, average height, plain qallunaaq face. The only special thing about this guy was that he was . . . dead? Or not dead. Somewhat dead? How do you describe someone who’s being treated with medication to make them a living human again after being dead? *Do I say he was an ijiraujaq?* She side-eyed Greg, trying to figure out his humanhood.

Aliisa started out of her perplexity with the most important question of all: “Wait, doctor? You’re saying you can turn ijiraujat—I mean, zombies—back into regular people? My whole family

"I'm Aliisa, and there's a five-year-old boy we call Anirniq," Aliisa told him.

The doctor wrote down an approximation of the two children's names on his notepad and turned to direct his attention to Ittuq. "I'm going to have to report you and fill out a form of non-compliance if you refuse to come with us. The proper authorities will be sent. I mean, we're short on resources, but I'm no police officer! I'm not going to forcibly take you, but the children might be another story. Are you their grandfather?" he asked Ittuq.

Ittuq was absolutely fuming. "Not by blood," he mustered.

"Well, if you're not their official guardian, I'm authorized to remove the children from your care," proclaimed the doctor.

"Ah . . . uh . . ." said Aliisa. She was lost for words. She and Anirniq had both relied on Ittuq like a father. He had saved their lives countless times. He'd somehow gotten them out of populated areas when the outbreak was bad. He had shot hundreds of *ijiraujaat*. He was the one who had the skills to keep them safe from the *ijiraujat*, the wild animals, the elements. Aliisa hadn't known how to shoot, hunt, or camp. Actually, she hadn't known how to do much back then. She had never tried to convince him of anything—he was in charge; he knew everything; he could *do* anything. He took care of them like they were his own.

But . . . her family might be alive. Her friends, regular life—they still existed! Aliisa wanted to be warm and watch TV, drink hot chocolate again, and have friends. She felt *alone* out here. Since they'd left Iqaluit, she'd had no clue about the outside world. *Better than being dead*, she reminded herself. But she had to go back to town. She needed to find out who was still alive . . . or alive again.

Aliisa looked to Ittuq and said, "I don't want to go without you. Will you come too? Please?"

He switched to Inuktitut. "Aliisa, *aakuluk*, dear, you don't know if he's telling the truth. You can't trust this man. I know, I've been taken from the land before. They took me from my parents to go to residential school. They told us we'd be better off, we'd be fed, and have safe places to live. It didn't work out like that. They tried to kill our language, our culture. We were barely regarded as people. He's telling you you're going to a treatment centre for quarantine. You're going to be moved around like an animal and jailed until they say you can leave. I can't do that. I want you to think hard about this. You're old enough to make your own decisions, but really think about it. You have enough here, you have freedom. We have a happy life."

Aliisa looked at Ittuq, looked to the tent, to the lines with fish.

"Dr. English," she said, switching back to English, "how bad can a person get? I mean, can they come back if they're really far gone? Rotten and stuff?"

"There's no way of me knowing out here what happened to specific people, my dear. Someone will enter you into the database when we arrive at the regional centre and you can ask them all your questions. Anyway, we really do need to get on with this." He had lost interest while the two Inuit were conversing and looked anxious to go. "Why don't you go pack your things and say goodbye to mister, uh, this gentleman here," he said, gesturing to Ittuq. He didn't wait to hear anything else from her before he started bringing his equipment back to the helicopter.

"Uh, okay," she said to the doctor's back. She shuffled uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Ittuq. I have to go and find out if my family is

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back. I miss them. I miss my old life." He looked like she had just smashed his heart into pieces. She couldn't look at him anymore. She stared at the ground and repeated, "I'm sorry."

She glanced up at him and quickly turned away, unable to meet his gaze. She went into the tent and looked around. Anirniq, looking terrified, was sitting in the middle of the sleeping skins. She surveyed their belongings: some tools for living on the land, some winter clothes, and a *qulliq*, a seal oil lamp. She didn't really need any of this stuff if she was going to live inside again. Everything looked smaller and older now. Her eyes had adjusted to the shiny technology and cleanness of the qallunaat already. She put a few little toys that Ittuq had made for Ani into her pocket, took Ani's hand, and exited the tent.

Aliisa felt terrible as she walked over to the waiting pilot. She was completely torn. This was all she'd known for three years. Sure, she had dreamed of going back, but now it felt different. She was flying into the unknown with two strange qallunaat and leaving Ittuq behind to live by himself. Her doubts about the situation flared. Maybe Ittuq was right. They didn't have it so bad out here, but . . . *My real family*, she thought. *I have to find out if they're back.* Ani had buried his face in Aliisa's snow pants. He peered out from under his hood at the strange pilot. Greg had an odd expression on his face and was positively leering at them. *Gross*, she thought as she looked away.

The doctor finished stowing his equipment, closed the back compartment of the helicopter, and held the passenger doors open to let Aliisa and Anirniq into the second row of seating.

"You're not going to need that," he said, gesturing to the rifle still slung across her back.

"Seriously?" Aliisa said, incredulously. "I've been carrying this every day for three years. This is why I'm still alive."

"This is a government mission. You need to be certified to carry a firearm. And besides, you're how old?"

"Thirteen," she said quietly.

"Ha! We have two adults here who are capable of taking care of you. You'll be fine without it from now on."

Aliisa definitely did not like this. But the doctor just stood there with his hand outstretched, waiting for her rifle. She took it off unwillingly and handed it to him. It felt strange to give up what had been her lifeline. The doctor set the rifle down on the ground.

"We have firearms and munitions stored properly in the back compartment. Honestly," he chuckled. "A thirteen-year-old with a firearm," she heard him mutter. He buckled them into their seats, pulled two pairs of headphones down from the ceiling, clamped them onto both of their heads and closed the door.

Aliisa was in shock. She felt completely powerless. Where was Ittuq? They hadn't even said goodbye. He had disappeared at some point; when? Was saying goodbye too hard? An empty hole opened up inside her. She held Ani's hand. She stared listlessly out at her now former home through the windows of this flying bubble. Ittuq was in the distance looking away. Her eyes started to water, looking at Ittuq alone out there. Now that she was really leaving, she started to panic. Maybe Ittuq was right, why is she trusting these strangers? Greg looked back at her and Ani. There was something wrong with this guy—his eyes had an unfocused glaze to them.

"I don't want to go," Aliisa said abruptly.

"You are coming with me to safety, child," said the doctor. "You two have your whole lives ahead of you. It's an utter waste out here

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Aliisa choked. Greg had already started her yelling, the bursts. The doctor silent. The rotor blur of movement and wiped her weightless, the forward into the left behind. Ani front of his face she thought.

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in the middle of this frozen land. That old man can choose to die out here, but you're young, you need to be back in school like normal kids."

Aliisa choked down a sob. "I don't want to go!" she yelled. But Greg had already started the engine, and it drowned out most of her yelling, the rest coming through the audio equipment in loud bursts. The doctor flicked a button down and her microphone went silent. The rotors started to speed up above them, growing into a blur of movement. Aliisa struggled to catch her breath, sniffled, and wiped her eyes and nose with her sleeve. The helicopter grew weightless, the ground moving quickly beneath them as they shot forward into the sky. All of a sudden, the camp was gone. Ittuq was left behind. Ani was crying soundlessly, his microphone askew in front of his face. Aliisa squeezed his little hand. *What have I done?* she thought.

They flew west over the cold seawater, toward the mainland on the other side. They were high up out of the mist now. The sun was low in the sky and cut through the fog at their higher altitude. Aliisa watched Greg move the controls of the helicopter. She felt utterly helpless. Only a few hours ago, she hadn't thought her life would completely change. She squeezed more tears out of her eyes. She missed Ittuq; he had always listened to her. He didn't treat her like a child. She shouldn't have left!

The water went by under them, impervious to being abandoned.

The doctor had been huffily rooting around in his equipment. He handed Greg a Kleenex. For some reason, Greg had drool dripping down his face onto his flight suit. Aliisa realized she could hear them over the headphones. She found the control and turned up the audio.

"... never seen this side effect before. Very odd. It must be this stupid climate," said the doctor. She could see him writing notes in

his field pad. Greg was trying to slop up the drool with one hand, the other hand on the helicopter's joystick.

He had barely cleaned up his chin when the helicopter jerked backwards, hard. They were flung forward. Aliisa hit her head on the seat in front of her and her headphones fell off. The noise from the helicopter was loud in her ears now, but she could hear the doctor yelling at Greg. He was reaching over from the passenger seat, trying to grab the controls of the helicopter. Greg's whole body was stiff. He whipped his head from side to side, drool flinging onto the window and into the doctor's face. She watched him convulse again, hitting the joystick with his knee hard to the left. The helicopter slammed sideways. They hung from their seatbelts, the sea directly under them to the left.

Aliisa looked up at Ani hanging above her. He was trying to reach her, belted into his seat, face red with tears. In the front seat, Greg was snapping his mouth open and closed, straining at his seatbelt, his eyes wild and bulging. It looked like the doctor had been knocked unconscious. His head lolled around, his arms limp. The helicopter began to spin. The rotor was completely sideways, force-driving them around in circles rather than up. Greg's hands scrabbled as far as he could get them, trying desperately to get a hold of fresh meat; the controls were completely forgotten.

They swirled rapidly, falling fast, trapped together with the ijiraujaq. The icy cold sea shot upward at them at an incredible speed.

"Noooooooo!!" Aliisa cried at no one in particular. She tried to grab Ani's hand, but she was glued in place by centrifugal force. Then there was a loud SMASH, a flash of light, and everything went black.

